

# Oakland University Chronicles

*Interview with Donald O'Dowd*

## Donald D. O'Dowd

Transcript of Oral History Interview

Interview date: September 17, 1999

Interviewer: Harvey Burdick



Supported by

Oakland University Foundation

Office of the President, Oakland University

Department of Chemistry, Oakland University

Published by Oakland University

Rochester, Michigan

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# **Oakland University Chronicles**

## **DONALD DAVY O'DOWD**

Date of birth: January 23, 1927

### **EDUCATION**

B.A.	Dartmouth College	1951
A.M.	Harvard University	1955
Ph.D.	Harvard University	1957

### **OAKLAND UNIVERSITY**

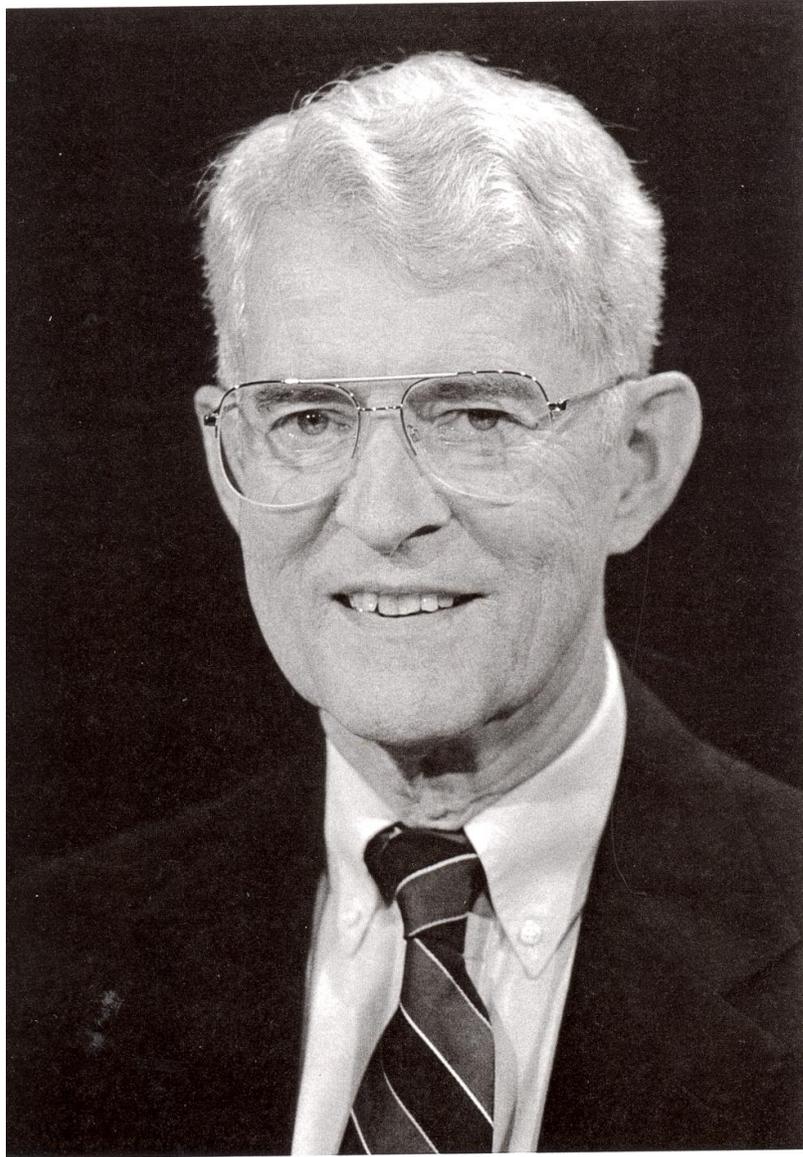
1960	Associate Professor of Psychology Assistant to the Dean of Faculty for Social Sciences
1961 - 1965	Dean of the University
1965 - 1970	Provost
1966	Professor of Psychology
1968 - 1970	Dean of Graduate Study
1970 - 1979	President
1979	Resigned

### **SINCE LEAVING OAKLAND UNIVERSITY**

1980 - 1984	Executive Vice Chancellor State University of New York System
1984 - 1990	President, University of Alaska Statewide System
1990 - 1995	Chairman, United States Arctic Research Commission
1991 - 1998	Senior Consultant, Association of Governing Boards of Colleges and Universities

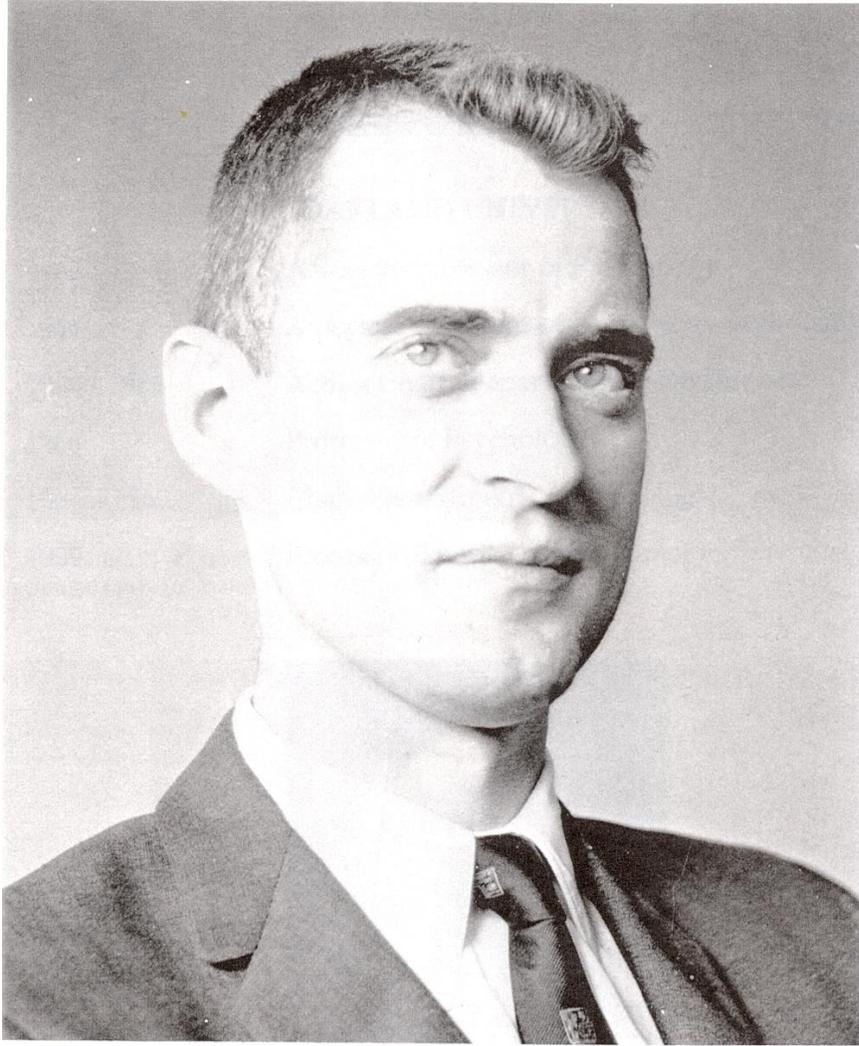
### **CURRENT OCCUPATION**

Retired



**Photograph of Donald D. O'Dowd**  
September 17, 1999

Photographer: Dennis Collins



Donald D. O'Dowd, *Dean of the University*

**Photograph of Donald D. O'Dowd**  
MSUO Yearbook 1963

**Oakland University Chronicles**  
**Interview with DONALD D. O'DOWD**  
**September 17, 1999**

HARVEY BURDICK: I'm Harvey Burdick, I used to be a professor in the department of psychology but now I'm retired. I will be doing the interviewing today. Today's interview may well be the last interview of the Oakland University Chronicles project, supported in its third year by a special university allocation. The goal of the project is to collect oral histories dealing with the beginnings of Oakland University, called at that time MSUO.

Today is September the 17th, 1999, and we are in Varner Hall on the campus of Oakland University. Today is a special day, since it is the 40th anniversary of Oakland's first convocation. It is also special in that we have Donald O'Dowd as our guest. Don came to MSU-Oakland in 1960 as an associate professor of psychology, and as an assistant to the dean of faculty for social science. In 1961 he was appointed dean of the university, and in 1965 became provost. While provost he also served as dean of graduate study. In 1970 he was appointed by the Board to be president and served in that capacity until 1980, when he left Oakland to become executive vice chancellor of the State University of New York [SUNY] system.

