

## THE MEANING OF COMMENCEMENT CEREMONY

The hierarchy of degrees dates back to the universities of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, which had faculties organized into guilds. Members of the faculties were licensed to teach, and degrees were, in effect, the professional certifications giving them the guild status of a “master.” There was originally only one degree in European higher education, that of master. The baccalaureate, or bachelor’s degree, was simply a stage toward mastership and was awarded to a candidate who for three or four years had studied the prescribed texts in grammar, rhetoric, and logic and had successfully passed examinations held by his masters. The holder of the bachelor’s degree had thus completed the first stage of academic life and was enabled to proceed with a course of study for the degree of master. After completing those studies, he was examined by the chancellor’s board and by the faculty and, if successful, received a master’s degree, which admitted him into the teachers’ guild and was a certificate of fitness to teach at any university.

This May, we are going to participate in a ceremony that has its roots in medieval Europe with these master’s candidates about to be initiated. Like their medieval counterparts, the candidates have been selected based upon the approval of the university faculty and the Chancellor’s Board of Trustees. The wearing of black robes is a direct link to the distant past when the university and church were inseparable. Central to this ceremony is the placing of the academic hood over the candidate’s head.