

‘Roots and Wings: The Case for Higher Education’
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I. Roots and Wings Of An Eagle

It is a true honor and privilege to serve as the seventh president of Oakland University.

From my very first days on campus, I have felt a special kinship with this amazing place – our history, our values, our people and our purpose.

You and I, we are resilient. We’ve persevered against great odds or risen above tragedies. We cherish lifelong learning. We thrive on hard work. We have grit! We have guts!

Our visionary founder, Matilda Dodge Wilson, liked to say, “to attempt great things is to expect great things.” I would add, “with passion and persistence, we **accomplish** great things for today’s students and tomorrow’s leaders.”

Matilda did it all on a grand scale, without fanfare or complaint. She ran her family farm and her business, and she was this great state’s first woman lieutenant governor. She pioneered our university with a generous spirit. To put it simply: **she got things done.**

Consider this: To accommodate our earliest seminar students in 1958, a year before the arrival of full-time students, Matilda and her team established the roots of this great institution by converting a chicken coop into a classroom. It was made of tile, concrete and a few stray chicken feathers!

From those roots – those humble beginnings – grew Oakland University.

Today, our superb faculty teach nearly 20,000 students across a campus that is growing in scale and reputation, while contributing 800 million dollars annually to the economy and 112,000 impressive alumni to date.

A university at its best gives us strong roots to grow and powerful wings to fly.

That’s today’s theme: We’re celebrating Oakland’s unique history – our roots – as we build on that legacy by helping students develop their wings – to learn, to lead, and ultimately, to soar.

Helping students achieve their full potential is our highest priority and our greatest pride. This isn’t always easy; our paths aren’t always clear. This reminds me of a favorite fable – one that also happens to start in a chicken coop!

The story is this: When an eagle was very small, he fell out of his nest. A kindly farmer picked him up and brought him to his farm's chicken coop. The eagle grew up there, strutting around, pecking at the ground and acting very much like a chicken.

One day, a naturalist came to the farm to see this eagle who thought he was a chicken. The man believed that the bird had the heart of an eagle, and nothing could change that. So the man lifted the eagle onto a fence and said, "Eagle, stretch out your wings and fly!" The eagle moved slightly, but then jumped down and rejoined the chickens.

The same thing happened again the next day. But the naturalist was determined. He returned once more, and this time, he took the eagle some distance away to the foot of a high mountain.

The man held the eagle on his arm and pointed high in the sky. He said: "Eagle, you belong to the sky. You were born for greatness. Stretch out your wings and fly!"

This time, the majestic eagle stared skyward into the bright sun and stretched his massive wings. His wings moved, slowly at first, and then faster and more powerfully. With the mighty screech of an eagle, he flew towards the sun."

I love that fable because it's a wonderful illustration of what educators do every day.

From my vantage point, I see all of you who are helping Oakland's students find their **greatness within, as they gain confidence, stretch their wings and fly.**

You – our extended community of champions, leaders, benefactors, parents and partners – help us aim high and advance Oakland's vision – to unlock the potential of individuals and leave a lasting impact on the world through the transformative power of education and research.

With your help, we're also transforming to keep pace with the fast-changing needs of our students and our economy, ensuring that education is highly relevant, affordable and accessible to all who want to learn.

I'll come back to this in a moment with a spirited defense of our value and our contributions at a time when higher education is under attack. How we respond to this threat will make all the difference for future generations.

So, thank you to our:

Past presidents, on whose shoulders I stand;

Respected trustees, faculty and staff, who push us to be our best;

Distinguished leaders of fellow institutions, who raise the bar for all of us;

Prominent mayors, state and federal legislators, who support our goals;

Generous benefactors, alumni and community leaders, who invest in our potential;

Devoted family and friends, who have provided strong, loving roots; and

Talented students, who will help change the world. They include eloquent Lena Mishack. Lena, you are going to make a very fine physician one day!