He served the New York State system for four years, after which he became president of the Alaska statewide system of higher education. He was president of the Alaska system from 1984 to 1990, and then became chairman of the United States Arctic Research Commission, serving in that capacity until 1995. I suppose in order to avoid being idle, Don also served as senior consultant to the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, from 1991 to 1998. It is difficult to believe, but he has finally retired. It is obvious that President O'Dowd was a major player in the early design and development of Oakland University.

Welcome, Don, and thank you for coming and sharing your memories.

DONALD O'DOWD: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here. We'll see how the memories unfold.

HARVEY BURDICK: Perhaps we can begin with your telling a little about yourself before you came to Oakland. I know you studied philosophy at Dartmouth and got your B.A. there. And then what happened?

DONALD O'DOWD: I'm a New Hampshire native, but I quickly left that part of the world—it's a great place to be from, I decided. I worked on my doctorate at Harvard until 1955, then went to Wesleyan in Connecticut as an instructor in psychology and got my doctorate in '57. Then they made me an assistant professor—I got promoted. The next year at Wesleyan, I took on an additional assignment as acting dean of freshmen, which meant I was the dean of students for the freshmen, of whom there were about 220 in those days. You know, those were the days of small liberal arts colleges, so it was kind of fun. I knew every one of the freshmen. My wife and I entertained them and got to know them and we looked over them, they were our kids. So from there, I came to Oakland in 1960, being attracted here by Woody Varner.

HARVEY BURDICK: You're moving pretty fast for me. I know that after you graduated from Dartmouth, you were on a Fulbright [scholarship]. You were a Fulbright scholar, and you went to what, Edinburgh?

DONALD O'DOWD: I went to the University of Edinburgh for a year, studied philosophy there. It was a great experience. My tutor said, "You shouldn't spend too much time on the campus, you ought to get familiar with Britain and Scotland and the continent. Make full use of your time here and be sure that you don't concentrate overly on your studies." That was the British educational attitude. I liked it very much.

HARVEY BURDICK: I take it that you took him up on it?

DONALD O'DOWD: I did, yes.

HARVEY BURDICK: Also, I remember from our brief conversation, your having met [your future wife] Jan onboard ship. You traveled a lot, commuting between Leeds and Edinburgh.

DONALD O'DOWD: Yes, we met on the ship going over. There were 300 Fulbright scholars who were gathered together in New York and put aboard a ship, and sent off either to the continent or to Britain. [Jan and I] met there and then got to know one another better during that year in Britain. She was at Leeds,

which is about 200 miles south of Edinburgh. But, you know, the British know how to get around. She would write a note to me in the evening and I'd have it at 7:00 in the morning. British mail was very good. Also there was high-speed train transportation between lots of places.

HARVEY BURDICK: You were interested in philosophy, but then when you came back and went to Harvard, you changed the subject matter to social psychology. Why did you do that? I'm just curious.

DONALD O'DOWD: It was pretty clear to me that the demand for philosophers was fairly limited. Most universities had one or two, and if you did a little quick count, you realized the job opportunities were limited. And psychology was a wonderfully expanding field at that time, as you well know. So it looked an awful lot more attractive, and I was interested in the subject matter to begin with. I had taken a lot of psychology courses as an undergraduate—I didn't major in it, I majored in philosophy—and the array of psychology courses at Dartmouth was fairly limited anyway, as far as I was concerned.

The other thing is that I had the strange experience of having a number of friends, including a next door neighbor, who were interested in and went into philosophy. I kept comparing myself with these people, thinking, "They are so bright, there's so much insight, they're so penetrating; obviously I don't belong in the same league with these guys." It turned out [later] that virtually every one of these friends, starting with my next door neighbor, had become international figures in philosophy, so I had this terribly biased sample of extraordinary, gifted people. So I had measured myself against a sample that was not a fair comparison—these were not average philosophy students or scholars, ultimately. So that was the second factor that determined for me that maybe psychology—and you know psychologists are not of the same intellectual caliber as philosophers—so psychology was, in the competitive sense, a more reasonable place to be.

HARVEY BURDICK: So right from the early period you were looking for a growth industry, and psychology is much more so than philosophy.

DONALD O'DOWD: I could recognize where job opportunities might be, and it was a good choice.

HARVEY BURDICK: So you came to Wesleyan before you had the Ph.D. in hand. You were an instructor. I remember those places, they didn't give you the title of assistant professor unless you had a Ph.D.

DONALD O'DOWD: Had to get the doctorate, that was the challenge.

HARVEY BURDICK: You taught in the department, and you got to be working with Dave Beardslee. You were an old friend of Dave's, a colleague of Dave's and I'd certainly like his name to be part of the Chronicles project as well. You worked with Dave and what kind of things were you working on?

DONALD O'DOWD: Dave was at the department when I arrived and I think he was the youngest member, in terms of service, of the faculty at that time. We kind of developed a bond very quickly, and he gave me a lot of pointers and guidance on the department and the institution. So I got to know him socially early on, and got to enjoy Dave and Betty [his wife].

Then, as time went on, Dave and I got to teaching several courses jointly in social psychology. We split the lectures and met the sections individually, and discovered that we had a lot of fun. So we just put the course together with the two of us as the instructors. As time went on, we got involved more and more in research. The research in which we were involved was a study of the attitudes of students, what we call the images of occupations: students' perceptions of the various fields of endeavor into which they might enter as graduates.

Then this sort of grew. Our interest was in higher education and this was part of it, really. This was a way of understanding students and their motives, and their expectations of the future. We had originally thought of trying to do a study of professors, and decided that we were too young in stature to get the kind of access we needed to faculty members—not at our institution, but nationally—to do a study that would be meaningful. So we figured we'd put that one off for a few years and work with students initially. The student work evolved and we began to get research grants from various places and more and more funding for it, so we were able to hire personnel. You know how this burgeons, and pretty soon we had a pretty expansive enterprise underway.

HARVEY BURDICK: Those were pretty exciting years, if I remember. There were lots of new ideas on the ways we taught, and at Wesleyan you were using some recent ideas by David Riesman. I understand you were using *The Lonely Crowd*, and that led to your making an invitation.

DONALD O'DOWD: Actually, Dave Beardslee and Joe Greenbaum were using *The Lonely Crowd* in a course, and I must have taken over that course, one of those I assumed as a new teacher. I had not read Riesman previous to that time. So I used that book in the first course that I taught, and found Riesman intriguing in terms of his outlook—as you know, he wasn't a sociologist, he was a lawyer.

HARVEY BURDICK: He was a sort of a Renaissance man.

DONALD O'DOWD: Right, he's an attorney, had been Assistant District Attorney for New York, was a law clerk with Justice Brandeis. So his background was in the law. He worked in one of the major federal agencies during World War II, and then afterwards went to Chicago in that committee—I can't remember the name of it—a very distinguished group of faculty members, many of whom were not in the disciplines in which they were trained.

Somewhere in the second or third year that I was at Wesleyan, the student body invited him down to give a speech.

HARVEY BURDICK: Riesman was Harvard at the time that you were at Wesleyan?

DONALD O'DOWD: Yes, he was.

HARVEY BURDICK: So, if I recall your earlier mention, you had this great idea of just having him come on down and participate in some lectures.

DONALD O'DOWD: There was the usual student-organized lecture series, so I had recommended to some of the students that he might be a good lecturer—and I had not ever heard him talk before. And, of course, he's a superb speaker. So he came down at the invitation of the students, and I was his host because I had used the book in my courses. The students had read it and enjoyed it, they liked the book.

He gave a lecture, and then he did a whole series of seminars. He visited a number of courses and talked to the students in courses. He was just gifted with students and he had the ability to make every student believe that the question he or she asked—and they were all “he” in those days—was a brilliant question. If it was a terrible question, he’d rephrase it so it was a good one. So he just charmed the student body, and I got to know him at that point. Then, for some reason, our relationship developed over time, and we got to be close friends over the years.

HARVEY BURDICK: You were teaching but you were also involved a bit in administration, as you were dean of freshmen. I don’t know if that was a factor or just pure accident, but you were telling us about being invited to a seminar.

DONALD O’DOWD: Yes, I was still over in Connecticut at that point. Sometime in early 1959, I got an invitation from Dave Riesman to make a presentation on what was then called the college plan at Wesleyan. Now Wesleyan, with its 750 students, was trying to figure ways of breaking down the student body into more intimate groups. The plan, which was hatched by the president, was to have small interdisciplinary colleges located throughout the curriculum of the institution, and I got an invitation to make a presentation on that. I was involved in the planning of it, but I was sort of a peripheral player—but I accepted the invitation. I guess I asked the president if that was okay, and he said, “Sure, go ahead, go up to Cambridge and make a brief presentation”—it was 10 or 15 minutes. So it turned out it was a seminar that was organized by Dave Riesman, McGeorge Bundy, and a fellow named Seymour Harris, who was senior economist at Harvard at the time. They had some funding from an agency to do a study of the economics of higher education. Well, it turned out they were really studying the future of higher education.

