

Oakland University Chronicles

Robert Griffith Hoopes

Transcript of Oral History Interview

Interview date: February 3, 1997

Interviewer: Paul Tomboulian

Contents



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Contents

Preface

About the Oakland University Chronicles

Editing of the Transcripts

Introduction to Interview

Biographical Sketch of Robert Hoopes

Photograph Taken February 3, 1997

Photograph from MSUO Yearbook 1963

Biographical Sketch of Interviewer

Transcript of Oral History Interview

Transcript of the Interview: 21 Pages

Index of Topics in the Transcript

Oakland University Chronicles

ROBERT GRIFFITH HOOPES

Date of birth: March 29, 1920

EDUCATION

A.B.	Cornell College (Iowa)	1941
M.A.	Boston University	1942
A.M.	Harvard University	1948
Ph.D.	Harvard University	1949

OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

7-1-59	Professor of English, Dean of Faculty, Assistant to Chancellor
7-1-63 • 12-19-69	Chair, Department of English
12-19-69	Resigned

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS - AMHERST

1989	Professor Emeritus of English
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Current as of February 3, 1997



Photograph of Robert hoopes

February 3, 1997

Photographer: Alice Tomboulian



Robert Hoopes
*Assistant to the Chancellor
for University Planning*

Photograph of Robert Hoopes

MSUO Yearbook 1963

Oakland University Chronicles
Interview with ROBERT HOOPES
February 3, 1997

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: This is one of the interviews of the Oakland University Chronicles Project supported by the Oakland University Foundation. Today is February 3, 1997 and we are speaking from the studios of Public Television Station WGBY in Springfield, Massachusetts. The goal of the project is to collect oral histories dealing with the beginnings of Oakland University. We are focusing on the first four years, the time prior to the graduation of the first class in 1963.

My name is Paul Tomboulian, professor and chair of chemistry at Oakland University. It's my great pleasure today to be talking with Robert Hoopes, who was professor of English at Oakland University for 11 years, dean of the faculty, and chair of the department of English. I first met Bob in 1959, over 37 years ago, when we both came to MSUO as members of the charter faculty. Professor Hoopes left Oakland in 1969 to take a position at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst from which he retired in 1990.

Bob, it's good to see you again, and welcome to the Chronicles Project.

ROBERT HOOPES: It's been 27 or 28 years, and Paul, it's great to see you.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Tell us, how did you first hear about MSUO?

ROBERT HOOPES: My word, what a question! I first heard about MSUO — Michigan State University Oakland, because as I'm sure you have revealed in previous interviews, that university began as an adjunct campus of Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan—I first learned of it from the man who became its first chancellor and who had then, in the spring of 1959, just been appointed to that position. D.B. (usually known as Woody) Varner came to see me, it must have been in March of 1959. I was working in New York as vice-president of the American Council of Learned Societies, usually telescoped to read ACLS. My job was to administer its fellowship and grant-in-aid program to scholars with projects in the humanities and in humanistic aspects of the social sciences. Woody Varner turned up one day—I learned that he was there simply from my secretary telling me that somebody named

Mr. Varner wished to see me—and he came in and sat down and we talked. We talked about Michigan State University Oakland, which is to say he talked about Michigan State University Oakland at great length, and I listened at great length and I was impressed with what I heard. What else can I say about what and when I first heard of MSUO?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You had no prior communication from him?

ROBERT HOOPES: I'd never heard of MSUO. I had missed anything that might have appeared in the newspapers about the planning or beginnings of a new campus of Michigan State University, so it was brand new to me.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: How did Woody convince you, with this nice job in New York City, to come to a place that didn't exist?

ROBERT HOOPES: Well, if he were carrying a football from yard one toward a touchdown, he was 50 yards en route when he started talking, because I was already dissatisfied with my current position in New York—not really with the position nor with my colleagues—I simply couldn't stand working in New York City, which is a kind of irony because I was born and brought up in Chicago, Illinois. Once I left Chicago for college in Iowa, I think I ceased being a city boy and never became one again. So my first reason for becoming interested in MSUO was my current dissatisfaction—with the commuter train from Connecticut to New York and back again, and simply working days and dodging taxi cabs and buses in New York City.

I had come to that job from my first teaching job after completing my doctorate at Harvard. I had been an assistant professor of English at Stanford University and I had already developed certain ideas about education. But at Stanford I had somehow got detoured part-time out of the English department into a curricular administrative enterprise, that somehow teased me into thinking that I had latent or hitherto concealed talents for administration. And so Woody's talk about a dean's job sounded tempting indeed. I've had second and third thoughts about that since.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So you accepted without a trip, perhaps?

ROBERT HOOPES: Oh yes, I liked what he said about Oakland. He is an attractive well-spoken gentleman, an enormously persuasive man, and his outline and vision for the future of that university was one that looked nothing but healthy, promising, and exciting to me. So I tended to react with great favor and enthusiasm to what he was in effect selling.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And you had an assignment immediately.

