FORUM

WHAT'S GOOD FOR THE UNIVERSITY?

Ronald M. Horwitz

Wow, what an opportunity! I feel humbled that a mere "kid" with only 22 years at Oakland was asked to participate in this exercise. Over the years, I've created more than my share of wish lists and thought I could "create the future," but to be able to muse on this level as to what's "good for Oakland" is too good an opportunity to pass up.

It's tempting to argue that we should just dismantle the "Pepsi" sign, revert back to the good old days of the Meadow Brook Music Festival, and ban all donors to the University from talking about golf. But these would only scratch at what I believe is a more pervasive problem—What has happened to the concept of quality at our University? Maybe it's because I'm too near retirement, but over my 22 years I have seen Oakland moving away from a concept of high quality in virtually all aspects of our university community.

Let's start with our students. For some reason, perhaps our basically urban location, we seem to attract a large number of students who work an unconscionable number of hours each week. It is not uncommon to have students taking 12–16+ credits per semester on top of working 20–40+ hours per week. What is the driving force behind this? Ironically, a major element is healthcare insurance! Most insurance companies require children of insured (employee) parents to be full-time students in order to remain an eligible dependent on

their parents' insurance. Full-time is usually defined as at least 12 credits per semester. Thus, we see many students who are working at least one-half time and are not eligible for their own health insurance at work, registering for at least 12 credits at Oakland. Under ordinary conditions, many of these students would be taking 6–8 credits on a part-time basis. Under this scenario, something has to give and guess what it is?

So, my first wish for a better Oakland, is to have insurance companies amend health-care insurance eligibility so that full-time student status is not required to remain as an eligible dependent on parents' health insurance.

Some of the professional schools at Oakland require students to have attained certain GPA thresholds for so-called major standing. Another sign of erosion is the decline in the required GPA as the push for more students intensified. In my own school, we were caught in the nationwide downtrend of business enrollments. Nervous about potential credit-related budget cuts, including faculty positions, we lowered our GPA requirement.

My colleagues and I spend a disproportionate amount of time moaning about our perception of a marked decline in the quality of our average student. Yes, we continue to attract some very good students, but for a variety of reasons, the average seems to have markedly declined. The fact that this has occurred at the same time as our enrollment has been increasing to repeated record levels may be purely coincidental, but it does raise some eyebrows. It is distressing to hear many espouse the quantity/quality trade-off. Too many naysayers are walking around believing that if we were to raise our quality standards on a variety of fronts, our enrollment would suffer. The fact is that in the long run, high quality will strengthen enrollments.

I firmly believe quality is its own best recruitment tool. Nothing will serve an institution better than having a reputation for enrolling outstanding students. Yes, I am aware of our need, and hopefully, desire, to enroll a diverse student body—diverse ethnically, by color, and economic status. But these are

not mutually exclusive objectives, contrary to beliefs held by many. I'm not sure we have been creative enough to satisfactorily balance the need to have a student body that is both diverse and of high quality.

So, my second wish is to work towards a gradual increase in the quality of our student body by revisiting admission standards at all levels, keeping in mind our institutional goals of access and diversity.

Now let's turn to the faculty. Oakland faculty have long had outstanding reputations for their performance in both the classroom and as scholars. However, for a University with our overall reputation, we have remarkably few world-class scholars in our ranks who would draw much needed attention to our campus.

I find it abhorrent that we are able to raise funds for a second golf course, but still have only one (semi) endowed professorial chair (the Dodge Chair in Engineering). Nor do we have any named professorships to enable us to attract, or retain, the best and the brightest for our faculty.

As we now face increasingly difficult labor markets in virtually all fields, economic pressures to meet salary demands are only going to get worse. Why haven't we seen any fundraising priorities to assist us in attracting the high quality senior faculty that we will need to maintain and improve our academic reputation? Maybe one solution is annually to take just 50% of the increase in costs associated with our move to Division I athletic status and transfer those dollars to an academic affairs endowment fund for named professorships.

