

Oakland University Chronicles

Interview with **Frederick W. Obear**

Transcript of Oral History Interview

Interview date: March 20, 1998

Interviewer: Paul Tombouliau



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Oakland University Chronicles

FREDERICK WOODS OBEAR

Date of birth: June 9, 1935

EDUCATION

B.S.	University of Massachusetts at Lowell	1956
Ph.D.	University of New Hampshire	1961

PRIOR TO OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

Graduate student and half-time instructor
University of New Hampshire

OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

1960	Assistant Professor of Chemistry
1964 • 1966	Dean of Freshmen
1965 • 1967	Assistant Provost
1966 • 1979	Associate Professor
1968 • 1970	Vice Provost
1969 • 1970	Acting Provost
1970 • 1981	Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost
1979 • 1981	Professor of Chemistry
1981	Resigned

SINCE LEAVING OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

Chancellor
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

University Professor and Chancellor Emeritus
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

CURRENT OCCUPATION

Interim Vice President for Academic and
International Programs, American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)

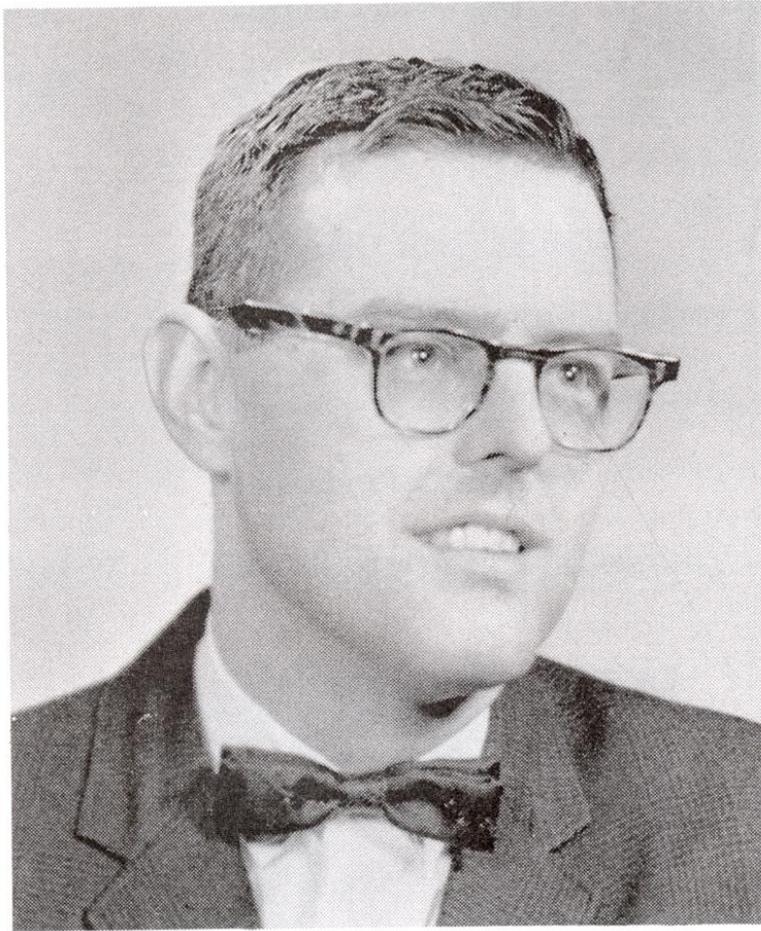
Current as of March 20, 1998



Photograph of Frederick W. Obear

March 20, 1998

Photographer: Alice Tomboulian



Frederick Obear
Assistant Professor of Chemistry

Photograph of Frederick W. Obear

MSUO Yearbook 1963

Oakland University Chronicles
Interview with FREDERICK W. OBEAR
March 20, 1998

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: This is one of the interviews in the Oakland University Chronicles Project, supported in this second year by a special university allocation. Today is March 20, 1998, and we are speaking from the studio of the Washington Bureau in Washington, DC. The goal of the project is to collect oral histories dealing with the beginnings of Oakland University, the time prior to the graduation of the first class in 1963. Our focus is on the first years and the pioneers who started the university. My name is Paul Tomboulia and I have been a professor of chemistry at Oakland University since 1959.

My guest today is Professor Fred Obear who joined the faculty at MSUO in 1960 at the rank of assistant professor. Subsequently Fred was promoted through the academic ranks, and also became Provost of Oakland University in 1970. Fred left Oakland University in 1981 to become Chancellor of the Chattanooga campus of the University of Tennessee. He stepped back up to being a faculty member of that school in 1997. [Professor Obear currently resides in Tennessee but is on a one-year leave in Washington, DC.]

Fred, welcome to the Oakland University Chronicles Project.

FREDERICK OBEAR: It's good to be with you, Paul.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Tell us how you first got connected with Oakland University.

FREDERICK OBEAR: My first connection was a letter that was handed to me by a professor in the chemistry department at the University of New Hampshire – where I was completing my doctoral degree work – who had been a classmate of yours in graduate school at the University of Illinois. His name is Paul Jones. You had written to him saying that you had authority to go forward and recruit a second chemistry faculty member, second to yourself at Oakland, in 1960, and were beginning that process. That letter was turned over to me by Paul Jones; he said I might be interested in it. I was a few months from finishing up my work at New Hampshire, and I was interviewing for other teaching and some

industrial positions, but leaning more in the academic side of that. I was intrigued by the things in that letter, and I contacted you and eventually I was invited to MSUO for an interview.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: What were some of your first impressions about Oakland?

