

UC Berkeley

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UCB Celebrates 150 years of Women in Engineering

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Cathy Cesere, [The American Society of Mechanical Engineers Web](#)

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Image Credit:

Inaugural meeting of Society of Women Engineers (SWE) Photo: SWE

The University of California Berkeley celebrates 150 years of women in higher education, engineering, and mechanical engineering.

The [University of California Berkeley \(UCB\)](#) began celebrating the 150th anniversary of the school's decision to allow women to attend and pursue a higher education in 2020. For those who have worked hard to create the [150 Years of Women at Berkeley](#) (150W) History Project, it has been a significant and ongoing pursuit to take a celebration of women, both past and present at UCB, and collect, create, and permanently archive information about the rich history of the contributions they have made to the school in the California Digital Library.

In 1870, UCB didn't have a campus but was founded on the idea it still holds—to bring higher

education to everyone in the state of California. A mere two years after its founding, its leaders unanimously approved a resolution that brought with it profound implications for the world: “That young ladies be admitted into the university on equal terms in all respects with young men.” And over the next 150 years, women have made immeasurable contributions to the school’s campus and have become an integral part of UCB’s culture.

[Discover the Benefits of ASME Membership](#)

Today, UCB embraces female faculty, students, and alumnae, which includes [cutting edge work in its mechanical engineering department](#) where females hold tenured positions, serve as mentors, lead innovative research, and found breakthrough startups. The first women may have been admitted to the school in 1870, but it wasn’t until 1892 that [Caroline Willard Baldwin](#) earned a bachelor’s degree from the College of Mechanics. The 23-year-old Baldwin spoke at commencement and then went on to graduate study at Cornell University and became the first woman to receive a Ph.D. in science in physics from an American university.

Campus women

Despite her education, Baldwin wasn’t hired to teach at the university level. Her status as a married woman with two children, was an obstacle to a position in higher education. The project that sought to tell the stories of such women as Baldwin and other lesser-known engineers and “trace and document the evolving roles and experiences of women at Berkeley” began five years ago, explained Sheila Humphreys, co-chair of UCB's 150W History Project. She was invited to co-lead [given her background](#), having served as UCB's first Electrical Engineering and Computer Science Director of Diversity, initiator of STEM intervention programs and an academic administrator in engineering since about 1980.



October 3, 2020 marks the 150th anniversary of the UC Regents’ unanimous approval of a resolution by Regent Samuel F. Butterworth: “That young ladies be admitted into the University on equal terms in all respects with young men.” Image: UCB

The project hasn’t ended, but continues to celebrate the successes of women as well as the many challenges they faced as they sought access to a higher education and often, a career in

engineering. Indeed, the online archive “is a living document” and one that is “far from complete,” explained ASME Fellow and co-chair of the project, Oliver O’Reilly, Paul R. Gray Distinguished Professor of Mechanical Engineering and UCB’s vice provost for undergraduate education. The school, in fact, looks “forward to seeing more stories of inspirational women being revealed and others being written in real time by our alumnae.”

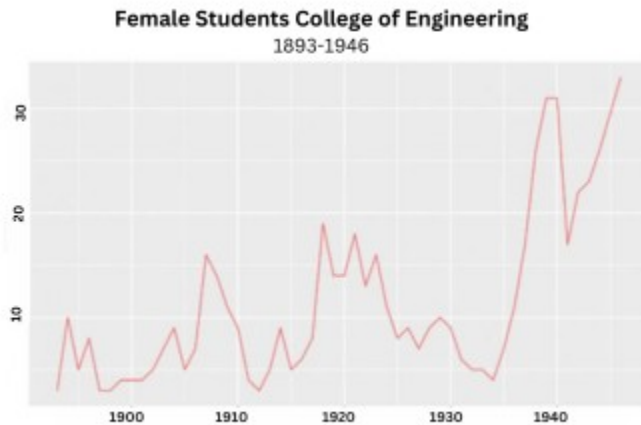
Emily Higgins, communications specialist for the school, helped compile the mechanical engineering section of the project. But Humphreys admitted that there are many more alumnae of ME “who deserve to be profiled” but there are always constraints of many kinds when it comes to a project of this size.

Past, present, and future

Humphreys calls the work of chronicling the stories of early women in mechanical engineering “fascinating” and highlighted not only Baldwin’s story but also that of [Alice Agogino](#). The first woman tenured in ME at UCB, Agogino pioneered programs to recruit women and continues her pathbreaking research in robotics and engineering design education. And then there is [Robin Coger](#). As a Black engineer, Coger earned both a master’s and Ph.D. at UCB and is chair of the Council of Engineering Deans of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Her achievements at North Carolina A&T ranged from advancing the global preparedness of students, highlighting the research of graduate students, to enhancing the innovation climate across the university. She is now the provost and senior vice chancellor for academic affairs and a professor of engineering at East Carolina University in Greenville, NC.

Another Resource: [Quiz: Can You Name These Famous Black Women Engineers?](#)

“Women in ME have a very bright future,” Humphreys concluded. O’Reilly agreed, and said the intent may have been to highlight some of the trailblazing women in the department, but the project not only is able “to honor their accomplishments,” but “inspire others to follow in their pioneering footsteps.”



The number of women enrolled in the engineering departments of University California Berkeley (UCB) increased to 38 in 1945.

Source: Cliometric Data Project, UCB, Zachary Bleemer

He pointed out that that work done is just the beginning over a [wide range of disciplines across the UCB campus](#). And as far as ME is concerned, “I’ve been a faculty member in the department since 1992. It’s been wonderful to see the ever-increasing number of female faculty over the past 30 years,” he said, and added, “I’m also inspired by stories I hear from our recent female graduates as they pursue graduate studies at some of the top ME graduate programs in the world, become faculty members and distinguished educators, and have successful careers in industry.”

Several schools have launched pages celebrating women in higher education. Here are a few more:

Cornell University, [Celebrating 140 Years of Women at Cornell Engineering](#).

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, [Celebrating the Accomplishments of Women](#)

Yale University, [A Timeline of Women at Yale](#)

University of Wisconsin-Madison, [History of Women at the University of Wisconsin](#)

Cambridge University, [The Rising Tide. Women at Cambridge](#)

Oxford University, [A Short History of Women’s Education at the University of Oxford](#)

Northwestern University, [150 Years of Women](#)

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