Special thanks also to:

U.S. Senator Gary Peters;

Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson;

OU Board Chair Ric DeVore;

OAAA Board President Beth Benson;

AAUP President and faculty representative Tom Discenna; and

AP Assembly President and staff representative Stephanie Willis;

Thank you all for your great remarks and contributions.

My own roots are in evidence today. I loved that wonderful tribute from Indiana University President Michael McRobbie; he is an extraordinary friend, colleague, mentor and leader. IU's accomplished first lady Laurie McRobbie is also here; she is a fantastic friend and colleague.

Dear friends who have traveled near and far to be a part of my inaugural celebration.

To my family – you are my pride and joy – my children Aliza, Ramzy, Ari, Allison, Naomi and Adam; my darling grandchildren; and my partner, Dan, and daughter, Rachel. I'm thrilled that my wonderful siblings, Emmet, Arica, Charles, Rick, Paul and Veronica are here today.

To my parents, Rabbi Richard and Bella Hirsch, who are watching from their home. I'd like to say thank you for building our home around love, learning and service to others.

With us in spirit is my late husband, Mark. He was a true renaissance man who would have loved our bright, curious students and our beautiful campus complete with its nature preserve and the 49 tolling bells we heard today. He would agree that this is the perfect place to make a lasting impact on the world.

II. Repairing The World

I have no doubt that education has the power to transform. I learned that lesson when I was only six years old.

On August 28, 1963, my father, Rabbi Richard Hirsch, took me to the March on Washington. My father was close friends with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and he played a leadership role in the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. King made history that day with an extraordinary speech that called for an end to racism.

Standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial before hundreds of thousands of civil rights supporters, Dr. King talked about his dream for America. He said: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

I couldn't see Dr. King over the crowd that day and I couldn't fully grasp what he was saying. But I understood the sentiment – that **powerful words and actions can change history.**

Two years later, despite warnings of danger, my father and Dr. King marched together in Selma. On April 4, 1968 in Memphis – 50 years ago this month – Dr. King’s life was tragically cut short.

We grieved as a family. Then my father delivered one of the eulogies, and I’ll never forget his words.

He said: “When God created man, he used every color of dust. Why? So that no one would ever be able to say, ‘the color of my skin is better than the color of your skin.’” It was a powerful and lasting memory for all who heard it.

My mother was less in the public eye than my father, but no less remarkable. A child of war-ravaged communist Russia, she arrived in this country in 1954, not knowing a word of English.

She quickly learned, and we spoke both English and Hebrew in our home. She was a strict disciplinarian. She liked to say: “We run a tight ship here – we call it a dictatorship!”

Books were our favorite toys. If we misbehaved, the penalty was an evening without reading. Dinnertime was noisy: a time for debating ideas as we welcomed political and religious leaders from many backgrounds and cultures into our home.

These amazing experiences were my roots. Our home focused on faith, education, music, the arts, and service to others. Perhaps, then, it is no surprise that, like me, two of my brothers are doctors and a third is a rabbi.

We believe in the Jewish principle of Tikkun olam, a Hebrew phrase that means to “repair the world.” This calls on us to do everything we can to improve the lives of others.

Repair the world. And so, that is why I am here. That’s a big part of why I left a corporate job to return to academia.

Here, we shape the lives of students. Here, as our mission says, we cultivate the full potential of a diverse and inclusive community. Here, we make discoveries that change the course of history. We dive into facts and debate mile-high ideas. We make learning a lifetime habit.

And, we actively engage in our communities, learning from them and making them better as we do so.

Where else but at a university can we do all that?

You see – at Oakland University, I’ve returned to my own roots and I’ve also found my wings. It is a freeing, exhilarating feeling to be in the right place at the right time to do the most good for generations to come.

