

In the Beginning, An Idea

“If the first faculty had met in a tent, this still would have been a great university,” said President Robert Maynard Hutchins, the University’s fifth president, in his 1929 inaugural address.

The first faculty assembled on Opening Day, 1892, were indeed an impressive bunch: lured from colleges all over the country, they had been drawn to Chicago by the idea of a community of great scholars. As Charles O. Whitman, who left Clark University to head the biology department at the new institution, enthusiastically put it, “The time has now come when we must recognize and live up to the necessity for greater organic unity among kindred sciences.”

‘Bran Splinter New’

William Rainey Harper, the University’s first president, envisioned a university that was “‘bran splinter new,’ yet as solid as the ancient hills”—a modern research university, combining an English-style undergraduate college and a German-style graduate research institute. The University of Chicago fulfilled Harper’s dream, quickly becoming a national leader in higher education and research: an institution of scholars unafraid to cross boundaries, share ideas, and ask difficult questions.

Winter on the main quadrangle, circa 1911. Hull Gate is in the foreground.

A Solid Investment

Founded in 1890 by the American Baptist Education Society and oil magnate John D. Rockefeller, the University’s land was donated by Marshall Field, owner of the legendary Chicago department store that bore his name. Rockefeller described the donation as “the best investment I ever made.”

Equal Opportunity

Harper, a young Biblical scholar from Yale, incorporated into Chicago’s early charter a commitment to gender equality in both undergraduate and graduate education and, remarkably, considering the initial intention to found a Baptist institution, to an atmosphere of nonsectarianism. This commitment to an accepting environment and equal opportunity distinguished the university in its early years and holds firm today.

A Leader in Higher Education

Chicago’s leadership was noted by Frederick Rudolph, professor of history at Williams College, who wrote in his 1962 study, *The American College and University: A History*, “No episode was more important in shaping the outlook and expectations of American higher education during those years than the founding of the University of Chicago, one of those events in American history that brought into focus the spirit of an age.”

Educational Innovations

One of Harper’s curricular innovations was to run classes year-round, allowing students to graduate at whatever time of year they completed their studies. Appropriately enough, the first class was held on a Saturday at 8:30 a.m. Just as appropriately, Harper and the other faculty members had pulled a feverish

all-nighter beforehand, unpacking and arranging desks, chairs, and tables in the newly constructed Cobb Hall.

Tradition and Innovation

The first buildings copied the English Gothic style of architecture, complete with towers, spires, cloisters, and gargoyles. By 1910, the University had adopted more traditions, including a coat of arms that bore a phoenix emerging from the flames and a Latin motto, *Crescat Scientia, Vita Excolatur* (“Let knowledge grow from more to more; and so be human life enriched.”).

Changing the Face of Higher Education

During Robert Hutchins’ tenure as president, from 1929 to 1951, he established many of the undergraduate curricular innovations that the University is known for today. These included a curriculum dedicated specifically to interdisciplinary education, comprehensive examinations instead of course grades, courses focused on the study of original documents and classic works, and an emphasis on discussion, rather than lectures. While the Core curriculum has changed substantially since Hutchins’ time, original texts and small discussion sections remain a hallmark of a Chicago education.

A 1930 Chicago Tribune editorial. By the end of the decade, Chicago had abolished its varsity football program.

Firsts in Athletics

In addition, Hutchins is famously remembered for another bold decision. With its emphasis on academics and research, it’s easy to forget that the University was a founding member of the Big Ten Conference. The University’s first athletic director, Amos Alonzo Stagg, was also the first tenured coach in the nation, holding the position of Associate Professor and Director of the Department of Physical Culture and Athletics. And in 1935, senior Jay Berwanger was awarded the first Heisman Trophy (which is proudly displayed today in the Ratner Athletic Center on campus). Just four years later, however, Hutchins abolished the football team, citing the need for Chicago to focus on academics rather than athletics. Varsity football was not reinstated until 1969.

Evolution and Growth

In the early 1950s, Hyde Park, once a solidly middle-class neighborhood, began to decline. In response, the University became a major sponsor of an urban renewal effort for Hyde Park, which profoundly affected both the neighborhood’s architecture and street plan. As just one example, in 1952, 55th Street had 22 taverns; today, the street features extra-wide lanes for automobile traffic, the twin towers of University Park Condominiums (I. M. Pei, 1961) and one bar, the Woodlawn Tap.

A 1969 edition of *The University of Chicago Maroon* after students occupied the Administration Building to protest a faculty appointment decision.

The Modern Era

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the University began to add modern buildings to the formerly

all-Gothic campus. These included the Laird Bell Law Quadrangle (Eero Saarinen, 1959) and the School of Social Service Administration (Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, 1965). In 1963, the University acquired the Robie House, built by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1909. By 1970, the Regenstein Library—at seven stories, and almost a block square, the largest building on campus by far—occupied the site of Old Stagg Field.

The University experienced its share of student unrest during the 1960s, beginning in 1962, when students occupied President George Beadle's office in a protest over the University's off-campus rental policies. In 1969, more than 400 students, angry about the dismissal of a popular professor, occupied the Administration Building for two weeks

In 1978, Hanna Gray, Professor of History, was appointed President of the University, becoming the first woman to serve as president of a major research university. During Gray's tenure, both undergraduate and graduate enrollment increased, and a new science quadrangle was completed.

Chicago's Second Century

In the 1990s, controversy returned to campus—but this time, the point of contention was the undergraduate curriculum. After a long discussion process that received national attention, the new curriculum was announced in 1998. While continuing the dedication to interdisciplinary general education, the new curriculum included a new emphasis on foreign language acquisition and expanded international and cross-cultural study opportunities.

The Ellen and Melvin Gordon Center for Integrative Science, which opened in 2006.

Uniting the Sciences

Today, under the leadership of Robert J. Zimmer, the University's 13th president, Chicago continues to evolve. Gothic architecture has made room for modern gems like the Charles M. Harper Center, home to the Graduate School of Business, and the future Reva and David Logan Center for Creative and Performing Arts, scheduled for completion in 2011. And the 400,000-square-foot Gordon Center for Integrative Science, which opened in 2006, can house 800 scientists, researchers, and students.

National Laboratories

But amid this physical change, Chicago's interdisciplinary approach to world-changing research and an insatiable commitment to inquiry continue, demonstrated in its partnerships with the Argonne and Fermi national laboratories, its world-class Medical Center, its tradition of accomplishment in economic research, its dedication to social services and community growth, and the many accomplishments of its faculty, researchers, and students.

Continuing the Tradition

Harper articulated his hope and vision for the University of Chicago at the very first faculty meeting in 1892, saying: "The question before us is how to become one in spirit, not necessarily in opinion."

The University's commitment to answering that question—and many others—continues to guide it today.

As President Zimmer said in his address at Chicago's 487th convocation, "If we take ourselves back to the University in its early years, we would find many major differences from what we observe today... And yet, many of us connected to this university feel that we might just as easily have been there—that going back to the University in its early days, or in fact at any time since its inception, we would know unmistakably that we were at the University of Chicago.

"Why is this? The University of Chicago, from its very inception, has been driven by a singular focus on inquiry...with a firm belief in the value of open, rigorous, and intense inquiry and a common understanding that this must be the defining feature of this university. Everything about the University of Chicago that we recognize as distinctive flows from this commitment."

Since 1913, the University of Chicago has been continuously accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association.