I appeared at the seminar one day, after a terrible night in which I got snowed into a motel, probably 25 miles out of Cambridge. I think I took a cab, three buses, a trolley and a subway, and I was about three hours late to the meeting. What was happening was that a variety of people were making presentations on educational innovations within their institutions, and one of those was Woody Varner. I didn’t know Woody, had never heard of him before, but I was aware of the impending MSUO from the various newspaper and magazine articles that had appeared about it.

Dave [Beardslee] and I at Wesleyan were teaching a course, periodically, on the social psychology of higher education, which was just a way of talking about higher education. Social psychology is wonderful, you can talk about anything under its guise—as you may know. [In teaching that course] we had paid attention to the new developments, and MSUO had quite a bit of advance publicity so we were aware of it.

Anyway, I made my brief presentation and Woody gave the pre-Oakland story, the only time I ever heard it. He told it very well, as you can well imagine. I'm sure he spoke with me sometime during or after the meeting, and then I went to my work and he went back to his.

HARVEY BURDICK: And that was it. You had a sense of MSUO from the mass media, and then this brief episode with Woody. Do you recall your images of this place at that time?

DONALD O'DOWD: Yes, and they were positive, that I remember, because it seemed an exciting new opportunity in higher education. It was one of the first new colleges in the public sector to be proposed after World War II, and that seemed exciting to me. The publicity all suggested a place that would be academically and intellectually centered, in a rather conscious way. Often when new institutions get started, they don't have any visible intellectual focus. The propaganda, the publicity for this place was clearly very positive. So I bought into that as sounding interesting and intriguing, and I had no reason to be skeptical.

HARVEY BURDICK: So in the back of your head, there was this idea that [MSUO] was a lovely little place that was developing an emphasis on the intellectual and the scholarly for students. But that was it, because you were busy at Wesleyan. Then tell us what happened.

DONALD O'DOWD: That meeting was on March 12<sup>th</sup> [1959]. There's a volume that resulted from that whole series of seminars, so I looked that up the other day. Then sometime later I think I got a letter from Woody, inquiring about my interest in possibly joining the faculty at MSUO. I might have had a phone call, I just don't recall what the contact was. Then there followed some exchange, and eventually it was agreed that Jan and I would come by here on the week just prior to Labor Day

in 1959. We were going to an APA [American Psychology Association] meeting in Cincinnati, so we flew into Detroit, spent maybe a full day or day-and-a-half on the campus, and then went off to Cincinnati from here.

HARVEY BURDICK: There wasn't much of a campus at that time.

DONALD O'DOWD: Well, no. It was North and South Foundation Hall, and a little bit of the Oakland Center, and a lot of mud and construction equipment, and noise. It didn't look as if it would open, which was to be 17 or 20 days later, after we were here. It was hard, as I remember, to believe that students would be in classes within three weeks of the time we visited. It was sort of chaotic, but it was exciting—chaos, but exciting chaos.

HARVEY BURDICK: There was an atmosphere, there was an ambiance of MSUO at that time?

DONALD O'DOWD: Oh, yes. We got to meet a number of faculty and administrative people, and they were good sales people.

HARVEY BURDICK: Well, they had committed themselves.

DONALD O'DOWD: That's right. They talked the talk, and it sounded pretty exciting.

HARVEY BURDICK: When Woody Varner was recruiting you, did he have any idea that you would be more than just a professor of psychology, do you think?

DONALD O'DOWD: I have no idea. My interest in coming here was to help found a psychology department, to build a psychology curriculum a little different than the conventional curricula that you found in most undergraduate colleges—and beyond that, to just participate with everybody else in the building of a new institution. Now, I anticipated that it would grow very quickly, because I was told that it would have, maybe 2,000 students at the end of the second year, 5,000 at the end of the fifth year, 10,000 at the end of the tenth year, or numbers like that. So one envisioned hiring two or three or four new faculty members every year in

psychology, and that sounded to me like a pretty formidable and exciting task—and that's what I came to do.

I should mention that Dave Beardslee and I came as a package. A condition of my coming was that Dave and I would come together. The reason for that is that our research was going so well, we had several grants that were well underway, and there really wasn't any good way for us to conduct that research at a distance. In those days we didn't have quite the communications that we do today. So we felt that if we were going to do that research, we had to stay together. So we'd either stay together at Wesleyan doing it, or here—and that turned out not to be a problem. Dave came out for an interview, probably in October, and after a couple of weeks of talking it over, we decided: "Okay, we'll come as a team, and start a department and continue our research."

HARVEY BURDICK: That was your image when you were coming. Any notion of your appointment as an assistant to the dean for social science—was that part of it, back then?

DONALD O'DOWD: No, it was not, and I'm not sure whether that came about before I came, or after I got here. It was somewhere about the time that I started here, that that challenge appeared on the scene. It was not something that I anticipated.

HARVEY BURDICK: Were you the senior social scientist?

DONALD O'DOWD: Well, I was about the only social scientist. June Collins was in sociology, and June had no interest at all in the administrative side of things. No one in economics [at that time]. I guess Bill Rhode was here in political science. So it would have been Beardslee and O'Dowd and Rhode and June Collins—those were the social sciences.

HARVEY BURDICK: You and Dave both came as associate professors?

DONALD O'DOWD: Yes, and so we were the senior social scientists. Both Bill and June were assistant professors.

HARVEY BURDICK: So Woody turned to you, or maybe Bob Hoopes at that time turned to you, to help out.

DONALD O'DOWD: It was pretty much Woody. He was kind of an operating officer, generally, as well as an executive officer.

HARVEY BURDICK: Tell us about the recruiting, because in our brief earlier conversation, you opened my eyes about the whole recruiting mode. This was not just sitting back, waiting for people to come and say, "Can I get a job at Oakland University?"

DONALD O'DOWD: I'm sure that from the beginning, and certainly when I got into it, recruiting was not like today, where you collect 300 applications and look through them and screen them out, and decide on the 15 or 20 that you might like to talk to further. [At that time] we might get no applications for a given position, and start from there. I recall one tenure track position—somewhere around the mid '60s—in either English or history, where we had three applicants. That tells you something about the different atmospheres of that era and this one.

I was literally out looking for nominees. I talked to graduate school deans, senior faculty members in departments—psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, and economics—just looking for names of people who'd be graduating, getting degrees in a given year. I usually looked for somebody who had earned a degree within the last couple of years, who was somewhere in the profession and might both have the qualities that we wanted and be movable. We were just frantically looking for possible faculty members, people we might hire.

HARVEY BURDICK: So Varner and Hoopes and Matthews, and yourself—you were just spending a lot of time trying to get the faculty in place for the future of the university.

DONALD O'DOWD: Yes, far more than I ever anticipated.

HARVEY BURDICK: I'm going to ask a hard question. Were you compromising your choices because of the fact that you were out to get heads, or warm bodies?

DONALD O'DOWD: No, it never felt that we were in a situation where we just took somebody because they had a degree and they were in that field. For whatever reason, we got really good or excellent nominees, in terms of just following some of those people over the years and having seen them again or followed their careers. They were, many of them, people with ultimately distinguished careers. So we were able to persuade people to nominate their good and very promising graduates to us, rather than the pedestrian ones, if those people were around also.

HARVEY BURDICK: Did you have a sales pitch?

DONALD O'DOWD: Oh, did we have a sales pitch!

HARVEY BURDICK: Now, give me the old sales pitch, Don. I mean, you had to recruit, and you had to have a bait, right, to catch the fish? What was it?

DONALD O'DOWD: Of course the fact that it was new, and that they could help shape it exactly as they thought the curriculum ought to be. "Come along, if you want to teach economics in your way, and the way that you know that it can have the most profound effect." I guess one of the keys is that when we were seeking people, we were using Ivy League graduate schools, University of California. We restricted our searches almost entirely to the major graduate institutions in the country. We were after people who already had a lot of promise, just given where they were and the training they had had. These were people, often, with real ideas and a lot of excitement. Many of them that we sought out had already had experience teaching in liberal arts colleges—that was not always the case, but frequently the case—or undergraduate teaching in Ivy League and related institutions. These [people] almost always wanted to get out from under the dead hand of the past in their discipline. So that was a big appeal.

