

President Russi

50th Anniversary Celebration Kickoff for Faculty and Staff

January 5, 2007

Good morning. Welcome to our official kickoff for Oakland University's 50th anniversary. You may have noticed as you drove in this morning that our new outdoor banners are beginning to go up around campus. We appreciate the help of our grounds maintenance crew in hanging these banners. Here we have the 50th commemorative banner design on display.

I hope you enjoyed breakfast. A special thank you to Chartwells for donating a portion of our food costs this morning. I hope you are all well rested and energized for the new year ahead and the opportunities that await us in our 50th year. We have many exciting plans in store as we take time this calendar year to reflect on how far we've come as a young university first starting out in 1957.

Back then, our emerging campus was billed as an "unusual adventure in education" by then Michigan State University President John Hannah. This new adventure, which at the time, was called Michigan State University – Oakland, began with the generous donation of one of the world's most distinguished mansions and estates, Meadow Brook Farms. This, along with a \$2 million dollar gift was given by Matilda and Alfred Wilson for the purpose of establishing a new center of learning that would become Oakland University.

Top scholars and presidents of universities and some of the nation's most distinguished business leaders worked to develop the principles that made MSU-O a distinctly new kind of institution. They all agreed. They wanted to build a school which moved away from the trend of higher education at the time to specialize, and to return to a more fundamental liberal arts objective. In the years that have passed since then, we remain committed to their original vision. An individual who safeguarded that vision during Oakland's first decade was Woody Varner. I was fortunate to know Woody and to work with him early in my career.

To those around him, Woody became the preeminent symbol of the fledgling university – an accomplishment that today remains his legacy. The first class unfolded with 570 freshmen who Woody called "the real pioneers." Varner personally hand-picked our first faculty, by writing to more than 150 graduate schools asking for names of their ablest young educators.

250 applications were received and screened down to the original 25 selected. The average age of the faculty was only 33 years old. Woody referred to them as the faculty "with the greatest amount of enthusiasm in the land." Woody loved Oakland and believed it had a bright future in part due to its location in the burgeoning auto world and a growing population base in Oakland and Macomb counties.

Manufacturers began to move north of Detroit after World War II. The famed Technical Center of General Motors was within 20 miles of the new campus; and Chrysler, Ford and others had pushed out and were producing missile components and automobile parts in factories in close

proximity to campus. And, more recently, Chrysler moved its headquarters right in our back yard.

When I came into the picture in 1993, in the footsteps of presidents Packard, Champagne, O'Dowd, and of course, Woody Varner, I perceived Oakland to be a high quality institution.

As I moved into the presidency in 1995, in an interim role, we began to focus our efforts on growth and an external focus for progress and advancement. In those years so much has been accomplished. We continue to match innovation with opportunity to prepare student leaders, advance research frontiers and engage with business, educational and community partners for the benefit of our region.

Just like those first faculty members, I am most proud of the superb quality of the faculty and staff who have re-positioned Oakland as a university on the move. And, I am equally proud of the students whose hands I shake each year in cap and gown as they receive their diplomas, and step into society and the workplace with the benefit of an Oakland education.

This is the most gratifying... to realize that we have all contributed to the personal development of our students... in keeping with the founding vision of our predecessors.