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Olivet College
Arend D. Lubbers
October 19, 2007

Few professional associations have provided the satisfaction that has come to me working with Don Tuski and his associates at Olivet College. The challenges at Olivet are similar to those that confronted me as President of a liberal arts college in Iowa, and are the generic problems of all college and university presidents. Don and I have shared the same difficulties and opportunities contributing to a relationship that allows us to understand one another immediately. If I am any assistance to him, it derives from my having passed through the experiences that he now faces, and depends on my ability to propose solutions to problems that I solved for better or worse, that now confront him.

The college presidency is a unique job. It has as many constituencies as our elected politicians. A direct order that one expects from CEO's of most enterprises, carries substantial risk for a college president. Power is necessary to move any machine forward, and so it is with a college. Yet, the power is generated from several sources. The Board of Trustees has final authority, in theory. Yet it is not exclusive authority. Traditions and events are important power generators. At different times under regulated or exceptional situations, the Faculty, the students, the alumni, a donor, the community, and even politicians take actions and apply pressure that are almost irresistible. It falls to the President to guide, balance, deflect, embrace, or deny in these situations. His authority, at its best, derives from influence. When his early decisions are right, when he demonstrates his ability to deal with tough situations, when he is

known to keep his word, and when he knows when to defer, he is considered trustworthy, and his influence becomes the chief element in moving the institution forward. His authority fits into a velvet glove and he seldom needs to take off the glove to exercise the authority. The Board's most important function is the selection of a President and then to make sure he is functioning successfully. The Board's second most important charge is to assist in reaching the college's financial goals. The President at Olivet College, as at most liberal arts colleges, has two principal objectives; one, to secure the number of students necessary to support the college's academic and athletic programs, and two, to balance the budget each year. Much must be done in academic administration, student life, and development to achieve these two goals. The President and the Board should always concentrate on them. Success will come to the college that does. They are basics like food and shelter.

Before I share with you my view of Olivet College today and outline what I consider priorities for the college, let me briefly describe my perceptions of Olivet's past. I have read President Gorton Riethmiller's history of Olivet and recommend it to you. Perhaps you should make it required reading for new trustees. The college had its best times when it remained faithful to its original commitment to inclusiveness without depending on that commitment alone to draw students. President Brewer and his curriculum and the Olivet Writer's Conference were special and different when compared to other Midwest liberal arts colleges. Someone knew what was good and important when a young George Rickey came to do WPA art on the walls of Dole Hall and teach students. We learn from President Riethmiller about the

bad times. I came away with the impression that they were the result mostly of a President who did not understand fully the nature of his job, and secondarily, of a Board chairman who didn't know his, and at one point radical faculty who the President should not have hired in the first place.

Riethmiller, himself, loved Olivet, had a Presidential persona, enhanced the reputation of the college and himself during a relatively long tenure. There is no written history after his, but by the time Ray Loeschner came I had returned to Michigan, and observed what was happening. Loeschner's administration may be underappreciated. During his time, enrollment increased, the budget was balanced, and Olivet's most important academic buildings were constructed.

The college advanced along a broad front becoming stronger academically as a liberal arts college with good professional programs, continuing in the main stream that was a hallmark of the Riethmiller years.

When Ray Loeschner left, the college, in my opinion, embarked upon a long almost imperceptible decline. It was gradual and well-cloaked so Trustees cannot be blamed for being unaware of it for several years. Finally, a series of small failures combine to make a big one that cannot be ignored. The Trustees acted, only after administrative mistakes that affect you today; mistakes that were compounded in a subsequent administration.

Michael Bassis brought academic energy to the Presidency, and recognition for the college. The Olivet plan initiated during his time was recognized throughout the country. It was right. It was appealing. What was wrong with it? The author, the fundraiser, left after five

years. He left before the plan was well-enough established. He left a plan that was financed to a significant degree by soft money that would run out shortly after he was gone. He was succeeded by a person who obviously did not know how to find the money to sustain the plan, nor have the courage to pare back the staff when the money ran out. Instead, he borrowed money instead of raising it, and introduced the four day week, I understand. The long term debt is greater than it should be, but can be managed. The short term debt is crippling. Both are the legacy of unsuccessful Presidencies.

What conclusions do I draw from Olivet's history and my observations since becoming engaged? First, some of the best years for Olivet were those in which an innovative President initiated a new curricular structure that attracted attention and stimulated academic interest. Unfortunately, they were not sustained because they were unique to an individual leader. Second, Olivet does well when it has good Presidential leadership, and takes its initiatives within a more traditional liberal art college structure. Third, the attempts to remake the college by innovative presidents, I assume, is an attempt to lift Olivet beyond its competition because it often feels behind it; noble, but ultimately unsuccessful. The course for Olivet is the Riethmiller, Loeschner, Tuski course. Offer a curriculum rooted in the liberal arts with tracks that lead to jobs in our present society. Nothing unique about that, but it sells. Be sure that the friendliness that is possible at a small college characterizes yours. Be sure that attention is paid to each student. Keep the campus clean and well-maintained. Run a competitive athletic program and see that art beautifies the campus. It doesn't need to be expensive. And balance

the budget. Four, when I became involved, I found there was an Olivet way of budgeting. Figure out what you want to do and estimate the cost. Then, project that you will have the number of students necessary to pay the tuition you will need. Since tuition doesn't cover all the costs, make up the shortfall with gifts without careful consideration for gift potential. This was the formula that put the college in jeopardy.

