

2024 Ohio University Mission Refresh Research, Discovery and Engagement

Background:

In October of 2023, Ohio University President Lori Stewart Gonzalez charged a small work group of administrative leaders, academic deans and faculty experts in communication and mission development to study and refresh the Ohio University Mission, Vision and Values. The current Mission Statement, Vision and Values were originally drafted in 2007.

A part of the work group's charge, President Gonzalez asked them to engage the University community in the process and to gather input from as many individuals as possible. The group's engagement strategy included:

- Developing and disseminating a University-wide survey that went to all faculty, staff, students, alumni and volunteer leaders.
- Engaging in dialogue with Ohio University Faculty Senate and Administrative Senate and with Student Senate leadership.

These engagements produced significant valuable input into the development of a clear University Mission and Vision, and the following report summarizes input collected.

Survey Analysis:

The Mission/Vision survey received just over 500 responses from across the various populations with faculty and staff representing the majority of responses at 302 completions but with significant involvement from alumni at 143 responses and 59 responses from current students as well.

The survey included both qualitative and quantitative questions.

Q1: What is Ohio University's central purpose?

The survey opened by asking participants to define OHIO's central purpose. Responses ranged from the simple a direct "educate students" to much more detailed and layered responses, but throughout the responses several clear themes stood out:

- Education was central in responses. Research and service were also mentioned but rarely served as the lead in the submitted ideas.
- Responses mentioned preparing students for professional or personal success, and often both.
- Many responses indicated a focus on education for the purpose of social impact. They mentioned prepared students to "solve problems," to "do good things," to "apply their knowledge" or to "make a difference."
- Several responses mentioned preparing students specifically for service in Ohio or in the Appalachian region.

- Some responses referenced a commitment to access, affordability or value.

Some sample submissions included:

- *Educate students to understand the world they live in, think critically and creatively, solve problems, make meaningful relationships and contributions, and discover a variety of career paths that will help them create sustainable and meaningful lives & futures.*
- *To serve the individuals of the region, state, nation and beyond through experience-based curriculum and training that leads to life-changing careers. And to foster research leading to innovative solutions to the world's most pressing problems.*
- *To make higher learning and education accessible for all who seek it and to prepare all students to be thought leaders and valued citizens who contribute to the greater good – locally and globally, no matter their area of study and discipline.*
- *To provide an exceptional learning community environment where all of our students can thrive while acquiring the skills and support, they to succeed and in today's world and fast passed work force.*
- *Preparing students to be effective members of society both professionally and personally, while supporting and engaging with the communities it serves.*
- *To effectively prepare students as people and as professionals for life-long success in their chosen careers so that they may have positive impacts on the world around them through their profession.*

These examples, although different, show an alignment in themes across various submissions.

Q2: Considering OHIO's central purpose, please identify the most important initiatives of this institution. Select up to four.

