

# A HISTORY OF CAPS AND GOWNS

The academic costumes of today have a history which reaches back more than 800 years. The development of the universities in Western Europe during the 12th century was the result of several influences in medieval life. One of these was the Catholic Church and its monasteries which, at that time, were the chief repositories of classical learning. As the Church developed, monastic and cathedral schools were often established at important cathedral centers to train clerics to assist the bishop in the administration of the diocese. Another major influence was the medieval guild system. The members of every trade or profession, having common interests and problems, had the right to organize themselves into a collegium, or guild, and to elect their own magistrates.

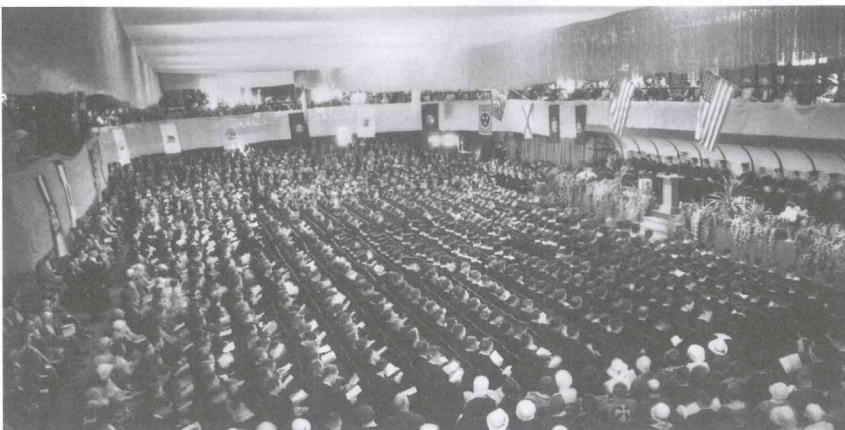
Two of the earliest medieval schools evolved at Bologna, where the teachers were called doctors (from the Latin *doctorem*, a teacher), and at Paris, where they were called masters (from the Latin *magister*, a teacher). As these schools grew and the number of doctors and masters increased, each group formed a local guild. The word *universitas*, a frequently used term applied to any collectivity—including that of guilds—soon became associated with these centers of learning.

A student at one of these early universities attended classes and heard lectures, but took examinations only if he decided to become a teacher. The first step in this process was a series of private and public preliminary examinations. After passing them, the candidate would don a special gown and sit with the *baccalari*, or bachelors. This ceremony was usually followed by a feast with wine provided by the successful candidate. Two or three years of additional study and the successful completion of a final examination were then required before the student became a "master," or in the Italian or German universities, a "doctor."

In medieval Europe, all townspeople—men and women—wore long flowing robes or gowns. Cold halls and drafty buildings made caps and floor-length capes with attached hoods a necessity for warmth. The materials and colors of these gowns varied greatly, according to the wealth and rank of the individual. Since the scholars at the early universities were usually clerics as well, they adopted gown styles similar to those of their monastic order, with hoods to protect their heads. Not until the universities gradually began to pass from the control of the Church did these early drab academic costumes begin to take on brighter hues.

Gradually, the academic costumes became distinctive in style for the bachelors, masters, and doctors, the chief distinction appearing in the hood. After a time, this hood became a separate article, worn over the head and hanging far down the wearer's back. When caps and hats came into fashion in the 15th century, the hoods became merely ornamental, draped over the shoulder and down the back. These early academic hats originated as a symbol of the master's degree and existed in various forms: some were round, some square, and some had a tuft in the center. The tassel in use today is an elaboration of this early tuft. The flat, square "mortarboard" style comes to us from Oxford. Ballad folklore suggests that it resembles a scholar's book.

The faculties of American universities seem to have worn distinguishing costumes from the beginning at Harvard in 1636. Styles became quite varied as they were, and still are, in Europe. However, a group of American college and university representatives met in 1895 to establish a uniform system of academic apparel for this country, which led to adoption of the "Intercollegiate Code of Academic Costume" in 1902, and its later revisions in 1932 and 1960.



*Purdue's commencement exercises have been held in many different locations through the years, ranging from a large circus tent on the Oval in the 1880s to their present site in the Edward C. Elliott Hall of Music. Commencement in the early 1930s was held in the Memorial Gymnasium, now Haas Hall. Limited space for guest seating soon necessitated a move to the larger facilities in the Armory.*