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Introduction

Jessica Montgomery

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF MEMBERSHIP
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Graduation, Commencement, and Diplomas: A Historical Perspective¹

Commencement is the special occasion that provides public recognition of the academic achievements of students after their successful completion of two, four, or more years of study. The commencement ceremony and regalia date back to the development of universities in Western Europe in the twelfth century. The first academic degree was conferred around 1160 A.D., when doctors (from the Latin *doctorem*, “a learned person”) at the various schools of the University of Bologna (Italy) formed a guild, and the graduates of those schools received their licenses to teach from the archdeacon of Bologna.

Universities are an outgrowth of the relationship between master (from the Latin *magister*, “teacher”) and apprentice. In medieval Paris, each master was licensed to teach by the chancellor of the Cathedral of Notre Dame. The number of masters increased, and ultimately the masters formed

a guild. The word *universitas* was a common term used to describe any collectivity, including that of a guild. By approximately 1250 A.D., the Parisian masters separated into four faculties: theology, canon law, medicine, and the arts. Arts students—by far the greatest number—correspond to the “undergraduates” of today.

After four or five years of resident study, the earliest university students would indicate an intention to “determine” and would be given preliminary examinations. Students who passed their exams would don special gowns and be seated with the *bachelari*, or bachelors. Often, this ceremony was followed by a feast, with wine provided by the successful candidates. Subsequently the students would divide their time between work (lecturing) and continued study.

Between the baccalaureate and the master’s degree, students obtained a *licentiate*, an authorization to teach. At the University of Paris, this was usually conferred through the bishop’s chancellor at Notre Dame or the abbot’s chancellor at Ste. Genevieve du Mont. Again, candidates had to pass the examina-

¹ This historical overview draws heavily from Margaret R. Perry, “Preparing for Commencement,” in *Admissions, Academic Records, and Registrar Services* (Quann 1979).

tions on additional texts, swear to uphold the regulations of the nation and the statutes of the arts faculty, and pay the required fees. Once these obligations had been met, the candidates would come forward and kneel in front of the vice-chancellor at Ste. Genevieve, who licensed the graduates by intoning, “I, by the authority invested in me by the apostles Peter and Paul, give you license for lecturing, reading, disputing, and determining and for exercising other scholastic and magisterial acts both in the faculty of arts at Paris and elsewhere, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

Following another two or three years of study, if masters thought their students prepared and worthy, they would request that the chancellor appoint examiners. If students passed this final examination, they themselves became “masters” or, at the Italian and German universities, “doctors.” They then were admitted by their masters into the guild of teachers in a special ceremony and in the presence of others were invested with the insignia of the office; this was their *inception*—at Cambridge, their ‘commencement’ as masters.

Graduates of the oldest universities—Paris, Bologna, and Oxford—generally were regarded as having degrees that entitled them to teach anywhere in Christendom, in accordance with the principle *jus ubique docendi*, the “right of teaching everywhere.” This principle continued as other universities conferred degrees on their students.

In the 1700s, academic attire was imported from England and used at Colum-

bia University (then King’s College) and at other colleges founded in America during the colonial period. Each college developed its own designs, patterns, and customs, without regard to what other institutions had done. On May 26, 1896, a group of scholars and university personnel met at Columbia University to establish a uniform code for academic attire. They recommended the establishment of a suitable code of academic dress for all colleges and universities in the United States. In 1902, the regents of the University of the State of New York gave a charter to the International Bureau of Academic Costume to function as a source of information and guidance. Cotrell and Leonard of Albany, New York, a firm that manufactured academic costumes, was designated by the regents to serve as a repository of information. Most U.S. colleges and universities that have adopted academic attire have followed the standards prescribed by Cotrell and Leonard.

Even as best practices have evolved and institutions have sought to make commencement a reflection of their unique identities, the public recognition of students’ accomplishments has remained surprisingly constant across hundreds of years of higher education history.

Overview of Content

The chapters presented in this guide explore different aspects of preparing and executing a successful graduation ceremony. The guide begins with Richard Morrell’s discussion around the graduation application and how the University of Nebraska’s

shift to an electronic application for graduation increased their on-time response rate from 65 percent to over 95 percent. In Chapter Two, Michael Moore discusses the degree audit and its potential impact on all stakeholders. In Chapter Three, Timothy Drueke provides a comprehensive discussion on the elements of the graduation ceremony, noting solutions to the common challenges of the day.

Denise Ellis and Cynthia Suter expand on the pros and cons of outsourcing or printing diplomas in-house in Chapters Four and Five, and Lucy Wilson discusses the options around diploma distribution in Chapter Six. Erin Mason provides guidelines on handling requests for diploma changes and reprints in Chapter Seven, and in Chapter Eight, Audra McQuarie provides an overview of the commencement program, a valued keepsake for the graduate. In Chapter Nine, Heidi Hoskinson decodes the significance and best practice around the various pieces of commencement regalia.

In Chapter 10, Melanie Tucker discusses the art and science of selecting and working with commencement speakers, and in Chapter 11, River Montijo discusses how institutional honors programs, honor societies, and academic awards add color, meaning, and content to the commencement ceremony. Paul Kleschick gives tips on yielding an effective and fun social media program around commencement in Chapter 12, and Lori Baker and Audrey Woods provide unique

considerations for graduates of online-only degree programs in Chapter 13.

Unique considerations are addressed toward the end of the guide, as Rhonda Kitch discusses the criteria and procedures for the award of honorary and posthumous degrees in Chapter 14, and Louise Monast discusses the practice of allowing students to participate in graduation ceremonies before their degree requirements are fully met in Chapter 15. In a similar vein, Heather Bjorgan discusses unique graduation date calculations in Chapter 16, including what date to choose when credits are transferred after coursework has been completed. In Chapter 17, Rajeev Jayadeva discusses grade changes for graduating students, Reta Pikowsky overviews considerations for students graduating with multidisciplinary degrees in Chapter 18, and Christopher Huang shares practical considerations for graduate commencement ceremonies in Chapter 19.

Finally, Rachel Danielson gives suggestions on how to recognize students who have served in the Armed Forces in Chapter 20, and M.J. Caro and Edward Trombly conclude the guide with a discussion on balancing academic integrity and student satisfaction throughout the graduation and commencement process in Chapter 21.

Appendices provide ample resources—including a sample timeline, letters and forms, and a self-assessment questionnaire—to utilize in preparing for successful graduation ceremonies.