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Graduation: Fact Sheet

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Introduction

Graduation and commencement ceremonies at U.S. academic institutions are often held in May and June. This guide is designed to assist congressional offices with work related to graduation celebrations. It contains a brief history of the ceremonial tradition and the attire worn, sample speeches by government officials, presidential commencement addresses, and statistical resources on educational attainment and graduation rates from authoritative government sources.

History

The tradition of degree ceremonies originated in Europe in the 12th century in the medieval universities of Paris and Bologna, and later in the English universities of Oxford and Cambridge in the 13th and 14th centuries.¹ These universities were originally composed of apprentices who would learn a set of skills from a guild of masters; at the end of the period of study, the apprentice would achieve a testimonial of skill, referred to as a *degree*, which enabled him to begin to practice and teach his trade as a member of the guild. The term for the ceremony celebrating this achievement, *commencement*, derives from the Latin “to begin” (*ad incipiendum*).² The Latin word for *step* (*gradus*) is the origin for the words *degree* and *graduate*.³

Modern graduation ceremonies in the United States have evolved to include the rituals and attire from these European traditions and newer traditions, such as the march to Sir Edward Elgar’s song “Pomp and Circumstance,” first used at Yale University in 1905.⁴

Attire

Modern graduation attire—hood, cap, tassel, and gown—has its origin in 12th century medieval European universities.⁵ The attire has been worn at U.S. graduation and commencement ceremonies in some form since the colonial period and was standardized by the 1895 American Intercollegiate Commission at Columbia University.⁶

The gown originated with the standard attire worn by scholars and clergy in the 12th century. At that time, gowns (i.e., long robes) were worn as a symbol of distinction, but also for warmth.⁷ The modern hood signifies the degree of the person wearing it. It originally was an extension of the cloak, as supplemental fabric to cover the head for warmth and protection. It appeared as a

¹ Frank C. Baxter and Helen Walters, *Caps, Gowns, and Commencements* (Chicago: E. R. Moore Co., 1966).

² *Ibid.*

³ University of Canterbury, “Graduation Through the Ages,” at <https://www.canterbury.ac.nz/study/graduation/history-of-graduation/>.

⁴ Miles Hoffman, “‘Pomp and Circumstance’: Familiar Standard Marches Ahead of Competitors,” *NPR Morning Edition*, May 27, 2003, at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1273081>.

⁵ University of Canterbury, “Graduation Through the Ages,” at <https://www.canterbury.ac.nz/study/graduation/history-of-graduation/>.

⁶ Eugene Sullivan, American Council on Education, *An Academic Costume Code and An Academic Ceremony Guide* (Walter de Gruyter, Inc., 1997)

⁷ Columbia University, “Commencement History & Regalia,” at <https://commencement.columbia.edu/content/commencement-history-regalia>.

separate article of clothing in the 13th century but was not used as an indicator of rank for scholars, as it is today, until the 16th century.⁸

The cap, or mortarboard, is thought to have originally been modeled after the rigidity and square shape of a mason's mortar board.⁹ The softer, original cap of scholars and clerics, called a pileus, was replaced over time with the rigid square mortarboard and tassel commonly used today.¹⁰ In the United States, a common tradition arose at some institutions to toss the cap into the air at the end of the ceremony to signify the completion of a degree; this tradition originated at the graduation and commissioning ceremonies of the United States Naval Academy in 1912.¹¹ Some institutions also incorporate the tassels into the ceremony, having candidates for degrees shift their tassels from the right front side of their caps to the left at the moment degrees are awarded to them.¹²

Sample Commencement Addresses

The following is a sample of commencement addresses by Members of Congress and other officials and dignitaries.

Commencement address at North Central Michigan College (MI)—Senator Debbie Stabenow, May 5, 2023 [Video]

Commencement address at Maine Maritime Academy (ME)—Senator Susan Collins, May 7, 2023 [Video]

Commencement address at North Central State College (OH)—Senator Sherrod Brown, May 12, 2023 [Video]

Commencement address at Bard College (NY)—Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, May 28, 2022 [Video]

Commencement address at the United States Coast Guard Academy (CT)—Vice President Kamala Harris, May 18, 2022 [Video]

Commencement address at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (MA)—Representative Jim McGovern, May 13, 2022 [Video]

Commencement address at the University of Maryland (MD)—Representative Steny H. Hoyer, May 22, 2020 [Video]

Commencement address at the United States Naval Academy (MD)—Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, May 22, 2020 [Video]

Additional resources for transcripts and video of past commencement addresses include

The Best Commencement Speeches, Ever—(searchable list) NPR.org

College Commencement Speeches—C-Span Video Library

⁸ Baxter and Walters, *Caps, Gowns, and Commencements*.

⁹ Ysabelle Kempe, "What's the Origin of Commencement Mortarboards?," *Boston Globe*, May 28, 2019, at <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2019/05/28/what-origin-commencement-mortarboards/bVmqSzUMWTAtlm0RqEl5xJ/story.html>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Sydney Combs, "Why Do Graduates Wear Those Square Hats?," *National Geographic*, June 15, 2020, at <https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/history-and-civilisation/2020/06/why-do-graduates-wear-those-square-hats>.

¹² Ibid.

Presidential Commencement Addresses

Commencement address at Howard University (DC)—President Joe Biden, Jr., May 13, 2023 [Video]

Commencement address at the University of Delaware (DE)—President Joe Biden, Jr., May 28, 2022 [Video]

Commencement address at United States Naval Academy (MD)—President Joe Biden, Jr., May 27, 2022 [Video]

Commencement address at South Carolina State University (SC)—President Joe Biden, Jr., December 17, 2021 [Video]

Commencement address at the United States Coast Guard Academy (CT)—President Joe Biden, Jr., May 19, 2021 [Video]

Commencement address at the United States Military Academy (NY)—President Donald J. Trump, June 13, 2020 [Video]

Commencement address at the United States Air Force Academy (CO)—President Donald J. Trump, May 30, 2019 [Video]

Commencement address at the United States Air Force Academy (CO)—President Barack Obama, June 2, 2016 [Video]

Commencement address at Rutgers University (NJ)—President Barack Obama, May 15, 2016 [Video]

Commencement address at Texas A&M University (TX)—President George W. Bush, December 12, 2008 [Video]

Commencement address at Furman University (SC)—President George W. Bush, May 31, 2008 [Video]

Statistical Sources

Numerous federal and private sources maintain statistics on graduation rates and educational attainment in the United States. The following resources may be useful.

Educational Attainment—U.S. Census Bureau

Undergraduate Retention and Graduation Rates—U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics

Public High School Graduation Rates—U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics

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