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THE MASTER'S DEGREE IN MISSISSIPPI

In his History of Education in Mississippi, issued in 1891 as a publication of the United States government in the Bureau of Education, Dr. Edward Mayes, a former chancellor of the University of Mississippi, presents the requirements for degrees set up by very early educational institutions in the state. The first mention of a master's degree occurs on page sixty in an account of Brandon College in 1850 when, says Dr. Mayes,

There was graduated with the degree of Mistress of Arts, Miss Veturia J. Final, who completed the entire course prescribed for young men, and was probably the first young lady in the state to graduate on that plan.

From the opening of Jefferson College in 1829 Dr. Mayes reviews briefly the history of a number of schools and presents the requirements for degrees set up by many of them. In most schools the master's degree was conferred upon a student who returned, after receiving his bachelor's degree, for another year of work, in some schools with free electives, in others with some limitations of choice. A number of schools granted a degree entitled Bachelor of English Literature. The recipient of this degree upon the later completion of additional courses, often in Latin and one other language, sometimes in mathematics, was granted a degree of Master of Arts. As late as 1890 the catalogue of Mississippi College showed a requirement as follows:

Those who have taken a degree of A.B. will be entitled to that of A.M., in course, when they have pursued a course of study, either in the college or after they have left the institution, which shall be adjudged by the faculty as being equal to two years of college work.

The Bulletin of the Graduate School of the University of Mississippi in April, 1940, stated:

In the early years of the University of Mississippi, in conformity with the general practice of English and American institutions for higher education, the degree of Master of Arts was conferred upon graduates of the University who had engaged in intellectual pursuits for a period of years following graduation.
The *Historical Catalogue* of the University of Mississippi, edited by Dr. Alfred Hume, covering the years 1849-1909, gives the following data. The first Master of Arts degree, *honoris causa*, was conferred by the University in 1854 on Jordan McCullough Phipps, an honor graduate of the University in the class of 1851. From that date through the commencement of 1869 the honorary master's degree was conferred on twenty-six men, most of them having previously earned bachelor's degrees. During that period the University conferred, also *honoris causa*, eleven degrees of Doctor of Laws, and ten of Doctor of Divinity. The bestowal of the latter degree was later discontinued as being unsuitable from an institution without a school of theology.

On August 15, 1870, the Board of Trustees of the University began the consideration of two previously requested plans submitted to them by the faculty looking toward "a re-organization of the University." A large and able committee of the Trustees, says the record, was appointed to study these plans and to report to the Board at no distant day.

A plan will certainly be adopted with a view of throwing the University more into elective form, allowing every student to take such a course of study only as he may prefer...The details of which plan...will be published and circulated. The present plans...of special schools of science and literature therefore will be continued, in addition to the classical curriculum, until the new plan shall go into operation.

On October 26, 1870, the Board completed this re-organization. It is interesting to note how much more authority the earlier Boards exercised over the curriculum than they assumed in later years.

In this re-organization, Dr. Hume wrote, there were also offered:

Several definite post-graduate courses requiring one or more years for completion, open to Bachelors of Arts and leading to the degree of Master of Arts.

The Board of Trustees had also ruled in the re-organization: "That the qualifications for admission into the several classes shall be such as are required in the best regulated universities in the United States." When one recalls that in 1870 the South was struggling to recover from the devastation of the Civil War and the effects of the
Reconstruction Period one wonders that the Board could approach their problems with so much ambition.

The requirements for the degree of Master of Arts mentioned above were presented in the report in some detail as follows:

The Course for Master of Arts requires one year additional to the Bachelor of Arts course and embraces in addition to the studies of that course in any three of the following, vis: French, Latin, German, Anglo-Saxon, Greek, Hebrew, Ethics, Metaphysics, History, on which the candidate must pass a satisfactory examination and present an approved thesis...Candidates for the degree of Master of Arts are required to pass an approved examination upon the entire course of A.B. in addition to the three subjects selected for advanced study.

Regulations at this time permitted the candidates to carry on his work in absentia, reporting to his instructors for examinations as required. This system was later deemed unsatisfactory and residence for a full session was required.

The lack of schooling during the War and Reconstruction was showing its results in the poor preparation of the students entering the University and it became necessary for the University to provide some elementary training. Hence a Department of Preparatory Education was established called at first a University High School, "in which shall be taught all those branches preliminary to the University courses, vis: English, Latin, Greek and Mathematics." Soon the name "High School" was changed to "University Preparatory Department" and this department continued its work for many years.

On page forty-three of the catalogue of 1871 are recorded some remarks of the Faculty on the responsibility of a school of higher learning to maintain high standards for entrance requirements into both undergraduate and postgraduate departments.

For nothing is more certain than that the schools of secondary education will take their tone from those above them...The Faculty are aware that the course they prescribe to themselves is not that which may tend to swell most rapidly the number of names enrolled in their Catalogue...If, even by diminishing their numbers, they should succeed...in exerting an elevating influence, reaching ultimately to all the schools of the State, they would feel that they had accomplished, for the cause of education in Mississippi, more than they would have done by any increase in the number of students enrolled.
The Combined efforts of the Faculty and the Board of Trustees in their re-organization had produced a plan for graduate work so well thought out as to require no great changes in the years that followed. There were, however, some re-adjustments necessary. In the catalogue of 1878, pages 22-24, the Faculty presented their own grouping of subjects required for the master's degree instead of allowing candidates to select any three as had been previously allowed. By 1880 outlines of courses and lists of textbooks were omitted from the catalogue and such details were left to the decision of the various professors concerned. The catalogue of 1893 records that the Master of Arts degree "may be conferred on Bachelors of at least one year's standing on passing a satisfactory examination upon an approved course of study.

Whether this policy cancelled the residence requirement is not made clear. The requirement for residence was not in force in 1898 when the writer was enrolled as a candidate for the master's degree.

The University had been requiring up to about this time three years of Latin and two of Greek for entrance into the freshman class. The Faculty now made beginners Greek a required subject in the freshman year, but in 1897 Greek was again required for entrance and the high schools were urged to offer courses in Greek. