

**From the Ohio Mechanics Institute to the OMI College of Applied Science  
Of the University of Cincinnati  
1828 – 2003**

## **The Vision**

From the free evening lectures at the Ohio Mechanics Institute to the current diversity of faculty, students and programs at the OMI College of Applied Science—a college of the University of Cincinnati since 1969—the initial vision remains clear. Technical education should be based upon scientific and philosophical principles and available to all.

In the first three decades of the nineteenth century, George Birkbeck, a professor of natural philosophy among the first *Edinburgh* reviewers, drove the development of mechanics institutes in London and Glasgow. Mechanics institutes then spread from England and Scotland, to the eastern seaboard of the United States, to Cincinnati.

The Ohio Mechanics Institute (OMI) was organized on November 20, 1828, joining four other American institutes in New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Boston. The catalyst was John D. Craig who challenged Cincinnati leaders to “form an institution for the invaluable purpose of diffusing the light of science over every department of the useful arts and manufactures: for letting our ingenious artisans and mechanics see that the practice of their respective arts is capable of being derived from scientific principles; and from the great and immutable laws of nature.”

## **Early Growth and Development, 1828-1870**

From 1828 to the time of the Civil War, the vision of educating artisans and mechanics in technical, scientific and liberal studies proved an idea whose time had come. From the beginning, the OMI’s library made technical literature available to the whole community, and its free evening lectures took place in city council chambers, downtown halls and churches, often alongside Dr. Daniel Drake’s famous lectures on medicine.

In 1838, the OMI purchased its first home, the Trollope’s Bazaar Building, which was built by Frances Trollope during the time she lived in Cincinnati and began writing her classic, *The Domestic Manners of the Americans*. Ten years later, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1848, a new four-story building was dedicated for the burgeoning institute at the southwest corner of 6<sup>th</sup> and Vine Streets. The Greenwood Building, named for Miles Greenwood, a prominent industrialist and benefactor, housed the OMI until 1911.

The OMI’s growth mirrored Cincinnati’s prosperity. Its first Mechanics and Citizens Ball attracted 700 contributors in 1838. Later that year, an Exhibit of Arts and Manufactures, sometimes labeled a precursor of the World’s Fairs, drew even more citizens to view industrial products. The OMI’s resources engendered Cincinnati’s Public Library and Art Academy. The OMI’s technical library schooled the young Thomas Edison, and more than 200 students were enrolled in its School of Design by the time of the Civil War. While the Civil War decimated the local economy, the OMI survived without major debt.

## **Grand Expositions, Music Hall and Electricity, 1870-1900**

Cincinnati's post-war recovery depended in large measure upon the OMI, and the OMI's national stature rested upon its community ties. From 1870 to 1888, the OMI's fourteen Grand Expositions of Manufactures, Products, and Arts were sponsored in partnership with the city's Chamber of Commerce and Board of Trade. These spectacular events celebrated art and industry side by side with unprecedented success. Half a million people attended the third exposition in 1872; they viewed entries submitted from thirty states and brought \$100,000 into the city.

The success of the Grand Expositions eventually led to the creation of Music Hall, which was built to house the May Festival Chorus in its central auditorium and the expositions in its North and South Halls—art and industry on either side. President Rutherford B. Hayes opened the 1879 Exposition at the new Music Hall. For the last of the Grand Expositions, the Centennial Exposition of the Ohio Valley and Central States, trellises of outdoor electric lights arched over the Canal (now Central Parkway), as commissioners of the Exposition arrived by gondola.

The end of the nineteenth century introduced electric lights into OMI classrooms and Electrical Studies to the Institute's Artistic, Mechanical and Architectural departments. In 1899, the Board of Directors rededicated itself to using "modern popular" methods of instruction to strengthen the academic programs and their ties to regional industry.

## **A New Century and a New Building, 1900-1912**

In the first decade of the twentieth century, OMI opened Cincinnati's full-time technical high school, offered continuing education for the city's public school teachers, and housed a symphony orchestra of more than forty student members. Even though two floors, including the Ladies' Parlor, had been added to the Greenwood Building at 6<sup>th</sup> and Vine Streets, "Capacity Outgrown" became the OMI's theme.

Mary Emery endowed the new home, known as the OMI Building, at the northeast corner of Walnut and Central Parkway. That property had been the site of Eagle Iron Works, Miles Greenwood's foundry which crafted notable munitions for the Civil War.

