

Oakland University Chronicles

Interview with

Richard J. Burke

Transcript of Oral History Interview

Interview date: December 5, 1996

Interviewer: David Lowy



Supported by

Oakland University Foundation

Office of the President, Oakland University

Department of Chemistry, Oakland University

Published by Oakland University

Rochester, Michigan

Copyright 1998

Oakland University Chronicles

Richard J. Burke

Transcript of Oral History Interview

Interview date: December 5, 1996

Interviewer: David Lowy

Contents

Preface

About the Oakland University Chronicles

Editing of the Transcripts

Introduction to Interview

Biographical Sketch of Richard J. Burke

Photograph Taken December 5, 1996

Photograph from MSUO Yearbook 1963

Biographical Sketch of Interviewer

Transcript of Oral History Interview

Transcript of the Interview: 18 Pages

Index of Topics in the Transcript

Preface

About the Oakland University Chronicles

The **Oakland University Chronicles** is a set of oral histories dealing with the beginnings of Oakland University, mainly focusing on the years prior to the graduation of the first class. The purpose of the Chronicles is to provide insight into those early times, and record the perspectives and personalities of some of the pioneering individuals who built the foundations of the institution. Special emphasis is placed upon information not readily available from written records.

Starting in 1996, a number of oral history interviews of early faculty, staff, and alumni were recorded as videotapes and transcripts, one of which is in this volume. The videotapes and transcripts are available for scholarly studies, research on institutional history, or outreach purposes of Oakland University; other uses are not permitted.

Bound copies of the transcripts are available from the circulation desk of the Kresge Library at Oakland University. Circulating copies of the videotapes are available from the university's Instructional Technology Center, where many of the interviews were recorded. Archival copies and supporting documents are located in the archives of the Kresge Library.

Editing of the Transcripts

Each transcript was prepared initially by a court reporter based upon the reporter's records and/or the audiotape of the interview. The transcripts were edited by the Project Coordinator, but only as necessary to clarify the meaning, consistent with understanding the intent of the interviewee. Thus, the transcripts differ in some places from the spoken narratives.

The editing followed accepted practice for oral histories, and included:

- correcting factual content, usually indicated by square brackets []
- adding clarifying words or phrases, also shown in square brackets
- correcting usage or unintended errors in speech; may be in brackets
- eliminating unnecessary repetitions, interjections, or false starts
- breaking up lengthy dialogue into shorter sentences or paragraphs

Each interviewee has approved the edited transcript, and has granted Oakland University the rights to the videotape and transcript of the interview, with the proviso that these will be used only for research, scholarly studies, or outreach purposes of Oakland University.

Alice Tombouliau, Project Coordinator
Paul Tombouliau, Project Director

Oakland University Chronicles

RICHARD J. BURKE, JR.

Date of birth: May 13, 1932

EDUCATION

A.B.	Georgetown University	1953
Ph.D.	University of Chicago	1959

OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

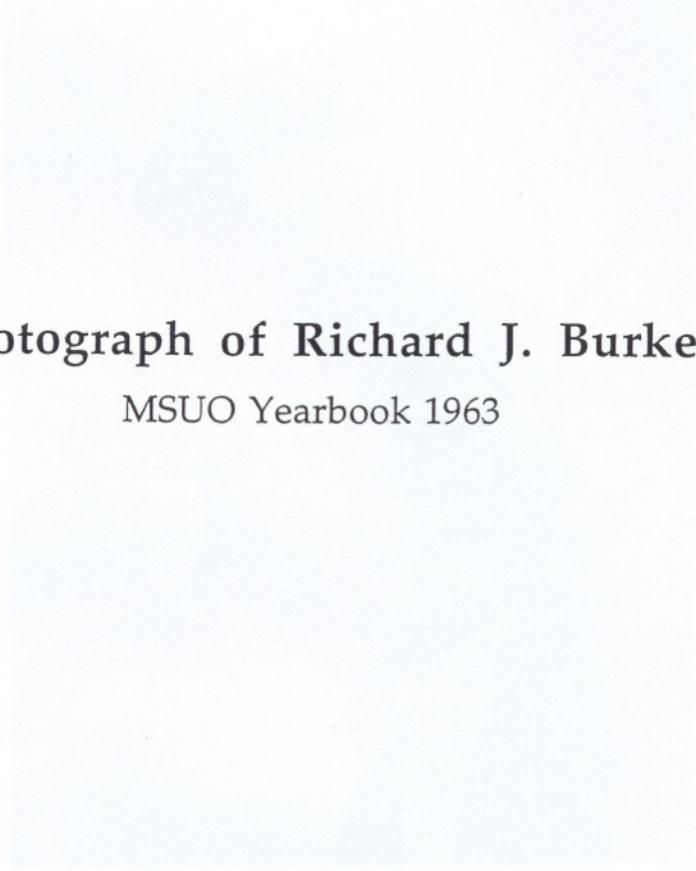
9-1-59	Instructor in Philosophy
7-1-60	Assistant Professor of Philosophy
7-1-65	Associate Professor with Tenure
1968 • 1969	Visiting Associate Professor, New School for Social Research, NYC
9-1-69 • 4-30-70	Acting Chair, Department of Philosophy
7-1-70 • 8-14-88	Chair, Department of Philosophy
7-1-71	Professor of Philosophy

