



## LIBERAL EDUCATION: THE FOUNDATION

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*Gary Russi*

Fifty years ago, Oakland's original benefactress—Matilda Dodge Wilson—donated \$2 million and 1,500 acres of land so that a university could be established in Oakland County. With this gift, Mrs. Wilson said: “I believe deeply in tradition as long as it means progress and advancement. I believe in history, if knowledge of the past helps face the challenge of the future.”

A year later, a group of eminent scholars and business people came together for the Meadow Brook Seminars, the meetings that laid the educational foundation for what was to become Oakland University. They were all asked this question: “How would you go about developing a program which will ensure that the students at this new institution are, in fact, liberally educated regardless of the field of specialization?” This confluence of great minds created the initial educational blueprint from which we are still working today, just as Mrs. Wilson set the core institutional values that still guide us, 50 years later.

As president of Oakland University, I am ever mindful of how this university began, and how it has evolved over the years into a world-class institution of higher learning. I think of the sweat equity and brainpower that thousands of faculty, students and staff have expended over the years to make Oakland the truly remarkable place it is today. And, I think about how prescient our founders were when they set this university on a

course that was focused on a liberal arts education, first and foremost.

Today, the liberal arts are the foundation of any degree conferred by Oakland University; this is still the bedrock educational principle that guides our mission. An Oakland University graduate may have a degree in electrical engineering, but she will also have critical thinking skills, an appreciation of the fine arts, and the ability to write well, among many other key aptitudes that a well-rounded liberal arts education provides.

Today's global economy demands that graduates have specialized skills and knowledge in their area of interest, of course, but also insists that graduates can write well, have analytic skills and the ability to adapt to new technologies as they emerge, and, perhaps most importantly, have human relations skills. Technically speaking, what we can teach students in 2007 about computer hardware, for example, would quickly become obsolete if not for the liberal arts base that involves them in adapting and integrating knowledge, skills that cut across the disciplines. Graduates without these key abilities risk being left behind by the fast pace of the real world.

This liberal foundation is enriched—if not exemplified—by research experiences that give our students first crack at discovering new knowledge for themselves and for their future fields, in everything from anthropology to quantum mechanics. Our students, with mentoring from faculty, adapt a scientific, analytical approach to problem-solving. To me, it is not the outcome of the research that most benefits an undergraduate; it is the “a-ha” moment, the spark of discovery. Research in labs alongside our dedicated faculty mentors is an ideal setting for such moments. Here, students become personally invested in projects that are born from an idea and transform into physical, visible experiments. Ultimately, these projects have the potential to change the world, but if they can expand one mind, the effort was worthwhile.

The real payoff of a college education is self-discovery. In essence, students are learning how to both live in and shape the world, a skill that will serve them throughout their lives. I think

Mrs. Wilson would agree that Oakland's approach to education, first and foremost, teaches students to actively seek new pathways to progress and advancement, and indeed the future.

With continuing funding challenges, we must continue to be creative in terms of attracting resources so that this university can be the best it can be. Partnerships with business and the community at large are vital to our success. They allow us to better prepare our graduates for the next chapter in their lives by offering them experience with the ever-evolving world of technology, and exposure to business, health care, education and engineering. Our recently announced partnership with Beaumont Hospitals to create a private medical school on our campus is a prime example of the importance of partnerships, and reaching out to the world around us.

Personally speaking, I feel honored and humbled that I have been able to be a part of Oakland University's grand legacy of accomplishment and growth. In the 11 years that I have served Oakland as its president, I have marveled at the creative minds at work, sowing the seeds of success that come from a combination of talent and commitment.

I often think about Matilda Dodge Wilson and her original vision for this university. I think about the great minds that, in the beginning, came together to forge the original educational roadmap for this university. I think about the four individuals who served in the Office of the President before me, and how their tremendous work and commitment to Oakland helped the university evolve into the outstanding institution it is today. Every day, I hope the work I do for Oakland University is informed by the sage and visionary legacy these individuals left for us. I hope the work I do stands as testament to Mrs. Wilson's idea of progress, and that it continues to perpetuate Oakland's evolution.

What stands out the most for me, however, are the people . . . the students, faculty and staff that give this university its signature identity, its essence. Our founders would agree. I like to believe that 50 years on, we are still paying tribute to Matilda Dodge Wilson's original vision for Oakland University.