ROBERT HOOPES: Yes, it was funny. As I recall, one of the first things he did was to invite me and my wife to come as guests of Michigan State University, to East Lansing and then to Rochester, Michigan, to see the home campus and then to see the grounds that were to be the area for the new campus. And of course I accepted the invitation.

But then he immediately put me to work and said, "As long as you're in New York, if you know of anybody who might be interested in becoming a faculty member—of course in your own field, but if you have any sensitivity toward other fields, that as well." So one of the first things I did was to get in touch with Jacques Barzun who was then provost and dean of the faculties at Columbia University. I'd had several joint assignments and enterprises that I worked on with him for the Council of Learned Societies. I asked him if he knew of anybody, especially in humanities, and he gave me the name of George Matthews, who was then one of the directors of Columbia's justly well-known and highly-respected required freshman course in western civilization.

So I called up George Matthews at his office—this was a day or two after Woody had left—and made an appointment to come over and see him. I did that and I took him to lunch and we came back and actually discovered that we talked very easily and refreshingly to one another about medieval and Renaissance history in particular, which were two of his fields. So I immediately invited him to make a visit out to Rochester before I'd even seen it myself. (Subsequently we both did.)

George had told me at the time that he was leaving Columbia University and was entertaining other offers, and that he had in hand a *bona fide* offer of an associate professorship with tenure at the University of Illinois at Urbana, and therefore he couldn't give me an answer one way or the other on the spot. I said, "Of course not. By all means make the trip to Urbana and take a look,

and then come to Rochester and decide which you like. Make any other trips you might have opportunities to make as well."

Well, he did that. He made his trip to Illinois, and a day or two after he got back he called me on the telephone. We were both still working in New York, the academic year wasn't over, he was still teaching at Columbia, I was still administering the fellowship program at ACLS. He said, "Well, Bob, I think you've bought yourself a new boy." And so he had accepted my job, he had accepted my offer before I had even seen the campus of what was to become Michigan State University Oakland—though I was practically on my way.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But he hadn't had an interview either on campus.

ROBERT HOOPES: Oh I think he interviewed Chancellor Varner when he visited Rochester—yes.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: OK. What were some of the aspects of MSUO—the image or the reality—which appealed to you?

ROBERT HOOPES: Well, almost everything. Here we had an institutional *tabula rasa*, so to speak, a blank slate on which we as faculty members would be privileged to write our own curricula and our own major programs, to establish our own requirements for degrees, to be part of the administrative and legislative (that is to say, academic legislative) mechanism that would decide, for example, whether or not this new university would have fraternities or sororities, whether or not—and if so, what—athletic teams to have. We decided to have none, at least for the first few years.

So all of that pioneer aspect appealed to us. Let's see, George was then about 40 years old, I was just 36, and it was a good time to catch us after our first serious faculty jobs. Now here was a chance to put into motion some of those hoped-for ideals of student achievement and pursuit that we'd thought about and talked about, in class and in bull sessions and what not.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Did you have a sense about this academic model that you wanted to create, in terms of the styles of education, the types of course work, the traditions that you wanted to get into?

ROBERT HOOPEES: Yes, and if I may I would like to refer to a copy of the convocation speech which I gave at the first freshman convocation in September of 1959, when we began with our first 20-odd faculty members and our first 400-odd students. Incidentally, that convocation was one of the longest in history. I think there were a total of eight speakers and I was the eighth, so I had my work cut out for me just to be sure that some members of the audience were still awake when my turn came.

I concluded by saying that the educational ideal to which I was committed was one that was not new but indeed was rather old-fashioned—traditional, one would say now. I concluded my speech, at least I tried to conclude it, on an inspiring note and of course that always requires a quotation from somebody else. So I quoted no less than John Stuart Mill from his own inaugural address to the students at St. Andrews University in 1867. He had just been elected rector of that university. He said, "Men are men before they are lawyers, or physicians, or merchants, or manufacturers, and if you make them capable and sensible men they will make themselves capable and sensible lawyers or physicians." What professional men should carry away with them from the university is not necessarily professional knowledge, but that which should direct the use of their professional knowledge and bring the light of general culture to illuminate the technicalities of a special pursuit.

So in general I was dedicated, long before Chancellor Varner first visited me, to a liberal education, one which emphasized the cultivation of all of the spirits of inquiry and discovery that the mind of man possessed. If anything, I was against narrow specialized notions of vocation, which run programs chiefly for the value that a diploma will bring in terms of cash. So it was with some such general notion that I came to Oakland. I did not have anything against a school of engineering, school of business, school of education, save that their students be permitted to avail themselves of the best that men have thought and said in the world, available to all the other students in the university, and that no block of students ever be permitted to graduate with a large gap of that sort in their preparation.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Bob, wasn't it sometime either at the convocation or soon thereafter that you discussed a famous remark about abrasive edges?

