



# OAKLAND'S HISTORY FOR BEGINNERS

One Professor's Perspective

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Please excuse my reading this history rather than just talking to you informally. I've been acculturated to Oakland's teaching modules, the shortest of which runs 67 minutes, and am afraid of running over my scheduled time unless I fall back on conference mode and a written paper. This presentation is something I developed six or seven years ago for New Faculty Orientation and that I modify slightly each year. I'll try to adapt it a bit for you, as O.U. veterans, but please remember that its basic purpose is to welcome newcomers.

When I joined the Oakland University faculty in 1969, the university was celebrating its tenth birthday. I remember sitting at a new faculty orientation session in the Kresge Library listening to Chancellor Durwood Varner delivering his well-honed rendition of "The Oakland Story." Now we have many more years to remember, so to give you some historical perspective I'll try to distill both his story and my experience to get at the essence of this institution: aspiration modulated by irony.

Woody's story always began with the 1956 visit of Matilda Wilson to East Lansing, where she met with John Hannah, president of Michigan State University, to offer her and her husband's 1,400-acre Rochester estate as the site of a branch

university affiliated with MSU. That was a time of tremendous expansion of American higher education while the United States braced itself to educate the baby boomers and just before the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, and the Wilsons' proposal was warmly received by MSU leaders and the Michigan legislature. Woody Varner, then an MSU administrator, became chancellor of a new university that welcomed its first faculty and students in 1959. He invited academic and business leaders of national stature for two weeks of Meadow Brook seminars to guide an institution that would play a distinctively experimental role among state universities. Those seminars brought disparate advice. On the one hand, Michigan State University-Oakland should be a leader in providing public liberal arts education and should, in particular, place both western institutions and international studies at the heart of its undergraduate curriculum; on the other, it should immediately develop professional schools in education, business, and engineering. It should provide its students with a no-frills studious environment free of distractions from football and fraternities. The chancellor should recruit a faculty of young Ph.D.s educated in world-renowned universities and entrust them with the major role in developing curriculum, policies, and institutional structures. Yet this pioneer university would serve a chiefly local community. Even before the first degree programs began in 1959, truly no-frills continuing education classes were offered in the Wilsons' farm buildings with Matilda Wilson herself enrolled in a course that met in her chicken barn while the couple's gift of \$2 million financed construction of North Foundation Hall. In September 1959, a charter faculty hand-picked by Chancellor Varner on recommendation of graduate deans of nationally prominent universities met an incoming class of 570 students—some of them academic adventurers drawn from the east coast by national publicity touting MSUO as “the Harvard of the midwest” but most of them local high school graduates willing to take a chance on a new institution. When enrollment fell short, according to one member of the

charter faculty, the admissions officer recruited the rest of the class from area pool-halls.

Even this brief account reminds us of mixed expectations among those professors, students, and administrators who prided themselves on being pioneers in an exciting new academic venture. On the one hand, our heritage of private benefaction, the collaborative engagement of faculty in interdisciplinary teaching and curriculum planning (in the first year, there were no departments, never mind schools), the emphasis on liberal arts and the hope that general education would suffuse all four years of undergraduate instruction fostered expectations among many people that this would mature into a small, elite, liberal arts public institution devoted to undergraduates. On the other hand, the extensive campus, the burgeoning demographics of Oakland and Macomb Counties, the affiliation with Michigan State (not only a research university but the state's land-grant institution), and the hiring of faculty members strongly imbued with the values of their graduate school mentors meant that others believed themselves to be building a comprehensive research university that would find its destiny in graduate programs and professional schools. There was an ironic mismatch too between faculty aspirations and the reality of the student population; in the first year, a huge proportion of the entering class flunked out and professors went through a period of intense rethinking of instructional goals and methods. Some marathon Senate meetings led to a sort-of consensus that this would be a university committed to providing top-rate, serious education for a population of students often unprepared for academic challenges and that it would take advantage of the flexibility open to a new enterprise to find creative ways to achieve traditional educational goals. Oakland would combine strength in the liberal arts with development in scientific, technological, and professional fields.

