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 1786 conferred a total of only twenty-two degrees—nine Bachelor of Arts, six Masters of Arts, four Bachelors of Medicine and three 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 1786 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 just sixteen. All were men. On the other hand the career aspirations of these graduates were very similar to those of today: five of the nine went on to study law and practice that profession in Philadelphia. Two—Jonathan Williams Condly and Joseph Hopkins—were among the students of Professor James Wilson when he delivered the first law lectures at the University in the school year 1790-1791.

The six 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 upon 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. Perhaps it may be seen as a mixed blessing that only two seized this opportunity at the Commencement of 1786: one, Joseph Thomas, delivered an “Oration on the manners of the times”; the other, Thomas Mastin, followed with “Oration on contemplative happiness.”

The Bachelor of Medicine degree was awarded to graduates of a medical course just two years long. This group averaged twenty-four 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 1786, two of that year’s M.B. recipients—Moses Bartram and Nicholas Baker Waters—completed their work for the M.D. and were awarded that degree in later years. Bartram, in particular, was distinguished at Pennsylvania: for eleven years of steady accomplishment he was awarded an A.B. in 1782, an A.M. in 1783, an M.B. in 1786 and the M.D. in 1790. He was one of just a handful of 18th century students to win every degree available at the time.

The honorary degrees of 1786 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 1786. The recipients were the Reverend David Griffith, an Episcopal clergyman and Bishop-elect of the Diocese of Virginia; the Reverend Samuel Provost, also an Episcopal clergyman, who was soon to be the first Bishop of the Diocese of New York and the first Chaplain of the United States Senate; and the Reverend Matthew Wilson, a Presbyterian clergyman of Lewes, Delaware, who had received an honorary Master of Arts from Pennsylvania in 1760. Unlike most years of this period the University did not confer an honorary Doctor of Laws in 1786.

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 1886 on Saturday, 1 May. Three other departments—College, Law and Auxiliary Medicine—met together on Tuesday, 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-five liberal arts majors. The Bachelor of Science was conferred to twenty-eight students who had successfully completed the five-year course of the Towne Scientific School (now part of the School of Engineering and Applied Science). The Towne School faculty had recently altered the undergraduate curriculum to recognize the fifth year as a “Special Course,” the completion of which resulted in the awarding of a “Professional Degree.” At the Commencement of 1886 the twenty-eight graduating five-year students were therefore also granted this additional honor, while the four-year students, for the first time, were awarded the traditional Bachelor of Science. In this way the Towne Scientific School was taking its first steps towards recognizing the distinction of graduate education.

The College Department also awarded a Bachelor of Philosophy degree. The course in Philosophy offered undergraduates the option of pursuing specialized studies in either biology or finance and economy. The first of these two was essentially a pre-med course; the second culminated in a degree awarded by the faculty of the Wharton School. At the Commencement of 1886 all three recipients of the Bachelor of Philosophy went on to the Medical Department of the University. It is interesting to note that Wharton’s third graduating class, that of 1886, has no alumni. The following year would make amends, however, for fifteen Wharton Students were registered as seniors in the fall of 1886.

The Department of Law accepted students directly from high school, though more than a third of the Class of 1886 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 1886 fifty-three students received the Bachelor of Laws on 15 June, the largest graduating class in its history up to that time.

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 one degree: the Doctor of Medicine. The degree was conferred upon 119 graduates of the three-year course in medicine and the Doctor of Dental Surgery upon forty-one 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 as a supplement to the three-year medical course, the three graduates of this department in 1886 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. This degree was awarded for the first time at the Commencement of 1886 and, in this instance, to just one graduate.

Two branches of graduate study were administered by the College. The “Professional Degree” conferred by the Towne Scientific School has been described above. In 1886 a total of twenty-four “Professional” degrees were conferred: five of “Practical Chemist,” nine of “Civil Engineer,” three of “Mining Engineer,” and seven 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 1886 eleven 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 Graduate 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.

Commencement Programs

Commencement Notes

Other Commencement Notes