Photograph of Richard J. Burke

December 5, 1996

Photographer: Rick Smith
Oakland University Communications and Marketing





Photograph of Richard J. Burke

MSUO Yearbook 1963

*Richard Burke**
Assistant Professor of
Philosophy



Richard Burke*
*Assistant Professor of
Philosophy*

Oakland University Chronicles

DAVID GEORGE LOWY, Interviewer

Date of birth: November 4, 1929

EDUCATION

B.A.	Drake University	1950
M.A.	City College of New York	1952
Ph.D.	University of Tennessee	1956

OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

7-1-62	Director of Counseling Service and Assistant Professor of Psychology
9-1-64	Clinical Psychologist (<i>10 months</i>)
7-1-68	Associate Professor with Tenure
8-15-77 • 8-14-78	Associate Professor of Psychology and Acting Chair, Department of Psychology
8-15-95 • 8-14-98	Chair, Department of Psychology



Oakland University Chronicles

RICHARD J. BURKE, JR.

Date of birth: May 13, 1932

EDUCATION

A.B.	Georgetown University	1953
Ph.D.	University of Chicago	1959

OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

9-1-59	Instructor in Philosophy
7-1-60	Assistant Professor of Philosophy
7-1-65	Associate Professor with Tenure
1968 • 1969	Visiting Associate Professor, New School for Social Research, NYC
9-1-69 • 4-30-70	Acting Chair, Department of Philosophy
7-1-70 • 8-14-88	Chair, Department of Philosophy
7-1-71	Professor of Philosophy

Current as of December 5, 1996

Oakland University Chronicles
Interview with RICHARD J. BURKE
December 5, 1996

DAVID LOWY: This is one of the interviews of the Oakland University Chronicles project supported by the Oakland University Foundation. Today is December the 5th, 1996, and we are speaking from Varner Hall on the campus of Oakland University. The goal of the project is to collect oral histories dealing with the beginnings of Oakland University. We are going to focus on the first four years, the time prior to the first graduation.

My name is David Lowy, chair of the psychology department, and I have been at Oakland since 1962 for a total of almost 35 years. It is my very great pleasure to be talking with Richard Burke, professor of philosophy who has been at Oakland from 1959 and continues to teach to this very day. I have known Dick since 1962. Dick, good seeing you.

RICHARD BURKE: Nice to see you, too, Dave.

DAVID LOWY: You know, one of the things we have been curious about is to find out, how did you first hear about – at that time we were MSUO?

RICHARD BURKE: I remember that very clearly. I was teaching at the University of Chicago while finishing my Ph.D. there in the adult education non-credit program that they have. It's a Great Books Program, and most of the students are people who already have a college degree and are just going on learning.

One of my students was a graduate of MSU, a woman who brought me one day an issue of the MSU alumni newsletter that had a little note in it, saying that MSU was going to open a new branch down near Detroit and it was going to have a liberal arts emphasis. I remember that much from it. So I wrote a letter to John Hannah. I didn't know who else to write to. I assumed he passed it on to Woody Varner, and I got a phone call then from Woody.

DAVID LOWY: So Woody contacted you directly?

RICHARD BURKE: Yes, I sort of applied for the job—I wrote for information about it, and Woody called me, and then he came down to Chicago. We met for lunch in a hotel downtown. A little later he said he wanted to bring me up to the campus, which was in the process of being constructed, and show it to me and to my wife.