By the university's tenth anniversary, when I arrived, it had an array of buildings: the two Foundation Halls, the Kresge Library, Dodge Hall, Hannah Hall, Wilson Hall, the

Oakland Center, several residence halls, and a health center under construction. It also had the Meadow Brook Theatre, the Meadow Brook Music Festival, and an Academy of Dramatic Art—all promoted by Woody Varner as the aesthetic equivalent of football in terms of benefit to the local community. Oakland had three professional schools in addition to the College of Arts and Sciences, and the College had a wide array of departments. The university now offered master's programs. Faculty in virtually all disciplines were still teaching freshman exploratories and senior colloquia, while the impulse toward a small, experimental college had resulted in the formation of three inner units known as Charter College, New College, and Allport College by which undergraduates could accomplish their general education in close interaction with faculty mentors. Alumni were beginning to honor us by their achievements, especially the remarkably large percentage of early graduates who went on to earn Ph.D.s. Although there was some agitation for academic reform during the period of student upheavals around the country, the only student demonstration I witnessed in my first year was one that took place on a Friday afternoon when students gathered outside Wilson Hall with pickets inscribed "Keep Woody Varner"—apparently to deter him from going. Varner left to become chancellor of the University of Nebraska system just before the legislature granted Oakland University its independent charter in the summer of 1970, thereby freeing it to enter upon doctoral education.

The next two decades, in the presidencies of Donald O'Dowd and Joseph Champagne, were a period of coming to terms with limitation after the exuberance of early Oakland. Growth continued with construction of Varner and O'Dowd Halls and married student housing as well as the doubling of Kresge Library; yet there were still vestiges of the Wilsons' farm in the barn students used as a theater and the creamery that housed various student organizations. By this time, however, it had become clear that there were limits on institutional freedom to experiment in that the university was subject to legisla-

tive pressures, to changing and generally murky criteria for state appropriations, to accreditation agencies, to student concerns about transfer equivalencies, to regional and national trends in higher education, and to faculty anxieties reflected in unionization. Student ambitions shifted from the humanities and education to career tracks they thought more marketable in business, computer science, nursing and health. The inner colleges merged to form New Charter College before collapsing entirely. But, by the end of the seventies, the College of Arts and Sciences launched the Honors College, and in the early eighties the university adopted a new, university-wide general education system. Doctoral programs developed along with the Education Specialist degree. By this time, Oakland faculty in many disciplines were achieving national and international recognition for scholarly achievements, while the faculty's original impulse to include undergraduates in scientific research retained vigor even with the growth of graduate programs. There was still no football, but the intermural athletic program grew and fraternities and sororities were approved—largely in response to pressures from minority students. The university fostered ties to local corporate, governmental, educational, and artistic agencies as a way of expressing the land-grant ethos Oakland inherited from Michigan State. We tried to reach diverse student populations by teaching night classes, opening off-campus sites, and introducing the Bachelor of General Studies program. Oakland's 1988 self-study for North Central re-accreditation documented that this remained an institution dedicated to providing exceptional undergraduate educational opportunities to students largely from this geographic area and often from families without college experience and that it was already a powerhouse of research—with a record of faculty scholarly productivity way beyond what could be expected of a university of its size, age, and resources.

From the 1990s, in the presidencies of Sandra Packard and now Gary Russi, there has been impressive growth in the physical plant. Among recent additions to academic facilities

are Pawley Hall, Elliott Hall, the Science and Engineering Building, and a handsome Honors College complex. New facilities for student life include the Sports and Recreation Building, apartment complex, and parking structure. We have recently been enjoying a much expanded Oakland Center and technologically updated classrooms in our older buildings. The university's first major development campaign is now raising funds for scholarships, a writing center, arts facilities, the library, and many other good causes to benefit this academic community in visionary ways. Although Oakland retains its reputation as an academically serious institution, it has discarded its original "no-frills" approach to student life. There is still no football, but our swimmers and basketball teams now play in Division I as the Golden Grizzlies. Student enrollments are up in both graduate and undergraduate programs, and we are coping with pressures of growth. In the early nineties, faculty, students, staff, and alumni engaged in an ambitious process of institutional planning that resulted in our Strategic Plan, which is now being vigorously implemented. Following that came a series of "Creating the Future" task forces and a process of envisioning "Oakland 2010."

This has been a very hurried history. Most of you know more than I do about the university's development, and you know that you can refresh your memories by chatting with your colleagues or perhaps by reading the 1971 book by David Riesman and Christopher Jencks, *Academic Values and Mass Education: The Early Years of Oakland and Monteith*. Or you can watch videos of the *Oakland University Chronicles*, a project of historical recovery in which Paul and Alice Tombouljian have interviewed representative persons active in the university's early history and recorded those interviews. What I want to do now is to point out some connecting threads from this story. One is a somewhat schizophrenic sense of history that Oakland University shares with other American institutions, this being a nation described by Richard Hofstadter as "born in perfection and aspiring to progress." You will find people here who place Oakland's finest hour in its opening. Shortly after my arrival,

when I asked a somewhat more experienced colleague when he had joined our faculty, he responded “same as everyone else: one year after the Golden Age.” But there is also pride in our development and excitement about the future.