Secondly, the fact that you would be able to recruit, yourself, colleagues in your discipline with whom you wanted to work in the future, because you were getting in on the ground floor.

HARVEY BURDICK: That was the pitch?

DONALD O'DOWD: Yes, and the fact that you would have young and exciting and compatible colleagues in a variety of disciplines, and have the reward of being able to work with such people.

HARVEY BURDICK: Did you believe in it?

DONALD O'DOWD: Absolutely, yes; absolutely. And it was true. What do you mean, did I believe in it?

HARVEY BURDICK: Right, of course. You would believe it, if it was true.

DONALD O'DOWD: I believed in it because it was real. We weren't selling an image, we were not concocting a pitch here, we were selling reality, as we understood it.

HARVEY BURDICK: Right. You came here and moved into positions of decision-making and responsibility very quickly. There's no question about it. You came here in '60 as a member of the department of psychology, and by '61 you were the dean of the university. So you were in an admirable position to talk about the concept of Oakland, the concept of MSUO, sometimes called the myth and the reality.

I wonder if you could chat with us about that. Here you were selling, you believed it, and yet there was also a reality that was waiting in the wings. What was Oakland, what was MSUO in those first few years? Was it the scoop that was promised to the world, in all the mass media that you had read, in the Loren Pope public relations, in the [Meadow Brook] seminars, telling you what this great place is going to be, what it's like—as opposed to reality?

DONALD O'DOWD: Of course, they were always talking about a future and something that we would grow into, it seemed to me, rather than talking about the current place. When we were talking to people [who were] considering it, we were again talking about what they could build, and that was one of the great attractions. Were the foundations in place to build toward that? Yes, I think they were.

You had to make some assumptions. We talked about a student body that would be drawn from the region or the nation, a student body not of elite students,

but of students with good abilities and a high degree of motivation. I think the motivational part was a very large part of our projection as to what to expect from your students. They were not going to be the selective students of the Ivy League, we knew that right from the beginning, nor should they be. They were going to be mainly lower middle class and even children of blue-collar families. We wanted people from that kind of background with talent and ambition. We wanted to find ways of capitalizing on those characteristics, and building a student body, an alumni group with real promise. It was an upward mobility kind of perception that we had, and we had the raw material to do that.

HARVEY BURDICK: Did it work out? You had troubles recruiting faculty, but you ended up getting decent faculty.

DONALD O'DOWD: We did.

HARVEY BURDICK: Did you have troubles recruiting students, or did they pour in? Who were the students? Where did they come from? Did they meet the hopes and aspirations?

DONALD O'DOWD: I think they were the students that [could have been] realistically anticipated for the institution. They were the young people from Pontiac and Royal Oak and Mt. Clemens and Flint and nearby communities. This is, after all, a manufacturing center, not an intellectual center of the nation, and we got the sons and daughters of that community, who I think were very promising people.

The faculty, it seemed to me, initially expected those students to be different than they were. They expected [more of] them, it seemed to me, to have a better preparation than they were likely to get from the regional high schools. [Editor's note: The faculty also expected more of them to have ranked higher in their high school graduating classes.]

So they set high standards for these kids, that many of them were not ready for, even though I think they had the ability to do the work. They needed probably more assistance in getting from their high schools into their college years, more of a gentle transition into college. Many of them went from very

undemanding high schools to very demanding college courses, and that's a tough move to make.

HARVEY BURDICK: Is it possible that in the recruiting of the faculty—in saying you can design your courses at a high level, on a high standard, because these students are going to do well, they're highly motivated—so there was a little [discrepancy]?

DONALD O'DOWD: Right, probably. I brought from Wesleyan the course that I had taught there—well, it had to be adjusted to the quarter, so I had to prune the material—but I taught essentially the same course here.

HARVEY BURDICK: When you were recruiting the faculty you told them this is a place to build, and to create programs and curricula that fitted them. What kinds of courses did they bring? How did they teach?

DONALD O'DOWD: It's hard for me to know what other people did. I had a pretty good idea that the "Columbia gang" led by Matthews taught Western civilization the way they taught it at Columbia, with that super-talented group of kids from the public schools of New York, selected out of New York City.

I brought a course or courses from Wesleyan, the same ones I had been teaching to kids with 1400 College Boards, and taught essentially in the same way, adjusted just for the quarter system. I made the same expectations in terms of exams and papers written and so on. I would guess maybe a third of my students performed as well as my better students at Wesleyan. Probably a third performed at the very lower end, in which at Wesleyan there would be maybe one or two students, the ones who slept through all the classes and got a gentleman's D or D minus, the ones who were planning not to continue in the subsequent years. About a third of [my] students were capable but not exciting.

But of that upper third, those students were performing at a level that I would expect of a highly selective student body. Some of them were as good as any students I had ever encountered previously, some of them showed just brilliant handling of the material. So I was personally very positively impressed by the students that I dealt with. It was clear to me that they were just working as hard as they possibly could, so we were getting the motivational effect we expected.

An analysis of this on my part is that we had this strange situation at Oakland where our students were unprotected from the faculty and faculty expectations. They had no fraternities and sororities. You know what fraternities and sororities do: they say, “Harvey, you don’t have to read those books, we’ve got these class notes over here that we took three years ago. This guy teaches the same course every year, same material, so just read this stuff.” And you go out and get *Cliff’s Notes*, you don’t bother to read the books. But nobody was around here to do that. There were no older students to give that kind of guidance. There were no fraternities or sororities, which do this systematically. There were not the jocks who developed a very skillful culture in manipulating the system. It was a culture where the faculty wrote the rules, and where the faculty determined what was appropriate for a student to do—and the kids bought it.

HARVEY BURDICK: They had no choice.

DONALD O’DOWD: I guess not. Anyway, they bought into it and they worked as hard and as diligently and as energetically as the faculty wanted—not all of them, but many did. And, of course, this became the culture. That was probably the single most exciting thing that Oakland had going for it, and none of us recognized it at the time.

Woody said “no fraternities and sororities, no intercollegiate athletics.” I’ve always felt—and felt at the time—that this was a negative message, that you shouldn’t be talking about what you’re not, you ought to be talking about what you are. Nevertheless, that kept coming out. That was a situation in which we were talking about all of the protections of students that we were going to deny them—which they didn’t know about—and the faculty didn’t quite appreciate [this situation]. In fact, I think we created a culture that extended for at least another 15 or 20 years, and maybe it’s still here—I hope it would be—a culture in which students are to do the work and do it diligently, as described by faculty members, and that’s what their job is.

HARVEY BURDICK: I must say I’m intrigued by the phenomena that did take place. You recruited a pretty good faculty. You could not select the students as other schools, who had reputations, could select students. You had to take the students in the neighborhood, perhaps students who might have gone to a

community college, if it had existed in that time. You put them into this place with the great chefs, to use a metaphor, ready to make this marvelous soup, and demands were made on the students to act like good students, and many of them just did.

DONALD O'DOWD: Yes, many did. Lots didn't, and many of them failed and they disappeared.

HARVEY BURDICK: As I mentioned to you earlier, I had pretty high standards and I gave grades that were not that great, and yet some of those students went on and got Ph.D.s.

DONALD O'DOWD: You just didn't recognize their talents, that must have been what it was.

HARVEY BURDICK: Well, I did. I just gave them a B minus.

As I said earlier, you became dean of the university very quickly, and then provost. Was dean of the university and provost essentially the same?

DONALD O'DOWD: Actually, while I was dean of the university, I had a little bit broader portfolio including dean of students, and a couple of other things. Then, in 1965, the dean of students was set up as a separate office, so student affairs moved over there. So it was a little broader portfolio than the later one, which was more narrowly academic.

HARVEY BURDICK: So you were very much in the midst of things right from the start. You are in an excellent position to chat about the kinds of tasks you had to deal with, the issues you confronted in that early period. What kinds of things were you doing as the dean of the university, as provost?

DONALD O'DOWD: I might reflect on one of the major challenges that we [at MSUO] faced in this period. I talked about recruiting a faculty, but recruiting a student body turned out to be probably the single most important challenge we had to deal with around the period from 1960 to maybe '65, '66, '67.

As I reconstructed it, [there was a] grading crisis in the first year, before I came. [I heard that] a demanding faculty and a new [fairly unprepared] student body came together, and the result was a lot of low grades being issued by faculty in the first [quarter]. If I remember [reading about] the figures correctly, in the economics course—I guess there probably was one economics course at the time—42 percent of the grades issued were Fs—not Ds, not Cs, but Fs. In chemistry, I believe it was 43 percent, and mathematics, 44 percent. So across the student body, somewhere about [17] percent of all the grades issued in all courses were F grades. I think in sociology it was [2] percent. That just gives you the range—well, that’s the way that sociology always is, you know.