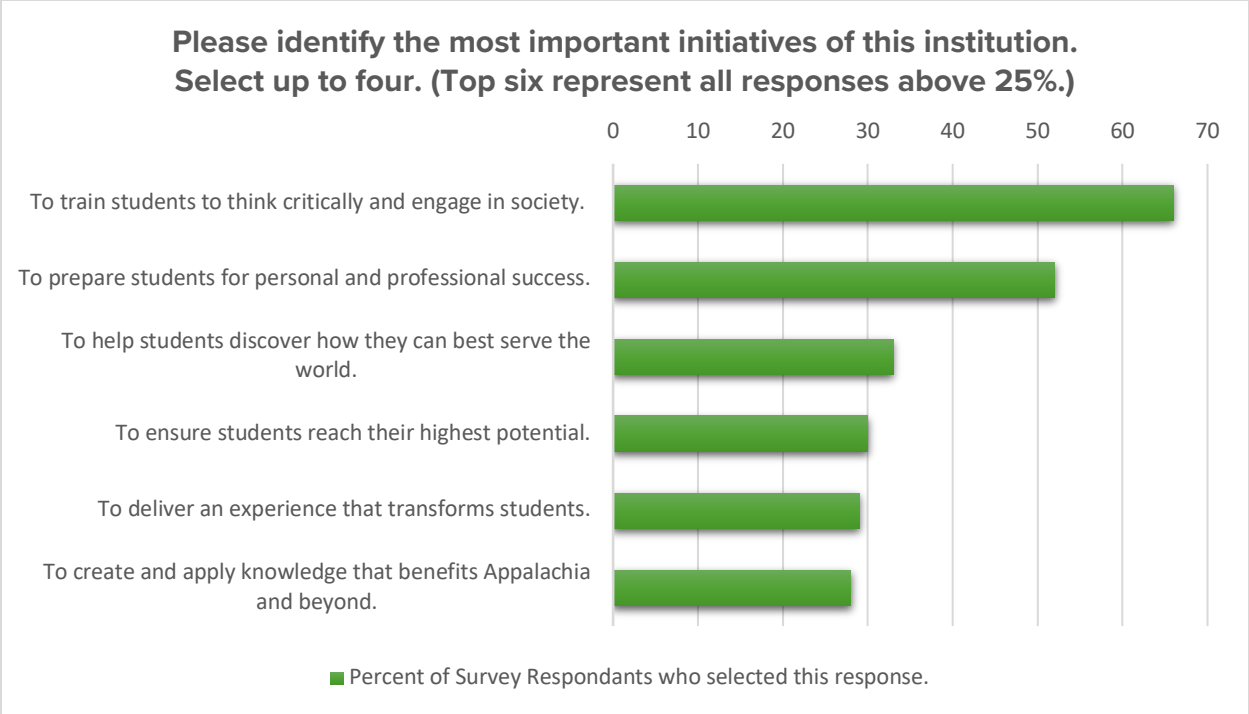
The survey's second question asked individuals to select up to four important initiatives from a list of 15 or to write their own. Of the more than 500 responders, only 6 percent opted to submit their own ideas. Similar to the responses to question one, the Top 3 most selected initiatives brought together a commitment to education for the purposes of preparing students to engage in society, to achieve professional success, and to discover how they can be impact the world.

Only two responses earned support from more than half of survey responders:

1. To train students to think critically and engage in society (selected by 66 percent of those who responded)
2. To prepare students for personal and professional success (selected by 52 percent of those who responded)

When considering the different audiences, it is notable that for faculty the ranking was the same but the divide was far greater. Among faculty, 78 percent selected No. 1 and only 42 percent selected No. 2. For other groups, the two initiatives had much more similar weighting. For example, 57 percent of students selected "to train students to think critically and engage in society" and 55 percent selected "to prepare students for personal and professional success.

Other choices included:



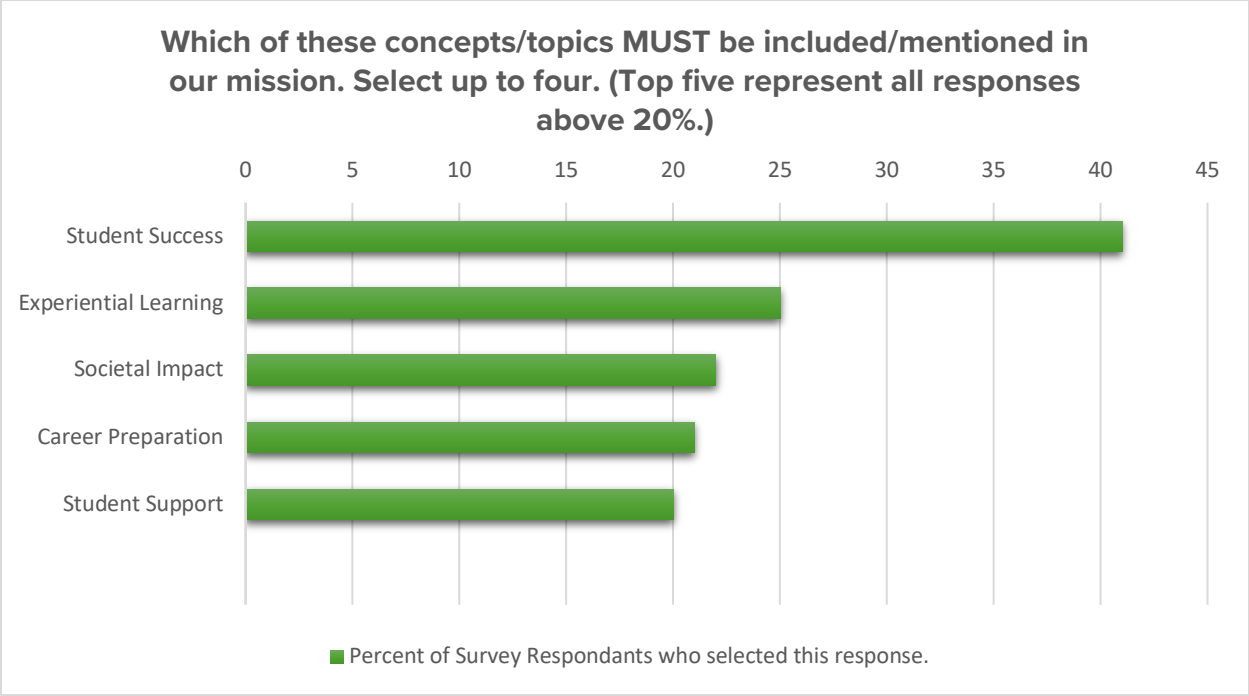
The alumni audience, with 143 total respondents, echoed the overall Top 2 choices and No. 3, 4, and 5 were also popular, though in slightly different order. Interestingly, alumni who had earned BOTH undergraduate and graduate degrees at OHIO selected the Top 6 in the same order as the overall result.