It helps to know, as we engage in Senate debates and similar discussions, that right from the start there have been mixed aspirations for Oakland’s destiny and that a certain healthy tension is built into our ethos. It reasserted itself in recent planning for the new general education program for all undergraduates that is gradually being introduced. We still have faculty colleagues who strive for rigorous academic excellence chiefly in undergraduate education, who feel nostalgia for the small classes of early years, and who make heroic efforts to sustain a tradition of individual attention that has characterized Oakland from the start and had empowering effects on our graduates. And there are others as fully dedicated to graduate education and research or to public service and contributions to the economic, social, and artistic betterment of this region. We seek a Phi Beta Kappa chapter to recognize excellence in liberal arts undergraduate offerings even as we develop innovative doctoral programs. Yet resources are never adequate to our dreams, especially in this time of state funding cutbacks, and we are still very much in process. What we all have in common is aspiration as betokened in our university emblem with its image of the sail of Ulysses and its motto from Dante exhorting us to pursue virtue and wisdom.

A challenge Oakland University still faces is that of self-representation as we try to strengthen our perceived identity—something that can be assisted to some extent by public relations efforts but depends ultimately on accomplishments of our faculty and our very best graduates. We aren’t easily classified. Even within this state, the local community often confuses us with Oakland Community College, and the Michigan legislature has trouble figuring out how we relate to other state universities. We aren’t really a regional university like Central, Eastern, Western, and Northern—all of which developed from teachers’ colleges, though we share their commitment to local

service. We aren't research universities to quite the same extent as Michigan, Michigan State, Wayne, and Michigan Tech though we rank just below them in terms of research productivity. Nor are we directly comparable to the Universities of Michigan at Flint and Dearborn, which—though founded about the same time—remain branch campuses of a larger institution. We will certainly never be the small, elite college for under a thousand students envisaged by some of our charter faculty, but we won't be satisfied until we are recognized for offering the best public undergraduate education in Michigan to students willing to avail themselves of opportunities and attention we offer, nor will we be satisfied until we are internationally acclaimed for contributions to knowledge. We remain hopeful, ambitious, and impatient with anything that limits our aspirations.

And what about that old publicity release about “the Harvard of the midwest?” Well, colonial American literature is one of my teaching and research areas, and I am a student of Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*, an epic history of New England written at the end of the seventeenth century. The central section of this massive work provides a history of Harvard as Puritan New England's greatest source of pride. Its founders started right out defining it as a university rather than a college—and a residential university at that. But whereas Oakland opened with twenty-four faculty members, Harvard began with just one who was to tutor the young men in all subjects but was soon dismissed for beating his charges. His wife, who provided food service, was sent packing too for starving the young men. Harvard also began with a clearer mission than Oakland's: to provide Massachusetts Bay with a learned ministry when its original clergy should lie in the dust. Thus, it was especially awkward when an early president, himself a minister, got discharged for heresy. And, when they finally developed local leadership with Harvard's appointment of its first alumnus-president, students abetted by community leaders rose up in rebellion and drove him out. Whenever I feel at all discouraged about events at Oakland, I think of Cot-

ton Mather. By contrast with Harvard's early history, Oakland's is far more respectable and heartening. We are proud of our origins and hopeful about our future and tremendously grateful to all of you who laid its foundations and created an institution so lively and hopeful for our new colleagues and students.

I hope we, emeriti and senior colleagues, can convey to newcomers the confidence Woody Varner instilled in Oakland's early faculty, assuring every new arrival that her or his dreams were the university's future. This university is still relatively young, and it provides abundant opportunities for everyone to get involved in academic governance. We remain Pioneers even when, to borrow a phrase from Emerson, "we grizzle every day." You have built a promising university where people and ideas still thrive. I myself have found happiness at Oakland; in fact, I married one of the other new assistant professors who sat near me at that orientation session so long ago. We have felt rewarded here both personally and professionally. So I'm happy each year to welcome new faculty and grateful for the chance to say thanks to you today for pursuing your own teaching, research, and service goals and—along with them—Oakland University's still boundless aspirations.