So, lastly, what else I think would be good for Oakland is to have our Development Office, as it is setting its goals, begin including as a high level priority, the funding of several named professorships across campus plus at least a couple of endowed chairs.

Frances C. Jackson

Institutions of higher education exist to transmit accumulated knowledge as well as the values of society. In this sense, society

is viewed broadly, not as the geographic area in which one lives, but as a representative of the values and knowledge of the world at large. Education is valued in this country and has a long history of public support, dating back to 1636 when the General Court in colonial Boston appropriated £400 to the Boston Latin School, the forerunner to Harvard University.

It is interesting that this question arises as many faculty are contemplating the role and support for academic affairs on this campus. With 7 Provosts/VPAA since 1993, does anyone know who we are, what we are here to achieve, and how well we have accomplished our academic mission? In other words, are we a good university?

I doubt that anyone would disagree that a good university must have a strong academic division. It must be recognized, however, that this academic mission occurs in many places and venues on campus.

Student organizations contribute to the academic mission as they promote the personal, and professional interests of students. Even athletics, whether at the NCAA, intramural, or personal level, promote the overall health and well being of students, faculty and staff. The governance structure contributes to the academic mission as it safeguards and monitors various academic activities, reviews new degree programs, evaluates existing programs and supports research activities of faculty and students. How else does one define a good university? Obviously, there are tangible and intangible factors in any definition of a good university.

First of all, a good university is one that has financial, human, technological, physical and material resources sufficient to accomplish its academic mission. The role of the Board of Trustees and President is to ensure we have the resources necessary to accomplish our academic goals.

Secondly, a good university is one where students' thinking is challenged, broadened, improved and they're exposed on many levels to the amazing variety of viewpoints that exist in the world. While every student must have an academic major, the overall goal is for students to learn, grow, change,

develop, contribute to the lives of others, and to challenge and reaffirm knowledge and values. If our students are admitted to OU, attend classes and graduate, all without any changes or improvement in their thinking and knowledge, then we have failed either to teach, or they to learn.

Third, a good university is one where faculty exhibit a passion for teaching and learning and are actively involved in extending that learning, personally and professionally. At a good university, faculty are engaged in campus life, not only through the governance process, but with the students who cross our portals. Through our interpersonal interactions with students, we transmit the values of our profession or discipline. Faculty must model and demonstrate to students the overall purpose and value of a college education. Through our service to professional, campus, and community groups, we model how the academic mission serves the public good. Finally, we have an obligation to contribute to the creation of new knowledge through research and scholarship, so that faculty, in many ways, continue to be students.

Finally, at a good university, the campus atmosphere undergirds and supports the academic mission. From the residence halls to the Food Court, what OU believes, the values it embraces, are represented by all of the entities that make up this university.

There are also intangibles that contribute to the definition of a good university. A good university not only tolerates, but promotes an atmosphere where dissenting opinions and alternative views are not only tolerated, but examined, discussed and encouraged. As long as dissenting opinions are also tolerant, such an atmosphere can provide the highest form of learning as it excites and stimulates the mind. In order to prepare students for society, a university, particularly a public university, has a higher responsibility to ensure that students are not cocooned in a safe world that only includes the people they know and the beliefs they brought with them. Yes, I believe that affirmative action for underrepresented minorities does have a legitimate place in higher education.

In some ways these various roles are deceptively simple; at a good university, students come to learn, faculty come to teach, and staff support the learning of students and teaching of faculty. However, it is not that simplistic. In learning, students also teach. In teaching, faculty also learn. And in supporting the academic enterprise, staff provide critical support services without which, the first two activities would not occur.

Is OU a good university? I could give you my response to that question but instead I hope this essay will spark some debate perhaps even a formal discussion on how close we come to the concepts I've included in my description of a good university. I'm sure there is someone reading this who would challenge the definitions and concepts I've described. Such discussions can help the campus as a whole to crystallize and gain consensus on the answer to this question. I've learned that sometimes the best questions are those that don't have easy answers.