ROBERT HOOPES: Yes, that particular locution, "abrasive edges," achieved wide currency, I think even beyond the borders of Michigan. As I recall, it might easily have come out of the burden, the gist of what I had to say in one long section of my convocation speech, but the actual words appeared first in a newspaper article. That article was written as a kind of a semi-interview with me. It was really just another piece in the *Pontiac Press* about MSUO, the new university in its midst, including little items of information about new faculty members that we had hired. There was a kind of wind-up commentary on Robert Hoopes, who was dean of the faculty, and who had this to say about the kind of student body he had hoped for.

This, you remember, was in 1959 and that was a period in America when a book such as David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* was very popular and was a big seller. One of the dominant public controversies of the time was individualism versus conformity and people like Vance Packard and others were writing about this subject, and I latched onto it in my convocation address to the students. I said something about how there were at least two kinds of attitudes toward a university's main job: one underwritten by what may be called an organizational philosophy and the other an individualistic philosophy.

I said that the organizational philosophy was largely custodial in its approach, and made a great deal of grade point averages and the statistical record generally; how certain kinds of deans—deans of men and deans of women—who supported this philosophy tended to worry about the odd-ball student, the loner, the fellow who, like Thoreau, takes the road not taken deliberately to see what's down there. Administrators of this sort tend to try to exert pressure, pressure to homogenize students—in individual statements and in speeches—into a respect for, if not a worship of, the cash value of a diploma. They foster an attitude which tends to equate leadership with popularity, and busy committee work with decision-making.

Whereas the individualistic philosophy opposes a custodial, *in loco parentis* emphasis. It feels that the university's responsibility is—of course the morals and manners of its students, but only secondarily—and that its primary responsibility is the education of its students. It has a wide tolerance for the countless kinds of individuals that make up a student body, and it has a wide tolerance for Bohemia and its inhabitants.

Now all of these antitheses need qualification and enlargement. But it's possible to say that one enshrines the "Humpty Dumpty student," the well-rounded student who was president of his high school senior class and goes on to become president of every one of his college classes. And the well-rounded student is necessarily opposed to what might be called the angular and more intensive student, the one with the "sharp abrasive edges."

Well, the sharp angular student with fine edges began to assume a cartoon outline and he turned up in cartoons all over the student newspaper and the local rags. That got a wide currency, but it did promote the idea of individualism versus mere or sheer conformity. And to that extent I don't regret it. It got to be a kind of a funny thing after a while because it became so overly used, but on the whole I think it was healthy.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: There was another term that we believe Loren Pope also generated, the term about "the Harvard of the Midwest."

ROBERT HOOPES: Oh yes, somewhere along the line the fiction grew, back at the Michigan State University campus and at other universities around the country, that this new college—Michigan State University Oakland—was going to be an honors college. We had never intended it to be an honors college. We had simply set honorable educational goals for its students to achieve and stressed that we weren't interested in their wasting time on non-essentials. Well, that grew into the myth that we were going to be a college that graduated only Phi Beta Kappas, which was absurd because we didn't have enough students to become Phi Beta Kappas, at least in those early years.

We tried to select our students carefully from the high schools and on the whole I think we did a good job. But if you look at it realistically and retrospectively you have to acknowledge that the students we got at Michigan State University Oakland, now Oakland University, were by and large very much like the average cut of student we would get from the average high school throughout the United States. Among them, the very best students were as good as the very best students at New Trier or Evanston or Scarsdale, and the very worst students were as bad as they were anywhere else.

That kind of spread was a perfectly normal one, but by calling the school the Harvard of the Midwest it was easy to make the leap to a judgment that we had hoped to become an honors college. After all, Harvard has

higher admission standards than most other colleges and when it comes to the number of applicants for admission to Harvard as against the number accepted, the percentage is very low. Therefore that's the kind of reputation we had. How it is now, 35 or 38 years later, I don't know. You would know better than I, Paul.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Wasn't there some difficulty or perhaps conflict or paradox here because we had these ordinary students and a relatively challenging curriculum? How did that play out?

ROBERT HOOPES: I think it would be fair to say that as professors we became victims of our own propaganda, or at least victims of others' propaganda about us. Once you get represented publicly and in print as an honors college, as an institution which pays special attention to and indeed caters to gifted students, and you hear this often enough, your sights in the classroom automatically begin to elevate themselves. You can't help but begin to intensify and try to make more elaborate, by way of multiple examples and illustrations, whatever lecture you may be giving. It is not to say that professors in honors situations automatically become showmen. But I think it is still fair to say that all of us as teachers are bitten to a certain degree by the impulse to show biz. We want what we have to say to sound, if not quite eloquent or elegant, at least refined and distinguished. And I think to a certain degree this happened to us.