Q3: Which of these topics MUST be included/mentioned in our mission? Select up to four items below.

Question three on the survey was another quantitative question and asked individuals to select up to four broad topics from a list of 30 different options. Once again on this question there were two clear leaders and general alignment among audiences in their support of the top three:

1. Student Success
2. Experiential Learning
3. Societal Impact

Only Student Success surpassed 25 percent in popularity as a selection with 41 percent of responders including it among their four selected items. Of 30 items only five broke the 20 percent mark in support:



Interestingly, while audiences aligned on their support for Student Success, there was a wide divide on other topics of interest. Among students, Career Preparation was No. 2 with 26% of students selecting it. It was third for administrators and staff and fourth for alumni. Among faculty, Career Preparation came in at No. 16 with only 11% of faculty selecting it as a top choice.

For administrators and staff, the term “Appalachian Serving” rose to the Top 5 most selected items, and for students “Diversity and Inclusion” was No. 3. Neither of these made the Top 5 list for other audiences.

Q4: Think ahead to the next 10-15 years. What would you like to see Ohio University do, be or become?

Leading up to question four, survey results saw quite a bit of alignment among responders in all groups. However, when asked about the vision for the University’s future, survey results demonstrated less alignment or clarity of vision.

In this qualitative question that asked responders to think ahead 10-15 years, there was broad variability in the responses in both theme and scope. Some responses were more micro-level such as suggesting the addition of a specific academic program, or to improve the University’s ranking in a specific area. Other suggestions were extremely broad in nature such as “become a larger institution” or “increase research.” Another portion of answers were framed in a critical voice, calling for the University to make some change. Several responses began with the adjectives “better,” “more,” “increase,” “stop,” or “reevaluate.”

There were a few themes that came through, however, including:

- Student experience and development – As noted in the feedback related to mission, many contributors emphasized a desire to be a leader in experiential learning or student personal and/or professional development. This often included mentions of service learning as well.
- Commitment to place – Many suggestions highlighted the importance of our role in furthering economic development and quality of life in the communities where we are located, in Ohio or in the broader Appalachian region.
- Access and Equity – There were several mentions of affordability or equitable access to education. This concept extended beyond cost of attendance to ideas about how we could and should expand the honors tutorial college experience to more students, mentions of our work in driving equity in rural communities and more.
- Research Impact – Growth in OHIO's research earned significant mentions, but in almost every case this was paired with description of how that research work would have impact on communities.

Here are just a few of the submitted responses:

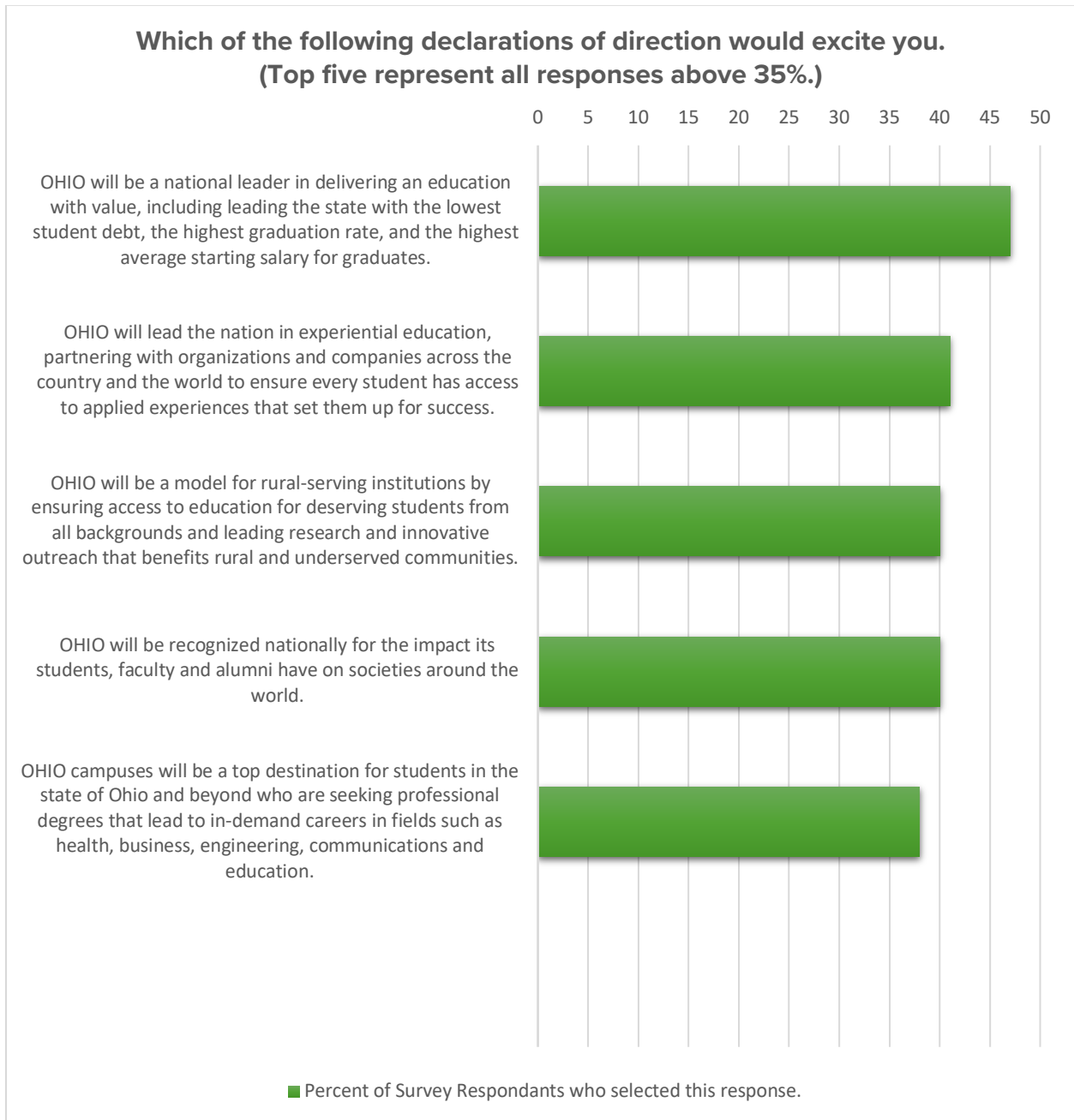
- *The oldest and the best public institution in Northern Appalachia, which prepares students as globally aware citizens recognized for national excellence.*
- *A model for using experiential learning to benefit the students, faculty and greater community--learning by doing.*
- *To become the national example of a rural location university that attracts, retains and produces students who, because of their unique educational opportunities at OHIO, are hitting the ground running in their chosen fields and giving back to the region through their time, talents and resources.*
- *Build on its strengths of place-based, service oriented, learning by doing foundations to engage with and contribute to communities at multiple levels.*
- *Ohio University should be a place where students integrate professional skills with new and complex understandings of the world around them and where faculty create nationally recognized knowledge and cultural work.*
- *Ohio University should be a community partner who helps to with the growth and development of our students so they can be the best in what they do. All while providing growth within the communities that OHIO is located.*
- *To be a center of progress and learning in the Appalachian region. A place where students of the highest caliber come to grow, learn, and spend the best four years of their life.*
- *Provide more visible opportunities to impact the surrounding regions through service and to become a leading institution that prepares all students through experiential, hands-on learning in their area of interest.*

Q5: Which of the following declarations of direction would excite you? Note that these are just for the purpose of the exercise, not an actual statement of direction. Please select up to 4 declarations from the list below.

After asking individuals to submit their vision for the future of OHIO, we then presented 10 theoretical declarations of direction and asked them to select up to four that would excite them. While there was one clear stand-out in the selection progress, like Question 4, there seemed to

be less overall alignment of responses to this quantitative question. No response was selected by more than half of responders. Five were selected by at least 35 percent of responders, with one reaching 47 percent.