She couldn't come, as it turned out, because she was working, and he was very disappointed at that, I remember. He said, "Oh, you have got to get her to come up with you, we are going to be all one family" — the first time I heard that phrase from him, not the last time. "It is very important that your wife come, too, and that she be interested in coming here and being a part of this. Ask her again." So I did and she said, "No, I really can't get off from work, I am busy right now." So she didn't come, and I came up in March to see the campus and to have another interview with Woody. The campus was a sea of mud; North and South Foundation Halls were half built.

DAVID LOWY: Is that all, just North and South Foundation?

RICHARD BURKE: Yes, just shells of buildings, and it was supposed to open in September. I didn't think they were going to make it, myself. There were boards laid out on the mud that we walked across to get to these buildings and see what the classrooms were going to look like, which didn't have any chairs or tables in them yet, just empty classrooms.

He took me to dinner at the Fox and Hounds and said, "I know nothing about philosophy; tell me about philosophy. Tell me what you are interested in." So I did and we talked for a while, and on the basis of that he hired me.

DAVID LOWY: That was the whole procedure?

RICHARD BURKE: I think so. He must have talked to my professors back at the University of Chicago but other than that—things were simpler in those days. I understand that he hired the whole first year faculty that same way, just by talking to each person and having him talk about his own field, and judging whether they would fit into his idea of this group of very young faculty members who were going to start a new school.

DAVID LOWY: So then Woody actually did all of the hiring?

RICHARD BURKE: Well, I am not sure of that; I have been told that.

DAVID LOWY: What kind of impression did you get as to what the university would be like, what they were striving for?

RICHARD BURKE: He talked to me about that. He told me about the Meadow Brook Seminars, and basically it sounded to me like they had recommended a school of a similar type to the University of Chicago where I was – a school that would emphasize liberal arts. By which I mean that there is a core of knowledge that everybody ought to have, whatever their field of specialization is going to be, either in college or afterwards in their work – that engineers ought to have a broad knowledge of science and ought to also have some knowledge of a number of other fields and be broadly educated; business people ought to also.

So I understood from the beginning that there were going to be programs in engineering and business and teacher education, but that first of all, those programs themselves would emphasize breadth of knowledge, and then second, all of those students would also take a large core of required courses – of general education courses. In the original plan – and this is what we did for a while – half of a student's total time, 50 percent of his time through the four years, was devoted to general education courses.

DAVID LOWY: Was there any discussion then as to the structure of the university, what would be taught and how it would be taught?

RICHARD BURKE: Yes, there must have been some, but I don't remember just how it was put to me. You mean, before I came?

DAVID LOWY: Yes, wasn't there something about departments?

RICHARD BURKE: Yes, we were not going to have departments. That appealed to me because the University of Chicago didn't have departments on the undergraduate level. The University of Chicago is very differently organized from most American universities. It has two different faculties, one

undergraduate faculty and one graduate faculty. There is no specialization on the undergraduate level and there are no departments. There are a number of courses each taught by a group of faculty. Those faculty are not expected to publish much, they are expected to be good teachers, and to teach jointly with other faculty in the same courses. So there will be a course in social science which will be taught by ten people with the same content. Classes are kept small. The students at the University of Chicago are exceptionally smart.

I came here thinking that the students at Oakland would be typical state university students, like the students at MSU, but that the program was going to be more like the University of Chicago program. So I summed it up in my mind as giving the kind of education that I had had, and that I believed in, but giving it, instead of to exceptionally smart students, to average students. And I believed that that could be done. I think most of us in the early faculty had that idea.

DAVID LOWY: So then you did not at that time have the notion that – you know, everyone talked about the Harvard of the Midwest, assuming that we would have similar kinds of students?

RICHARD BURKE: Yes, you would have to have good students for that, and I didn't expect that. It was maybe almost as naive to think that you could really teach a University of Chicago program to average Michigan students, but I didn't think it was going to succeed that well, you know, that we would transform the students into top quality students. So the idea was to do as well as we could with a top-notch type program, on the basis that students probably were not pushed hard enough in American schools, that they were capable of learning more than they were learning, simply because they were being underestimated. And I still think that's true today.

DAVID LOWY: Of course, wasn't that just about the time of Sputnik, where there was this huge emphasis on more vigorous education so we could compete? So this was part of that Zeitgeist, in a sense?

RICHARD BURKE: Yes, definitely. Sputnik was put up by the Russians in 1957. It indicated that they were ahead of us in some branches of science. It

suggested that there was something good about their system and there was quite a violent reaction to that in the country, a feeling that we needed to change the educational system so that our students would do better.

