This year the University of Cincinnati is 166 years old. Founded in 1819 as the Cincinnati College, it became the University of Cincinnati in 1890. Despite its long history, Black Americans have not had much access to U.C.'s halls until recent times. However, as early as 1891 some Blacks did receive degrees from this institution. The history of these early Black pioneers deserves attention and this paper provides descriptions of the educational experience of Cincinnati Black women attending the University between 1897 and 1940.

During the nineteenth century less than four percent of all college age Americans actually attended any college or university. Since education was essentially elitist, few Blacks enrolled. Supported by private philanthropy, southern Black colleges did graduate 1,942 “colored” Americans but the number receiving degrees did not increase, during that century, relative to the number of college age Blacks, while the proportion of White graduates doubled between 1850 and 1899. Only seventy-three “biracial” colleges and universities existed in the nineteenth century, and they graduated a mere 389 students. Oberlin College was responsible for one-third of that total. Most institutions did not overtly exclude Blacks, but their lack of high school diplomas kept them out. For Black women, the options were even fewer. Just 170 of them graduated from “colored” and another eighty-two from “biracial” institutions. Thus, 8.8 percent of all graduating Blacks in the former and 21.1 percent in the latter were female.

The University of Cincinnati was no exception to the trend. The name and identity of the first Black who became a student at U.C. is unknown. Reginald McGrane's history of the University does not even state his or her name, but merely mentions that a Black enrolled in 1886. Alice May Easton was the first Black female of record to graduate from U.C. in 1897. Known as “a math whiz,” she later taught Black youngsters at the Harriet Beecher Stowe School.

The attitude of college administrators toward the admission of Blacks at U.C. is unknown. Certainly Charles McMicken, an early commission merchant whose considerable funds actually laid the foundation for the University, did not favor their enrollment (even though he himself had an illegitimate Mulatto son). McMicken's will in 1853 provided for “two colleges for the education of White boys and girls.” It is not known whether University officials endorsed McMicken's idea that U.C. should be for Whites, but the enrollment of at least two Blacks before 1893 was apparently done against the spirit of McMicken's will. However officials at this institution, like those at other universities around the nation, generally adopted a laissez-faire attitude and made no effort to attract Black students. Some may even have shared the ideas of Conservative Social Darwinists who asserted that the Black was no more than an “amiable blockhead” who could not be expected to benefit from higher education except by absorbing notions of thrift and decency from the study of mechanical trades.

Such Social Darwinist attitudes had considerable currency among U.C.'s student body, The Cincinnatian, the University yearbook, in 1893 presented a stereotypical illustration of a smiling Black man whose head was anchored in a tree stump. Twenty years later another yearbook drawing featured a big-eyed big-lipped bald-headed Black barber treating the hair of a classical Greek (Hermes). Such drawings revealed a conception of Black males as happy-go-lucky and rather dim-witted. Black women were similarly caricatured. One 1900 drawing features “The Book of the Month-Black Beauty,” represented by a big-lipped, kinky-haired Black woman in a long evening dress. Over her head is a sign declaring “First Prize $50.” A 1901 St. Valentine's Day poem made fun of Black dialect as it recorded the proposal of a Black man to a Black woman.

Stereotypical attitudes toward Blacks in higher education changed little in the early twentieth century. Even though Judge Peck in 1893 voided McMicken's requirement that U.C. remain white (with the specious reasoning that
Table 1 Racial breakdown of students graduating from the University of Cincinnati

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Students</th>
<th>Blacks</th>
<th>Whites</th>
<th>White Men</th>
<th>Black Men</th>
<th>Black Women</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>% Black Female</th>
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<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>468</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>454</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>870</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>864</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>628</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>682</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>665</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Statistics compiled from photographs appearing in the yearbooks

A 1901 “St. Valentine’s Day” poem made fun of black dialect as it recorded the proposal of a Black man to a Black woman.
"since the words of the will did not definitely exclude colored persons, they could be admitted to the University"), few local Blacks had any hope of achieving a college education. Many reformers of The Progressive Era affirmed that "the real source of strength in the community comes from the bottom" and discussed equalizing classes by getting students together in "the old-fashioned democratic way," but such calls for democracy in education did not translate into increased opportunity for Blacks—men or women. U.C., like other institutions, opened its doors to members of the poor—the free tuition policy of the teens facilitated that—but the new students tended to be poor Whites, not poor Blacks. To some extent, Blacks may have been intimidated by the racial attitudes expressed in the student yearbooks, as well as by their awareness that discriminatory legislation was being written into law and practice. Moreover, Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896 had legitimized segregation on a national level and the Berea College v. Kentucky case of 1904 explicitly gave states and institutions license to exclude Blacks.5

