Commencement Notes

Two hundred years ago the University of Pennsylvania was located at Fourth and Arch Streets in Philadelphia where it conducted both its arts and medical courses in just two buildings. The Commencement of 1785 conferred a total of only twenty-two degrees—five Bachelors of Arts, five Masters of Arts, nine Bachelors of Medicine, and four honorary degrees. Though the University was among the largest of the new nation, the commencement ceremony reflected the methods of a relatively small institution. The program was directed by the Provost, the chief University officer at that time, and included no less than nine student orations, the valedictory address being the most prominent among them. The degrees were awarded individually, each diploma signed by the entire faculty. Then as now, however, the meaning and significance of the occasion was the same. The responsibility for expressing these feelings rested upon the Provost, whose concluding remarks of tribute and encouragement for those who had just received the University's honors were intended to be remembered for years to come.

The University graduates of 1785 may be contrasted in many ways to those of today. Students awarded the Bachelor of Arts degree had completed a course only three years in length. On graduation day, their average age was seventeen. Despite what may seem to be disadvantages, these young men were a successful group. Their number included Philip Syng Physick, later physician and Professor of Surgery and Anatomy at the University, the man generally acclaimed as "Father of American Surgery."

The five young men who were awarded the Master of Arts degree had not completed graduate studies in the modern sense. Following the standard practice of English and other North American universities, Pennsylvania conferred this semi-honorary degree to all arts graduates of three years' standing, provided they made proper application. These degree recipients also had the option of presenting a public dissertation if they so wished. Luckily, at the Commencement of 1785 only one availed himself of this opportunity.

The Bachelor of Medicine degree was awarded to graduates of a medical course just two years long. This group averaged twenty-two years of age. At a time when an undergraduate degree was not required for entrance in medical school, the M.B. was the standard and the M.D. was considered an advanced degree. The latter was similar to the A.M. in the stipulations for its conferment. Medical course graduates of three years' standing and a minimum of twenty-four years of age could earn the advanced degree by writing a medical dissertation in Latin and defending it in public, i.e. before the medical faculty. Though no M.D. degrees were awarded in 1785, two of that year's M.B. recipients—George Buchanan and Edward Miller—completed their work for the M.D. and were awarded that degree in 1789. Both men went on to distinguished careers in medicine, Buchanan in Baltimore and Miller in New York City.

The honorary degrees of 1785 were also notable by comparison. The honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity, awarded just once in the 20th century, was conferred three times in the Commencement of 1785. The recipients were the Reverend Henry Helmuth, one of the Professors of the University; the Reverend James Madison, President of the College of William and Mary and cousin of the later President of the United States; and the Reverend James Manning, President of the College of Rhode Island (today Brown University). The fourth award, that of Doctor of Laws, was bestowed upon Thomas McKean, Chief Justice of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and University Trustee. McKean was a Signer of the Declaration of Independence and a future Governor of Pennsylvania. At a time when the passions of the Revolutionary War had little subsided, McKean was honored for "his profound law knowledge and approved patriotism."
One hundred years ago the University held two commencement exercises, both at the Academy of Music, Broad and Locust Streets. Two departments, Medicine and Dentistry, held their commencement of 1885 on Friday, 1 May. Three other departments—College, Law and Auxiliary Medicine—met together on 15 June. The programs were simpler than those of the 18th century and many of the diplomas signed only by the Provost, Vice-Provost and University Secretary. The number and variety of degrees, however, reveal a maturing university, one where the student could advance along any of several courses of study.

At the undergraduate level four years of study was the norm and the graduates now averaged twenty-one years of age. Bachelor's degrees were offered in four areas of concentration. Three of these areas came under the umbrella of the College Department. The Bachelor of Arts was awarded to twenty-eight liberal arts majors. The Bachelor of Science was awarded to eight students of engineering who had successfully completed the five year course of the Towne Scientific School (now part of the School of Engineering and Applied Science). The Bachelor of Philosophy was awarded to five students who comprised the second graduating class of the Wharton School's course in finance and economy.

The Department of Law accepted students directly from high school, though more than a quarter of the Class of 1885 were college graduates. As a result the Department awarded the Bachelor of Laws degree to those who successfully completed the requirements of the two year course. In 1885 thirty-seven students received the Bachelor of Laws on 15 June.

The departments of Medicine and Dentistry, like that of Law, also accepted most of their students directly from high school. Unlike the Law Department, however, they awarded only doctorates. In 1885 the Doctor of Medicine degree was conferred upon 108 graduates of the three year course in medicine and the Doctor of Dental Surgery upon forty-nine graduates of the two year course in dentistry. Though the Department of Veterinary Medicine had been organized in 1884, it would not hold its first commencement until 1887.

Graduate education, just in its infancy, resembled contemporary practice much less than did undergraduate. The Auxiliary Department of Medicine offered a two year course leading to a Bachelor of Science. Though this study may have been seen more as a supplement to the three year medical course than graduate education, the five graduates of this department in 1885 had previously taken their M.D. degree. The Master of Laws degree was offered to graduates of the Law Department who completed an additional two year course. The first time this degree would be awarded would be at the Commencement of 1886.

Two branches of graduate study were administered by the College. The Towne Scientific School conferred the "Professional Degree" upon students who completed a thesis in addition to the regular course. In 1885 a total of eight "Professional" degrees were conferred: four of "Civil Engineer;" two of "Mining Engineer;" and two of "Mechanical Engineer." The Master of Arts degree, after 1878, was awarded only to those College graduates of three years' standing who "(have) pursued liberal studies since their graduation, and who present a satisfactory Thesis to the Faculty." In 1885 nine students completed these requirements and were awarded the Master of Arts degree.

Graduate education at the University, as we know it today, has its roots in the formation in 1882 of a Department of Philosophy. This department did not enroll its first students, however, until the fall of 1885 and did not award its first Ph.D. until 1889. The first recipient was Arthur Willis Goodspeed, who went on to be Professor of Physics at the University and Director of its Physics Laboratory. In 1887 the Department of Philosophy took over the granting of the degrees of M.A. and M.S. Since that time these degrees have only been conferred after a candidate has devoted at least a year of close and continuous study and passed full examination. The Department of Philosophy was renamed the Graduate School in 1906 and today is part of the School of Arts and Sciences.