DAVID LOWY: So then it was your impression that the whole structure of the course of study came from the Meadow Brook Seminars, that it was an outgrowth of that?

RICHARD BURKE: I guess that was my expectation, yes. It didn't turn out that way.

DAVID LOWY: So when you came, were the courses all set up?

RICHARD BURKE: None of the courses were set up at all. The initial faculty were told to develop courses, and we weren't even particularly told, I think, to read the results of the Meadow Brook Seminars and follow them. We were just told to do what we thought ought to be done in our courses and we got together in groups, basically, I think from the beginning. Natural science, social science, and humanities had been the three groups, but then broke down further into smaller groups.

I was in a group that would develop a course called Western Institutions and Social Ideas—five of us, George Matthews, Bill Kluback, Gerry Straka, Peter Amann and myself. George Matthews persuaded the rest of us very quickly in the last week of August that we ought to start from the Columbia [University] course, which he was familiar with and which was a good course, and adapt that as necessary; so we did that. But we had no constraint on us at all; we could have done whatever we wanted at that point.

By the way, you didn't ask this, but when we began to develop majors in separate departments two years later, we likewise had no constraints put on us. That is, I never exchanged a word with anybody in philosophy up at MSU in East Lansing, I never got any direction, and I was completely free to develop the philosophy department as I thought it should be.

DAVID LOWY: So really MSU did not seem to have any direct input and there was no attempt to match Oakland up with MSU?

RICHARD BURKE: They sponsored us and they said essentially, "Do what you think best," which we appreciated very much.

DAVID LOWY: So the original notion of no departments obviously did not last long?

RICHARD BURKE: That didn't last long: two years. I think most faculty that come out of American universities — as I say, the University of Chicago is very unusual in that respect — and most faculty are not persuaded that that's a good way to operate. It is too different from the establishment. In academia, the whole thing is organized by disciplines: journals, meetings, and everything. So we pretty quickly fell into the normal pattern since most of the faculty were from normal schools.

DAVID LOWY: Was that the pull that brought you here rather than someplace else?

RICHARD BURKE: Yes. I happened to get an offer from U. of M. [University of Michigan] at the same time and from a couple of other places. U. of M. was a very good school but it was a typical state university and I wasn't interested in that. So I came here on the basis that this was going to be in some ways very different from the average state university, but with average students.

DAVID LOWY: How did it work the first year — the rather rigorous program with state university students?

RICHARD BURKE: Well, the students had a lot of trouble with the courses that we created. They were too hard, and I think the faculty worked very hard outside of class as well as in class to help the students, and some of them responded to that. But we did have quite a few students, I think in the first year especially, that just were not equipped to handle what we considered solid material.

For example, the course that I created with those four other guys, Western Institutions and Social Ideas, in many state universities would be

taught using a textbook which had a vocabulary and syntax and content graded for students at freshman year of college. We were using, as Columbia [University] does, excerpts from original materials, not only from philosophers like Plato and Aristotle and Kant and Hegel – hard to understand – but also documents. It was a history course based on original documents, so we studied feudalism by reading medieval documents from which historians can interpret what feudalism was like. And for the Catholic church, we used actual documents to talk about the history of Christianity. The course basically covered political, economic, social, cultural, religious, philosophical history, but not literature and the arts – they were in a separate course.

DAVID LOWY: But was it the very first quarter that there was a crisis, the students did very badly?

RICHARD BURKE: At the end of the first quarter we had forty percent F's all together, that's right. There was a book written about the early years at Oakland by David Riesman and [Joseph] Gusfield, which said essentially that there was a mismatch at Oakland from the beginning between the faculty and the students: that the faculty had come from elite Eastern colleges and the students came from Midwestern high schools, and that the faculty didn't understand how to teach these students. So Riesman essentially blamed it on a cultural gap and a lack of adaptability by the faculty. I think that's completely wrong.

The courses where students had a lot of F's in that first quarter were math, economics and foreign languages, and those are all courses where you are either learning it or you aren't. I mean, once they set up the course, they discovered that a lot of the students simply couldn't learn the material that they were trying to teach them. They were still convinced the material was proper and essential, but the students weren't equipped to learn it, so they didn't get passing grades. Whereas, in a course like this Western institutions course, we were having them read very difficult material but we could adjust our expectations – how much of Aristotle we expected them to understand and how much of Hegel – and that way the grades in our course weren't out of line.

So we gave them the chance to take those courses over. I think it was Bob Hoopes' suggestion (the original dean) that we declare an amnesty, I think that's the way he put it, and forgive the F's in the first quarter if the students took the course over and passed it. The first failure just wouldn't appear on their record any place. We did that and most of them took it over and passed it the second time. We did eventually drop a couple of the requirements that we had at the beginning. We no longer have a foreign language requirement and we no longer have a calculus requirement.

DAVID LOWY: But there initially was obviously concern for the students, giving the amnesty and so on?

RICHARD BURKE: Oh, yes, there was a lot of concern. And if Riesman's hypothesis was right, you would expect the biggest gap to be in cultural areas, I think, like our course and the literature and the arts course. But that wasn't where the gap was, that wasn't where the high flunk rates were. Also the faculty didn't come particularly from the East, they came from all over the country. I think Riesman's book is very flawed.

DAVID LOWY: So it wasn't quite the "brilliant Harvard/Yale faculty?"

RICHARD BURKE: Well, I would say that some of the original faculty didn't work out, and they were let go after a few years. In my opinion, by the end of the fourth year, when MSUO changed to Oakland U. — the period this series is covering — we had an outstanding faculty, young but outstanding. I wouldn't say that the first year faculty by itself was outstanding. There were a number of people in it that didn't last long, but that got corrected pretty quickly.

So I think it was not exaggerating to say it was an excellent faculty. I think it was virtually a hundred percent with Ph.D.s, when the average across the country, I believe, at that time was about thirty percent Ph.D.s. The students were, I believe, below average in that first year. After that they were average, I would say, and about the same as they still are today, but we no longer put the pressure on them that we did in the beginning, to learn more.

DAVID LOWY: But I think as we mentioned earlier, that is probably not only because we were a new school, but the whole push was to be tough —

RICHARD BURKE: —to be more serious. And it goes with not having fraternities and sororities and intercollegiate sports, and not having a physical education credit program, it would be just extracurricular. Yes, and the Spartan theme in general: to have the school focus on learning important knowledge.

DAVID LOWY: I would guess also that probably the difficulty with the math and science was the usual high school preparation, and that without that solid foundation, there is no place to go, they have no anchor.

RICHARD BURKE: I think so.

DAVID LOWY: I think you mentioned one time that you were also involved in recruiting.

RICHARD BURKE: Yes, once. I think this was in the second year, just one weekend. Jim McKay and I went to Chicago. We realized that we needed better students to handle the program that we had. One of the ways we were going to do it was to get more out-of-state students, in particular students from the suburbs around the big cities. We were already drawing and hoping to draw more from the suburbs in Oakland County. So four teams of two faculty in each volunteered to go out to recruit students from good high schools. We went to Chicago and met with a few interested students at a couple of the excellent high schools—New Trier was one of them. Another team of two went to New Rochelle, New York (in Westchester County) and another team went to Alexandria (outside of Washington, D.C.) and another into Boston. And we did get some students from these high schools by doing that.

DAVID LOWY: I know it must have worked, because by the time I came there were some out-of-state students. Maybe the reason they were so noticeable is that they were around all the time.

RICHARD BURKE: They lived in dorms.

DAVID LOWY: They lived in dorms and were on campus.

RICHARD BURKE: I think we started that about the same time we started the dorms, which was the third year.

DAVID LOWY: Yes, that's the year I came.

RICHARD BURKE: So that means we probably did this in the third year. And those students were very active outside of their courses. We realized that we needed more campus life, more social life, so we needed more students from other states. And I would say – while I said before that I expected the students to be about what they were – I expected that soon we would be drawing students from all across the country, and we would be known all across the country, and we would get some students from other countries. In other words, I had a pretty grandiose idea of what our student body would become.

DAVID LOWY: And so by that time you were infected with the propaganda?

RICHARD BURKE: Yes. I mean, U. of M. was drawing students from all states and many countries and so I thought we would, too – having a different kind of program from U. of M., but having an equal quality program – something like that.

DAVID LOWY: I think also during those years there was some community involvement, wasn't there?

RICHARD BURKE: I do remember one sort of outreach activity that I was involved in. Yes, there was some. First I remember a party – the city of Rochester was a village at that time – and Rochester welcomed our faculty with a party in the park down in Rochester in September of the first year. Then I remember a group of ministers in the area who came to Woody Varner and asked for a course on communism for them. They felt that they didn't know enough about communism. This, of course, was still the height of the Cold War, at a time when everything bad was communist –

DAVID LOWY: It was right after [Senator Joseph] McCarthy.