As I conclude my remarks, I will comment about the President, discuss what I believe are Board of Trustees' priorities, and priorities for the college.

When I learned that Don Tuski was a candidate for the Presidency, I recommended that he be appointed immediately without making a national search. I asked if he was successful as an interim President and before that as Dean. I learned he was a graduate and dedicated his whole career to Olivet. Then I made my recommendation, though I was only asked unofficially. I made it because I know a small college is better served if the President loves it. I know that Olivet needs an able President who will stay for at least a decade and longer if he can take it. Olivet can thrive with a strong dose of commitment and continuity. After a false start with the wrong leader in the finance office, Don has learned what to suspect, what help he needs from a finance officer, what budget decisions he must control. Too many CFO's in colleges call most of the budget and money shots. It's like a lawyer controlling your enterprise instead of helping you achieve what you want to accomplish. Don knows and is in charge. The old way of budgeting at Olivet has come to an end. Don has demonstrated four essential qualities for a college president. 1) He has the toughness to remove people from their positions when

they are not needed or fail to perform satisfactorily. 2) He has the persistence to find the right people to fill the essential positions. 3) He has the understanding for the necessity of a balanced budget. 4) He is a development President. He knows that he must lead you, the alumni, and the larger constituency to secure the resources that Olivet must have.

As Board of Trustees, I suggest you take most seriously two of your responsibilities at this point in Olivet's history. First, that you make sure Olivet College has a realistic annual budget. At times in the past, the Trustees have not engaged as thoroughly as they should in this task. Second, think of yourselves as a Development Board, as donors, but just as important, as identifiers of potential gifts. In addition you should always be asking questions about programs, projects, and people; giving the President and his staff the opportunity to define for you and themselves the present and future of the college.

In closing, I want to describe for you the major objectives that I see for Olivet.

1) The success of current fund raising will provide the college with three necessary facilities to attract and hold students; the events-athletic center, updated academic facilities, and student housing. I urge you to continue to build student housing. It carries the only debt you can afford. Next, you must find the money to build a student center, a place for students to meet, to organize their extra curricular activities and hang out. Once the student center is in place and you add to student housing, you will have the essential facilities to compete for students.

- 2) There must be a continuous and persistent campaign to raise the endowment to T \$100 million dollars. The essential facilities are a higher priority, but not by much. Endowment income will help retire the short term debt by pumping money into operations. Eventually, there will be enough cash coming from endowment so no short term borrowing is necessary.
- 3) T Establish a financial plan for faculty compensation. You have a number of excellent faculty who stay out of loyalty or for family and geographic reasons. They need to be paid more. This cannot be done, however, by sacrificing a balanced budget.
- 4) T When you are able, add amenities. You have an attractive New England-like campus. A few amenities will enhance it and pay dividends in attracting students and their parents. The proposed art building can be an inviting entrance to the campus. It can include a large public room for receptions, as well as art. It can be a Welcoming Center. What a stunning asset a carillon tower would be at the center of the campus; a \$750,000 project that some will call misspent money, but it will be an enhancement that pays dividends in image and perceptions of the college. Visit Grand Valley or Cornerstone University. When fiscal solvency is on your minds it is difficult to think about amenities, but let them peek into your thoughts once in awhile.

- 5) The demographics of the 18 year old population in the area from which you o draw students are changing and not in Olivet's interests. The college needs a strategy to expand its market. Northern Indiana, northwestern Ohio, and northeastern Illinois are possibilities. You have some ties to New England that might be explored. Your relationship to the Congregational Church might be favorably exploited in the search for students and financial resources.
- 6) I have personally had contact with several faculty who would be welcome additions to the best liberal arts faculties. They provide the core of what you have to offer. For years you will not have the number of faeulty that Albion, Hope or Kalamazoo employ. It is important, therefore, that the professors who you employ be of the highest quality. You will need to be apprised of and support the President and the Dean as they implement a policy of quality control.

By now you may have ascertained that I am not a consultant who came, saw, and doled out advice. I came, saw, and was captured by Olivet and its comet-red president. I feel as close to Olivet as I do to my own alma mater. That makes it tough for me when I watch a Hope-Olivet football game. You have a jewel of a college that has not been well-led too many years of its long history. But it has been well-led often. Olivet is being well-led now by the only kind of person who can do it; a person totally committed to the college, and one who has learned

how to be a college president. I'm proud to be associated with him, and I am proud to be associated with you.