

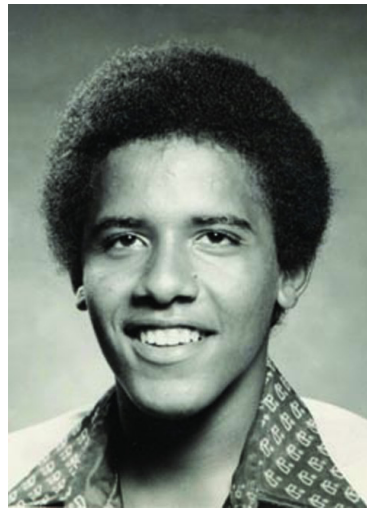
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Obama at Oxy

Sometimes where you start out is more important than where you end up.

The two years President Barack Obama spent at Oxy from 1979 to 1981 played a major role in determining his future.

"In the development of the person he was to become, Oxy was significant," David Maraniss writes in *Barack Obama: The Story*. "It was a school with a subset of intellectual professors and sophisticated students one and two years ahead of him who steered his interests toward politics and writing... And it was where, in anticipation of that still uncharted journey, he felt the first stirrings of destiny, a sense, he told friends, that he was brought into this world for a purpose."



"Diverse and inspiring"

"It's a wonderful, small liberal arts college," President Obama says of Oxy. "The professors were diverse and inspiring. I ended up making some lifelong friendships there, and those first two years really helped me grow up." As a freshman from Honolulu, he lived in Room A103 in the Haines Hall annex – a triple he shared with Paul Carpenter '83, a poli sci major from Claremont, and Imad Husain '83, an econ major from Dubai. "We had a really good hallway; there were a lot of interesting folks," says Carpenter.

As an Oxy student, by all accounts, Obama was obviously talented but never in danger of working too hard. Years later, when asked about his favorite college course, Obama unhesitatingly named the politics classes he took with professor Roger Boesche. Yet the sting of B Boesche gave him on a midterm, together with a message that he needed to work harder, still lingers. When his old teacher visited the White House in 2009, Obama "announced to the room that 'Professor Boesche taught me all I know about politics,'" Boesche recalled. "And then he said, laughing, 'But he gave me a B on a paper!'"

Basketball and politics

A high school basketball player, Obama also was a regular at the lunchtime pick-up games played by students and faculty in Rush Gym. Eric Newhall '67, professor of English and comparative literary studies, also played in those informal but fiercely competitive "noonball" games. "I think Occidental's greatest contribution to American politics lies in persuading Barack Obama that his future did not lie in

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basketball,” Newhall says.

Oxy was the place where the future president made his [first political speech](#) on Feb. 18, 1981 as part of a movement to persuade the Occidental Board of Trustees to divest the College of its investments in South Africa. “I found myself drawn into a larger role [in the divestment movement] ... I noticed that people had begun to listen to my opinions,” Obama recalled. “When we started planning the rally for the trustees’ meeting, and somebody suggested that I open the thing, I quickly agreed. I figured I was ready.”

Obama’s speech was planned as a carefully rehearsed piece of street theater – two white students dressed in paramilitary uniforms dragged him off before he could finish to dramatize what often happened to South African activists. “They started yanking me off the stage, and I was supposed to act like I was trying to break free, except a part of me wasn’t acting, I really wanted to stay up there ... I had so much left to say.”

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- [Listen to Obama biographer David Maraniss](#) speak about the president during his visit to Occidental