We, after all, were a small enclave out there in Rochester, Michigan, with very little communication and exchange with other campuses around us at Ann Arbor and East Lansing. They were awfully busy with football and things like that at those places, and we didn't have any of that, so we tended to prize this kind of situation to our very students. We encouraged them to feel proud to be a member of a student body in attendance at an institution which turned its nose up at physical sports. The only thing we ever had by way of an extracurricular activity was recreational family swimming and debate. There were at times movements from within the student body and indeed some of the faculty, certainly the public and the administration, toward basketball, perhaps even football. Those things never took hold, at least not in the first decade when I was at Oakland.

We prized the prizes of the mind and we tried to infect our students with a sense of that same pride. Well that produced a paradox. After all, these students were just a bunch of average kids from average high schools in Troy and Hamtramck and Rochester and Pontiac, and other blue-collar and lighter or darker blue suburbs of Detroit—and a certain contingent from Detroit itself, but those schools weren't really any superior to the high schools in Rochester and in Pontiac.

So this produced a paradox of the professors glorifying one mode of achievement of the mind, against all the public press championing who's going to win the Big Ten this year, who's going to go to the Rose Bowl. The students didn't know exactly where they were. I don't think we ever took proper steps simply to sit down and talk levelly with them and tell them, "Look, French 1 and English 201 and the history of the French Revolution, these aren't any great big things. [They are simply] part of the history of mankind, which, if you don't pay any attention to you'll never grow up yourself. It is all interesting in its own sake but it's not any thing razzle-dazzle." And so, for the absence of razzle-dazzle there was always a kind of gray atmosphere around the campus of Oakland University.

We did have excellent students here and there. Loren Pope was a former education editor of the New York Times; he was recruited by Woody Varner to come to Oakland as an assistant to the Chancellor. Well, Loren Pope recruited a young student by the name of Dan Polsby from somewhere out of the Maryland or Alexandria, Virginia district, who had himself never finished high school. I think he'd been kicked out of high school after two or two and a half years, and he was doing odd jobs around town. Loren Pope brought him out to Oakland and enrolled him. He went on to become as good a student as any Phi Beta Kappa—we didn't have a chapter at Oakland, we weren't old enough yet—but as good a student as any Phi Beta Kappa I have known anywhere. Dan Polsby is right now the occupant of a named professorship at Northwestern University Law School in Evanston.

Incidentally, a footnote here: during my first quarter at Oakland, in addition to deaning and doing the many things that deans do, I taught one section of freshman English. It was a bit too much, with all of those papers to grade as well as a budget to work out and so forth. But I had one student, a graduate of Pontiac High School, had about a B-minus average in high school, an ordinary student, maybe slightly above average, but no ball of fire. He spoke clearly

and for the most part, straight clean English. He found himself in my section of freshman English writing weekly A papers—he was good enough. We had a rule at Oakland at the beginning that any student in freshman English who got an A the first quarter would be excused from all the rest of freshman English, and this student got an A. I would prefer not to name him for the sake of his own embarrassment but he wrote me a little note which I will now share with you.

This was in December of 1959: "Thank you, Mr. Hoopes. I would like to take these few lines and try to express how grateful I am to you. It's hard. Please don't take this for what it maybe appear to be, a last-ditch attempt to make a favorable impression. (This was well before grades were handed out, probably the last meeting of the class.) You and the rest of the faculty, (so it was a tribute to the entire faculty) have been beating us on the head with intellectual sledgehammers all of this first quarter. You must have better biceps or a stronger hammer because you were the first to put a good-sized dent in my oversized head. It hurt at first but I needed it, and I'm glad I got it. The class was very enjoyable and profitable. I'm only sorry that you won't be able to teach next term. Please keep the sledgehammer in good shape. We prospective eggheads may need it. Merry Christmas, sir. Sincerely, ..." And by the way, as to "egghead": I haven't yet used that word. In addition to abrasive edges, egghead was another term that became current as applied to Oakland students. This young man, by the way, has gone on in the business world to achieve a vice-presidency and early retirement at age 55.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Yes, he was quite a success. There were some other interesting disparities or unusual occurrences that happened early on, when some other folks had to be hired at the university, other than the faculty and administrators. Tell us about some of those particular cases that you happen to remember.

ROBERT HOOPES: Well, there is one very amusing story out of all of this. Of course there had to be employed typists and clerks, someone to run the bookstore. We had to have a barber shop on campus. We needed secretaries by the dozens. This was an active publishing faculty and their work had to be typed up and there was all the correspondence that the administrative officers carried on, and chairmen in the course of recruiting. So we had all of these

ancillary supporting people, as well a whole physical plant group who cleared the snow from the walks in the winter, who made it possible for school to take place.