To honor the memory of her husband Thomas J. Emery, Mrs. Emery funded "a building suitable for [the OMI's] purposes for educational uses . . . and an assembly hall for school use and also for lectures, symphony, May Festival, et cetera." On January 6, 1912, Leopold Stokowski conducted the inaugural concert and proclaimed that the auditorium's "superb" acoustics rivaled those of Carnegie Hall. The auditorium housed the Cincinnati Symphony until the orchestra moved to Music Hall in 1936, and today the Emery Theatre is one of four such remaining concert halls including Carnegie Hall.

Fall classes moved into the OMI Building in 1911. The new site boasted the city's largest construction beam, approximately 90 feet long and weighing 33 tons. Its roof garden grew produce prepared in the 5<sup>th</sup> floor kitchen to feed more than 1,400 students. The twentieth-century OMI was off to an auspicious start.

## **Academic Development and Expansion, 1912-1969**

The Ohio Mechanics Institute expanded on all fronts and secured its academic status. An Industrial Museum opened in 1914, housing the Emery Collection amid an array of international artifacts and industrial products reflecting twentieth-century technology. New programs in printing and lithography were launched with financial support and laboratory equipment from industry.

World War I brought a US Army contract to provide technical instruction to more than one thousand injured servicemen. After the war, a new two-year, work/study program in Power Laundry attracted students from 17 states, plus Canada, England, and Scotland—testimony to OMI's growing reputation for leadership in applied learning.

In 1934, OMI introduced cooperative education to its Industrial Engineering programs; in 1948, the programs received accreditation from the Engineers' Council for Professional Development. Later mid-century developments included full-time, associate degrees in Civil, Electrical, and Mechanical Engineering Technology, and in Chemical Technology. For these and other programs created throughout the twentieth century, cooperative education and professional accreditation served as the hallmarks of OMI degrees.

Evolving academic programs led to reorganization in 1958. Within the OMI corporate structure, the day school was named the Ohio College of Applied Science (OCAS), and the night school was named the Ohio Mechanics Institute Evening College (OMIEC).

## **A College of the University of Cincinnati, 1969-1990**

In 1969, the OMI corporate structure merged with the University of Cincinnati, the last private school to join the University. The OMIEC and OCAS entered another era of expansion, and soon came another change of name. In 1978, the new UC College was officially named the OMI College of Applied Science (CAS).

In the 1970s, baccalaureate degrees with required cooperative work experience were offered in Architectural, Electrical, and Mechanical Engineering Technology, and in Construction Management. These first baccalaureate programs quickly became the backbone of CAS. They were followed by Fire and Safety Engineering Technology in the 1980s and Chemical Technology in the 1990s.

As baccalaureate programs evolved, senior students were challenged to demonstrate their applied learning through the development of prototypic products and processes. That expectation led to a rekindling of the annual expositions so much a part of the OMI tradition. Since 1986, CAS seniors have publicly displayed their work at the annual *Tech Expo*. On occasion, seniors' projects have been rewarded with patents.

The OMI College of Applied Science gained critically needed laboratory and classroom space at its next campus on Victory Parkway (the former Edgecliff College campus). This move occurred in 1989, following 78 years of operation in the OMI Building on Walnut Street and Central Parkway.

## Entering a Third Century of Tradition and Innovation, 1990-2003

At the end of the OMI's first century of operation, the advent of electricity revolutionized both industry and the programs of the OMI. So too, in the 1990s, computer technology revolutionized academic programs and practices. Drafting tables gave way to computer networks. At the end of the twentieth century, new programs in Information Engineering Technology, Computer Science Technology, and Computer Engineering Technology began to draw as many students as resources could be stretched to support.

Today, new growth sweeps the college much as it did a century ago. Evening students in the information technology programs have expanded enrollment beyond current capacity, and new programs in horticulture and culinary science are on the horizon. Planning is underway to expand the campus footprint to meet these needs and to assure that hands-on learning and low student/faculty ratios (typically 15/1) continue to be the trademarks of OMI-CAS.

The OMI College of Applied Science holds fast to the founding mission of the Institute:

- That the opportunity to learn should be available to all those who are able and willing to participate.
- That liberal learning in the arts and sciences should form the academic core of technical education.
- That learning is applied, and designs are functional.
- That technology responds to societal needs and promotes societal well-being.

Maria Curro Kreppel, November 20, 2002.

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