FREDERICK OBEAR: From the letter and from some material that either accompanied it or followed quickly, I was aware of the affiliation with MSU. I was aware that it was a new campus, and had only been in existence for a year, that it was a serious academic institution, that it was an institution where a lot of the policies and certainly the traditions had yet to be developed. There was an invitation that it might be a setting in which one could influence those activities, rather than just inherit them and operate them from somebody else's creativity.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Somebody else's mistakes.

FREDERICK OBEAR: Somebody else's mistakes — we can make our own mistakes, that's right. I just found that very intriguing. All of the other places, both corporate and academic, that I was involved with were places with long histories, and this was the "new kid on the block." It was that newness that was intriguing and appealing.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You had a number of interview trips lined up?

FREDERICK OBEAR: I did, yes. I had already completed some at the time I got that letter. I had done some industrial interviews in New Jersey and New York, places like Air Reduction Company and American Cyanamide and Bell Labs. Then I had another academic interview scheduled at the State University of New York, Albany campus, which I never did follow through on because the Oakland process unfolded faster than that interview schedule.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Not any more!

FREDERICK OBEAR: Too bad! Yes, that was one of the things that was lost from in the beginning year.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Tell us about that interview trip. Do you recall anything about it?

FREDERICK OBEAR: I recall it vividly. I was excited from the materials that I had, and from Paul Jones' comments about you and your associations together. I flew out to Detroit; you met me at the airport. I think I was only on campus for a couple of days. I stayed at a not very impressive motel on Opdyke Road which I don't think is there anymore.

I spent some time on the campus with you and meeting other colleagues: Bill Hammerle, Jim McKay, and Bob Hoopes who was dean of the faculty. I also had an opportunity to meet the Chancellor of the campus [Woody Varner], which I was very impressed by – just in his taking time to do that, and also impressed with him as a person during the interview, as I was with the others.

At the end of the interview, starting out in a snow storm, you drove me back to Detroit. I think I insisted that you head back north, because I wasn't sure you were going to make it home, and I never did make it on the airline that day. They bused all of us over to the Detroit train terminal. What was supposed to have been a few hours plane ride back to Boston turned into a twenty-six hour overnight sitting-up train ride. I graded final exams for students at the University of New Hampshire all the way back, got off at the train station in Boston, and felt really grubby. I don't know where my luggage was. I guess that came a couple of days later because the airlines consumed that.

I got a shave in either North Station or South Station in Boston, and then took another train up to Durham, New Hampshire where my wife, Trisha, met me at that train station. She could tell from my enthusiasm, even at the end of that long travel experience, how wonderful the interview was, and how excited I was about what was going on in Rochester, Michigan at that time.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Sounds like a love affair.

FREDERICK OBEAR: It was. It was certainly a feeling on my part that there was a lot of excitement going on, and that those people – pioneers you called them

just a while ago here – were really into the building of a new and important educational experience.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: It didn't bother you that it was small, or looked small?

FREDERICK OBEAR: It didn't. The University of New Hampshire was not that big – of course it was old and fairly developed – it was only three or four thousand students at that point, certainly nothing like Michigan State University was at that time. Oakland, of course, was in the hundreds rather than in the thousands of students. It did not [bother me].

There was a small physical plant but there were drawings all around for what was in the future for the campus, and I think the prospect for the future seemed good, seemed exciting, and seemed in some respects undeveloped, to the point where I felt that anybody who was brought on the faculty or staff could really help influence the future direction of that campus. That was a selling point that most places could not offer.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You didn't see it staying as a small institution?

FREDERICK OBEAR: No. As a matter of fact in discussions with you and others whom I met – and I realize there were some colleagues of mine who joined in that second year faculty, who perhaps got or interpreted different stories about that – even in the written materials I had, a brochure that may have been developed over in East Lansing, [we] talked about the campus and the development and talked about 10,000 students, not in the near future but eventually. I never got sold on a small exclusive campus; I got sold on a rigorously academic institution for state aided [status]. ("State-supported" we used to call it – it's shrinking to the point where it's going to be "state-located" rather than anything else at this point.) A story that was shared with me was one of eventual growth and development, and complexity and service to citizens of the state of Michigan and other places who would come there, and not in small exclusive numbers.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Do you have an impression about the curriculum, or the image, or some of the directions from materials, say the Meadow Brook Seminars, for instance?

FREDERICK OBEAR: I was aware of the Seminars, but I think partially because of being in the discipline of chemistry and in the sciences, the seminars didn't speak extensively to that part of the curriculum. I certainly could not recite them even back then, from having studied the content of those documents. But I think I was aware of an early and strong commitment to liberal arts education. I certainly was aware of the Western civilization course, and the importance of it in the curriculum. The language requirement issue was one that was being hotly debated.

The year that I visited was still the first year of the institution, the year I arrived of course was the second wave of students coming through. A lot of that curriculum was still being talked about but hadn't been implemented, there was no junior class, there was no senior class, so there was still a lot of discussion about what would eventually work itself in. One thing I remember was a discussion that general education should permeate the whole four years. It shouldn't just be something concentrated in the first one or two years of a student's education. I liked the commitment at the undergraduate level to some breadth of educational experience for students, in addition to the concentration that they would pursue in their majors and minors.

But I was mostly impressed by the commitment to what I would say were strong academic values, without saying how they were reflected in the course requirements or the class offerings or the degree requirements. I think it was just a philosophy of education that permeated the entire institution – that this place was serious about academics, about academic values, and intellectual concerns – and it was what constituted most of the appeal.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But there was also this opportunity for you to do things, right?