Anyway, I'll never forget one day near the end of the second quarter of the freshman year, so it would have been in '60. My secretary burst into my office, and she was visibly agitated, I could see. She said, "Mr. Hoopes, Mr. Hoopes, may I see you alone for a moment?" and I said, "Go right ahead." She closed the door behind her and said, "Miss So-and-so down the hall in admissions is right outside the door and she's got a big problem." I said, "What's that?" "She has this student who wants to drop out of school." Well, we had a rule that any student could drop out of school and have all of his tuition money refunded if he did it by a certain date. After that date you couldn't get your money back. Common practice in colleges all over the world.

Well, it turned out that my secretary told me that this other secretary had a young man in tow who wanted to drop out of school today, that day. Tomorrow, the following day, would have been too late because this was the last day you could drop out of school and get your tuition money back. But my secretary said to me, "She tells me she's got him pretty well convinced and she thinks she can keep him busy enough so that he will have to stay here for the rest of today. And then tomorrow he couldn't get his money back." All I could do was throw up my hands and explain patiently that unlike other organizations, businesses and institutions for which they may have worked in the area, we were not a profit-making institution and any student was free to drop out at any time during this grace period. If he waited until too late, then that's tough, it's too late. But you can't make him stay an extra day just to hang on to that money; that's not fair under our rules. "Oh," she said, "thank you." It had never been explained to her. And so the student was allowed to drop and he got his money back.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You had characterized this automobile business shadow in a particular way.

ROBERT HOOPES: I said when we first came to Rochester that all we could see was this enormous patch of land that Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Wilson had given to Michigan State University for purposes of building a new campus.

There were no crops planted. Here and there you could see stands of trees, but mostly it looked like a series of empty lots with wild flowers and weeds growing. We all looked at this, you know, and we remembered the diagrams that Mr. Varner had shown us in the course of recruiting, in which there always appeared outlines of the buildings as they would be ten or fifteen years from now—plus enormous spaces for parking. So here we were building a university "in the valley of the shadow of the hubcap" and it looked on paper as though the most important thing about this university was going to be its parking places.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Well, that concern has not disappeared. Bob, during that first year, that 1959 to 1960 period, you were extensively involved in the hiring of faculty. Tell us about some of your experiences in that assignment and role.

ROBERT HOOPES: Faculty recruitment was a very large part of my primary responsibility as dean. But I discovered very early on that, as would have been true of anyone from any disciplinary background, I needed help. I was perfectly comfortable in recruiting sessions—which usually went on to considerable length—talking with English professors and French and German professors and classicists and historians and art historians and members of the music faculty. (I had a musical education growing up as a boy, myself.)

But when it came to mathematics and chemistry and physics, I was far less qualified to carry on even an intelligible conversation because about all I could remember of my high school chemistry course was the word "titration," and to this day I'm not sure what it meant. (I do hear people using that word in other contexts now, and I really wonder what they mean.) So far as physics was concerned, although I had done my high school physics, that was pretty much a blank wall. In other words, to tell the difference between a promising, able young physicist and one who seemed not so promising, I didn't have the wherewithal to see the differences, and those were the differences that were vital in recruiting. Naturally you wanted the best judgment and so I needed help. I asked Jim McKay, professor in mathematics, and Donald O'Dowd, who was then professor in psychology, if they wouldn't give me some help in social science and science and mathematics recruitment, and they were extremely helpful.

But I must say the process of recruitment of faculty generally is a strange and diversified thing, chiefly because you meet so many types of people. In this situation where you're recruiting, you're trying to recruit people to join a wagon train that's going to go hurtling across unknown territory and you've got to represent that in some way to make it sound attractive. Of course all of my colleagues helped me in recruiting. If we brought a candidate to campus there would be a lunch or a dinner for him, and he would meet the other members of the department and so on. But you would want to be able to speak of the candidate's own research, whatever he might be engaged in, with some modicum of intelligibility so that you didn't seem like a complete ninny, just hiring arms and legs.

One of the things I ran into again and again was the faculty member who seemed almost too promising, and then somewhere along in his first year or so at Oakland it would turn out that he was—well, one type was a professional malcontent. That faculty member would have been a burr under the saddle of any dean anywhere. And others—I would get phone calls, for example, and letters from people: "I've read about Oakland University and I've always thought it might be exciting to be in on the ground floor of an enterprise of that sort. If there are any openings of any sort please get in touch with me." Well, I would respond to a few of these, and altogether too often the character would turn out to be a professional mischief maker who, once he got to campus, made life miserable for the other members of the department around him in ways that I can't begin to enumerate. Just like a pesky neighbor that couldn't keep his nose out of your business.

Other faculty members would conceal, for example (and I guess I can't blame them for this), the fact that they were already under notification at their present institution that their services would no longer be needed starting next year or two years from now. So we would hire, almost accidentally, rejects without knowing that they were rejects. But every once in a while we would get a nice surprise and one of those rejects would turn into an absolutely first rate teacher and scholar. So we had both kinds of experiences. But you really had to be alert, and I suppose at least try to be something of an amateur psychologist in making guesses about a person's future behavior.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: When you were chair of the English Department, I am told that you started the tradition, or at least joined a tradition, of a very congenial department. Maybe you could tell us a few of your thoughts about that.