The effect of this, of course, on students, parents, teachers, counselors, principals, and all the people who are crucial for your future supply of students, was to create some real tension about whether or not this was a reasonable place for kids to come. I remember there was an article in *Time* magazine, entitled “Brainy Flops,” and it was echoed in the *New York Times* and *Newsweek* and every place else across the country. The message was that all these bright students went to this glittering new institution and fell on their faces. The implication was that the institution didn’t know what it was doing. It probably did know what it was doing, but it didn’t [appear to] do the right thing in the first [quarter].

I believe the effect of this was to make recruiting much more difficult in terms of admission of students. I think what happened is that the students became much more self-selective. The able students said, “I can handle that,” and they would come to MSUO. The more limited student said, “I guess I can’t handle it; I’m going to Michigan State, where you can get good grades and you don’t have to work too hard,” which was true—or at Central Michigan, or a variety of other places around the state where the tradition was, I suspect, that most of the first-year instruction was what we would today call remedial.

There were no remedial [courses at MSUO]. You went to calculus, you didn’t take remedial math or remedial English. I think that if you really understood Central Michigan University, they probably had a remedial first year and close to a second year. They brought kids along until they could do college work by the time they got to be majors. But we didn’t think that was necessary. The result was that our enrollment the first year was about 570. Our enrollment at the end of registration in year two was 908. The next year, I think it was around 1069, and the next year 1250, or something like that.

Remember that earlier on, we were telling people we're going to have 2000 students the end of the second year, 5000 at the end of five years, 10,000 at the end of ten years. I know that I wrote that in letters when I was trying to recruit faculty members. I was describing the future that they were going to be building. We weren't getting there very quickly. We weren't getting there because, in my judgment, we had achieved a reputation of being very tough, very demanding, very good—not a place where your wimp student is going to go. You've got to be confident and have evidence for yourself that you can do reasonably good college work.

HARVEY BURDICK: And [what was] the reaction to this situation? To change anything? To discuss with the faculty?

DONALD O'DOWD: I was not here. A system was set up, I believe, whereby students could repeat courses and the original grade would be erased; I think that's how it was done. I guess many students did repeat the courses and did better subsequently, and I have a hunch the faculty were probably a little bit more reasonable in their expectations.

I remember, about five to six years along, one new faculty member in humanities assigned 15 full-length books in the first semester of one year. Again, [this faculty member] brought this expectation, "they can do anything." This was for one three- or four-credit course and the students got 15 books to read. So people were, even later on, making inflated assumptions about the students.

In looking back through some of the earlier data about Oakland, which I've been doing in the last week or ten days, I was surprised to discover how good that student body was [after a few years], by objective measures. The data that I particularly focused on was for 1964. That would have been the year after the Charter Class graduation. In that incoming freshman class the SAT scores were about 1120 to 1140—it was in that range. If you take into account the inflation that occurred in the SAT in the years subsequent to that, after the 1960's, you have to add about 100 points to that to get an equivalent to, say, a 1995 average SAT. That would bring [Oakland's scores] up to 1220 to 1240. That's as good as almost any major highly selective public university does today. SUNY Binghamton and SUNY Albany, which are two very highly selective institutions, [have freshman

SAT's] around 1240, 1260. The University of California campus is around 1250 or 1260 as their average. U of M is in that range.

At that time we had a self-selective student body. We were still doing admissions, we were not recruiting students in a really aggressive manner—that came later. So my analysis is [that by 1964] we were getting the very best students from the second-tier high schools. From the first-tier high schools, that's Seaholm and Groves [in Birmingham], for example, they went to Ann Arbor [U of M]. They always had, and they continued to. But Pontiac Central and Pontiac Northern, these were not considered elite high schools from the point of view of those [other universities], and we'd get their valedictorians and salutatorians and their top ten students. We'd do that from Mt. Clemens, Royal Oak, Rochester—we got good students. We were getting the best students from these high schools and probably people of real ability, and they did well. They did well here and they've done well subsequently. I think we attracted exciting people.

One illustration of this, which is important to me, is [what I found out] when we were in Alaska. My belief is that Oakland students are more adventurous and somehow a special group of people. Fairbanks is the end of the road—you just keep going in North America and you get there, so it's an outpost. It's wild and woolly country, it's a little bit like the old West. There are still gunslingers in that part of the world. We found 17 Oakland alumni living in and around Fairbanks. There were three Dartmouth alumni, incidentally, of which I was one. So that gives you a little idea of the kinds of people that go there. Elite college alumni don't end up in places like that, but adventurous alumni do, and we had this great group of people there.

We had an attorney in the community, an ophthalmologist who is an Oakland graduate, several teachers, one of whom teaches in the town of Venetie, and Venetie is 200 miles from the end of the road. You fly to Venetie or you take a dog sled over two weeks; that's how you get to Venetie. She was teaching native American students in Venetie and loved it; that was her calling. A young woman bartender at Gold Dredge Number 8, which is a watering hole in Fairbanks, was an Oakland graduate; the county treasurer was an Oakland graduate; a dean at the university; an oceanographer, a product of Paul Tombouljian's chemistry department. I had an interesting experience with her. I was hooding doctoral candidates as they received their doctorates at a commencement ceremony, and they would read off the bachelors and masters degrees of these people getting

their Ph.D.s. And Susan Sugai came up and they said, “Bachelors degree, Oakland University,” and masters degree, someplace else. Susan turned out to be a graduate of Oakland of our time so I got to greet Susan on stage, and then give her her doctoral hood.

So that was just wonderful, and that’s so typical of these people. The photographer for the local newspaper is an Oakland Graduate. It was a vital group of people. They were the products of this curriculum and these faculty and those standards that developed over the years.

HARVEY BURDICK: The hope is, of course, that we continue to do that.

DONALD O’DOWD: Yes, the hope is that we’re still having that effect on people. Somehow you’re a little special if you come from Oakland, and you can do more than other people can do. You can have a greater impact on the world. I think, at least in our early years and the years of which I’m aware, that was a kind of thrust to the institution.

HARVEY BURDICK: Let’s talk about your role in the administration. We would like to get your impressions of some of the people—certainly of Woody Varner, how he worked, how you worked with him, maybe George Matthews. It would be nice to get some memories into this record.

DONALD O’DOWD: Sure. Woody was just a magical person as far as I was concerned. I worked with him from my first year onward very closely. For some reason, he included Jan and me in every endeavor that went on in the place, including the endless round of receptions and dinners for every conceivable community group in the whole Detroit metropolitan area, I guess. Two, three, four, five nights a week he would have groups on campus to tell them the Oakland story. Along with several other people we were invited to go along and sit at a table and tell these people about Oakland and what a wonderful place it was. These were media people, union leaders, lawyers, doctors. Much of it was political—Democrats and Republicans and legislators and anybody that could shape the future of the institution, including auto executives and the wealthy of Grosse Pointe and Bloomfield Hills. I heard the Oakland story 150 times. I could have repeated

everything verbatim at some point in my history. That was a really rewarding opportunity.

I would get depressed at times with things that were going badly and were not making any progress, and I didn't see Woody all that often. You would think I might see him, but I sometimes went three or four weeks without seeing him. He left the campus to me, he disappeared. He was out raising money and raising political friends. He worked all the time, and he was not out enjoying himself in the non-professional sense, he was out working for the institution.

Anyway, I'd be essentially running the home front and loved it. I didn't need daily communications. [Sometimes] I'd get pretty depressed. I'd spend 15 minutes with Woody and I'd feel great again, and ready to go and take on any challenge. He just had the ability to somehow lift your spirits and make you feel that what you were doing was worthwhile and rewarding and important, and I don't know how he did it. As I say, I'd go three or four weeks and I hadn't seen him, I'd spend 15 minutes with him and I was completely buoyed to go on for the next month. I might have seen him sooner at dinners in the evening, but I'd not sat in the office with him and had a chance to talk over whatever our problems were.

He was a great leader, I thought. He was not a detail man. He's not a hands-on detail administrator. That's not his strength, and I did that. That was the job that I did and did it with a fair degree of satisfaction. I didn't want to be the public spokesperson for the institution; that didn't interest me at all. I was glad he was doing that. I was just delighted to worry about curriculum and faculty and the tenor of the institution and how it was unfolding.

HARVEY BURDICK: Woody, I think, was fortunate in finding someone to divide the labor in that fashion.

DONALD O'DOWD: Yes, that turned out to be something I never anticipated.

