

The Columbus Dispatch

Ohio's Greatest Online Newspaper

Romney tells students he is the 'right guy' to create jobs

By Joe Hallett Columbus Dispatch

Friday April 27, 2012

Hoping to win over young voters from President Barack Obama, Mitt Romney told Otterbein University students today that his presidency would give them more hope for success in life.

Spending more than two hours on the campus of the United Methodist Church-affiliated school in Westerville, Romney derided Obama's policies as job-stifling, saying he knows better how to create jobs and offer a brighter future for young people.

Speaking for 40 minutes to about 250 students and faculty in the auditorium of the university's Battelle Fine Arts Center, Romney mixed a scholarly treatise on the economy with a scathing attack against Obama, accusing the Democratic president of fostering a "government dominated society."

The former Massachusetts governor and presumptive Republican presidential nominee said that Obama is squelching job-development with higher taxes and more regulations on businesses, resulting in fewer jobs for college graduates.

"If your priority is to punish people, Barack Obama is the right guy to vote for," Romney said. "If your priority is to get more jobs, I'm the right guy to vote for."

Appearing for the first time during the campaign with Gov. John Kasich, Romney joined seven seniors for box lunches of hamburgers during a 20-minute roundtable discussion before delivering his economic address. Notably, Romney made no mention during the Otterbein visit of any plans as president to fund higher education or make college more affordable.

Romney's visit to the 3,000-student Otterbein campus came at the end of a week in which Obama had visited universities in North Carolina, Colorado and Iowa to tout his plans for college affordable, including by preserving low interest rates on student loans.

More than 7 million students who need loans to attend college this year face a doubling of the current 3.4 percent interest rate on popular Stafford loans unless Congress votes to keep the lower rate in place.

Sen. Sherrod Brown of Ohio this week introduced a bill to freeze the loan rate at 3.4 percent for a year, a move that Romney supports.

But the loan freeze has been stalled by a disagreement on how to pay for it. Brown and other Democrats advocate an extra tax targeted at law and lobbying firms, while Republicans have proposed diverting money earmarked to promote wellness in the Affordable Health Care Act, which they call "Obamacare."

In the roundtable discussion, Romney did not reveal a platform for higher education, but funding it and making it affordable clearly were concerns on the minds of students he and Kasich ate hamburgers with.

“I would like to see our president put more funds in higher education,” said Jeff Fabus, an actuarial science and math major who planned to attend graduate school in Indiana.

Dan DuBruil, a biochemistry major from Plymouth, N.H., told Romney: “What I really want is somebody who’s going to put money into scientific research.”

But it was Brent Ford, a broadcast media production major from Westerville due to graduate on May 20, who expressed to Romney and Kasich a more immediate concern: “Right now, I’m jobless. I’ll take anything, anywhere.”

Romney expressed sympathy, noting that only about half of college graduates in the country are finding jobs in their majors.

As has become routine for both parties, Romney’s appearance was bookended by protests, press conferences and conference calls from the Democratic Party and allied groups. They lumped Romney and Kasich together, accusing the Republicans of advocating economic and education policies harmful to the middle class and college students.

About a dozen placard-carrying and chanting protesters from the Service Employees International Union District 1199 gathered outside the event, expressing their outrage over Senate Bill 5, an attempt by Kasich and GOP lawmakers to roll back collective bargaining rights.

“Mitt Romney and John Kasich are a dangerous duo for Ohio’s middle class,” said Becky Williams, president of the SEIU local.

Referring to Kasich’s low-approval ratings in polls, Mike Gillis, spokesman for Ohio AFL-CIO, said it was “interesting that Romney finally decided to sit down with Gov. Kasich. They have both been on the wrong side of issues affecting working people and students. If Romney were to govern as president the way Kasich has as governor, working people will suffer.”

Westerville has emerged as somewhat of a destination for presidential candidates. Obama and Hillary Clinton held dueling events at separate Westerville high schools during their 2008 battle for the Democratic nomination, and John McCain, the GOP presidential nominee four years ago, drew 6,000 to a rally in the Rike Center at Otterbein two weeks before the election.

That Romney spent the better part of an afternoon in Westerville, and Obama will kickoff his national re-election campaign May 5 with a rally at Ohio State University, make sense strategically, according to Mike Dawson, an elections statistics expert in Columbus.

“The numbers would indicate that the Columbus media market is the likely battleground for the state in 2012, so it’s no surprise that Romney is here and Obama is opening his national campaign for president in this market,” Dawson said.

The 19-county Columbus media market favored GOP nominees in five of the last six presidential elections, but Obama did 12.8 percentage points better in the market than the Democratic nominee in the previous five presidential races combined, the highest differential of any media market in Ohio.

“Winning the Columbus media market is critical to Obama’s chances of carrying the state,” Dawson said.