



Class Agents Letter

Class of 1972

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Class Agents

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Gentlemen:

In September, I attended the Class Agents Forum at Wabash, where the College briefs class agents on important matters. Presenters included Dean for College Advancement, Michelle Janssen; Director of Alumni and Affinity Group Engagement, Ron Dostal; Associate Directors of Advancement Initiatives, Hugh Vandivier and Emily Vetne; and President Scott Feller. Those folks gave us a detailed picture of the state of the College, and I now pass my summary of that on to you.

Possible New Capital Campaign

Dean Michelle Janssen explained that the Advancement Office was getting ready for Wabash's Bicentennial in 2032, just over seven years away and, incidentally, coinciding with our Class's 60th reunion year. Why do the powers that be think we need another capital campaign after the successful Giant Steps campaign? Because, as you will learn from Scott Feller's thoughts below, higher education is under stress, and things are likely to get worse in the future. Dean Janssen said that one question considered by the Advancement Office was how to celebrate the \$250 million raised by Giant Steps. Another question was how to launch an even bigger campaign, i.e., what to improve and change, and what not to do. Everything is now in the planning stage, but we can expect to hear more later.

Enrollment

President Scott Feller started his presentation by pointing out that he has been president of the College for five years. In 2020 when he started, the COVID-19 pandemic was raging, and his goal was to keep the College open. He had



three priorities, the first of which was enrollment. College enrollment is declining, especially among young men. Recruiting was tough during the pandemic. The hardest hit areas were the Northeast and the Upper Midwest, where most small liberal arts colleges are located. This has caused Wabash to recruit in the Southwest and Texas. The good news is the College is making progress. Total enrollment for 2024-25 is 882. The senior class is the last one recruited during the pandemic. Housing is fuller than ever with 99% of students living on campus. The retention rate from last year's freshman to sophomore class was 93%, which was the highest on record.

Philanthropy

President Feller's second priority was philanthropy. The College runs on philanthropy. Last year in 2023, the College's total intake was \$52 million. The average for colleges with fewer than 1,000 students is \$800,000. Of that \$52 million, \$25 million came from a Lilly Endowment grant, but even without that, 2023 was Wabash's biggest year ever. The College has reduced spending from the endowment by \$4 million per year, and it has been adding \$10 million per year to the endowment. One problem for the endowment, however, is inflation, which has depleted the endowment's purchasing power.

Belonging

Finally, President Feller's third priority was belonging. He wants everyone – students, faculty, alums, spouses, families – to feel like they belong. A college needs a strong culture, and Wabash has one, but we are not uniformly welcoming. The new Community Center, of which Wally's Pub will be the centerpiece, will help make the campus more welcoming.

Q & A

President Feller made several points during the Q & A period. (1) Colleges are closing. Both Wittenberg and Earlham are shrinking. (2) Wabash has \$25 million in deferred maintenance. The electrical system is outdated and is being replaced. (3) Fraternities are important to Wabash because retention and philanthropy are higher for fraternity members than for independents. The pandemic was hard on recruitment, but fraternities are doing better now. Over half are over capacity.

Five are doing well, two are doing OK, and three have issues. Not all national fraternities will survive.

More About Engagement

In my last letter, I told you about the College's emphasis on engagement. Ron Dostal continued his messaging on this topic. Overall, Wabash has 15,000 living alumni. Of these, 10,000 are graduates, and 5,000 are considered alumni by virtue of attending two or more semesters without graduating. An "engaged" alum donates, attends events, or both. The percentage of engaged alumni, according to Ron, is 46%. The percentage of engaged graduates is 60%, but this is only 6,000 people. Why is all this important? Because Wabash's future depends on engaged alumni. If you want to become more engaged, it is easy. There are several online activities that you can participate in for free. Go to the website, "Whenever. Wherever. Wabash." at www.wabash.edu/www. There, you can sign up for "After the Bell" virtual sessions with current professors. The next "After the Bell" session is December 9 on the subject of sports betting with Economics Professor Eric Dunaway and Ryan Rychlak '80. You can also find *on-demand* "After the Bell" sessions, Chapel Talks, news, and more.

Annual Fund

Hugh Vandivier and Emily Vetne reported that 2024 was the 11th year in a row of 40% alumni participation in the College's fund-raising. The goal for the Annual Fund was to raise \$3.7 million, and the College raised \$3.8 million. The goal for 2025 is to raise \$3.75 million in unrestricted gifts. Your year-end gift at www.wabash.edu/give can help the College reach its participation and dollar goals. Our co-Class Agent, Tom Ristine, will be communicating with you more on this subject!

Sparks Center and Community Center Update

At the Class Agents Forum, President Feller reported that the Sparks Center was still standing because the temporary dining facilities had not been completed and the College needed to restructure the proposed debt for the project. Hugh Vandivier just updated me with this report: On Monday, November 11, the campus transitioned from Sparks over to the temporary dining facility, which has

already met with a positive reaction from students, faculty, staff, and visiting diners. Dubbed “Grub Hollow,” a dozen mobile units, each 12’ X 60’, have been connected beside the Collett Tennis Center. Demolition of Sparks and construction of the new Community Center has been delayed because of a unique funding opportunity through a USDA Rural Development Loan. With a 40-year fixed rate, the loan will help fund the Community Center and infrastructure improvements mentioned above. Wabash has filed the paperwork and successfully met each step. The College is waiting to hear the final word, which seems close.

Sports Roundup

One reason I postponed writing this (other than my tendency to procrastinate) was I wanted to report on what I hoped would be a victory in the Monon Bell Game. The Wabash football Little Giants had a great season, going undefeated in the North Coast Athletic Conference and losing only one regular season game to one of the many University of Wisconsin extension campus teams. Unfortunately, DePauw had an even better season, going undefeated for the entire year and ending the regular season ranked the #9 team in the country. The final score was DePauw 42, Wabash 21. A bright spot for Little Giants football is the promotion next year of Jake Gilbert as head coach. Jake knows how to win.

Aside from football, none of the other fall teams had a particularly successful season. One bright spot was cross country runner Brayden Curnutt, who was the individual champion of both the North Coast Athletic Conference Meet and the NCAA Division III Great Lakes Regional Championships. This past weekend, Brayden ran in the NCAA Division III National Championships and finished 18th overall, giving him All-American status!

I encourage you to check out all the Wabash athletic teams’ updates at www.sports.wabash.edu!

Final Thoughts

I hope you are all well. Please send news about yourself to Rick Fobes (rwfobes@gmail.com) or any communication you want to send to Tom Ristine (thomashristine@gmail.com) or me (jbridge@psrb.com). Please stay in touch! In

the meantime, I wish you all the best for a Happy Thanksgiving, a Happy Holiday Season, and a Happy New Year!

Yours in Wabash,

John

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