The most selected declaration was that *“OHIO will be a national leader in delivering an education with value, including leading the state with the lowest student debt, the highest graduation rate, and the highest average starting salary for graduates.”*



Among the various populations surveyed, responses differed significantly.

For faculty, the leading choice was the fourth on the overall list – recognized nationally for its impact on societies. The overall No. 1 – value – was the fifth most selected among faculty, and the No. 3 overall – a model for rural-serving institutions – was the fourth most popular choice. Other highly selected choices among faculty, which did not rise to overall popularity included:

- “Ohio University will have a transformative impact on every community it serves and on every student who enters.”
- “Ohio will be the leading national research institution in the 13-state Appalachian region, solving problems and driving progress in the region we call home.”

For administrators and staff, delivering an education of value was the clear No. 1 with being a model for rural-serving institutions rising to No. 2 ahead of leading in experiential education.

Overall choices 1, 2, 4 and 5 represented the most popular choices by students. Closely following those choices, they also ranked highly: “Ohio will be known for delivering a flexible, personalized education that allows students to move more freely between on-campus and online options to best meet their changing educational needs.” This selection did not float to the top for other audiences but may demonstrate a desire from students that should be considered in our institutional planning.

The alumni audience selected No. 3 – to be a model for rural-serving institutions – as their most popular choice. The overall No. 1, 2 and 5 followed as popular among alumni.

Q5: In your own words, what do you believe is the single most valuable aspect of Ohio University?

Of the 304 responses analyzed for Question 5, a long list of valuable aspects was created. Certain themes were more prominent than others. Below is a ranked breakdown of the five most-mentioned aspects.

1. **Community:** This encompasses the sense of belonging, support, camaraderie, and collaboration among students, faculty, staff, and the surrounding communities. It's all about the people and the environment that fosters connections.
2. **Quality Education:** Highlighting the high standards, variety of programs, faculty commitment, mentorship, and the university's focus on student success and experiential learning.
3. **Location and Setting:** The beautiful campus, Appalachian foothills, small town atmosphere, and the unique location in southeast Ohio.
4. **Diversity and Inclusion:** Emphasizing the diverse student body, faculty, and programs, which create a rich environment for learning and understanding different perspectives.
5. **Affordability and Accessibility:** Mentioning the accessibility of education, online learning opportunities, affordability of programs, and the university's commitment to providing quality education in a rural setting.

Q6: Most of the OHIO community agrees that Ohio University is magical. Yet, it is difficult to identify exactly what makes it feel “magical.” What do you believe is an understated but essential aspect of what makes Ohio University so special?

The final question asked responders to put words to the qualities that are often difficult to articulate when discussing Ohio University. Qualitative analysis of the 291 responses to this

question revealed seven key themes that contribute to the perceived "magic" of Ohio University. Overall, the synthesis of these sentiments underscores the convergence of place, people, tradition, and community spirit as the key elements that contribute to the perceived "magic".

- **Academic Opportunities:** The sense of community, inclusivity, and the university's ability to offer diverse programs and resources while maintaining a personalized experience. Some respondents emphasized the historical emphasis on undergraduates, attributing OU's special quality to its commitment to providing a focused and supportive educational experience.
- **Connection to Place:** Respondents highlighted the importance of a sense of place, encompassing everything from the architecture to the cherry blossoms and hidden corners on campus. The beauty of the campus, its architectural charm, the scenic surroundings, and the blend of historic and modern elements are mentioned repeatedly. Respondents also recognized the symbiotic relationship between the university and the local region, which contributes to the enhancement of both. The small-town feel and the combination of campus and town are seen as unique and conducive to a special atmosphere. Unique aspects like the Marching 110, all the bricks, College Gate, and the welcoming environment across campus and College Green were specifically mentioned. This connection to the environment seems to create a personalized experience for each individual.
- **Sense of Belonging and Community:** The sense of belonging, community, and home was a recurring theme. The feeling of intimacy, singularity, and a "bubble" atmosphere on campus contribute to a unique communal experience. The camaraderie among students, faculty, staff, and alumni creates a unique bond and a shared love for the institution. These groups' shared values of community, culture, collaboration, and engagement contribute to the institution's specialness. Within this theme, diversity and a sense of unity were noted as core values that contribute to the university's uniqueness, and the acceptance of diversity and the inclusive atmosphere on campus were mentioned among the university's magical quality. While a few responses indicated otherwise, the ability to make everyone feel like they belong in the Ohio University community, regardless of background, was frequently highlighted among the responses.
- **Alumni Engagement:** The ongoing connection with alumni, as well as the sense of pride and loyalty among former students, contributed to the feeling of a strong and supportive community that feels like family. The long history and traditions of the university play a role, as does the historical significance and age of the institution. The sense of heritage is a contributor to the university's unique atmosphere.
- **Experiential Learning and Opportunities:** The hands-on, experiential learning opportunities provided by OU, combined with a supportive environment, were noted as factors that set the university apart. Specifically, the variety of experiences available to students, such as small-group trips, opportunities for personal growth, engagement with Appalachian culture, and a mix of large university offerings with small-town accessibility, are highlighted as contributing factors.
- **Faculty and Staff Dedication:** The dedication of faculty and staff to students, as well as their involvement in the community, were repeatedly mentioned as crucial elements in making Ohio University special. Employees are dedication to student success, treating students as individuals, and caring deeply about their well-being. The genuine care and attention provided by faculty and staff members creates a supportive environment.
- **Personal Growth and Support:** The university's role in supporting students' personal growth, providing a sense of hope, and creating an environment where individuals can