David Maines

Oakland University is experiencing a transition that fundamentally is one from local to cosmopolitan culture, and, we are told, toward better scholarship, wider visibility, increased credibility, better service to students and communities, and excellence. This is a difficult process, but, considering that it is one of attempting to transcend an entrenched status quo, two facts must be faced. One fact is that the status quo is comfortable since few really have to face the standards of real excellence, and the second fact is that becoming excellent takes serious effort and pronounced structural change. The real battle, therefore, is with entrenched institutional inertia, which typically is more powerful than the mechanisms of change. The only way to produce serious change, given that there is plenty of talent at the university, is to change the structures of standard operating procedures. The following are some suggestions, cryptically stated and in no necessary order, for structural changes that would contribute to Oakland Uni-

versity's transition, but they will make sense only if the people involved are really serious about improved performance.

First, there must be radical changes in budget allocation to better support academic departments and the research infrastructure. The operating budgets of departments are sparse at best, and the internal support for scholarship is dismal. All new assistant professors should have start-up cost money, not just those in the sciences. The university should fund a permanent social science/humanities institute with actual space and support staff through which research grants, contracts, and programs can be processed, and the Office of Contracts and Grants must be strengthened. Some but certainly not all of this can be accomplished by reallocating indirect costs of external grants to the research enterprise itself instead of to the general fund.

Second, considering that academic work is the primary if not sole function of universities, those in positions of administrative leadership must be exemplars of academic achievement. All administrators with doctorates and departmental retreat rights, for example, should teach at least one course per year or be directly involved in scholarly work. Superior administrators, in my experience, are those who stay in touch with their disciplines, who understand that they are facilitators of faculty work, and who understand that when the faculty look good they look good. Above all, this university must break down the barriers between administrators and faculty that are symbolized by the cliche that faculty are somehow the employees of administrators.

Third, the quality of both students and faculty should be improved. The growth rate of the student body should be seriously reduced and a major emphasis put on attracting superior or potentially superior students. Likewise, departments should institute systematic procedures to help guarantee superior quality instruction, including syllabi review and periodic updating of specialty area knowledge and research through departmental seminars. Tenure and promotion criteria should be increased in the majority of departments, to include

a university-wide discussion of minimal universal standards of faculty performance. Also, there should be contractually guaranteed replacement positions for negative departmental votes on reappointment and tenure decisions. Without such guarantees, departments are induced to support marginal tenure candidates for purposes of retaining faculty lines and basic course coverage.

Fourth, we should cease creating new programs solely on the grounds that there is a market for them. Programs should be market-sensitive but not market-driven. The prerequisite for all new programs should be the unambiguous demonstration of faculty talent and ability to deliver quality teaching and research. In all such considerations, there must be the recognition that quantity and follows quality and that growth is a natural consequence of superior planning and talent.

Fifth, the Board of Trustees must be educated regarding the purpose and function of state universities. Universities are not corporations, not all of their output is measurable, and they are not designed to show profits. They must be fiscally responsible, but that responsibility means fully funding academic units rather than underfunding them to generate a surplus. The Board must rethink most of the budgetary structure of the university, eliminating, for example, the mail services 25–30% markup on postage, which means that academic departments basically subsidize that operation. The Board must come to understand that corporations are cynical, profit-driven, self-interested institutions, while universities are idealistic, service-oriented, public institutions. If the current Board cannot come to understand those basic differences, then those members might consider resigning so that others who possess such understanding can replace them and work toward transforming the university.

Sixth, to get all this started, the university should fund external reviews of all academic departments as well as reviews of all administrative offices and support units. These review committees should composed of scholars and administrators from universities that represent the levels of excellence to which

Oakland University aspires. For this procedure to work, their recommendations for change should be binding.

