

The Graduation Ceremony

The graduation ceremony, interesting and exciting to watch, originated in the Middle Ages and carries on the traditions and continuity of academic symbols from that period, roughly between 400 and 1500 C.E.. This span of history, beginning with the fall of the Roman Empire, was the catalyst for extraordinary changes that literally shaped societies and laid the foundations for our world today. The university is one such innovation. Universities (from Latin *universitas*, “the whole, the total”) first formed in the 12th and 13th centuries with the earliest graduation ceremony held in the 12th century and patterned after the ceremonies of scholastic monks. The ceremony was known as an “inception” (acceptance into mastership) with graduates known as “inceptors”. The diploma evolved from the license that was bestowed upon the recipient granting the right to teach. Upon inception, the inceptor was formally admitted into the mastership and inducted into the masters’ guild. Formal admission into the guild was signified by having a cap placed upon the inceptor’s head (a symbol of the master’s status) and receiving the insignia of office, a ring and an open book. During the 13th century, the system of degrees evolved within the existing universities in Italy, Portugal, Spain, France, and then England, with three comparable degrees—Scholar, Bachelor, and Master (or Doctor or Professor)—at all universities. These degrees are very similar to today’s degrees: Bachelor, Master, and Doctorate.

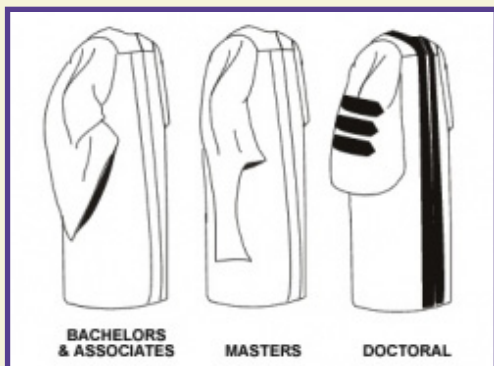


Academic Dress

Academic dress displays both secular and ecclesiastical influences and originally served a distinctly practical purpose: to keep students and faculty warm in the cold buildings of the Middle Ages. The first school to formally require the wearing of robes was the University of Coimbra in Portugal in 1321. In the earlier days, the masters and scholars, particularly in the more minor Orders, wore the drab, plain garb termed a *vestmentum clausum* (closed vestment or dress); however, nothing distinguished the secular “clerk” from the laity of all classes. In 1222, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, at the Council of Oxford ordered clerks in England to wear the *cappa clausa* (closed cloak) as the accepted form of outdoor dress. The clergy gradually stopped wearing the closed cloak, but academics did not. This eventually led to its being regarded as purely academic dress. During 1500s, academic dress moved from the more formal to a simpler and thereby comfortable dress, leaving the closed dress garments behind in favor of the sleeved tunica. During this evolution, academic dress followed the lay fashion of having the garment open in front with an embroidered bag sleeve or bell sleeve at thigh-length.



The Traditional Cap & Gown



Oxford University held the first baccalaureate ceremony in 1432 and required students to wear robes for the occasion. It later required them to wear a cap (a mortarboard) as well. The square shape of the mortarboard has changed little since then. It suggests the hawk, or board for caring masonry mortar, that was used by a master workman; on the other hand, the cap's square shape may have been intended to represent an open book, which would give its wearer a more scholarly appearance. The

mortarboard gained popularity through its use at Oxford University and is sometimes called the "Oxford cap." Depending upon the level of matriculation, a cap or mortarboard, tam or bonnet is worn. The tam is the softer version of the mortar board; the bonnet is most often worn by students receiving a doctoral degree.

Hoods

The exact origin of the academic hood is not completely documented. Some believe it was strictly practical, secured to the gown, for the purpose of protecting students and faculty from the cold. Some argue that the hood dates back to the Celts and their Druid priests who wore capes with hoods to symbolize their superiority; the Druids were considered the scholars of their day, possessing superior knowledge of the sciences and nature. By 1592, the "shoulder piece" (the attached hood and garment that covered the head, neck, shoulders and upper arms) began to evolve into an elongated scarf made from long strips of colored fabric draped over the shoulders and down the back; different colors were and are still used today to denote the student's area of study.



Tassels

The early graduation caps in Oxford, Cambridge, and other European universities had a tuft in the center. That tuft has evolved into today's tassel. The tradition of "turning the tassel," moving the tassel from right to the left, signifies that the student has graduated and is moving on to the next phase of life.



Diploma



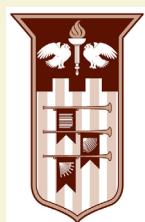
Originally, diplomas were made from paper-thin sheepskin, hand-written, rolled, and tied with a ribbon. Around the 1900s, diplomas were made of paper as paper making techniques improved. The early diplomas were rolled up, but by the turn of the 20th century, they started to be given out flat in leather binders.



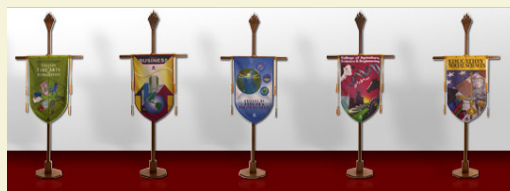
Ceremonial Mace

The ceremonial mace leads the academic procession at commencement as well as other special ceremonial occasions. The use of a mace dates back to the 11th century when it was carried before or placed near a magistrate or other dignitary as a sign of authority. For the commencement ceremony, it signifies the ceremony as one of dignity and importance of what is about to occur.

Gonfalons



The gonfalon is a banner or flag that hangs from a crosspiece or frame, and it originated in the medieval republics of Italy as an insignia of state or office. Each college's gonfalon is carried at the head of the procession to identify the particular college.



References

If you are interested in learning more about the origins and evolution of academic dress, consult these references:

- Cox, Noel (Hons)) MA PhD GradDipTertTchg FRHistS FBS, Barrister of the High Court of New Zealand, Professor of Law, and Discipline Chairman of Law, Faculty of Business, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand. Excerpt from "Academical Dress in New Zealand", Chap 3: Early Academical Dress. 2000
- Hargreaves-Mawdsley, W.N. A History of Academical Dress in Europe Until the End of the Eighteenth Century Oxford University Press 1963 Reprinted Greenwood Press, Inc., Westport, Connecticut 1978
- Haskins, Charles Homer. The Rise of Universities. Cornell University Press 1970
- Lunce, Dr. Stephen E. C.C.P. , Associate Professor of Information Systems "Academic Costumes and Regalia: A Brief History and Chronology"

< <http://graduation.tamu.edu/history.html> >

For Parents

"By far the largest element in the correspondence of medieval students consists of requests for money; 'a student's first song is a demand for money,' says a weary father in a 14th-century Italian letter, 'and there will never be a letter which does not ask for cash.' " From Charles Homer Haskins, *The Rise of the Universities* (1923).

Why Study the Past?

"Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness. When change is absolute there remains no being to improve and no direction is set for possible improvement: and when experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual.

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. "

From George Santayana, *The Life of Reason* (1905-6).



How past civilizations handled the challenges of disease, societal upheavals, class distinctions, climate changes are all part of our common "Human" experience, regardless of the century. Study of our past is the best means to avoid disastrous, unproductive mistakes; by examining these societies we significantly increase our chances to create better solutions for our world today. Without knowing where we have been, we cannot begin to plan for a safe, secure future.

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