Black students may also have been dissuaded by the University's endorsement of de facto segregation in the public schools. The U.C. College of Education was operated jointly by the Directors of the University and the Board of Education of the City of Cincinnati; thus, the College's officials possessed supervisory power over the city's schools. Therefore, when Education Dean Louis Pechstein justified separate schools for Blacks and Whites, his words supposedly reflected administrative policy at the University. In 1929 Pechstein emphatically stated "separation of the races in all walks of life is operating and seems likely to continue," adding that in segregated schools "greater racial solidarity, superior social activities, greater retention, greater educational achievement,...a closer parent-pupil-teacher relation, a clearer insight into the treatment of mental deficiency, social maladjustment, special disabilities, and irregularity in behavior" were possible.6 Pechstein's meaning was clear: separation of the races in all walks of life meant separation in higher education as well as in elementary and high schools.

Notwithstanding Pechstein's declarations of separation, Black students did filter into the University, albeit in miniscule numbers. One Black male graduated in 1904, three Black women in 1911, another two females in 1913, and a Black male in 1915. Jennie Charlotte Austin, Sallie P. Frazier, and Mary Lee Tate followed Alice May Easton as the initial Black women of record to graduate from the University. Mamie Charlotte Mason and Susie Pearl Williams also graduated in 1913. The number of Black graduates jumped fourfold in the 1920's, with a high of fourteen graduating in 1925, but Blacks never comprised more than 3.3 percent of the graduating class and, with the extremely bleak times of the Great Depression, the percentages fell from three percent in 1925 to just seven-tenths percent in 1935.7

Interestingly enough, the numbers of Black women graduating far exceeded the numbers of Black men. In the first two decades of the century, five of seven Black graduates were female, and between 1920 and 1925 women comprised thirty-four out of thirty-seven such graduates. There was good reason why this was the case. The only college at U.C. then open to Blacks was the College of Education, and teaching was not a profession which many males joined. Blacks received a B.A. in teaching or a B.S. in home economics. A Bachelor of Education degree was added in 1924, after Jennie Porter, who received her B.A. in teaching or a B.S. in home economics. A Bachelor of Education degree was added in 1924, after Jennie Porter, who received her B.A. in teaching or a B.S. in home economics. A Bachelor of Education degree was added in 1924, after Jennie Porter, who received her B.A. the year preceding, petitioned the college to create a separate degree which required in-the-field training (i.e., student teaching).8

Blacks could progress through the entire sequence of degrees in education, however. Angy Smith and Breta Walker received B.A. and B.E. degrees. Annie May Lee Houston and Lena Norton entered the graduate department of the College of Education in 1923, and two Black women—Norton and Jennie Porter, along with male Norton Roberts—became the first Blacks of record to receive master's degrees at U.C. in 1925. Three years later Porter received her doctorate, becoming the first Black to earn that degree at the University. Outside of education, it was almost impossible for a Black woman to earn a degree, although some easing of restrictions did occur between 1928 and 1940. Elsie Austin completed a course of legal studies at the University of

Tuition was free for those local students studying liberal arts courses at the University of Cincinnati but a fee was charged for engineering and professional courses. Black students who enrolled in the professional course of education had no access to a tuition free education.
Colorado and U.C. from 1928 to 1930, receiving an LL.B. degree in the latter year. Lucy Orintha Oxley in 1935 became the first Black to graduate with a bachelor's degree from the College of Medicine. Celenarol E. Jones became the only Black woman to pursue a business-oriented course of studies, receiving a certificate in secretarial practice in 1940.9

These early Black women who received an education at U.C. had incredible commitment. As pioneers, there were few other students with whom they could associate—students who would understand their backgrounds, concerns, and difficulties. There were no Black faculty or administrators to whom they could bring their problems. As late as the 1930s, they did not have access to the dormitories. Recreational facilities—with the exception of one room in the Student Union for card playing—were closed to Blacks, and in the words of Vera Clement (Class of 1931), “No social opportunities existed.”10 Blacks could swim in the University pool but only on Friday evenings just before the pool was drained. Dirty water hardly proved an inducement to aquatic pleasures.11 Blacks could not attend the Junior Prom, until in 1934 a delegation of “colored” students requested of the University president the privilege of attending that function and it was granted.12 When they attended classes—in the College of Medicine at least—the word “nigger” flowed easily off student and faculty lips.13

