Continual transformation has been a hallmark of the history of the University of Cincinnati. At the largest scale, the University has been a private institution, a municipal university, and a member of the state system of higher education. Physically, the University has occupied several homes. Academically, programs have evolved to meet the needs of our students and society.

The University of Cincinnati traces its origins to 1819, the year in which the Cincinnati College and the Medical College of Ohio were first organized. The people of Cincinnati have always supported education. The first attempt by the citizenry to create a college occurred in 1805, when the city was less than 20 years old and its population numbered fewer than 1,000. Four years later, Cincinnati tried again – this time employing a lottery to raise funds. Both attempts were unsuccessful, as was an attempt to establish a seminary in 1815. In 1819, primarily due to the tireless energy of the indomitable Daniel Drake – physician, scholar, teacher, and lecturer – the State Legislature chartered both the Cincinnati College and the Medical College of Ohio. Both were private schools. These institutions are today the oldest units of UC. News of the incorporation of the Cincinnati College was acclaimed by the citizens of Cincinnati. They took great pride in the college building, located at Fourth and Walnut Streets. A small faculty was hired, and within three years of the College's opening the first Commencement was held. But a paucity of funds and internal friction handicapped both the Cincinnati College and the Medical College of Ohio, and they gradually fell into inactivity. Meanwhile, Cincinnatians founded other schools that later merged with the University, notably the Ohio Mechanics Institute, the College of Pharmacy, and the Conservatory of Music.

In 1835, the Cincinnati College was revived, with a distinguished Medical Department, Law Department, Academic Department, and an Observatory that boasted the largest telescope in the world at that time. The institution's president was William Holmes McGuffey, author of the famous readers. But, again, financial trouble, internal friction, and the effects of the Civil War prevented the institution from achieving success. Only the College's Law School survived.

An unexpected boost to higher education in Cincinnati came in 1858 when Charles McMicken, a wealthy merchant and landowner, bequeathed the bulk of his estate to the City of Cincinnati in order to establish a university. This munificent gift provided the foundation of the University of Cincinnati, chartered as a municipal university by the passage of an act in 1870 by the Ohio State Legislature. In the same year, the City of Cincinnati established the University of Cincinnati, which later absorbed many of the earlier institutions. For many years, the University of Cincinnati was the second oldest and second largest municipal university in the United States.

During the next century, a number of Cincinnati educational institutions were merged with the University of Cincinnati, including the colleges of Medicine, Law and Pharmacy – each of them the oldest colleges of their kind west of the Allegheny Mountains. Also merging with UC before 1970 were the esteemed College-Conservatory of Music, the College of Applied Science (founded in 1828 as the Ohio Mechanics Institute), and the Cincinnati Observatory. Over the course of its first century, the university created colleges of engineering, business, education, nursing, and art.

The first graduate degree was awarded in 1886. In 1906, the university created the first cooperative education program in the United States through its College of Engineering.

UC became a "municipally sponsored, state affiliated" institution in 1967, entering a transitional period culminating on July 1, 1977, when the University entered the ranks of Ohio's state universities. UC was dramatically changed by World War II and the G.I. Bill. The war drove a need for research, and provided federal funding for it. After the war, enrollments soared as the G.I. Bill sent ex-soldiers to campus. By the mid-1960s, it was apparent that the university's days as a municipal institution were numbered. The resources of the City of Cincinnati could not be stretched to accommodate the rapidly growing student body and an aging physical plant. The State of Ohio offered relief through state affiliation (in which UC remained a city institution, but received increased state funding). Two branch campuses were established during this period: Raymond Walters College in Blue Ash and Clermont College in Batavia. A decade later, the partial remedy of state affiliation could no longer allow the university to thrive. The citizens of Cincinnati voted overwhelmingly to convert their university to full state status, and UC was named Ohio's 12th state university on July 1, 1977.

In 1989, transformed by a rapidly growing research enterprise and the impact of electronic communication, the University adopted a plan to renovate and expand its physical plant within a land-locked campus. A key element of this Campus Master Plan was a new attention to academic life on campus, and this emphasis attained greater momentum throughout the 1990s, culminating in a call for a Comprehensive Academic Plan in 2003.

HISTORY IN BRIEF