FREDERICK OBEAR: Clearly. I think "clean slate" was the phrase that was used; but that's never the case, because of some internal and a lot of external forces. I don't think a slate is ever totally clean. But clearly there were

important decisions to be made about that institution that faculty members particularly – and in many instances some staff, certainly academic administrative staff – were consulted about. We served on committees that probably under a larger, more established institution I would never have had an opportunity to either be on, or in some cases even chair a committee, as a very junior faculty member. That kind of opportunity was very appealing.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You indicated to me that you are an only child. Maybe when you first came out, there was some reluctance to go to this strange place out in the “trans-Appalachian” region?

FREDERICK OBEAR: That’s right. Michigan – where was Michigan? I think my mother at least, and maybe both parents, thought it was the other side of Alaska. I can remember saying with some measure of frustration in my voice, “It’s still in the Eastern time zone, it’s not that far away.” But my family had been close, and I had done my undergraduate and graduate work in the New England area. I lived at home during most of my undergraduate experience and had never been that far away for any length of time. I had worked in Ohio for B.F. Goodrich Chemical Company briefly, and that was my first foray into the Midwest. But it was a short-term appointment, and this was a real full-time job, and [they felt], “He’s leaving New England and how can he do this?”

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Exactly. But it was something new for you, and you were willing to try it.

FREDERICK OBEAR: It was a new experience. I think [I was] not only willing, but I think that was the appeal of it; that was the attraction. The attraction was very much that, and combined with the fact that it had the connections to a well-established, stable, known Big Ten institution. I mean the “MSU” part of MSUO was sort of the foundation, in terms of security. But the “O” part of it provided for the getting involved in things that probably junior faculty members in most instances never have a chance to do.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: The element of risk perhaps was there, but you chose not to be concerned about it?

FREDERICK OBEAR: That's right, maybe that was the idealism of a 24- or 25-year old at that point. I guess it never entered my mind that the experiment might fail, or somehow or other the campus wouldn't exist in x years. It might change – a lot of institutions change over time, adapt to new circumstances – but higher education institutions are pretty stable entities.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You say that with hindsight. I'm trying to reflect on the mentality or perspective of a young person going out, and going to some distant place and taking a chance on something which really wasn't there – well, it was there the second year.

FREDERICK OBEAR: More of it was there. Some of our second year group felt like we were a little bit interlopers on the hardy pioneers like yourself who trailblazed that first year for us, and for the students who eventually came there. Maybe [on] the issue of risk here, if it hadn't worked out I had other options. I was delighted when I got a subsequent letter – I think over Bob Hoopes' signature – offering me a position there, and nothing else that I was interested in, or had job offers for, was as appealing as this. This was my first choice if I was Oakland's first choice, or a choice. You may have interviewed three or four other people before I got there, I don't know. But I knew that I was bitten by the excitement bug about what was going on there. If there was that opportunity presented to me to come and share the development of that campus, there wasn't any other place I would go.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: It sounds like there was spirit of contagious enthusiasm here.

FREDERICK OBEAR: I think I picked up some of that too. I don't think that's all self-generated. Not just from you; Woody certainly was a marvelous salesman. I mean if he were not in agricultural economics he could have been in marketing.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Politics too – maybe as governor.

FREDERICK OBEAR: Yes politics, very much so. But also and with incredible depth and sincerity, comments that were made to me during the interview process by Bill Hammerle and by Jim McKay.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Tell us about some of those folks. You mentioned Bill Hammerle, who is no longer with us.

FREDERICK OBEAR: No, and regrettably; what a wonderful mind, what a wonderful generalist scientist! I'm not sure there was any field of science or academic pursuit of any kind that he could not have taught and taught well. He was just a very thoughtful and great teacher; somewhat informal in his approach. Very high standards. I found him very easy to talk to, and I just found him very exciting because of the breadth of knowledge that he had about a variety of fields. I think he taught chemistry in the first year with you. I think one of the pitches he made to me was, "Please, if you get the job offer, please come because I want to go and teach something else." Not that there was anything bad about working with you, which I certainly found out, too. I loved every minute of it.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Then there's Jim McKay.

FREDERICK OBEAR: Jim McKay was in the math program at that point. This was well before departments were formed there. Jim also had an influence on me in terms of the sense of community that he shared with me, the interaction between faculty and students. Even in that first year the students were pioneers also, along with the faculty, and there was a closeness, there was a kind of a stretching of student minds, a setting of high—some would say in some instances too high—standards. But there was also this junior scholar-senior scholar interaction, where both were learning together, and sensing the excitement of learning for learning's sake. Jim certainly conveyed some of that to me.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And Woody was always a presence.

FREDERICK OBEAR: Woody was very much a presence, yes. Interestingly, a “hands on” chancellor but not an interfering chancellor. He walked the talk – using some of the current jargon about that – but part of his philosophy was to hire good people and give them some rope, some freedom, and delegate things to them, and let them prove how good they were. But he never lost touch with what was going on. There were no surprises, probably it was a part of his philosophy. He was just an enthusiastic spokesperson for all that was going on on that campus.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You always felt that if he was happy, then the institution was going to work.

FREDERICK OBEAR: Yes, and he was a bit of a father figure. He was older, and there were a few people who were older than this late 20s, early 30s group. We used to brag on the average age of the faculty being very low, compared to other institutions, extremely low. Woody represented not necessarily another generation, but an older and more solid, experienced, secure figure, and he was at the helm. So again coming back to that risk question of yours, it didn’t seem risky, or maybe youth doesn’t sense risk in the same way.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: How did the idea of this academic job fit into your dreams and hopes? Did you have any experience in this, or was this something you did the first time as a professional? It was, right?