There was, moreover, an unwritten rule that Blacks and Whites should not associate with one another. Thus, Black students rarely joined a University organization which also included Whites. Fully ninety-five percent of all White women graduates before 1940 belonged to some campus group other than a sorority, but only eleven out of eighty-four Black female graduates did so. Just six of these joined “White” organizations. In 1923, first year student, Anne Mae Johnsone of Lexington, boldly joined two previously White societies. Two years later Eugenia Brisco of St. Louis attended meetings of the all-White Sociology Club during her junior and senior years, as did Ivy B. Jenkins in 1940. Gladys P. Graham, Class of 1931, became a member of Le Cercle Francais, and LaVerne Jackson, Class of 1940, belonged to Arete, a physical education society. Johnson, Brisco, and Elsie Austin were active participants in the Inter-Racial Club.14

Blacks, possessing little access or incentive to join “White” student clubs, had no option but to form their own student organizations. As sororities and fraternities became popular in the early twentieth century, both Black men's and women's Greek societies came into existence. Black women, led by senior Maude Belle Ragan, created the Zeta Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta in 1920. That sorority had been founded at Howard University in 1912. Just one year later, another group, the Omicron Chapter of the Washington, D.C. based Alpha Kappa Alpha was formed. By 1940 a third sorority, Iota Phi Lambda, had also been established. Nearly one-half of all Black women receiving U.C. degrees in the twenties and thirties joined one of these sororities—thirty-three of seventy-eight. Black men also formed a Greek organization—Alpha Phi Alpha in 1920. Yet, interestingly enough, no photographs of these Black groups appeared in the University yearbooks between 1923 and 1941, although White fraternities and sororities were regularly featured. Nor did those Black women who were members of “White” organizations, with one exception, have their pictures taken with their White associates.15

Before the 1930s no Black coeducational group existed. By 1931, however, a group of artistically inclined Blacks joined together as the University Singers and Players. Both males and females participated in musical and dramatic presentations, including graduates Pauline McKnight and Gladys P. Graham. However the Singers and Players quickly folded. Perhaps because of its limited appeal at a time when few Blacks enrolled at U.C. or because prospective Black musicians had no opportunity before 1915 to receive training at any of Cincinnati's music colleges, and private lessons were virtually the only way young students could receive any musical training.

By 1935 a second coeducational organization, the first recognized society which promoted better conditions at U.C. for Afro-Americans and which facilitated social interaction among Blacks, was established. This society, the Quadres, continued, although with only a handful of members throughout the 1940's. The Quadres Society endorsed four goals—hence the name: to “promote high scholarships, foster cultural enterprises, and social life, and foster better interracial relationships.” Quadres claimed to be “the coordinating body for all negro student activity.” The Society supplied scholarships for needy students from the proceeds of the play Slightly Delicious, which in the “spirit of philantropy” the University commended.17

Black female students participated actively in Quadres. In 1940 three of the six Black female (and two of the six Black male) graduates were in the Quadres. Similarly, Black female students earlier attempted to “better interracial relationships” through membership in an Inter-Racial Club. Dorothy Gillespie (White) and Georgia Beasley (Black) engaged in a—for the times—radical action in creating a club to sponsor interracial social activity. The organization, which
included three of the five Black women graduating in 1927-1928, met together to play cards and discuss issues. Yet, notwithstanding, a national liberalizing trend in the late 1920's, the U.C. student body was not ready to accept interracial socializing. The club folded within a few years.  

The Greek organizations, Quadres, and Interracial Club all represented efforts of Black (and, in the last case, a few Whites) to better conditions for their race. Blacks had to rely on other Blacks for psychological, as well as economic, support. Both the sororities and the Quadres Society held theatrical performances to raise money for scholarships, which helped finance the education of needy Blacks. The Black community sometimes proved responsive. As one example, Honshell and Elizabeth Ward of 1115 Yale Avenue provided housing for Black female students attending the University. They charged the students a reasonable amount for board, room, and streetcar fare, but when parents could not afford the sum, the Wards simply fed and boarded students for free.  

Local Blacks could live at home, but those outside the city limits had to have money for room, board, and tuition. Even though tuition was free for local residents in liberal arts courses at U.C. (as it also was provided for students at Ohio's other municipal institutions at Akron and Toledo), a fee was levied for engineering and professional courses; thus, Black students—concentrated in the professional course of education—had no access to a tuition-free learning. Moreover, non-residents, who in the teens comprised sixteen to eighteen percent of all students, paid a fee of $80 to $100 per year. Free education in the liberal arts vanished with the coming of the 1920's, when all students, except those receiving scholarships, paid some fees. Some Blacks worked while attending classes, often taking them in the evening hours; others sought full-time employment during summers. Several women already held positions as teachers in the city's few Black public schools, Laura Troy Knight was Assistant Principal of Jackson Colony School before earning her bachelor's degree. Her immediate supervisor, Jennie Porter principal of Harriet Beecher Stowe School, also held that post before her own graduation. Many Black female students like Vera Clement spent virtually all their time in study to graduate as quickly as possible. When Clement proposed that she earn her Master's degree in one year, she was preemptively informed that she could not hope to accomplish such a feat, but she did! (It had taken Lena Norton three years and Jennie Porter two years of graduate study to obtain their Master's degrees.)  