ROBERT HOOPES: We were a big department, I think the biggest department on campus, with lots of members—over 20 at one point and that's quite a few in those early years, when you only had about 2000 students. We were very lucky. It was an extraordinarily congenial group. As to the extent that I contributed to this, I wouldn't begin to try to recite. About all I could say is that I tried to treat my colleagues as equals and scholars, and to treat them civilly and hope for the best. I'm afraid that their own experience with me as chairman has to be your primary source for that sort of information.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: It was.

ROBERT HOOPES: And I was very grateful to them. They gave me a birthday party on the occasion of, or close to, my 10th year at Oakland. They gave me a copy of the big new folio edition of Shakespeare, which was very kind and very thoughtful of them. A couple of them wrote some amusing little pieces making fun of, and having fun with, their chairman. I guess all I can say is, I never really tried to act as a chairman.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: In the role of dean of the faculty and also chair, later, of the English department, you were certainly active in structuring the early curricula, and discussing some of the many decisions and curricular directions that seemed to be on the platter that was served. Tell us about some of those events.

ROBERT HOOPES: I always tried to give each person an opportunity to teach what he felt was his best strength, plus his contributions to other courses that needed to be in the catalogue.

We had one interesting experience. We brought in a young fellow from the Pontiac School System, who was chairman of the English department at this particular high school in Pontiac. Believe it or not, we brought him in to do the job that we had all expressly said we would never do at Oakland:

namely, teach remedial English. But some of these kids needed it. They couldn't tell a semi-colon from their elbow, much less a dangling participle, and so we brought him in.

Then he proved to be such an able young man that we conceived the idea of generating some kind of acquaintanceship between the members of our department and the teachers in the high schools around, us who sent us their students. And that developed into quite a healthy chain. You see, the School of Education regularly sent their seniors out for—whatever it was—five weeks of practice teaching. Well, we went out ourselves, regular professors of Chaucer and Shakespeare and Milton, and taught high school English. We visited the class, got the teacher's willingness to let us teach, sometimes a whole week's work, and then sit down with the teacher afterwards, or sit down with that teacher and a whole group of other teachers who'd had different professors working with them. It built a healthy cooperation between the two groups of English teachers, so that we were able to converse about problems in our own discipline, problems with students, ways of improving teaching, and in general close a little this enormous gulf between college professors and high school teachers. I think that was in a way a pedagogical success as well as a community service.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Indeed. You were also involved in dialogues and communications on the overall curriculum itself.

ROBERT HOOPES: Boy, and how!

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Tell us a little about that—it started very early.

ROBERT HOOPES: Very early. You see, before Oakland University opened its doors to students in the years '57 and '58, Chancellor Varner had convened a group of distinguished educators and business men into groups called the Meadow Brook Seminars. They all met together first and they arrived at a tentative agreement on the kinds of things in which MSUO should try to concentrate. The first was liberal arts. They were committed to the proposition that, whatever kinds of professional schools we might develop, all students of the university are going to be well-acquainted with the liberal arts.

Then they settled on engineering, education, and economics in business as the three areas for professional development.

They also settled on a three course curriculum—a curriculum in which people in all of these fields would take only three courses per term, or per quarter, or per semester, whatever the calendar was. Well, when the faculty got there and we tried to make this work, it just wouldn't work. The accrediting societies that bestowed validity or bestowed credibility on college professional schools around the country, the engineers and the schools of business, they had certain course requirements that had to be part of the curriculum. I forget what they were—one set of requirements in business, engineering, and education—and when you started adding these up you couldn't get it below four courses a semester.

The Meadow Brook Seminars had been so committed to this super experiment, and I really think that they blinded themselves, they were so infatuated with the word experimental. The three course system was to be the arch of the experimental enterprise. Woody Varner—after all he had convened them, he had created these committees—so he was for this three-course system and there we sat as a faculty arguing against him.

Every time we would come up with a curriculum consisting of four courses per semester (or maybe we'd even weasel a little here and there, and say, "Well, in this term you can take just three") he would oppose it. He said, "I want you to use your imagination. You've got to try to establish a curriculum with only three courses per semester." Eliminating freshman English was part of that scheme, and I couldn't abide that, and so it went around and around on this forever. It finally settled into a four course system. The School of Education, you couldn't get them through college in four years if they only took three courses a semester. The same with engineering.

The Meadow Brook Seminars and then the MSUO Foundation program committee, which grew out of those seminars, had projected a curriculum which said (among other things) what a lot of curricula always say: MSUO will offer no course of a sub-college character, no high school courses. We will admit students only who have demonstrated in high school that they have the proper training and ability to do college work, though I don't know quite how you could tell that. Then there was a little colophon to the effect that students of ability who

have been admitted but who have irregular backgrounds may take high school courses for a fee. I don't think those fee courses were ever offered, but it went on from there to say that the faculty will place strong emphasis on writing in all of its general education courses. It did not elaborate precisely what they meant by general education courses. They said that no freshman English course of a traditional nature would even be offered, no communications course, no composition.