HARVEY BURDICK: Tell us about the labor. You were essentially the operating officer at Oakland. Can you talk about the kinds of issues you had to deal with at that time? Do you recall curricular issues?

DONALD O'DOWD: I've found that over the years my real interest is curriculum, more than any other aspect of institutional operation. Curriculum is—you can say

it's just the courses you offer, but it's much more than that. It's how you offer them, how they relate to one another, how departments handle their affairs, and the broad array of the academic operation of the enterprise. Curriculum interests me, and always has, so I was able to work at that.

The Oakland curriculum had some funny history to it. The curriculum was shaped in the beginning by the people who were hired in the beginning, and naturally you hire people to teach general education in your first year. So a lot of people were hired who I would classify primarily as "humanities faculty." That was a dirty word in my vocabulary 40 years ago [in 1959]. I hadn't thought that earlier because I had taught humanities at Wesleyan—I taught in the humanities program. I had philosophy in my background and it was quite easy. I taught in literature as well as psychology; I did both of these things.

When I got here, I discovered that not only were the first-year faculty "humanities faculty," but they had an interesting view that there really wasn't anything else worth teaching, that anybody ought to really have an opportunity to learn. There were those kind of "non-fields" called the social sciences, and then off here were the sciences, and "we don't understand them so they're different, we'll leave them alone." That was my perception [of their view]. Anyway, this faculty that arrived in the first year—probably 70 or 75 percent humanities faculty—decided over time, at least some of them, that a really fine university would be one where humanities was *the* university. Since they were the faculty and they were designing the curriculum, and they were [also] the faculty Senate, they said, "Primarily we can have maybe a social science course somewhere in the curriculum, but since those aren't real disciplines, we shouldn't have too much of that."

Somewhere during the course of the second year, and this was before I was in any administrative role of any importance, some committees were established, and I think they were to deal with the transition from the quarter system to the semester system. We had made the decision to go with the semester system—that was done before I came—and it probably had to do with the trimester plan, the notion that you could run three semesters year-round, rather than a succession of quarters.

HARVEY BURDICK: And students could [graduate] in three years.

DONALD O'DOWD: Two and a half years. Yes, that was the goal toward which we were working. The only time I ever taught in the quarter system was the first year I was here, and I disliked it. You get [final] exams every ten weeks and not enough time to develop a course, I thought, or to get papers assigned and read, and so on. Anyway, in order to go from twelve quarters to eight semesters [as an undergraduate program], you really have to remake your courses and your requirements. So committees were put together to do this.

In February or in the winter/spring of 1961, the committee which had been studying the new general education curriculum that had to emerge from this transition from quarters to semesters made a report. As I remember, it was a little biased in favor of the humanities and short-changed the social sciences and probably the natural sciences, though I don't remember the natural science part of it. The social sciences were my concern at that time.

Then we had a Saturday morning Senate meeting which was in North Foundation Hall. Probably it convened about 9:00 and various things happened, this committee made its report. Then at some point along the way, some faculty member proposed an amendment, and effectively what the amendment would do was to expand the number of [general education] courses required for graduation in the humanities, eliminate the social sciences essentially from the curriculum, and wipe out the school of education. It wiped out education [because] all the preliminary courses required for certification could not be taken until later. Les [Hetenyi] saw this, as he argued at the meeting, as requiring at least a five-year bachelors degree for education, if that had been implemented.

So a battle royal ensued, with those of us who were committed to the social sciences arguing vigorously this was completely unacceptable. We started counting noses and realizing that the faculty was two-thirds humanities faculty, and one-third the rest of us, the social sciences and sciences, so we knew we had a problem on our hands. The meeting went on through lunch—somebody brought in pizza or box lunches or something—until probably three in the afternoon, with an endless and acrimonious debate over the completely, to my mind, unrealistic curriculum that was being championed by this group of people who were humanities faculty members.

We had faculty in the Senate being abetted by some of the administrative people. Loren Pope, I remember, was certainly one of the major participants in the group putting forth the amendment. It was a group of very able and very

committed humanities faculty arguing that this [humanities coursework] is what a good education consisted of, and that other stuff is probably peripheral and hardly worth the time of a bright able student. They were probably right, incidentally, but at the time I didn't believe that. So anyway, it went on and at some point, as I remember it, this was adopted.

HARVEY BURDICK: It was adopted?

DONALD O'DOWD: I think it was, or at least it was clear that it was a position that would garner a substantial majority of the Senate, enough so that it was not defeatable. The effect of this was essentially—I'd been out recruiting and hiring people [in the social sciences], and there wouldn't be a job for them. If you don't have required [social sciences] courses, you aren't going to have an awful lot of students in your freshman and sophomore [courses]. You'd have majors but we hadn't got to the majors yet, you know, we were still in the sophomore year at that point. We hadn't even offered a junior level course.

It was a bitter battle and we came to label it Black Saturday, those of us who were on the losing side. I remember it so vividly because on that day there was the most ferocious ice storm I can ever recall, and we went out into the parking lot and our cars were encrusted in half an inch to an inch of ice. I recall digging that ice off the windshield of my old brown Plymouth Cranbrook.

Actually, I didn't go home, I went over to Hetenyi's house, and Les and I, over one or more drinks, both indicated, both decided we would leave. I said, this is no place for the social sciences. This place, if this prevailed—which I assumed it might—then the institution was one in which there was no real opportunity for the kind of people I had been recruiting, and I had no interest in staying around. Les said the same thing, there was no way that he could offer an education major. I think Les would have accepted a five-year major with a strong liberal arts base, if he had thought there were any way he could recruit three students for it. But his view was that, as long as every other school of education in the state offered a four-year bachelors degree, you weren't going to sell many students to come for five years.

HARVEY BURDICK: And I think that, if anybody would be sympathetic to the humanities, it would have been Les Hetenyi.

DONALD O'DOWD: Oh, yes. He believed that a student should have an undergraduate major, a full legitimate undergraduate liberal arts major, and education courses on top of that. To do that, he had to essentially prescribe every course that a student would take from freshman through senior year. But he was willing to do that, to give his students what he thought was the right base, which today of course is accepted everywhere as the best way to prepare teachers. Les was a generation ahead of his time in that regard, and he did accomplish ultimately what he set out to do. I think he did turn out remarkably well-prepared teachers, particularly at the secondary level. So I think his heart was in the right place, but that day [the curriculum plan] didn't work.

Now, the outcome of this was that Woody essentially suspended the Senate. Either over the weekend or by Monday, he nullified the action and created some kind of committee to review the whole issue, which then came up with the general education curriculum that prevailed for the next couple of years. But I don't think the Senate was reconstituted for maybe a year. He set up a faculty steering committee. He put together [a different] balance of faculty, that was the key—the steering committee was not three-quarters humanities faculty, and a few others. So that was the device [used to plan the general education curriculum]. Then of course, as we added junior and senior classes, we had more and more faculty across the sciences and the social sciences, and the balance of faculty then shifted to about half humanities faculty, and that led to a somewhat different approach to curriculum.

That was the biggest curricular fracas, I think, in the early history of the institution. We had some tough ones later on, for example, the eliminating of a lot of the requirements during the time of the student uprising, as I would call it, in the 1970 and '71 period. But that's a very different kind of history.

HARVEY BURDICK: I want to spend a little more time on curricula. In our discussion the other day, you were talking about the innovative thrustings of Oakland. This Black Saturday, even though I think it was [the end of] an era, nevertheless, it was an expression of creating a new type of institution; even though perhaps it was out of touch with reality, it was still that notion of excitement in something new.

DONALD O'DOWD: You weren't here, you can talk about that Black Saturday with equanimity, but I'll tell you the feelings ran fairly deep on that occasion. We were fighting over real things. Those were curricula wars of the most intense kind.

HARVEY BURDICK: So now [after that event] you've gone back to a "squared-off" curriculum, where everybody has their piece of the action. So what kept us special in those days?

DONALD O'DOWD: An approach that I'd say George Matthews, Ken Roose, and I had, particularly—and I bring Ken Roose in now, who had come about '62 or '61—we were of the opinion that one of the ways to keep the place vital was to keep the curriculum in flux. The flux didn't make any difference to a given student, because he or she takes that year's courses and the sequence that they lead to. But the notion was that if the faculty is teaching new courses and in new ways periodically, that they're likely to be more stimulated by the experience than if they just teach the same thing over and over again. So there were a series of changes that were instituted over the next decade.