To enroll at U.C. before 1940 was, for the Black woman, a courageous act. She had to be highly motivated because she was entering a world where she had to prove herself in the face of discrimination. Her activities were circumscribed, she had no role models among the faculty, and little opportunity to participate in University organizations. Black sororities and the Quadres Society provided the only groups to which she could realistically belong. At least half the Black female students joined no organization at all. They applied themselves to serious study, rather than engage in socializing or in the “social uplift” societies which were so common during Progressive times. Such women appear to have been isolated from the complete participation in University life enjoyed by White women. For these Black women pioneers, U.C. was an institution of higher learning—a place where they could achieve the knowledge they needed to succeed in the career of teaching—and little else.  

Black men faced similar circumstances, but their University opportunities were less limited than those of their female counterparts. The College of Education was, of course, open to both sexes, but men could receive certificates in business management, real estate, general business, and art in industry, as well as degrees in physics and law. Black men, unlike Black women, could also join intercollegiate athletics (track, basketball, and football), especially after 1930.  

Notwithstanding the difficulties they experienced in achieving a degree from the University, several

Jennie Davis Porter was the first Black to earn a doctorate degree from the University of Cincinnati.
female graduates did make considerable impact in the city, state, and nation. At least four prominent women—Jennie Porter, Vera Edwards, Elsie Austin, and Lucy Oxley—deserve fuller attention.

Jennie Davis Porter, born in 1876, the daughter of a hack driver, had created a reputation in Cincinnati before enrolling for classes in the College of Education in 1918 at age forty-two. As a flood of uneducated Black children accompanied parents who moved from Southern cotton fields into more hopeful prospects during the 1910’s and 1920’s Porter responded to their needs by founding a private kindergarten for West End Blacks in 1911. Two years later she opened a summer school for children who were not enrolled in the public schools. She had served as a teacher at the all-Black Douglass School between 1897 and 1914. In recognition of her efforts, Cincinnati Board of Education appointed her first Black female public school principal in the Queen City, locating her at the newly organized all-Black Stowe School in 1914. The number of incoming students there—as a direct consequence of the Great Migration—jumped from 350 in 1914 to 1,300 in 1922. Porter soon became a spokesperson for the segregation of Blacks, arguing, as did the U.C. educators, that Black schools provided “colored” students with a more optimal learning environment than did “mixed schools.” She played a central role in the huge controversy which emerged in Cincinnati, as well as in the rest of the nation, concerning the relative merits of integration and segregation of the schools. The controversy was fierce at times, and Porter received denunciation from the Union, Cincinnati’s Black newspaper, and the local branch of the NAACP. Union editor Wendell Dabney dubbed her “Jubilee Jennie,” while J.W. Rawlins accused her of being a “lonely woman whose ambition and aspirations have blinded her to a realization of that great motto of my birthplace, ‘United We Stand,’ ‘Divided We Fall.’” Through it all, Porter continued to assert that segregated schools were crucial to the formation of Black identity and could become vital, unifying community centers. She was featured widely in the Black press throughout the nation, and in Cincinnati essentially controlled activities within Black schools. Before her death in 1936, she supervised a community center, a social service bureau, and fifteen clubs, as well as the “Colored Farm.” She was, indeed, a powerful Black woman in the Queen City.24

Vera Clement (Edwards), the third Black woman to receive a Master’s degree from U.C., unlike Jennie Porter, came from a family where learning was accentuated. Her teacher mother, grandfather, and father—a farmer in Prairie View, Texas— informed her that “education was the only solution for Blacks.” The dean of her undergraduate institution, Prairie View College, contacted the Dean of Education at U.C. concerning her admission and was instrumental in securing a scholarship for her. After earning her M.A. degree in one year at age twenty-one, Clement became a social worker for the Children’s Home, a private philanthropic institution which aided abandoned and orphaned children. She directed the psychological clinic at Juvenile Court for eight years in the later 1940’s and early 1950’s, served as a troubleshooter for the Cincinnati Board of Education in tense racial situations, helped design the public schools’ psychology program, and, between 1946 and 1950, participated in the organization of the Children’s International Summer Villages. Clement, after marrying dentist Arthur Edwards, received her Ph.D. degree from U.C. in 1954. Later, as one of the earliest Black faculty members in the College of Education (1967-1977), she played an instrumental role in the establishment of federally funded programs for poor and minority students, and directed one of these, the Project for Youth, from 1969 to 1971.25