The implementation of these six points will not by themselves transform the university, but if faculty, staff, students, and administrators are really serious about that transformation, these are some of the structural changes that must take place. At a minimum, they should be topics of discussion and consideration. If institutional inertia is regarded as more important, however, they can be easily ignored. We all can live our lives quite well, but we should recognize that we will be part of the perpetuation of various expressions of the status quo. Both choices—purposeful structural change and enacting the status quo—draw from strong traditions in American society and are generally acceptable. However, we should not confuse one with the other.

Kevin J. Murphy

Where should we, as a university, be in ten years? This question is both a reasonable one to ask and now is a reasonable time to ask this question. Despite many brainstorming exercises euphemistically referred to as "strategic planning," we have, as an institution, wandered aimlessly for the last seven years. During this period the share of the university budget spent on academics has declined and the fraction of student credit hours delivered by part-time instructors has risen, alarmingly, to almost 40%. Our enrollments have grown, but one has the disquieting feeling that this growth has come via reduced admissions standards. We have added new "graduate" programs, executive programs, distance learning courses, and the like, but many of these initiatives are ill-conceived, without due thought given to potential demand for what we are offering or to whether we have the requisite expertise necessary to supply the product. We have adopted an "all things to all people" approach. When we talk about competing against other educational institutions, our leadership seems to want us to compete against the likes of the University of Phoenix rather than the University of Michigan. Because of our all-things-to-

all-people approach and because we have aimed low rather than high in choosing our competitors, I fear we are at the brink of devolving into something less than a university.

So, what path should we pursue? In our rush to be all things to all people and to compete against the credentialing mills, we have overlooked a basic fact. It is this—Oakland University has a niche, a monopoly position really, in the local market for higher education. Unfortunately, we have not exploited this advantageous position.

Let me elaborate. We have two assets that distinguish us. One distinctive asset is that we have a very good faculty. We have many accomplished researchers and teachers. These accomplishments can be measured by published research, by grants won, by awards and honors received, and so forth. None of the local competition—Lawrence Tech, U of M—Flint, Walsh College, Central Michigan University extension sites, Wayne State University's extension site, the University of Phoenix—is remotely in our league when it comes to quality of faculty. We did not assemble this quality faculty overnight. It is an artifact, a legacy, of previous generations of OU leadership. At Oakland's inception, the country was scoured for the best and the brightest young faculty interested in creating a new university. That pioneering attitude established an ethos of quality that built upon itself and drove hiring decisions here ever after. We have never viewed ourselves as little Oakland University from Rochester, Michigan. When it came to hiring new faculty, we competed at the national level with other major universities for the best faculty talent. Despite the strategic meandering of our current leadership, the academic departments have continued to pursue outstanding young researchers and teachers, and this momentum leaves us with a solid faculty that many universities would be proud to have.

Our other distinctive asset is our campus. Yes, we have a great location; we've known this for years. But have we ever attempted to sell the college-bound public in our market on the notion that a *real* university experience awaits them at Oakland? A university experience with all the trimmings—dormi-

tories, a good library, tree-lined walkways, campus life, and so forth? If you look at my list of the local competition above, not one of those other institutions can possibly hope to offer the kind of campus experience that we can offer students.

So, how do these two distinctive assets confer upon us a monopoly position? It is in this sense: we are the *only* educational institution that offers the real university experience—both good faculty and campus—to the residents of Oakland, Macomb, and Genessee Counties. The combined population of this tri-county area is 2.4 million people. More people live in these three counties than live in *seventeen* other states. The population-weighted median household income in these three counties is 42% greater than median household income in the United States. Now, granted, not all college-bound students in these three counties want to stay at home. Some will head off to Ann Arbor, East Lansing, or even the Ivy League. But there is no question that we offer the only legitimate university experience to those who do wish to stay at home in this market. Unfortunately, however, many potential students still feel that there is no appealing *local* alternative to the University of Michigan or to Michigan State. We have failed to make the case that a serious, university-level education can be obtained at Oakland. Instead, we continue to be mis-perceived as being like the other institutions at the lowest rung of the educational ladder that I mentioned earlier.

