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Over the past several months our country has undergone a historic and groundbreaking societal shift. Between the revitalized and volatile racial tensions, political insecurity and divisiveness, and a global pandemic, the unity once sought by our collective American community seems ever so out of reach. Covid-19 and the ominous nature of much of 2020 has challenged our understanding of what unites a community. Certain crucial aspects like proximity, empathy, or a shared sense of purpose have been hindered by the pandemic and further weakened by societal unrest. You may now be asking how this bleak picture I have just painted relates to my current undertaking as the Texas Oilbirds' vice president; however, I assure you this picture will serve as the basis of our plan moving forward. I firmly believe that any true student organization must in some way act as a microcosm of its larger collegiate and national community. Consequently, while our sense of community faces different challenges than the country at large, we must define who we are and who we want to be in order to truly face the virtual challenges that lie before us.

Oftentimes it can be seen as disrespectful or outrageous to challenge the longstanding traditions of such a prestigious organization as the Texas Oilbirds, but I believe that this year is one that calls for innovation and we must be prepared to answer that call. Our historic work across campus has given our organization credibility amongst much of the student body, and they will look towards us for direction and security as we tackle this semester. Thus, we must not change the heart of what our organization has been -- a socially, academically, and service-oriented student organization -- but rather we must expound upon it. In our pursuit of community we must be a beacon to which the students can look to for acceptance and support in these tumultuous times. For my own experience as an African American young man having gone

to PWIs his entire schooling life I joined the Oilbirds for their inherent sense of inclusion. It is my hope to expand this idea from inclusion to empowerment. Students of all backgrounds and situations need a space to break free of those previous societal shackles which may have hindered them, and I believe the Oilbirds can be the arbiter of this freedom. Now that we have established who we are and our vision of what we can be I think we must understand what brings communities together.

The question of what draws mankind together in community is a historically omnipresent one, as such I will narrow our vision down to two impetuses. I believe groups of people can either unite out of a shared sense of pain or injustice, or out of a shared sense of purpose and optimism for the future. The Oilbirds are in a unique position to channel both of these unifiers beyond the confines of Covid-19. On the one hand, as an organization centered in service, many students will be faced with situations they either personally relate to or have otherwise been acquainted with. The first situation that comes to mind is the growing issue of food insecurity in this country. With the increase in national disasters along the southern coast alongside the challenges presented by the pandemic, communities across the country (particularly in and around Texas) are hurting. Our organization, through social media, open conversation with our members, and virtual fundraisers can serve as a proactive entity on campus working towards addressing this problem. As previously alluded to, our country is in the midst of a revived racial tension. While we are not inherently a social activist organization, it is important to show our members that we are dedicated to their well being and mental health. Consequently, we can channel the anger and fear some of our members may be feeling, by hosting open discussions on certain issues such as police brutality and how to overcome said issues. This will be a crucial necessity in building our community because through this focus t we can turn shared pain into

burning optimism. By reaching beyond the computer screen or socially distanced conversation tables, we can act as a substantial force of stability in our members' lives where they are exposed to a melting pot of cultural struggles as well as cultural beauty. By adding certain creative outlets for a collection of our members we will be able to convert that ominous energy into something beautiful and energizing. For example hosting an art exposé, perhaps called “Oilbirds’ Oil Paints”, where various members present their art work -- paintings, drawings, stories, etc -- via zoom or some other streaming platform might be a way to unite our members through joyous appreciation of our differences. By reaching beyond the basic dictates of our organization into these new and varied realms, we will push ourselves further as an organization and cast a wider net to our members at large.

Beyond social justice and service, it is also crucial for our organization to have purely entertaining outlets. Coming together with friends just for the sake of being together and having fun is certainly one of the most crucial aspects of community building that the virus has hindered. Nonetheless as officers of the prestigious Oilbirds, we will persevere. I believe that despite the challenges these virtual constraints present, they also push us to explore new paths. For example, I believe one social event we could host might be “Throwback TBs” where we invite prominent former Oilbirds back to have a panel discussion with our officers and members. With the hundreds of members we currently have, a virtual platform like zoom will actually prove to be more advantageous for our members than having to cut capacity for a certain room. I also believe a tournament style event, such as a video game competition, would be greatly facilitated by our virtual environment. No matter what the game or games be, we could host a virtual “TB Finals Night” where all the games are streamed virtually for the members to watch and comment on together. Moreover, the best entertainment also serves to help us grow as

individuals. Thus, hosting an event such as “TB Talks” where we host a movie night via Netflix party and watch a variety of categorical films followed by a virtual discussion the next week would be a great opportunity to exercise this balance. By making use of those various virtual tools we have at our disposal, group me, instagram, text messaging, etc along with our reimagined vision as a student organization we will surely build a strong community of Oilbirds.

I do not pretend to claim that these shifts in our fundamental direction, as well as the implementation of these new virtual events will be a difficult undertaking. However, our organization’s purpose is too great for us to shrink back from the challenge. We have a great number of our UT community counting on us. Furthermore, with our success in navigating the virtual setbacks before us we will indirectly strengthen other UT communities by serving as an example for other student organizations. We are truly in a marvelous time right now full of difficulties and pain, however, the chances for innovation and unity such a time presents are even more apparent. I believe that we can be a truly historic Officer Board across the 50 year establishment of the Texas Oilbirds. Moreover, the strides we make this year in the face of unprecedented adversity in building our community and uplifting our members will strengthen this organization unimaginably once we return to a state of normalcy.