Helen Elsie Austin, the first Black woman to graduate from the University of Cincinnati College of Law also came from an educated family. Born at Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee, Alabama, in 1908, she was the daughter of a teacher in the Department of Household Sciences and of the commandant in charge of that institution’s male students. Austin came with her parents to Cincinnati before she was old enough to enter school. She graduated from Walnut Hills High School at sixteen, then followed in her aunt Jennie Charlotte Austin’s footsteps and enrolled at U.C. There she became one of eight students appointed on the basis of scholarship and merit to work on the Cincinnati Law Review. After earning her LL.B. degree in 1930, Austin practiced in the Queen City between 1931 and

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Queen City Heritage

Porter, principal of Stowe school, was a spokesperson for segregation and argued that Black schools provided a "colored" students with a more optimal learning environment than "mixed schools" did.
1935, gaining a reputation as an astute attorney. She also became secretary of the Cincinnati branch of the NAACP, chairman of the Legal Committee for the Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, Southwest District, and in 1934 a member of the Board of Trustees of Wilberforce University. In 1937 she received an appointment to the position of assistant attorney general of Ohio, thus becoming the first Black and first woman to be named to that post. During the later years of the Great Depression and World War II Austin served as senior attorney for the Office of Price Administration, as well as handled legal matters for the Office of Emergency Management, the National Labor Relations Board, and the Washington, D.C. Recorder of Deeds Office. During the 1950's she taught in North African private schools preliminary to her appointment in 1960 as regional women's affairs officer of West Africa for the United States Information Agency. An advocate of improved conditions for women, she helped set up day nurseries for Nigerian market women and establish contact between U.S. leaders and organizations and African women's associations. The International Conference of Women selected her as a delegate to the First Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in 1947. The National Council of Negro Women chose her as executive director in 1958, and she served as national president of Delta Sigma Theta the sorority she had joined at U.C. Elsie Austin currently resides in Washington, D.C.

Lucy Orintha Oxley, recipient of the first medical degree awarded a Black woman at U.C., has also enjoyed considerable national renown. The daughter of a teacher and a Harvard educated Episcopalian minister from Trinidad, her sojourn at the College of Medicine was not very harmonious. Her anatomy partner was denounced as a "nigger-lover," and her obstetrics professor called her a "nigger woman." Unable to attend after class festivities at nearby restaurants, she applied herself to study and graduated as one of the top fifteen medical students. General Hospital revoked its offer of an internship after other interns protested, the Dean of the College informing her, "Miss Oxley, you are a negro and we don't want you." Since opportunities for internship in Cincinnati were closed, Oxley interned at Washington, D.C. The difficulties she experienced were not unusual. The first Blacks to enroll in previously White medical schools during the Depression were denied access to some facilities: one Black intern in Indianapolis was dismissed from the position because White interns sat with him in the doctor's dining room. General Hospital did not employ its first Black resident physician or any Black nurses until the 1950's.

Since many White physicians would not administer to the needs of Black patients, Oxley centered her practice in the Black community of Walnut Hills. She applied for residency at Jewish Hospital, but was rejected. Notwithstanding such difficulties, she became a success in her profession, helping to establish family practice medical groups in Cincinnati. Believing that continuing education for physicians dealing with family medicine was a necessity, Oxley co-founded the Ohio Academy of General Practice (now the American Academy of Family Physicians) after World War II. Designated Ohio Family Physician of the Year in 1974, she has also served as a member of the Ohio State Board of Medical Examiners.

The experiences endured by Lucy Oxley and the other Black women at the University of Cincinnati before 1940 suggest that it took a special Black woman to earn a degree during times when discrimination was not covert and few Blacks attended college. That they could achieve positions of local and national renown demonstrates the desire that motivated them. They served as illustrative pioneers—women helping to carve out significant changes in a wilderness of education—and as appropriate older role models for the Black students who would come in larger numbers to the University as more contemporary times brought, for many, new opportunities to achieve quality learning. Discrimination, of course, in its subtler forms still exists, but these Black female pioneers made an important beginning.
A 1900 drawing in the "Cincinnati" featured "The Book of the Month—Black Beauty."

Drawings revealed a conception of Black males as happy-go-lucky and rather dimwitted such as drawings in the 1904 and 1913 yearbooks.