We had the LSD program. It was a name, because it was simply an arrangement of courses whereby every student would have at least one lecture course, one seminar (I think limited to 15 students), and a discussion course of around 30 students, in each semester, and particularly in the first two years. That's what we called LSD, and the effort was to guarantee that every student had to have a seminar; that's what we were trying to do. The lecture and seminar and discussion would balance in terms of the student/faculty ratio and where the burdens fell. The idea was that every student had to face a small class, with the necessity of writing papers and doing the other things that you do [in that setting]. Otherwise a "smart" student would avoid all classes under 200, and take only multiple-choice exams, and get through college in a way that we didn't think was appropriate. That required changing courses around very substantially in order to make that work out.

At one time, I remember, we were emphasizing teaching writing, and requiring some substantial writing by undergraduates in every general education course, not just English. The notion was, not that faculty members could teach writing, but they could certainly emphasize writing and require writing of students, and avoid the pattern, again, of the multiple-choice exams being the only gauge of

a student's performance. That became known 25 years later as "Writing Across the Curriculum," as a movement.

In fact, almost every movement that has occurred since 1960 in higher education, we explored in the first 10 years. We had the small inner colleges: Charter College, the New College, and Allport College, and of course Honors College was the last of the sequence. That was a way of, again, generating small groupings of students and faculty, and leading again to a different way of structuring curricula. We had patterns of grouping courses so that—it just occurs to me now—where people like [Mel] Chernow and Gertrude White and somebody else would take a block of two or three courses and teach them together. Effectively the students would have these three instructors for a whole year in what is a large humanities course, or humanities and social science. These things were difficult to work out, but they were ways of keeping the faculty alive and the curriculum alive.

HARVEY BURDICK: And you allowed the faculty to come and say, "I have this idea, I can do it," and you said, "Do it."

DONALD O'DOWD: Yes, that's what would happen. Administrators didn't invent the ideas, but we sure did encourage them. People did keep coming up with ideas and things they'd like to try, and I think we were more than accommodating. We tried to institutionalize change and experimentation, based on the notion that this was a way of invigorating the whole curriculum. I hope it still goes on.

HARVEY BURDICK: Certainly it kept a sense of community, of identification with the university. The faculty have a choice, don't they? Do they go towards their professional commitments, or do they identify with the university at large? In those early periods, we had a sense of community.

DONALD O'DOWD: The role of graduate studies hasn't come up [yet in this discussion]—that wasn't until about 1964 or '65. I always think of Oakland as the polar opposite of UC San Diego. They started with a doctoral program and they worked down to the freshman year. We started with the freshman year and we worked up to the doctorate. One of the questions is: how did we ever get to doctorates, this institution which is [based on] a liberal arts, undergraduate, small private college model? The reason we got there is the school of engineering.

Woody recruited three senior faculty in the years when I was chief academic officer, in areas where I couldn't do it. One was Jack Gibson in engineering. I worked for months to find a senior engineer who would come, and they wouldn't come to Oakland. They would look around and say, "Where's your doctoral program?" We kept telling them, "Doctoral program? We don't have seniors yet, we'll get there." And they'd say, "Well, you call me when you get there, and I'll come look at you." Finally, through the dean or the vice president at Purdue in those days, Woody found Jack Gibson and persuaded him to try us, so he was our first senior engineering person.

Ken Roose, who headed the economics and management program, was recruited by Woody from Oberlin. The other one was Charlie Hucker in area studies, whom Woody turned up from Arizona—I don't recall the route. Those are the three senior people that escaped me. I couldn't find the people in those areas, and I didn't have the seniority, that was my problem. I was a junior wet-behind-the-ears administrator, and when I was trying to persuade the dean of a high-powered graduate school, it wasn't easy. Some would listen and be very cooperative, and others would just say, "Come back some other time, Sonny." So Woody could overcome that.

Anyway, Gibson said, "Look, I'll build you an engineering program, I'll make it a good one, but I have to give doctorates. I can't attract the quality faculty that this institution needs, and that any quality engineering program needs, without doctorates." There were two in the country without [doctoral programs]: Swarthmore was one—an engineering program without a Ph.D.—and there was a second, Rose-Hulman or someplace, which at the time did not have Ph.D.s, and that was it. Out of all the engineering programs in the country, two that were recognized as legitimate engineering schools did not give doctorates.

We accepted that, and I talked to deans and faculty elsewhere, and everybody said, "Yes, there's no other way you're going to build an engineering school of any distinction." So we went out—this was after Woody left—and fought a battle with MSU and U of M and Wayne and the State Board of Education and the legislature and everybody else, and finally through endless hours of negotiating, got approval for the doctorate. The key on that one was the State Board of Education. We could have done it without their approval legally, but I think it would have been an impossible problem in terms of the politics of it. So we did get the approval after a couple of years of hard work.

HARVEY BURDICK: I know you remember the Ph.D. and of course that's pretty important, but isn't it also true that you assumed the role of dean of graduate studies while you were provost, and so you were thinking along the lines of masters programs?

DONALD O'DOWD: Yes, it seemed to me that masters programs just emerged. I don't recall their being controversial. They may have been at the time, but they just sort of happened naturally. The reason I took that role of dean of graduate study is because of the accrediting issue. Accreditation—I haven't thought about that for a long time!

I cannot recall when we acquired our independent accreditation, but it was sometime after the first four years. I think that toward the end of the '60s we went to North Central Association. [Our accreditation] was derivative from Michigan State earlier. At some point, we wanted our own accreditation so we went through the process of acquiring separate accreditation. It turned out to be a very unpleasant process, because we got an accreditation team headed by a dean of education from some Midwestern institution. I thought we did a brilliant job of presenting our case, and this guy wrote a scathing report, denouncing a variety of things. He denounced our education [major] because it included the liberal arts. He said this was a bastard form of education degree, including all these wretched courses in English and history and literature and social science—

HARVEY BURDICK: The very thing that we stood for.

DONALD O'DOWD: Right. He absolutely pounced on that, and generally criticized us for being what we thought we were. I was utterly offended by this report. I decided, "I'm going to war with the North Central Association," which I did. I really decided that this was life or death, and went after them. I wrote something like a one-hundred-page rebuttal to this thing, line-by-line; it was an awful report.

They finally relented and sent a second team, we had raised so much hell with them. The second team—not including an old-fashioned dean of education as its chair, but somebody perhaps from the University of Chicago in literature came as the chair—and they wrote a glowing report. So we turned it around 180 degrees. I then joined North Central and decided I was going to be active in North

Central and defend our interest, which I did after that. We got our accreditation and it was a good one. At the time, we were just getting into graduate study, and they did require that we go through a fair number of hoops to get graduate study approval and masters approval.

HARVEY BURDICK: When I came here in '62, I must confess I wasn't clear in my own head about just where MSUO was going as far as size [was concerned]. I was getting mixed messages. Are we going to stay small and be kind of like an honors college, or are we going to grow? Talk to us about this size issue.

DONALD O'DOWD: That's always been a confusing one. There were certainly a number of faculty members who believed that the institution's commitment right from the beginning was to be very small, a small liberal arts college. I never found any of that in any of the writings about the institution that I saw. And having heard the Oakland story 3,000 times, I knew that Woody Varner did not ever include that in anything he ever said to anyone. Maybe because I didn't want to hear it, my view was that a public institution cannot stay small.

When I came to Oakland, it was my first sally into public education. All of my education and previous experience had been in the private sector. I was convinced the private sector would not shape higher education for the rest of the century, because we were faced with a baby boom, an enormous growth in numbers in the millions. The private colleges—Wesleyan [for example] was having intense battles within the faculty of whether to go to 800 students from 700. I knew they weren't going to go to 12,000, to accommodate the needs of the nation, whereas the public institutions were. I saw Oakland as I thought everybody did, as one of those institutions which would meet the needs of the next 20, 30, 40 years by growing, by taking the students that were being produced by the society. So as to size, it never occurred to me that we would or could be small.

Now, we were small because we were not attracting students, and this was creating substantial legislative problems. The Legislature heard the story that we were supposed to be large. When they bought into Oakland in the beginning, they knew that this huge bulge of students was coming, they were already in the elementary schools, so they expected us to grow. When we didn't grow, there were legislators who were very critical of the university. My personal view is that if we had not solved the growth problem, we would have run the risk of some kind of

legislative interference. I don't know what it would have been. I think there were threats to close us down. I remember some legislators saying, "We ought to just shut that place, the investment is too high for what we're getting."