FREDERICK OBEAR: It really was. I had done some teaching as a graduate student and a kind of half-time instructorship at the University of New Hampshire before moving to Michigan, but this was my first full-time teaching job. I was involved with a freshman chemistry course, and with the design of junior and senior level courses in chemistry. You were heavily involved with the building plans for the science building at that time.

We all were in North Foundation Hall; [I was in] an office right off the labs in what was formerly a balance room. You and I shared an office, as a matter of fact, at least for the first year – probably two years, more than likely – in that balance room. It was much better conditions than I had as a graduate student, so that didn’t even seem like it was inappropriate. There was a wonderful sense of excitement that

made the trappings, and the setting, and the simplicity of the facilities, and so forth, unimportant because that wasn't the essence of what was going on here. I mean that was just space to do the real things in.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: When you reported this opportunity back to your advisors and friends at the University of New Hampshire, how did they react?

FREDERICK OBEAR: Very supportive. Particularly two of them, Paul Jones – who had put me in contact with you initially – and Sandy Amell, my thesis director, were both very encouraging. When I received the letter of offer and talked to them about it, they certainly in no way counseled against or suggested that this was more of a risk than somebody should take.

The chair of the department in New Hampshire at that time was much older and much more conservative in his counseling about where students graduating from that graduate school program should go. He was a little “off the wall” and I'm not sure I ever really consulted him about this one, but he'd given strange advice on other recommendations to me about institutions that would and would not be hospitable to a faculty member of my background, training, experience, religion and everything else. So I let the recommendations from the younger faculty up there guide me more than Dr. Iddles, bless his heart, bless his soul.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Fred, tell us some of your views about the early curriculum and undergraduate education. What were you doing? How was the department you were working in developing? And what happened? You said many decisions had been made but many more were still to be made.

FREDERICK OBEAR: Right. We were adding a class at a time and unfolding a whole new year in the curricular requirements each year. While we were teaching my first year – freshman and sophomores – we were planning for juniors the next year, and developing and designing courses. I was designing one in analytical chemistry for the department. At the same time all this curriculum development was going on, there were general academic policy issues affecting both the majors

as well as the general education program, that were being hotly debated and resolved, in most instances.

On top of all of that was a physical plant unfolding on the campus. Our shared office in that little balance room—space that normally is reserved off laboratories in the sciences for students to use a number of double-beam balances in there to weigh chemicals that they're working on—had been converted into our office. That in turn was converted into what I thought was almost an architect's studio because of all of the building plans and everything that were around there. You were very intimately involved in the design of that [science] building, and asked opinions of others about teaching spaces and research space in there. Again, it was an opportunity to influence a part of the development of Oakland University, that if I had gone to a more established campus I would never have been asked about.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Did you sense—and you have now much experience behind you—that the involvement of folks at Oakland in building planning was extensive, and perhaps more extensive than one typically finds in academic institutions?

FREDERICK OBEAR: I thought so. Maybe it was because the space that wasn't there [at first] was in the areas that you and I and some of the other science faculty were working in. We were fitted into sort of a general-purpose building with not a lot of specially-designed space for us in those first years. I think the fact that you certainly led the effort to maintain involvement and even control over the development of spaces, [did] put that into the hands of the people who were going to be in the spaces. I concluded that the only part of Hannah Hall you were going to let the architects work on was the lobby, but the rest of us had to live and work in those other spaces, and “darn it, we were going to influence what was going in there.” How it was shaped and how it would be most effectively used would determine the design of those spaces.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: I think we got encouragement from our administration to become involved.

FREDERICK OBEAR: Oh, I think so, too. Woody was involved. He met a lot with architects. I can remember a number of building meetings that he was involved with.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Yet it wasn't micro-management. It was a different kind of involvement. The message he must have conveyed to the architects was, "You listen to these people because they know what they want and they have to live in the space," and the architect does not live in the space. He gave us support in that way, that I never expected to find and haven't found subsequently: that you let the people who are going to live there have input into it.

What were some of your views of the curriculum that developed after you added some of these chemistry pieces? It became clear that we were building just a small element within a larger context of a university which didn't have a strong science area.

FREDERICK OBEAR: That's right. Even in the general education, [in] which a lot of the science was pushed to the upper level years, which hadn't yet occurred.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: It actually never really happened.

FREDERICK OBEAR: It never really materialized. There was so much of that general education program that got absorbed by other non-science courses.

The other thing that was happening was, of course, we were building the major program, and developing attention for those students who would be majoring in chemistry and in the other science areas, and that was consuming. We were also developing aspects of that curriculum in which students and faculty interacted in very unusual ways for undergraduate students. Maybe because of the absence of graduate students there, we positively co-opted undergraduate students into working on research projects, and what a wonderful experience it turned out to be for them! I mean, this is another form of active learning. I suspect that most of our students, had they gone to other campuses, would not have had the opportunity to work as closely with faculty members as they had in that setting.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: I think we were successful, thanks to your help, for many years in having an undergraduate research participation program supported by the NSF [National Science Foundation]. It just seemed such a normal thing to do and yet other institutions didn't have that focus.

FREDERICK OBEAR: No, they did not, or didn't elect to pursue it. I think those with larger numbers of graduate students probably get deflected from thinking about the way undergraduates can learn in that kind of a setting. Necessarily – absent graduate students – we had to look to that other way. But I think we also saw it as an extension of an educational program, and a philosophy that again brought this junior scholar-senior scholar interaction. The strong mentoring that goes on sure made it easier, now and even at that time, to write letters of recommendation for students because you knew them. I think that was just wonderful; these were not just numbers in the classroom.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Do you recall some discussions with Bill Hammerle – always a part of our lives in those days – talking about what we were [doing] as educators and teachers? What was our role? What was our mission?