RICHARD BURKE: —as well as everything communist was bad. I mean, they were interchangeable. These ministers recognized that that might not be necessarily true and they wanted to understand more about communism. So they came to the young university, and four of us from this Western institutions course gave them a little course on communism. I think this was in the second year.

I later learned that a woman in that group taped my lecture without my knowing it and brought it to a state representative from this area, saying, "Look, there is a communist in this new school's faculty. Look what he is saying: he is saying good things about Marx and Engels." That representative came back to Woody with a transcript of the tape that she had made of me. I had been defending Marx and Engels, just as I defend Aristotle and Kant and Hegel and all of the people that I teach. I make the case as strong as I can for them. She had missed the quotation marks that were around some of the things that I said.

So this representative came to Woody and said, "You seem to have a communist on your faculty." And Woody talked to me about this and told me about it and said, "Don't worry, there will be pressures like this from the community, but you have the right to teach whatever you believe in. Academic freedom is an absolute right that professors have and I know you are not a communist."

DAVID LOWY: Bravo, Woody.

RICHARD BURKE: Yes. So I said, "Bravo, Woody" to myself, but I also thought about this group of ministers. Woody then told me a week later that the ministers had heard of this and had jointly written a letter to Woody, saying that it was nonsense, that I wasn't a communist, that this woman had misunderstood, and that they much appreciated the course that they were getting from us because it was objective. They were indignant at what the woman had done. So it was a heart-warming experience overall, but it did show me that out there in this community there are some pretty conservative people who wouldn't like some of the things that we were saying, not only in

this special non-credit course that we had developed for them, but in the regular credit courses that we were giving to students.

Along that line, I remember something. That course (Western institutions) made a big impression on students. Not meaning to boast, but I would say it probably made more impression than any other course from the original years. I have looked at the yearbook that the students made for the first four years and that's the course they talk about most.

One of the things that came through to them from that course I thought was interesting. It was the idea that socialism was not necessarily bad, that there was such a thing as good and bad points about socialism, and maybe good and bad forms of socialism. I don't think we set out to teach that, but it just came through. We were reading Marx and Engels and Robert Owen and Fourier and a variety of socialists as well as Lenin and Stalin. What excited them was they were reading these people themselves, and could decide for themselves what they meant and whether it was right, and they were getting a neutral treatment of them.

DAVID LOWY: But these courses didn't last?

RICHARD BURKE: They didn't last because as we got bigger the number of sections got so big that we couldn't staff them anymore. At first we had about 500 freshman and we could staff that in small sections and have discussions. You have to have discussions of material like this. As we got bigger, we added sections. At one point, we were up to about twenty sections, twenty-five sections, and finally we gave up because we were too big.

DAVID LOWY: Dick, one of the things that I have heard is that initially the whole university was very democratic, not too much administrative stuff — where faculty could kind of do their own thing rather quickly. Do you have any comments on that?

RICHARD BURKE: Well, of course, this was one of the reasons I came here — a chance to be in on the beginning of a new school with freedom to create your own programs and not have to fit into traditions and bureaucracy. I was very young — I was 26 when I came here.

DAVID LOWY: So you pulled down the average age of 32, and you and a couple of other people.

RICHARD BURKE: Half of us pulled it down.

DAVID LOWY: That's true.

RICHARD BURKE: I appreciated so much the chance to be in on the big decisions that were being made from the beginning, instead of just other people making them who were above me on the totem pole. You know, there really wasn't much of a totem pole. There were a couple of people with higher ranks and we had a dean, but everybody was getting input into big decisions.

I remember I had some input into the decision about intercollegiate sports that we made, for example. There is a myth that Matilda Wilson didn't want intercollegiate sports, and I even heard a version of it that she forbade intercollegiate sports or she forbade football, something like that. Not true at all. We decided whether we were going to have those thing, and we decided not to, and I was part of that committee that made that decision. I was the chairman of it, in fact. Also the admissions policy and the attempt to get students from other states and from the rest of Michigan: important decisions that everybody pitched in and did. Yes, it was very good.

DAVID LOWY: I remember when I came was when we first started having departmental courses. I can remember teaching some courses for the first time and I just did my thing, you know. No one said this is the way we do it, so on and so forth, which was really very exciting. Also the administration was almost nonexistent.

RICHARD BURKE: Very few administrators, and of course there were very few faculty, too. I mean, in the first year we probably had about twenty-five faculty and five administrators. Now I guess we have about, what – as many administrators as faculty – pretty close.

