

OAKLAND UNIVERSITY TRANSFORMS ITSELF



Dr. Wanda Reyaert, a medical lab science professor, leads a class at Oakland University. The school plans to build a medical school by 2010.

Charles V. Tines / The Detroit News

Once-quiet college aims for the big time

Enrollment grows as it pushes to become top-tier research hub

By Marisa Schultz / *The Detroit News*

ROCHESTER HILLS — Oakland University was a quiet campus with moderate growth a little more than a decade ago. Dimly visible outside the region, many students considered Oakland their second choice.

But as Oakland celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, it has become one of the fastest growing and most ambitious institutions in the state, adding more than 3,000 students in the last decade, creating more than 100 new academic programs and diving into NCAA Division I sports. In one of its boldest moves yet, the university announced this year it will build a medical school with Beaumont Hospital by 2010 — joining the ranks of Michigan State University, University of Michigan and Wayne State University.

“I want to become one of the top universities in this region, bar none, and gain national recognition in certain disciplines,” said Gary Russi, who has helped fuel the transformation since becoming president in 1996.

With distaste for complacency, Russi is proud of Oakland’s progress but envisions much more for the university.

By 2010, Russi wants Oakland flourishing as a research hub with about 25,000 students vaulting from the eighth-largest public university in the state to at least the fourth, he said.

“It puts us in a different category,” Russi said. “It puts us in the top-tier group, like the medical school does.”

From second thought to first

No longer in the shadow of its one-time parent university MSU, Oakland University has aggressively sought many of the pillars that set the traditional big-dog universities in the state apart — high enrollment, Division I sports teams, research, and law and medical schools.

Perhaps one of the biggest testaments to the turnaround is its reputation among students, Russi said. A decade ago 75 percent of its students said Oakland wasn’t their top choice.

“Today it’s the reverse,” Russi said.

Oakland was the best choice for Renee Blackburn, 24, a junior majoring in anthropology and French. Between working three jobs, Blackburn commutes



2020 vision

Here are some goals Oakland wants to achieve by 2020:

- Expand reputation from regional university to national university
- Provide global experience to any student who wants one
- Grow to 25,000 students
- Become the applied research center of the region
- Impact economic development by expanding its business incubator, OU INC., to a network of about 50 businesses
- Create more satellite campuses
- Expand online class offerings

Source: Oakland President Gary Russi

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Photo by M. Jerry Beznos

from Macomb Township to Rochester Hills for class.

Why Oakland?

"Convenience," she said. "I could continue to live where I'm living; I wouldn't have to uproot myself."

But she worries about the school becoming too big. "I know they are trying to expand, but the small feel of the campus is what keeps me here," Blackburn said.

Richard Novak, vice president of public sector programs at the Washington-based Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, questions the wisdom of Oakland's growth at a time when "people are leaving the state and the economy is in the toilet."

"Where is the enrollment growth going to come from?" Novak said. If Oakland is a winner, is Wayne State a loser, or is Eastern or Western a loser? And if Oakland bleeds those institutions, is that good for Michigan?"

With more than 18,000 students, the evidence of the recent growth has been palpable.

The student center has been renovated and expanded four times in 13 years to keep up with demand, said Mary Beth Snyder, vice president for student affairs.

Student life has evolved, thanks to a newer recreation center, creation of four Greek houses on the perimeter of campus and thriving club sports, such as cricket. And plans are in the works to boost the number of on-campus residents from 1,800 to 2,500, Snyder said.

"We are trying very hard to provide the students who want a more traditional undergraduate experience, with all the accoutrements that go with being at a school that has football," Snyder said.

Programs, athletics grow

Founded in 1957 as Michigan State University-Oakland, the institution was once a small liberal arts school with strengths in the foreign languages.

The university became autonomous in 1970 and placed increasing emphasis on health, sciences and engineering fields. It has added scores of master's and Ph.D. programs that are tailored to meet the demands of the marketplace, such as doctoral programs in nursing and physical therapy.

"We support only those programs that have expressed need in the community rather than building programs for the sake of building programs," Oakland provost Virinder Moudgil said.

Aside from expanding programs, sports have been essential to Oakland's growth. In 1998, Oakland jumped to NCAA Division I athletics.

The main agenda for Division I athletics was to add visibility to the university," Russi said. "And there's no question it has made a huge difference for us." The biggest boon came after the men's basketball team made the NCAA tournament in 2005.