FREDERICK OBEAR: I can remember one bit of educational philosophy that he shared with me – and I think he shared it publicly in some faculty meetings – about speaking negatively against those courses in which there was only a mid-term or a final exam, maybe only one or two exams. He was saying for lower-level undergraduates, you really have to have much more continuous feedback, and early feedback. You gradually grow students through the undergraduate experience to be able to take learning in larger blocks, and then as graduate students they can even become self-starters on their own. But you just can't treat first-year undergraduate students, many of whom came out of families that did not have collegiate experiences themselves by saying, "Okay, now go learn it on your own." It just doesn't work that way.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Bill had a lot of experience at Michigan State. He taught in the physics department there, and in some interesting ways he brought these standards you mentioned, the high standards, to Oakland – the grading standards. They still use the same approximate grading breaks that he

introduced in those early years. I don't know if other people use them or not, but the idea [was] that you distribute the students' [scores] on a scale, you look at the top [score], you take about 50% [of that score], and that's the bottom [passing score]. That division of student scores has stood the test of decades, and they still use it in many courses I know. It seems to be a very pragmatic approach to dividing the talent you have, and grading them in some fashion. I was always struck with how sensible it was to take something as abstract as student scores, and then assign these peculiar grades we had to them. We changed grading scales, right? Do you remember that?

FREDERICK OBEAR: Yes, we did. We changed academic calendars, grading scales, and grading systems. Didn't we have some supergrades at one point, too?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Yes. Why did we do that?

FREDERICK OBEAR: I remember Harvey Burdick's "modest proposal" – that was the title of it – which was hardly modest, as a dramatic tenth-of-a-point breakdown of a 1 to 4 (or maybe even a 4.3) grading scale. I can remember the term "supergrades" [up to 4.3] were being talked about at one point. The argument against [was from] people who said, "I can't fine-tune things that much." His answer was, "Just don't use all of the numbers; those who can, can do it." It was a system which a lot of people could use. It was a very flexible system. It finally did get implemented and adopted.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And we still use it; other places have adopted it. We just don't have the supergrades.

FREDERICK OBEAR: That's right. Yes, those got dropped.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: That's too unusual. That's one of those cases where you'd better not be too far off the main stream because people won't be able to understand.

FREDERICK OBEAR: Yes, the slate is not really clean again, right?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: If you go to 4.3, nobody ever heard of a 4.3 grade, as being the top end.

FREDERICK OBEAR: The graduate schools would discount that, or move them all down to four-point or something.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Yes, automatically subtract [three-tenths].

So a lot of those early curricular things were just physically borrowed from Michigan State—because they had quarters, they had A, B, C, and D grades—and that may have been what [they] were familiar with.

FREDERICK OBEAR: I was not familiar with quarters. I went through my entire undergraduate-graduate experience on semesters, and as a science faculty member I thought quarters were not the most efficient way to do things. A comment was made that we spent too much time checking people in and out of laboratories three times a year, registering students three times a year, and administratively it was just a nightmare. I think over time the semester system has really become the dominant system in American higher education.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: I'm sure of that, and yet Woody and the other early planners liked quarters, for reasons that I can only assume had to do with the fact that you can get more different courses in a year under quarters, right?

FREDERICK OBEAR: Yes, you had much more course choice, and particularly in humanities and social science areas where the smaller blocks seemed to work better. Maybe in languages, for example.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Did you recall some discussion about the number of courses the students should take, three versus four?

FREDERICK OBEAR: Yes, and the number of standard credits per course and the standard teaching loads for instructors and so forth.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Eventually all of those things trended towards an average, a mean—what’s on the dirty slate, so to speak: what other people were doing.

FREDERICK OBEAR: What other people were doing, that’s right. It was understandable by the outside world.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You couldn’t do anything too different because you’re really constrained by what’s out there. I don’t think that ever shows up in any of the original documents—the “Oh, by the way [you’ll need to be concerned about what other agencies think and do].”

FREDERICK OBEAR: That’s right. There is an external constituency that is going to have some influence over the way this unfolds as well.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You can’t really operate without constraint.

FREDERICK OBEAR: That’s right.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Well, then, you saw a lot of changes happening right after you came. Some of the things that were originally described or some of the original plans didn’t continue for very long. Perhaps you had an example of that—some of the things that “we weren’t going to do.”

FREDERICK OBEAR: It was, as I recall, a list of negatives about what MSUO wasn’t going to be. For myself, I think it was some of the things that it tried to be or strived to be that were more appealing to me. But there was this wonderful list about no fraternities and sororities, no physical education, no compulsory ROTC, no athletics, and certainly not football.

I can recall a humorous story the first fall that I was there. I had never attended a Big Ten football game but we had MSU faculty price privileges. Trish and I went over to a game and watched this spectacle in the stadium in East Lansing. There in the stands quite close to us were Woody and Paula Varner, other MSUO faculty members, and other MSU faculty members. Woody was really into the game and I can recall going up to him at half-time and saying, “I hear all this rhetoric back

in Rochester about no athletics but you seem to be having a good time here today.” Without blinking an eye he said to me, “Oh, I come over here as often as I can to renew my disgust.” I just thought it was a great Varnerism to sort of put things that way. He could compartmentalize in wonderful ways.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Maybe he didn’t really believe everything he said.

FREDERICK OBEAR: As you say, maybe some things that were right for the beginning weren’t right, once people got there and understood what some of the other constraints were on the development.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: In that area, for instance, there certainly were differences in view about the size of the university and it became a big issue among many of the early folks. Perhaps you attended the meeting at the St. Clair Inn about this. Can you recall going to that?

