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A Message from the Executive Vice President and Provost

The following message was shared with faculty on May 15, 2020.

Dear Colleagues:

When I accepted the appointment as Provost on March 7, 2020, the global COVID-19 health crisis was not yet declared a pandemic. Since that day, our University and our world have changed in ways that would have seemed unfathomable then. To protect the educational experience of our students and service to our region, I have approved, with solemn contemplation, the decisions implemented today by our deans and academic leaders as necessary to withstand this global health and financial crisis. I deeply regret the devasting impact that these actions will have on some of our colleagues, their families, and our communities.

By email today, [President Nellis shared specific information] about the magnitude of instructional faculty non-renewals and administrative position eliminations across the University. I want to provide additional context about the actions taken in the colleges and academic support units, which includes providing notice of non-renewal to 53 instructional faculty members. After COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, and as faculty members moved to fully remote instruction in a matter of days, President Nellis, with my support, made the decision to pause the planning and implementation of personnel-related budget reductions so we could reassess our situation once we had more clarity about the financial impact of the pandemic in this fiscal year and beyond. As the pandemic unfolded, its impact on our state and national economy and on higher education quickly emerged. In his [message delivered on April 28] to the campus community, President Nellis outlined the unexpected changes to our current year's budget, including $18M in housing and dining refunds to students and pending decreases in state funding, as well as the need to move forward with reductions that would impact every area of the University. The state recently confirmed an immediate decrease of about $6.5M in our state share of instruction subsidy through the end of June, and while we are not likely to receive final state budget decisions for at least another month, we have also been asked to plan for an anticipated reduction of 20% in our state support for FY2021 (approximately $35M). While we have received about $19.4M in federal funding through the CARES Act, $9.7M of that funding is emergency grant support that is being distributed directly to students across all our campuses who are experiencing COVID-related financial difficulties.

The economic impact of COVID-19 has intensified the financial pressures on Ohio University that existed prior to the pandemic. To ensure that our University and the communities that depend on us continue to thrive, we must grapple with difficult facts. Beginning in 2012, Athens undergraduate enrollment increased rapidly and peaked in 2016 at 18,207 (Institutional Research and Effectiveness Census). We added faculty and staff in order to support this influx of students, and we did so successfully, as reflected in the rapid rise in our four-year graduation rate. But this sharp increase in student enrollment did not persist. By fall 2019, the overall Athens undergraduate enrollment was 16,278 (IRE Census). Compounding the issue, changes in student enrollment were not evenly distributed among the colleges or across all majors, and College Credit Plus has impacted credit hours differentially in the colleges. Despite the decline in undergraduate enrollments, we did not adjust the number of faculty on the Athens campus through attrition; instead, we maintained the number of full-time faculty, and we employed more full-time faculty—particularly instructional faculty—on the Athens campus in academic year 2019–20 than in the previous year (excluding HCOM). Since 2016, the Athens campus student-faculty ratio has declined from 18:1 to 15:1 (provisional IPEDS data). We must adjust across the University to reflect our current reality while ensuring that every student has the highest quality educational experience possible.

Our regional campuses, which boomed during the Great Recession, have seen a steady decline in students as unemployment rates dropped below 4% nationally before the pandemic. Since 2013, regional campus credit hours have dropped between 15.3% and 27%, depending on the campus (IRE Annual Student Credit Hours Produced). RHE has been especially hard hit by College Credit Plus. While the regional campuses have already made many cuts to try to balance their budget, they, too, continue to be significantly impacted by these trends.

In short, before the pandemic, we were already anticipating using about $26M in reserves before June 30, 2020; now we anticipate using $50 to $55M in reserves in the same timeframe. For FY21, we had already planned to use $18M in reserves; if we do not change our spending, we will use an estimated $55M in reserves even before accounting for any enrollment changes due to the pandemic. Before the pandemic, we faced significant but manageable challenges, but now we, along with the vast majority of colleges and universities in the United States, face dramatic deficits that we must address through a series of short-term, intermediate, and long-term measures.

We already have announced a hiring freeze, limitations on spending and travel, a review of all in-progress capital projects, and a suspension of new capital projects. Approximately two weeks ago, nearly 190 positions in the University's American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) were abolished, for a savings of approximately $11.3M.

Seventy-four tenured faculty members and administrators who hold tenured faculty rank chose to participate in the Voluntary Separation or Retirement Plan (VSRP) this spring, for savings of more than $10.3M million in salary and benefits. Today, President Nellis announced a furlough plan that will impact most employees, for approximately $13M in one-time savings. These are important steps, but they are not enough to ensure our financial stability.

As deans made difficult decisions not to renew instructional faculty positions, they had to consider and balance several key factors. Some factors were quantitative, such as a program's major, minor, and certificate enrollments; credit hours and trends; teaching, research, and service capacity; and external funding. These factors differ by college and program. For example, from 2013–14 to 2018–2019, undergraduate credit hours in the College of Business increased 24.7%, while they decreased by 18.9% in the College of Arts and Sciences (IRE Annual Student Credit Hours Produced). In addition, faculty participation in the VSRP varied widely by college, representing about 6.6% of all tenure-track faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences to more than 16% in the Scripps College of Communication and the College of Fine Arts. While such factors are important, the deans also considered a program's contribution to the mission of the department or school, college, and university. In some cases, the data clearly indicated that deeper cuts could be made, but such cuts would have led to the loss of academic areas that are central to every student's education. However, even these vital programs must change how they operate in order to become more sustainable. Some programs that also provide student support have sustained deeper cuts due to current enrollments. We will need to redesign how these services are offered in order to continue meeting student needs. In all areas, we have prioritized student learning, knowledge creation, and service to communities, while also realizing that during this crisis we cannot continue everything that we have been doing across all our campuses. We have followed the Faculty Handbook in all these decisions, and in accordance with section II.D.3, affected instructional faculty members have received written notice that their appointment will end on May 15, 2021.

I want to affirm that today's actions are not a reflection on our colleagues' dedication, success, or important work with our students and our communities—far from it. I recognize and am grateful for their many contributions, and I acknowledge the tremendous impact these difficult budget decisions will have on individual people, their families and friends, their academic unit, our students, and our larger communities.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Sayrs
Executive Vice President and Provost