"Our applications shot up, donations shot up. I didn't have to ask anybody for anything," Russi said.

Joel Russell, a chemistry professor at Oakland for 41 years, supports the growth, Division I jump and construction, such as the newer Science and Engineering building where he teaches. But he wishes it would have been slower.

"The emphasis on growth in terms of students has led to the dilution to the quality of the student body," said Russell, 68. "We still get high-quality students, but (not the same caliber as before). In the old days, chemistry professors could use calculus in the first semester and now we can't."

Citing a former provost, Russell says universities can gain recognition in three ways – hire outstanding faculty, recruit outstanding students or emphasize Division I athletics. Oakland adopted the quickest and cheapest of these three – the athletic route, he said. The administration is now working on the other two areas, he said.



By 2020, Oakland University President Gary Russi wants the college flourishing as a research hub with about 25,000 students, vaulting from the eighth-largest public university in Michigan to at least the fourth.

Photos by Charles V. Tines / The Detroit News



Oakland jumped to NCAA Division I athletics in 1998, but its biggest boon came after the men's basketball team made the '05 tournament.

Young college seeks funding

But struggles remain on the funding front. State aid to public universities is drying up, prompting hefty tuition hikes and delaying construction of a \$68 million engineering design center and \$55 million human health building. The state would traditionally pick up 75 percent of the tab.

"How do you pay for this when you know the state doesn't have the money and you know the state may not have the money in the near future?" said Henry Baskin, a member of the Oakland's board of trustees.

At 50 years old, Oakland doesn't have the same alumni base and endorsements as its century-old counterparts.

To help close the gap, leaders have turned to partnerships, first with Macomb Community College. There, students can earn an Oakland University degree in Macomb County. Lansing-based Cooley Law School also expanded to Oakland's campus.

Although Cooley will move off campus this winter for more space, its bond with Oakland is strong, as the joint law degree and MBA or public administration master's programs will continue, said Cooley President Don LeDuc.

"People have a tendency to overlook the real capacity they already have," LeDuc said. "They don't need to do anything else to be a top flight institution. But they are poised to move up even more. We are just happy to be along for the ride."

You can reach Marisa Schultz at (313) 222-2310 or mschultz@detnews.com.

10-year enrollment growth

Oakland University added the second largest number of students between 1997-98 and 2006-07 among Michigan public universities.

University	Number of additional students 1997-98 to 2006-07
Grand Valley State	7,619
Oakland	3,358
Central Michigan	3,218
Ferris State	3,107
Michigan State	2,917
Michigan	2,823
Wayne State	2,253
Saginaw Valley State	2,016
Northern Michigan	1,895
Michigan Tech	247
Michigan-Dearborn	231
Michigan-Flint	39
Eastern Michigan	-378
Lake Superior State	-456
Western Michigan	-1,307

Source: Presidents Council, State Universities of Michigan

Oakland profile

Founded	1957
Mascot	Golden Grizzlies
Undergrad enrollment	14,090
Graduate enrollment	3,992
Part-time students	36.2%
Michigan residents	93.5%
From Oakland County	44.9%
Female	63%
Minority students	13.5%
Returning freshmen	70.2%
Six-year graduation rate	44.5%
Undergrads living on campus	13% (1,837)
Tenure/tenure-track faculty	458
Total faculty	923
Student faculty ratio	19 to 1

Source: Oakland University The Detroit News

Then and now

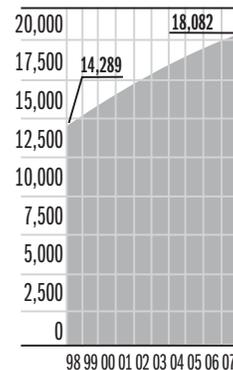
Oakland University has seen significant growth over the past decade.

	1996	2007
Tuition (average of upper and lower division)	\$3,761	\$7,928
State appropriations	\$40.2 million	\$46.6 million*
Fall headcount	13,956	18,082
Average freshman GPA	3.1	3.2
Average freshmen ACT	21.3	21.8
Number of major buildings	37	48
Ungrad academic programs	71	127
Graduate academic programs	44	99
General fund operating budget	\$82.4 million	\$150.6 million
Value of endowment	\$18.3 million	\$42.3 million
Sports teams	11	18

*Accounts for delayed August payment and midyear cuts to universities

Sources: Oakland University and Detroit News research

Oakland enrollment



Sources: Oakland University The Detroit News