DAVID LOWY: I guess also it was a necessity for survival that things had to be done quickly, and you couldn't have a huge administrative process or nothing would ever get done.

The other thing I have been trying to figure out myself is the whole notion of Harvard of the Midwest, which really wasn't there at the very beginning. Somehow after a while we all believed it and we also felt we were going to have a top-notch student body, the top one percent of the classes or something. For those students, we could have this top-notch program because, as you mentioned earlier, you thought we would also be more like U. of M.

RICHARD BURKE: I thought that, like U. of M., we would draw students from other states, but not that they would be the top one percent students – they would be average students. So my picture of it (anyway at the time) was, as I said before, a combination of a program as good as any school in the country being taught to average students, and this would succeed. It would become a focus of interest around the country that you could do this, and students would start coming from the rest of the country, but they wouldn't be students like the University of Chicago gets. I mean, that's a different concept entirely and I never suspected that we would ever be like that. You can be known nationwide, as Michigan State is, and have students come from all over the country and the world to Michigan State. It doesn't mean they have University of Chicago-type students or Harvard – they have average students, I would say.

DAVID LOWY: But do you think that in time the curriculum kind of moderated a bit?

RICHARD BURKE: Oh, yes, over the years it moderated a lot. I think a lot of these things that I have mentioned, that I think made us special in the beginning, have gradually gone away: partly because we got too big to do them, partly because we didn't try hard enough to try to get students from across the country – and I think we might have been able to do that if we put money into it – and partly because the trend in the country became even more against it, with even more emphasis on specialization and vocational training, training for future occupations.

I mean, one of our ideas from the beginning was that everybody, whatever his future occupation, ought to spend most of his time in college learning the core knowledge of mankind, and that specialization was mostly for graduate school. So while you would have a major, the major would take up less than half of your time in college. That has changed and it has changed not because we grew bigger, but we simply chose to change it. I disagree with that change, but it's the pattern all across the country that we're following. At the beginning we were bucking the pattern of the country. That pattern has become even stronger. We now are going along with it, I would say.

DAVID LOWY: And also nowadays, being very pragmatic, there is much more competition for students than there was then. Many more universities are trying very hard to get all kinds of students.

So the faculty initially were very much involved in designing curriculum and courses and so on, and then we became a larger institution (as you pointed out) with many more administrators, and we became much more traditional.

RICHARD BURKE: Yes, we divided into departments focusing more on research and publication than we did at first, which again, is a national pattern. It tends to take you both away from your colleagues and other disciplines, and away from campus quite often. I think the faculty were on campus Monday through Friday all day at the beginning and now, as across the country, faculty are dividing their time between the campus and other activities.

DAVID LOWY: Also then, maybe because of size, there seemed to be much more collegiality where everybody knew everybody else.

RICHARD BURKE: Of course, that's mostly because of size I think.

DAVID LOWY: We were all in the same building so you were running across each other all the time. Now months can go by where you don't see people.

RICHARD BURKE: Although I would mention that that continues — there is a kind of momentum that is acquired by that. So even as we got bigger I still

knew most of the people in most of the other departments, because they were coming in little by little each year and I had a chance to meet them, and even be involved in the hiring of some of them in other departments. So we kept going for quite a while after we were into a typical departmental structure. Still the camaraderie of the early years carried over, I think, for quite a while at Oakland, maybe for another ten years.

DAVID LOWY: But now it's rather difficult.

RICHARD BURKE: Now it's gone.

DAVID LOWY: Now it's gone, so the initial promise remained for awhile.

In looking back, what kind of memories do you have of those early years, what was it like?

RICHARD BURKE: Very positive. They were the best years of my life, I would say. That was partly because of my personal life but partly because I really liked teaching here in those early years. It was just what I hoped it would be. It wasn't a big disappointment that the students were not as good. The students were even worse prepared than I expected, but that didn't put much of a dent in my enjoyment of it.

I really thought that we were doing something important and doing it well and I was a part of it. It was very exciting for me. I sometimes encounter, such as in that Riesman book, a kind of overall judgment that we were trying to do something that was impossible at the beginning. I really don't agree with that. I think we were trying to do something that was difficult, but possible, and we were doing pretty well at it. So I look back very fondly at those MSUO years.

DAVID LOWY: One other thing: We started out as MSUO and then before the charter class graduated, we became OU; how did that take place?