What should we do? The former Dean of Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Henry Rosovsky, described what goes on at a real university best when he said, "We train students in the state of the art while attempting with all energy to change the frontiers of that state."[1] Oakland has the human and physical capital in place to be the type of university Rosovsky described. We are, in addition, the only such educational institution serving, on a local basis, this densely populated and wealthy tri-county area. In order to capitalize on this position during the next ten years, we should re-establish academics as our number one priority. We should, moreover, strengthen our distinctive assets and market them appropri-

ately to the college-bound public. To accomplish these ends, we will need leadership possessing strong academic values driven by academic purpose. Rationality and integrity must be restored to our decision-making processes regarding both new programs and admissions. We must stop trying to be all things to all people. In doing so these last seven years, we have wastefully diverted energy and focus from our core mission of offering an excellent undergraduate education and we have risked squandering the inherent advantage that we possess in the local market.

Mary L. Otto

> *Just call me by my name, Li Po. Everyone does. And if you must use a title, call me Academician.*
>
> *A Floating Life: The Adventures of Li Po*

My first response is to say that everything is good for the university. I think of the university as a place where differences are not just encouraged but also expected and where new ideas are welcomed for exploration and study. The modern university is a place where academicians come together in pursuit of knowledge and believe that truth will be found in the pursuit of knowledge. It is an outgrowth of ancient academic models when mentors and proteges studied together to understand the world, the meaning of life and the place of humans within the world context.

I think that academicians today, like those in the past, choose life at a university because they want to work in an environment that allows them to contribute to the knowledge base in their discipline and because they want to contemplate the deeper meanings of life. Academicians today as in the past want to make a difference. While the pursuit of knowledge and truth has always been an ideal and noble goal, it has not always been perceived as a worthwhile goal. There have always been people who believe that knowledge is static and they are troubled with the idea that it changes.

The notion that knowledge can be modified over time

based on reading, discourse and experimentation is often met with suspicion because it implies that changes must occur in beliefs and behavior. Academicians throughout time have been estranged from mainstream society and political leaders when they challenged common ideologies. The famous 18th century Chinese poet, Li Po, for example was exiled to float on the lakes of China because he challenged the Emperor.

Conflicts between academicians and society make it important to create the university as a place where the protection of academic freedom is regarded as the highest principle. The pursuit of knowledge flourishes in an environment that encourages the development of new theories and the challenge of respected theories and where academicians cannot be punished or dismissed for their unpopular declarations.

Though my first response to the question was to say that everything is good for the university, I recognize that some things impede the purpose of the university and therefore are not good for the university. I will add the caveat that everything is good for the university when the university is made up of ethical people who are committed to intellectual integrity. Ethical behavior includes honesty, compassion for others and consistency between beliefs and behavior. The purpose of the university is to support intellectual curiosity and to share as well as develop and challenge knowledge. I believe it is good for the university when its members accept and understand each other. It is good for the university when its members appreciate and respect differences in people, beliefs and behaviors. It is good for the university when the pursuit of knowledge is perceived and treated by its members as the foundation of the university.

When I first responded by saying that everything was good for the university, I made the assumption that the university is made up of ethical people who are trustworthy. Trust is not just good for the university it is essential. When the members of the university community trust each other they can concentrate on the pursuit of knowledge.

As I reflect upon the question and my answer I realize

that my answer is ideological rather than practical. I have responded to the question by describing how I believe the university should be with little attention to the daily tensions between ideological principles and the reality of work at the university. It has become much more difficult to remain focused on the ideals of the university. The daily lives of academicians in the university are filled with many endeavors that are not related to the pursuit of knowledge. The importance of the scholarly work of academicians often seems to be overshadowed by the business of operating the university. If the university as an ideal and the university as a place are in conflict then the answer may be that.