

Commencement steeped in centuries of tradition

By Kara Story
Of the Emerald

In 1642 Harvard College was the site of the first commencement exercises in the United States, according to the Encyclopedia of Education.

The first ceremonies, however, began more than 800 years ago in the medieval universities of Europe.

With such a long history the ceremony has acquired a lot of pageantry and ritual. Some of the taken-for-granted traditions have a colorful past.

In medieval days, graduation granted students the right to teach, or in the case of law and medicine, to practice. Commencement was originally designed for master's and doctoral students, and marked the commencement of their teaching careers.

The bachelor's degree simply

meant that the student had entered a course of study leading to a higher degree.

Bachelors students were required to complete a teaching internship before they entered their master's study. When they completed the practicum they earned the right to wear a round cap. While history is not clear on the point it is suggested the round teacher's cap has emerged as our present day mortarboard.

In 1895 an intercollegiate commission formally adopted a code of academic costume for the United States that is basically the same today.

The code provides for three items of academic apparel: the cap, the gown, and the hood.

The University began issuing caps and gowns during the 1890s and has continued to follow the code. The mortar-

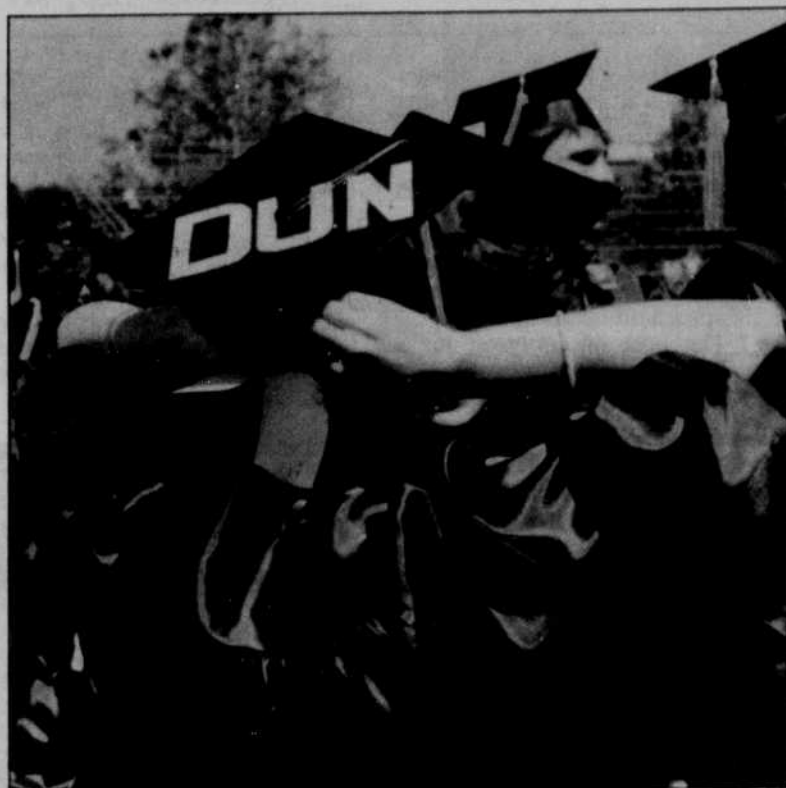
board cap is of black cloth, except for a doctoral student who may choose to wear one made of velvet.

"But there have been some suggestions that we go to a beret style and do away with the mortarboard," says Keith Richard, University archivist. "In some schools it's mandated that you wear a cap and gown to go through commencement, but it's not here and you do actually see some students go through in semi-formal clothing," Richard says.

Each student's tassel is the assigned color of their major. Journalism students wear a crimson tassel, for example, and doctors in all fields generally wear a metallic gold tassel.

Richard guesses the reason for gowns at graduation is a result of them being worn daily in England. The gown was regularly worn to school because it was a way of keeping

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The mortarboard is made of black cloth, although doctoral students may choose to wear one made with velvet.

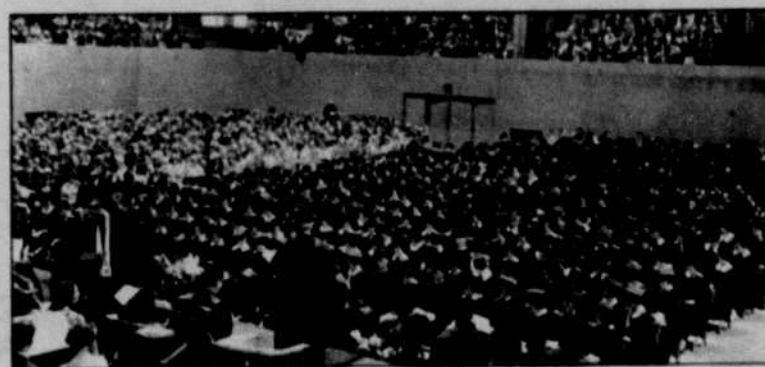


Photo courtesy of University Archives

In the photo above, graduates and their families gather in McArthur Court, circa 1939-41.

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