FREDERICK OBEAR: I did. Yes, I remember a heated debate and some significant differences in terms of what people believed was the story they were told about how the university would develop.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: This would have been when, I’m not clear on the time, maybe the third or fourth year? [It was in 1966.]

FREDERICK OBEAR: It was not my first year there. I know that and I’m not sure why I was even included in the meeting. I’m hazy on that, but I do remember that there were some close friends of mine in the humanities areas who felt that this kind of small, elite public liberal arts college was the bill of goods that they were sold. As I said earlier, all of the materials I had received talked about something much larger, more service-oriented: 1400 acres of available land, state support and so forth. It was kind of hard to see how elitism could be drawn against all of those elements.

That debate was a heated one, and as I recall Woody presented two or maybe even three different plans for the development of the institution in terms of size. One was this exclusive, elitist, totally undergraduate, small liberal arts

model, and the others varied up through a much larger, maybe medium-size institution with some graduate programs, and the other was perhaps a clone of MSU or something like that. It seems to me neither end of the spectrum was a reasonable one for the development of the campus. The majority straw vote – this was never put to a test any stronger than that – the sentiment of that meeting was that probably what was in the cards for us was that middle-sized, large but not mammoth in size, institution.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And yet not all agreed.

FREDERICK OBEAR: No, not at all. Some, also, when that was an adopted course for strategic planning and policy setting at the university, really felt like the ground rules had been changed for them. As I say, I never felt that way because those were not the ground rules that I was attracted there with.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Well that's one of those confusions of understanding which doesn't have an easy explanation.

FREDERICK OBEAR: No, that's right. People hear, too, what they want to hear. But the number I'm talking about being more familiar with, I not only heard but I saw in print, and it's kind of hard to confuse that.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: There was another meeting early on. A Saturday Senate meeting called for everyone, in which various institutional issues came up. Do you recall that one?

FREDERICK OBEAR: Yes, I certainly do. A miserable ice storm day where the faculty of the whole [entered into] this curriculum dispute over the balance of electives versus major courses, and how many credits in general education, leaving how many credits left for majors and elective courses – some majors ending up with negative numbers of electives. (I don't know how students would do that.)

The end result of all that was the disbanding of that kind of academic governance, and a resolution of that dispute in favor of those voices that were crying for more balance and more sense in the curriculum, more choice for students,

and not such a tightly prescribed curriculum that there wasn't any opportunity for students to pursue courses of study on their own. Those of us in the sciences, again I think here, felt that the outcome of that day was more to our favor than against us. So I really didn't feel as if that was as tragic an experience as those who felt like they were the losers in that.

What may have been lost was this feeling that faculty governance could be the whole faculty acting rather than some smaller representative voice. I think we really grew into a more mature institution as a result of that. Some of that "everybody does everything" of the first few years got tempered a bit as a result of the changes that came after that time.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Woody clearly had something, at least in his mind, that had to be resolved there—I think he was going to have it. It was one of those few cases, wasn't it, where Woody really essentially said, "We have to have this"? He didn't say it but it had to come out his way.

FREDERICK OBEAR: Oh definitely, absolutely.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: There was a sizable group of the faculty that didn't want it his way.

FREDERICK OBEAR: That's right, very much so. Rather than have them vote that down, he disbanded the voting mechanism, which was a daring kind of thing to do for an administrator. Fortunately, Woody probably had enough credits in the bank, and the level of trust was still high with him. It was high all throughout his tenure and I'm not sure anybody other than Woody could have gotten away with that kind of an action. But that brought those discussions [of curriculum] which were not leading to productive end results to an abrupt halt.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Yes, but it also sounds like—and this is a very common academic problem—we didn't have a good process for conflict resolution.

FREDERICK OBEAR: We did not.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: These conflicting agendas that were in people's minds didn't get worked out very well until they came to a rather unpleasant – for some – confrontation.

FREDERICK OBEAR: Right. There were actions and coalitions, largely drawn I think along discipline lines, on many of these issues. But the other thing I want to observe, and I experienced this personally with Norman Susskind with whom I either drove or rode on "Black Saturday." I remember chipping ice off the car with him and driving back over to Featherstone Road where we both lived a few houses apart. Even though we were on different sides of that issue we maintained a friendship. It's almost like how lawyers can yell at one another and then go have lunch together or something. I mean there were professional disputes which didn't get in the way of personal relationships, in a wonderful way. I appreciated it.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You lived with a group of folks on Featherstone Road?

FREDERICK OBEAR: Yes, there were a number of faculty over in that area.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Near where the Silverdome is now.

FREDERICK OBEAR: Yes, right across the street from there.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Do you have any particular reason why that area was so popular?

FREDERICK OBEAR: Inexpensive housing. In my case it was rental, furnished rental housing. Maybe some of the others had purchased, although I think most of those houses were probably rented over there. There must have been upwards of ten or fifteen faculty members in that area over there and it was close to the campus. It was in close proximity.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Subsequently you decided to get involved with the faculty subdivision.

FREDERICK OBEAR: Yes. But between those two things, I had an interesting experience. That was when Woody invited Trisha and me to be head residents in the first men's dormitory on campus.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Tell us about that.

FREDERICK OBEAR: I'll tell you some of it. Fitzgerald House was the name of the dorm; Anibal House was the women's dorm next door. Woody had this concept of not having professional dormitory head residents or counselors, but having faculty members live as head residents in the dorm.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: That's sort of unusual, wasn't it?