Well, the spirit which animates noble resolutions such as that is laudable, but the resolution to do away completely with a course in writing in the freshman year seemed to me to go too far. English prose does possess its own identity and process that can be defined. To say that all freshman English courses have invariably been failures, it's just a generalization that won't stand up: there are too many good freshman English courses around the country. It seems to me that every writer knows one thing to be indisputable and that is that one learns to write through the reading of great literature. If that requirement isn't there, then progress in ability to manage a language is bound to suffer.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So you took exception then to this approach?

ROBERT HOOPES: Yes, and we wound up with a freshman English course. I'm not sure it was all that good. But it's been said, and said rightly, that one learns how to teach primarily by having been well-taught. And I think it's equally true that one learns how to write primarily by being well-read. Reading and writing have always gone together because they belong together. No one has ever become a good writer without first becoming a sensitive and critical reader, so how can we expect his own prose to develop the suppleness and flexibility and control that we hope for, if he isn't given some guidance?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You were complaining then about this part of the prescription for English?

ROBERT HOOPES: Yes, the Chancellor and I cheerfully—sometimes not so cheerfully—disagreed completely on this. Education, you know, may be described in great part as a process of learning to do certain things by observing the ways in which others have done them. Not the way, the ways.

And the fact that there are multiple ways encourages the student to explore

and cultivate the potential of his own way, but without exposure to these other ways how is he going to know whether he is doing anything right or wrong? So, I resisted that, and that was one of the ones I lost. We had other disagreements. I have always felt that the essential nature of a university will probably have its finest flowering if the educational authority is where the real educational responsibility lies, namely with the faculty which forms the community of scholars from whom the student learns by association, and which, I would add, the administration is privileged to serve.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Bob, when you say you lost, was that just a temporary setback for the placement of the freshman writing?

ROBERT HOOPES: Well, Oakland began then to form separate little colleges within the larger college. They were like honors colleges and some of them had a freshman English course and some of them didn't. But these were small groups, and it was possible working with a small group of students to do all kinds of things that you can't do with a whole classroom full. Professor Mel Chernow was instrumental in a lot of that.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: The tradition of teaching English or writing seems to be a key feature of most freshman programs most places.

ROBERT HOOPES: They're still arguing about it.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You had some other observations about faculty-administration relationships that you wanted to share with us: the role of the faculty, the role of the administration. You felt strongly about that I know, as many of us did.

ROBERT HOOPES: Well, somebody's got to be there to collect the money. I suppose that you have to have an admissions director to sift through the applications. But it seems to me that one of the reasons that Oakland really got off to such a superior start was that for its first 11 years it had the same chancellor. There have been new campuses started in different places in the country. We've got one in Massachusetts—they're 25 years old now and

they've had four or five chancellors. I don't think we can underestimate the vitality that comes from that kind of continuity.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: What about faculty governance, the Academic Senate. Do you have any recollections or perceptions about how that worked or didn't work?

ROBERT HOOPES: I do have one in particular. We were trying to get up a catalogue and we were trying to number the courses. If hadn't been for Paul Tomboulian, the numbering of courses at Oakland University would be a box of snakes right now. I'll never forget that nobody else saw the difficulties you could get into just by adding numbers, until you shook us all up and drew our attention to it.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But that means that the faculty were heavily involved in what some people would call the administrative process.

ROBERT HOOPES: At a new university that's inevitably the case. I don't think any administrator is dumb enough to think that he can preside over a whole new faculty in a whole new place without their advice and counsel. I think Woody always had an extra attachment to Mr. Hannah and to MSU, where he'd sort of grown up in the administration, and that sometimes exercised a very powerful influence on his judgment.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Perhaps more so than communications [with the MSUO faculty]. You were only dean the first two years.

ROBERT HOOPES: Yes.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And so he would be more likely to talk to John Hannah about how to proceed than to you?

ROBERT HOOPES: I think so, because he was almost like a son to John Hannah, and Hannah was a very wise man. But I never knew how much they conversed. A few years ago, 1992 to be exact, my wife and I went back to Rochester to attend a wedding of a daughter of a close friend of ours. Many,

many faculty members were present at the wedding and I got to talking with a young sociologist who seemed very bright indeed. He hadn't been there when I was there. He was asking me about the early days of Oakland, and I told him how barren the place looked when we first got there, except somebody had started putting up a building with some bricks. It all looked so impossible, and we thought starting a university here was like a Boy Scout trying to build a fire with wet wood.