I think that at Michigan State, there were people who thought that they ought to send somebody down here who could really fix this place and make it grow by making it vocational. You know, "You can shift it into the community college mode and you would attract lots of students." They were skillful at doing things like that, so that was another threat. I think the degree of freedom Oakland had was extraordinary. Really, there was no oversight from Michigan State of any kind except [President] John Hannah's interchanges with Woody Varner. That was all that there ever was, that I could see. I think that came about because of Hannah's great faith in Woody as a person and as a leader. Except for that, I think there would have been pressures from Michigan State to change us.

Our reaction internally, though not with any kind of "legislative" faculty approval, was to realize in 1962 that we had to change the way we went about the admissions process. We had an admissions office until then: we processed applications, we got material out to the schools, our people went around and visited the local high schools. But we were not recruiting students, we were accepting students.

In 1962, Woody hired Glen Brown. He decided he would take over building an admissions recruitment staff. Glen Brown was the go-getter for Kalamazoo College, had done very well there, and they had a wonderful, very selective student body. Woody attracted Glen to come to OU and gave him a budget about four times the budget that Herb Stoutenburg had in the previous year, and said, "Hire some people and go get some students." Glen said, "Yes, sir!" He was a Marine; he saluted and off he went. He got in his car and drove 10,000 miles the first month or something like that, and started the recruitment process. By 1970, we were at [7,000] students [by headcount], and by 1980 we had [12,000] students.

HARVEY BURDICK: So it was the recruiting that was important in building the size.

DONALD O'DOWD: Oh, yes. And by that time the effects of the early grading crisis had worn off and people had forgotten about it, and the new generation of students was coming along. Glen had built an early public institutional recruiting

venture. Not many public universities were doing that yet; very few, I would say. The model came right out of the private sector. [Woody] went into a private college, got a guy whose business was recruiting for a private college, and said, "Do the same for us." Glen tried very hard, for example, to broaden our catchment area to the whole state, and toured every high school in the state and tried to get the word out, so we got a broader selection of students.

HARVEY BURDICK: I have just a couple of questions left.

You have been in academe your entire professional life; you've had experiences after you left Oakland, as president of a system, vice chancellor of another system. Just talk briefly about the kinds of work habits that seem to have existed at MSUO in those early years, and how they compare to your image of how people do those jobs at other places. We talked a little bit about the lack of boundaries—when you were provost, you did everything.

DONALD O'DOWD: In the first three, four, five years, we had to do everything for the first time. I essentially wrote the commencement script for the first [graduation] with Herb Stoutenburg, and George Matthews was very helpful in that. Several of us wrote a catalogue one year because the PR department, which was charged with the job, didn't get it done. So we said, "We'll write it," angrily, "we don't need this job but we'll do it." So we wrote a catalogue, and anything that needed doing, we all did. If admissions needed help, we went out and visited schools. The notion of jobs being narrowly circumscribed, I don't think occurred to anybody in the first four or five years.

HARVEY BURDICK: That was across the board, where people would just help out in recruiting and whatever we needed.

DONALD O'DOWD: Yes, right. People did, and people were willing to do it. I think the work ethic here was amazing. People put in endless hours and time, and they wanted the place to succeed. We all wanted it to accomplish what we thought it should. We had an investment in it. The notion [elsewhere] was that if you didn't like it, you'd leave. The notion [here] was that if you didn't like it, you'd change it and make it better—at least many people adopted that outlook, I think.

HARVEY BURDICK: I may have a wrong perception but my sense is that a lot of people came and stayed. Am I off-base on that? There was a lot of keeping of the faculty here, they didn't leave here and go elsewhere. They came here, they committed themselves to Oakland, and they stayed a long time.

DONALD O'DOWD: It's hard to compare over eras that have changed so much by now. It seemed we had people moving on, and often to pretty impressive positions and to very good institutions. I thought Oakland was a pretty good place to be from, which I always think is a good thing to say about an institution. If people leave you and go off to distinguished positions in other institutions or to bigger challenges elsewhere, than you have done your job, you've recruited and held a good person for awhile.

There was a fair amount of turnover, but I didn't think it was as much turnover due to people being repelled by Oakland, as that they were being attracted by even better offers somewhere else. Many of the people that I've met over the years, who were here in the early years, say over and over, "Best teaching experience and academic experience I ever had! That was just special." Howard Clark, who was our early classicist—Howard one semester taught 11 courses, actually had 11 courses. He had often two or three students per course, but he taught a whole curriculum himself. Howard, who went to the University of California Santa Barbara, which has a very high-quality student body, said that he never had courses there that were as satisfying as here. The students there were blasé, they were smart and wealthy and well-to-do, and they knew the place of the faculty in the world. But Howard said, "Here [at Oakland] the students were just wonderful, they were hard working and they believed what you said, and generally it was a rewarding experience."

You mentioned [that I went to] other places. I went to New York State in 1980, and I was the second-ranking person in the SUNY [State University of New York] system. I met faculty and presidents—we had 64 campuses that I visited constantly, and I was on the road all the time. The image of Oakland among those people was very high, and I came with high credentials, having been at Oakland. The old Loren Pope image persisted very well in the Eastern colleges. People in places like Cornell, people looked at Oakland very positively saying, "Oh yes, that's that wonderful institution out in the Midwest that is Eastern really." Oakland was "like us," you know, one of "our" institutions.

HARVEY BURDICK: The myth lives on.

DONALD O'DOWD: At least 20 years ago the myth was still firmly established and firmly entrenched, and I was able to take advantage of it, which I hadn't anticipated at all. I didn't think that would work but it did.

New York is a big and complex system—we had twelve liberal arts colleges in the SUNY system, four major universities. I had the feeling that there—and again in Alaska, though Alaska is a lot different—that as I compared Oakland in terms of faculty and students and accomplishment, Oakland compared favorably with the best in the SUNY system. I never felt there was an institution [in New York] that I got to know enough about, which I didn't think [Oakland] would stand at least equal to, if not better than—probably better than. The people that have been recruited [at Oakland]—the accomplishments of this faculty were greater than the average of those faculties. I had looked through vitas and faculty records and things like that.

HARVEY BURDICK: You were here almost 20 years and you've now been away for almost 20 years. We both know that as you look back 20 years, things may get blurry. But I'd like to end the interview with your impressions of that first period. Were you glad you came here? Of course, from Wesleyan you could have gone to any of the beginning schools in California and so on. How do you feel in retrospect about having come here?

DONALD O'DOWD: Oh, I have no regrets at all about having made this choice; it was a great place to come. I couldn't have gotten a better training in higher education, which happened to be one of my great interests at the time, simply because I was able to participate in every aspect of it here—from developing junior and sophomore level courses to being involved in the unfolding of doctoral programs, and all the administrative things that went with an institution. It was, for me, the most important thing I've ever done and the most rewarding. I still think of Oakland as the apex of our life's experience, and our children were brought up here. They all went to local schools and all graduated from Rochester Adams High School—and all left immediately and went off to California and Colorado, so we have finally followed them.

I stayed here 20 years and made a decision in 1979. I had to decide whether to stay until retirement—it was getting to the point then, I was in my early '50s—or whether I should go and try some other kinds of experiences. I came to the conclusion that I couldn't stay as president. By the time I left, I was a gray eminence in this place. You know, I had seen every curricular battle, I had buried every skeleton that the place had. I realized that when new young faculty came in, they—unlike when we came in, when we could challenge anybody—they couldn't do that anymore. Us old hands had just gotten too much seniority. I thought it probably wasn't good for me or for Oakland to stay very much longer.

In the late '70s I began to explore other opportunities and made a decision that I was going to not complete a career here. So I didn't leave here out of any lack of enthusiasm for the institution and its promise, but really out of the sense that I either had to limit my life experience to Rochester and Oakland, or go out and see the world, and decided I'd do the latter.

HARVEY BURDICK: And you did, and it was rich and responsible and rewarding, I'm sure.

DONALD O'DOWD: Yes, I went off to an exotic place in Alaska, which is unlike anything you'd ever seen. Somebody asked, "Why, why," several times, "why would you go to Alaska?" I pointed out the funding per student in Alaska; when I went there, it was about \$18,000 per FTE [full time equivalent] student, and at Oakland it was about \$3,000, to give you a little comparison. University of Michigan, University of California were about \$9,000 at that time, so the University of Alaska had twice as much money per student as any other public university in the United States, and nearly any private university. We were in the position where, at the end of the semester, the dean would call up faculty and say, "Harvey, wouldn't you like to go for a trip to Europe or someplace, we have a lot of traveling money left this semester." So it was interesting.

HARVEY BURDICK: We really appreciate your coming, Don, and sharing your memories of the early days. I want to thank you.

DONALD O'DOWD: Harvey, thank you, for asking good questions and challenging me the whole way.

# Oakland University Chronicles

Donald D. O'Dowd

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