step outside their comfort zones were identified as contributors to the magical experience. Ohio University has an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere where each individual feels valued and encouraged to explore and learn.

It should be noted that some respondents expressed discomfort with the use of "magical" terminology, suggesting a preference for more tangible or substantive descriptors. However, the magic perceived by many stakeholders of Ohio University is multifaceted, encompassing physical, cultural, and interpersonal elements that create a unique and inclusive educational environment. The emphasis on relationships, community, and a strong connection to place emerged as particularly important aspects of the OU experience.

Senate Engagements:

In addition to the survey, the Mission and Vision Work Group held discussions with Faculty Senate, Administrative Senate and leadership from Student Senate. The discussions with the Senates centered around four questions:

1. What is the most important purpose our university serves?

For all senates, responses to this initial question largely echoed responses submitted to the first question of the survey. Educating students was identified as central with student success and their personal growth earning mentions. One Administrative Senate member articulated it this way: "To educate our students in their chosen field, but also bring the world to them and them to the world so they become global citizens."

Each of the Senates additionally recognized a commitment to the region and the state. One Faculty Senator articulated it this way: "to build and sustain a rich community in our region, through education." Student leaders in particular highlighted our responsibility to ensure a welcoming University climate that encourages a sense of belonging.

2. In what ways might our purpose be different from other universities that are similar to us in size and scope?

Responses to this question for both Administrative Senate and Faculty Senate centered largely around location as a differentiator. Being in a rural, Appalachia community – both in Athens and most of our regional campuses – plays a role in the students we serve as well as our research and outreach. In addition, members of both senates commented on the connectedness and physical size, particularly of our residential campus in Athens, highlighting that as an asset in delivering on student development.

Student Senators also mentioned place, but they once again highlighted OHIO's welcoming University community. One senator commented: "People have an open mind and there is no pressure or restrictions on being your true self." They also mentioned access to faculty and the relationships they are able to build with campus leaders.

3. When we do our best work, who benefits and how do they benefit?

There was unanimous agreement across Senate membership that students are at the top of this list. One Administrative Senator said: “When we do our best work, the students benefit because they stay engaged, feel empowered and leave prepared.”

A close second was the regional communities we serve and the state of Ohio. All groups emphasized the responsibility we have in particular to the most immediate communities where we are located. One Faculty Senator noted, however, that we should be careful not to limit our scope of impact to our immediate region: “It is important that we have an impact in our region, but it is also important and true that we have an impact nationally and internationally – through our scholarly research and through the work our students do when they go out and have that impact.”

4. Recognizing that we will celebrate 225 years of OHIO in 2029, describe your most optimistic vision of Ohio University at 250 years.

Similar to the survey results, Senators struggled the most with articulating a response to the fourth question centered around our vision for the future. Faculty Senators highlighted that it is difficult to envision the future that far out because of ongoing change and disruptions in higher education itself. Some themes in discussions included growth – in both student population and programming – and staying focused on delivering valuable outcomes.

Student Senators articulated some hesitation to consider a “future vision,” and highlighted that there are many things that they hope don’t change over time such as the sense of community care, the beauty of the campus and our close ties to local communities. One Student Senator said: “It’s a balancing act between stability and innovation. Too much innovation might mean we lose the University’s character that we all love.”