RICHARD BURKE: I don't remember exactly. I do remember a meeting at which we discussed various names in connection with severing our sister status with MSU. We had the opportunity to take a new name and, in fact, we were going to take a new name. It couldn't be MSUO anymore and I don't remember

exactly which year it was. I do remember discussing Meadow Brook University, which was one possibility – from Meadow Brook Hall and Meadow Brook Estate, the name of this property. Also Wilson University, and I think we discussed "Something" State University, but how the decision was actually made – I don't think we voted at that meeting, it was just tossing around ideas.

Maybe Woody made that [decision] by himself after that meeting, which he sometimes did. For example, I remember that committee I mentioned before, on intercollegiate athletics, recommended that we not have any at least for awhile, lest they become the tail that wags the dog. Woody received our recommendation and said, "Thanks very much, but I am going to have to think about this and talk to some other people," and decided that we would have some intercollegiate sports. He put off the decision about football and basketball, and later decided to have basketball. Of course, we still don't have football.

That was a little startling to me, I remember, because we had the impression – you mentioned the democratic quality – we had an impression that if a faculty committee decided something, "that was it." This was one of the earliest examples I can remember where "that wasn't it." As it turned out, there was somebody above us that was capable of deciding otherwise. That happened with a couple of other things that I remember, too – curricular questions.

However, I think Woody Varner was a wonderful chancellor and so does everybody else from those early years. It is not controversial.

DAVID LOWY: Just the fact that everyone refers to him as Woody and everyone knows who you mean. It is never president or chancellor so-and-so, it is Woody.

RICHARD BURKE: He knew everybody, he knew everybody's wives, he probably remembered all the children's names (I didn't have children). He was remarkable at the social aspects of the job. Although he wasn't an intellectual himself, never claimed to be, he gave the faculty the feeling that he really appreciated the intellectual accomplishments of the faculty and he was proud of them, you know, that these were his intellectual stars that he had put together.

DAVID LOWY: He was really an incredible administrator, he really did a superb job. So then I guess we both agree that those early years were very exciting and very wonderful.

RICHARD BURKE: I certainly do, yes.

DAVID LOWY: And things have changed, but that's inevitable.

RICHARD BURKE: I am sure there are equally wonderful things that have come since then of a different kind.

DAVID LOWY: But harder to see. Well, Dick, thank you very much for showing up.

RICHARD BURKE: You're very welcome, and I am delighted to have had a chance to talk about it. It is one of my favorite subjects.

Oakland University Chronicles
RICHARD J. BURKE
Index: Transcript of Interview

Athletics:	
Committee on intercollegiate sports.....	13, 17
Atmosphere on campus:	
Democratic input on decisions	12-13, 17
Community:	
Special course on communism	10-12
Course design:	
Design of Western institutions course.....	5, 7
Curriculum:	
Liberal arts, core knowledge.....	3
Contrast in types of courses and grades	7, 8
Focus on serious learning.....	9
Loss of special aspects	14-15
Departments formed	5-6, 15
Faculty:	
Disagreement with Riesman's hypothesis.....	7, 8
Outstanding quality	8
Early sense of comradeship	15-16
First contact with MSUO	1-2
Growth of MSUO/Oakland:	
Unable to continue small sections.....	12
Image of MSUO.....	3, 6, 9, 14, 16
Matthews, George.....	5
McKay, James	9
Meadow Brook Seminars.....	3, 5
Michigan State University:	
No constraints on MSUO	5-6

Name change:	
Discussion of possible new names.....	16-17
Philosophy of education:	
High-quality program for average students	4, 6, 14, 16
Phrases:	
“All one family”	2
“Academic freedom is an absolute right”	11
“A good program being taught to average students”	14
“That wasn’t it”	17
Reasons for coming.....	3, 6, 12
Recruiting of faculty	2-3
Recruiting of students:	
Out-of-state recruiting trip.....	9
Reflections on career at MSUO/Oakland	16
Riesman, David:	
Disagreement with hypothesis.....	7, 8
Students:	
Type of student expected	4, 10, 14
Not equipped for courses.....	6-7
Amnesty for failing grades	8
Recruiting out-of state students	9
Teaching experiences:	
Expectations in Western institutions course	7
Effect of Western institutions course.....	12
University of Chicago program	1, 3-4
Varner, Durward B. “Woody”:	
Campus visit and job offer	1-2
Recruiting faculty	2-3
Response to communist accusation.....	11
Outstanding administrator	17-18