FREDERICK OBEAR: Very unusual. Again somewhat risky—I know my own age, experience and training at that time. I mean, I didn't have a lot of counseling or psychology courses or things like that, that I could draw on to sort of operate. Both my wife and I had been only children, so we had never lived in a group family environment. There I was with 64 young male students who weren't a lot younger than I was, and I was supposed to be the figure to sort of bring some sense of stability to that arrangement. But it was a great experience. It didn't start out too great because the dorms were not ready in the fall when the students arrived.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: That was the fall of—

FREDERICK OBEAR: That would have been the fall of 1961. The women students were housed up at Upland Hills Farm, miles away from the campus and bused up there. The bus only ran at certain times and they all had to move as a group. The male students were housed in the top floor of the partially completed Hannah Hall of Science building, in kind of a barracks-type bunk bed arrangements. I can't imagine what parents felt like when they left their students there that fall. But Woody was there when they moved in and other faculty were there, to help sort of temper the blow that this university that was going to create "sharp abrasive edges" was providing sharp abrasive housing arrangements right at the beginning as well. That

went on for almost three months – it was close to Thanksgiving when we finally could move into the dorms.

We lived in the dorms two years and then moved over to the [faculty] subdivision. In the two years that we lived there our oldest child Jeff was born, and he was kind of the house mascot. People used to laugh about the diaper truck driving down to Fitzgerald House. He had 64 ready babysitters to come in and share the refrigerator, play tapes or records on the hi-fi set, and sit in comfortable quarters outside of their rooms.

It was just a great experience. It brought me into a different kind of relationship with students in terms of out-of-class learning, and I think it really helped begin to build a collegiate atmosphere on the campus – to have students residential on the campus for the first time, not just a totally commuter institution. There began to develop a coterie of students who were very active. They used the library late at night and they ate meals on the campus. There was entertainment arranged for them as well. There was a swimming club. I think I remember the end of [the sports] building under construction there, and some parties of students in the middle of the night going over and using the pool before the building was open. There were all sorts of public safety and insurance [issues], and sort of “that’s not orderly and tidy” and “we need to stop that business.”

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: There were some unhappy events that you had to live through, as an inexperienced professional, let’s call it.

FREDERICK OBEAR: Oh, absolutely. Fortunately there was some support from the student affairs staff and the counseling group there. In the dorm itself, we had a student death, we had some attempted suicides. When you have that number of students together, all sorts of things can develop and not all of them are good. We just learned to kind of handle each one of those incidents and learn from them. They were not preventable in the sense that the university could have done anything, but the university still felt responsible in dealing with parents and trying to resolve the issues.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You mentioned something about learning about student behaviors that you weren’t perhaps familiar with.

FREDERICK OBEAR: Very much so. That was an eye-opening experience for me. I remember one comment that Trisha made, I don't remember the incident or series of incidents with the men in that dorm, but she said, "You know, I never believed *Catcher in the Rye* was reflective of anything real; I now know that he knew what he was writing about." But it was, on balance, a very, very positive experience.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: I think you mentioned that this was the time that we had our first black students.

FREDERICK OBEAR: Yes. The first black student at the university, in residence at least, and I think maybe the first black graduate in the university – David Lewis – who went on later to become a trustee of the university. His mother and father were very involved in the Oakland Foundation for years. For David, in terms of racial issues, this was an open and accepting environment. I have to believe that part of that was due to David's personality. But it's part of the pioneer spirit again, I think, that "we're going to make this work, these are new and, for all of us, better times so let's take advantage of it."

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So this dorm experience was a first step into administration for you?

FREDERICK OBEAR: It really was. I began to work with the student affairs people who actually hired me, but the pay was housing and meals. There was no reduction in teaching load or anything associated with that. But a couple of years later, as a result of some of the heavy attrition, and in some instances the attrition of good students from the university – who were either running into unusual academic difficulties or had not bonded in any strong way with the institution – Woody approached me again and asked if I would take on a new responsibility, and sit in a new position that he was creating called dean of freshmen. I remember asking him what the responsibilities were of a dean of freshmen. In his very clear and cryptic way he said, "To make sophomores out of freshmen".

I took that on in a half-time responsibility and helped develop, with the cooperation of faculty members throughout the university, an advising system

and a mid-term grades early warning system. That's where some of the discussions with Bill Hammerle—about how do you not put students in trouble too early just by the structure of the course, the way you organize the course, make sure that they have a syllabus, that they understand what the ground rules are for a course—and all of that was put in place.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: It sounds like you brought to the dean of students' office an academic perspective that most deans of students would not have.

FREDERICK OBEAR: That's an interesting observation. I mean there's a parallelism to that, which is that a year or so after that appointment occurred, Woody combined student affairs with academic affairs at the university, at a time when that was not being done nationally. It's going on now more frequently, but I think, again, the importance put on the academic enterprise, and to say that the student affairs should be supportive of that and a corollary to it—rather than something competing with it—was reflected in even the organizational structure in a very unusual way in the institution. But there was a heavy influence of academics into student affairs at Oakland almost from the beginning.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Except perhaps for the first year, where we were adopting what you would say would be traditional modes, with traditional counselors and a dean of students [Roy Alexander] out of a high school situation. That had a different flavor.

FREDERICK OBEAR: Sure. I can understand that. I also recall the debates, I'm not sure how early on they were, about whether or not to have professional advisors, or have faculty serve as advisors. The Oakland model would have always leaned toward using the faculty that way.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Which we sort of still do. From there you took on other administrative jobs, getting up into the title of assistant or acting provost.