You might ask: ‘How will OU make a lasting impact on the world from our beautiful location here in southeast Michigan?’ My answer is – don’t underestimate us! We already do – in thousands of bold and innovative ways:

- We do it through our talented students and their academic success – reflected in rising retention and graduation rates. But it’s much more than good grades. Some are working to make football helmets safer or documenting the plight of refugees who escaped violence. And our medical students are collaborating with 60 community partners, including clinics in Detroit and Pontiac, to prevent disease and promote good health.
- We also do it through our brilliant faculty and researchers, and their contributions to scholarship and better teaching environments. But it’s more than that. Our professors are working to improve the health and literacy of our communities, hosting STEM summer camps, and even deploying a drone to combat hunger and boost crop production in Africa.
- We do it through important partnerships, such as our OU-Pontiac Initiative, where we have six pillars working collaboratively with the mayor and other leaders to help revitalize the community.
- And we do it through our diverse, welcoming environment that encourages a rich tapestry of people, backgrounds and ideas. I’m proud that we’ve been recognized as the nation’s second-safest campus as well as Michigan’s most LGBTQ-friendly campus. It’s essential that our students know that we warmly welcome free speech and that every single voice matters.
- We also do it by innovating for the future. We’re among the nation’s top five schools for placing engineering graduates in the fast-growing industry of self-driving cars. This makes perfect sense, given our connection to the Dodge Brothers Motor Car Company. We’re also unique in Michigan for directing not one but two business incubators that assisted roughly 80 startup companies in the past six years. This translates to new jobs and millions of dollars in economic impact for our region.

Stay tuned: we’re just getting started!

III. Universal Truth: Education Is A Strength

Thomas Jefferson believed that educated citizens are a vital requisite for our survival as a free people. I wonder what he would think of some of today’s media headlines.

Here are just a few: “Education is a Racket.” Or “Higher Education is Bad for America.” Or “College Is A Waste of Time.” Or even “College is Dead.”

My response? **Nothing could be further from the truth.**

But clearly, this is an urgent issue; higher education is under attack. Critics contend that we are no longer relevant. That a four-year degree is too expensive and takes too long. And that universities haven't kept pace with the cutting-edge needs of our workplaces.

Some of these points are fair criticism, and we must do better for our students – or we'll risk falling behind.

Here at Oakland, we're leading by example. We have added our persuasive voices to the debate. And we're working in partnership with industry and other universities and community colleges across the state to ensure that everyone who wants to learn can do so.

Far from a monopoly, we are a big tent, dedicated to the unique needs of today's students. To meet those needs, we're evolving quickly:

- To help relieve students' cost burdens, we're increasing efficiencies as well as student aid. To make classes accessible, we offer flexible schedules, and we've created easy pathways for transfer students.
- To prevent students from falling behind, we energetically mentor and tutor.
- To help students land jobs, we partner with top employers and community leaders to provide real-world internships.

We can, and we will, do more. But to suggest that higher education is a wasted effort or obsolete is just plain **rubbish**. Back when I was a child at the March on Washington, Dr. King broke through the confusion and the noise, and he spoke the truth.

Here is our universal truth: Education is not a weakness. It's a strength.

It will **never** be a disadvantage to be educated. It's not a racket; it **is** the pathway to a rewarding, productive life. It's not a waste; it's the best possible use of our time.

All indicators of a good life – our happiness, our health, our jobs, our family, our contributions to society – are improved by an active mind and a quality education.

- Spending time with extraordinary faculty is a **strength**.
- Learning to lead a campus social group is a **strength**.
- Discovering a love for a poem, a play or a symphony is a **strength**.
- Being the first in your family to graduate college is a **strength**.
- Competing and winning a sports tournament and feeling a sense of confidence as we spread our wings is a **strength**.

This is no time to settle or to be complacent. Our roots are in the chicken coop – but we have the hearts and heads and wings of majestic eagles!

Like our founders, we will be bold! We'll show that grit, and those guts! With the transformative power of education and research, we will inspire and aspire to rise.

We'll improve lives everywhere from the statehouses to schoolhouses to factories to hospitals to museums to Broadway stages.

With powerful minds and passionate hearts, we'll invent and innovate, nurture our families, grow our businesses, be great citizens of the world, and serve others.

As Matilda said all those years ago, we'll attempt and expect great things. And there is no doubt in my mind that we will accomplish them.

In doing so, **we will help to repair the world.**

Thank you.