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OU maintains founding academic mission

By **Jeff Samoray**, OU Web Writer

Michigan State University Oakland opened its doors to undergraduates for the first time when it set sail with its charter class convocation on Sept. 17, 1959. MSUO was a different place then, and not just in name (the institution was renamed Oakland University in 1963). Only 570 freshmen were admitted; the faculty numbered 25; sheep grazed on the campus, which was little more than a farm; and Squirrel Road, which today is a four-lane boulevard only a short drive from DaimlerChrysler and Volkswagen's headquarters, was just a narrow country lane.

But for all the changes, Oakland University continues to draw from its founding precepts and has maintained one constant over its history – a commitment to providing a high quality and challenging education that offers its students an enriching and diverse combination of liberal arts, professional education, and cultural and social experiences.

OU's first convocation took place in the cafeteria of a much smaller Oakland Center, which wasn't completely finished prior to the event. Convocation attendees recall hearing construction crews hammering away behind the scenes. Those who were present also heard stirring speeches that set some high expectations for the university and its students.

"What we have planned for you here is a refreshingly different combination of courses to prepare you to live in a world far different from the world your grandparents knew, and far different from the ancient world which first saw the beginnings of the liberal tradition," said Michigan State University President John Hannah. "Here at MSUO we are attempting to give effect to what some of the best minds in the country think is a sound revision of the definition of a good education – science, technology, and the liberal and humanistic studies in a new combination to meet the demands of today's world and tomorrow's world."

These sentiments were echoed in OU President Gary Russi's 2003 convocation address.

"While I don't know most of you personally, I do know that you share one simple hope and dream – to be successful in life," Russi said. "I can say, without hesitation, that you have come to the right place to achieve this goal. How do I know this? Because time and again I have seen students grow and develop at Oakland University and go on to become leaders in their field of work, their communities and their families. What you learn here, both in and outside of the classroom, will serve you well and last you a lifetime...Your journey through Oakland's wide-ranging and distinctive programs will take you places no other university can."

Students from the charter class can still find many elements of Oakland's educational mission preserved. The core of its visionary general education program, which provides undergraduates an intellectual and cultural foundation for productive citizenship and a satisfying personal life, remain in place. A high percentage of OU classes are still taught by full-time faculty, and the majority of OU classes have sizes that maximize opportunities for student-faculty interactions.

Ron Miller, a member of the charter class and a retired education administrator, reflected on OU's strong liberal arts foundation during a campus visit earlier this year.

"OU became known for having a groundbreaking curriculum," Miller said. "We were required to study a foreign language, take literature courses, music courses and others. There were no fraternities or sororities then. The students voted not to have them. We were all committed to an egghead kind of existence. It's good to see that has changed because there are important things in the outside world. But it's good to know that the academic standards are still there."

"I've sat in and monitored a few classes recently, and I can tell you that the curriculum is just as challenging now as it was back then."

Naturally, a number of changes have taken place over more than 40 years of growth and development:

- About 570 students were enrolled when MSUO first opened its doors. The present student population is more than 16,000.
- Just 25 faculty members taught MSUO classes in 1959. Today there are 427 tenure-track faculty.

- MSUO had about 34 employees in 1959. Today OU employs more than 2,300 full- and part-time workers and is one of Oakland County's top employers.
- The university offered just 18 academic programs in 1959. Oakland now has 114 bachelor's degree programs and 82 graduate and certificate programs.
- Only three buildings existed when the campus opened: North and South Foundation halls, and a small part of today's Oakland Center. Today's campus has 14 academic buildings, six residence halls, student apartments, and several student-service and administrative buildings. The Oakland Center also just received a facelift that includes a 30,000 square-foot expansion and an attractive two-story, semi-circular glass front offering views of the campus mall.
- Intercollegiate sports didn't arrive at Oakland until 1964. Today OU boasts six men's and eight women's NCAA Division I teams and six club sports teams.
- The first graduating class numbered 125. More than 1,700 students received their diplomas in the spring 2003 commencement.

There are sure to be many tales from Oakland's early days told when charter class members arrive on campus for the 40th Charter Class Reunion celebration, to be held Oct. 3-5. The scheduled events include a welcome bonfire, golf at Katke-Cousins, campus walking tours, a charter faculty and staff coffee social, a Kresge Library archives open house, Meadow Brook Art Gallery exhibition, a charter gala at Meadow Brook Hall, and an **Oakland University Alumni Association** farewell brunch. For information, visit the **Charter Class Reunion** Web page or contact Jamie Simek in the Alumni Relations Office at (248) 370-3700, ext. 1113, or ruark@oakland.edu.

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