FREDERICK OBEAR: Right. In the late '60s, I was nominated by Woody, again, for an academic administration internship program sponsored by the American

Council on Education and funded by the Ford Foundation. I spent a year at Rice University serving as a special assistant to the president of Rice. I came back from that and was asked by Don O'Dowd, who was then provost, to serve as vice provost involved with admissions, registration, records, advising, computing, library and a number of academic support services in there, and I did that for a couple of years. Then in 1970, I was named acting provost, and then a year later provost, where I served for 11 years before leaving Oakland in '81. That was a wonderful job. I mean that's the heart of the university enterprise. Even though I later served as Chancellor of a campus, deciding where sewer lines are going to be isn't nearly as exciting as helping to decide what the general education curriculum is going to be.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: How was Woody, as a supervisor or higher administrator? How did he interact with you in that job? What was your relationship, in terms of assignments and freedom and letting you do or not do what you felt was appropriate?

FREDERICK OBEAR: As vice provost you mean? Woody was not Chancellor when I was provost—so there had been a change there as well. Don O'Dowd had come in but I had worked, sort of indirectly or directly, with Woody as dean of freshmen and partially his vice provost, and went through that transition of student affairs under academic affairs.

Woody's style was absolutely magnificent. I think he was right on top of things—knowledgeable but not running it on a daily basis. I think he had confidence in the people that he surrounded himself with, and was very comfortable to let them go forward, keeping him informed so that there weren't any surprises that came around the corner. For me, he was a wonderful mentor. I just feel as if I learned so much from him by example, as well as a lot of observation seeing what he did and how he did things. I also felt that way about lot of other people at Oakland University, present company not excluded from that. You and I were more contemporaries, but I also valued your experience and learned a lot from our association as well.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: It was a very interactive time.

FREDERICK OBEAR: It was, and people helped each other. When you talk about a university sort of striving to create a community of scholars, there was a sense of community in the early years of Oakland, however its newness. Its leadership, whatever the secret ingredients were for that – there was a kind of pulling together even against disputes and everything else. We had differences of opinion, but there still was that sense of the collective that was special.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And not so much leading off into separate disciplinary areas – as happens as universities get into the multiple graduate programs, and the many different departments divide the institution.

FREDERICK OBEAR: They do. But in the early years we also had this sort of mixed-up office arrangement and everything else.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: It forced people together.

FREDERICK OBEAR: If you can remember a little later, Carl Vann wearing chemistry lab coats in political science?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Woody left suddenly though, didn't he?

FREDERICK OBEAR: He did. I think he was under some positive pressure from the MSU Board to maybe do a different job for that Board. That Board had some strong personalities on it. I think Woody felt that he had a cleaner slate, maybe, by going to a different position and a different institution.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Did he ever talk to you about that?

FREDERICK OBEAR: No. This is conjecture on my part, it really is. I just saw some pressures building as there was turnover at Michigan State. There's no doubt in my mind that he could have done that job well [at MSU], but that was a challenging time for that campus. There probably was also a sense of having reached a level of accomplishment with Oakland, and kind of going out on a "high" – and again, I'm speculating totally here – but it would not have been out of character for him to have sensed that.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Quit while you're ahead.

FREDERICK OBEAR: Exactly.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But you left also.

FREDERICK OBEAR: Yes. I did too, and my circumstances were a little different than all of that. I was an unsuccessful candidate for that position.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Which one was that?

FREDERICK OBEAR: It was originally Chancellor but later President of the university. I had served 11 years as provost which was a long tenure time in that role, and I'd been at the university for about 20 years with the gap for that ACE Fellowship. But new leadership came in, and I really felt that it was time for me to find new territory to work in and began actively working at other job opportunities, most of which were chancellor or president ones (not all). I looked at some other academic vice presidencies because I thought that kind of a move in a different type institution would be a challenging thing to do as well.

The Chattanooga position came; I don't know how I was nominated for that. At the time that happened or just before it, there was an American Association of State Colleges and Universities inter-institutional exchange program which involved Oakland, the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, and the University of Missouri at St. Louis. Faculty members and administrators rotated around those campuses, and learned how things were going on elsewhere. It was as a result of the Chattanooga team's visit to Oakland that my name got dropped into the search process in Chattanooga.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: By whom?

FREDERICK OBEAR: By one of the members of that team. To this day I do not know which one of them. Several months later that led to my being offered that position in Chattanooga, which I thought was probably the most unlikely (of all the job searches I was in) to lead to something positive, because the

University of Tennessee had a reputation for turning within for appointments of that kind. I don't think anybody believed that they would go outside, certainly to somebody from Michigan and Massachusetts. The whole 16 years I served as Chancellor of the Chattanooga campus, the current President and then earlier executive vice president always thought I was from Vermont or Rhode Island; he never did get it straight where in New England I came from, but that it was someplace up North. But lo and behold, they did accept this Northerner into their midst. And I had a great experience there, too.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: It worked well. Reflecting back on your Oakland experience as we sort of close up here, do you have any final thoughts about those times?

FREDERICK OBEAR: I'm not sure if they're final, maybe final for the interview. It was a great run; a wonderfully positive experience. Certainly an incredible growth experience for me to move from that first real job to helping influence the direction of the academic programs at the institution. The educational values and the educational philosophy that I perhaps in some small way contributed to – but certainly I know drew a lot from Oakland – have certainly stood me well over the years. I will be forever grateful for that experience. I have just wonderfully positive feelings about the institution, and I'm pleased to see it continue to grow and develop. I'd like to keep in touch.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Well it's been great fun talking to you tonight, and thanks for coming.

FREDERICK OBEAR: It's nice to see you again, too. Thanks for giving me that first job.

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FREDERICK W. OBEAR
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