Incidentally, George Matthews and I did a little bit of team teaching on one occasion. I was auditing his class in Western civilization and he was lecturing on the rise of the universities in the West. He dilated at great length: "You can't build a university, you can't build a good or a great university unless you've got a city. Look at all of the great universities—Heidelberg, Oxford, University of London; all of the great universities in this country—Harvard (Cambridge), Yale (New Haven), University of Chicago, and New York University. You can't hope to build a university in an empty field." One student hollered from the back row "Oakland!" I had never seen George Matthews blush in my life but he did on that occasion. He said, "Well, I suppose there's an exception to every rule."

But at any rate, to come back to this wedding we were attending. I complained to this sociologist about how in our first months at Oakland after the first term began, the students didn't have any inclination to hang around campus. Of course there wasn't any thing to hang around for—the little place where you could get something to eat and that was it. They all ran back to their high schools every weekend, went back to their high schools because the overwhelming majority of the students just came a few miles from home, [and that's where their long-term friends were].

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: They didn't have far to go.

ROBERT HOOPES: No. And they would go to the junior prom at their high schools and we would try to talk them out of it, but we never succeeded. He [the sociologist] said, "They still do it, thirty-eight years later, they still do it. But you know, there are academic problems on every campus. We've got all the same ones here that you have, but Oakland's unique." And he never really elaborated on that, but he meant it very strongly. I repeated it to George Matthews, and George pondered for a moment and he said, "You know, he's right."

It may not be the most attractive or the most desirable uniqueness in the world, but it is unique." He and this other fellow I had just met were both proud of it, and it felt good to hear that.

Out of all of this one wonders why somebody hasn't long since written a really great academic novel. We have novels in which people go to school and graduate—Scott Fitzgerald writes a little bit about Princeton—and there are all kinds of (if not academic) all kinds of school scenes in Dickens' novels, lower schools. Then we get satirical academic novels: Mary McCarthy, *The Groves of Academe* and Randal Jarrell, *Pictures from an Institution*. Some of these are marvelously funny but to my knowledge, not only has no one written, I don't think any one can point to a book that he would call a great academic novel. I've often wondered about this.

I've tried my hand at little short stories based in an academic setting. But I have finally come to the conclusion that the academic novel is really impossible to write, and the reason is that there is no way to end it. There's no way that you could put a proper ending, there's no way you can give suitable aesthetic closure to an academic novel. Why? Because the academic novel is always ending just at the end of spring vacation, or just the beginning of Christmas vacation, or the end of the summer vacation. It's all going to start all over again, and no matter where you end the novel, you know the school is just going to go on and on and on. I don't think anything can be made of this point, but it's always struck me as interesting that one result is that we don't really have a great academic novel that I know of.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: What may have to be made of this point is that this interview will not go on and on, and so thank you very much Bob. It's been good talking with you and I hope to see you again some time.

ROBERT HOOPES: You're welcome Paul, I've enjoyed it. Thank you very much.

Oakland University Chronicles

ROBERT HOOPES

Index: Transcript of Interview

Academic novel.....	21
Administration:	
Educational authority	17-18
Faculty involvement	19
Athletics.....	8
Chair of English department.....	14
Cherno, Melvin	18
Community:	
Interaction with local schools	15
Course design:	
Freshman English.....	16, 17-18
Curriculum:	
Interaction with teacher training	15
No remedial courses	14-15, 16-17
Three-course system	16
Dean of faculty:	
Appointment.....	2
Faculty:	
Attitudes about education	8-9
Involvement in administration.....	19
First contact with MSUO	1-3
Freshman Convocation:	
Hoopes' speech.....	5-7
Hannah, John.....	19
Image of MSUO.....	4, 8
Matthews, George:	
Recruitment.....	3-4
Rise of universities	20
Uniqueness of Oakland	20-21
McKay, James.....	12
Meadow Brook Seminars:	
Decisions made.....	15-17

Media coverage:	
<i>Pontiac Press</i>	6
O'Dowd, Donald.....	12
Philosophy of education:	
Liberal education.....	5
Organizational vs. individualistic.....	6-7
Educational authority	17-18
Phrases:	
"Sharp, abrasive edges"	6, 7
"Humpty Dumpty student"	7
"Harvard of the Midwest"	7-8
"Intellectual sledgehammers"	10
"Valley of the shadow of the hubcap"	11-12
Pioneers:	
Pioneer aspects.....	4
Barren appearance.....	20
Polsby, Dan.....	9
Pope, Loren.....	9
Reasons for coming.....	2, 4
Recruiting of faculty:	
George Matthews	3-4
Responsibility as dean	12-13
Recruiting of students	7
Students:	
Dan Polsby.....	9
Note of appreciation	10
Returning to high schools	20
Support staff	10-11
Teaching experiences:	
Classroom expectations	8
Varner, Durward B. (Woody):	
Recruitment of Robert Hoopes.....	1-3
Three-course system	16
Continuity as chancellor.....	18-19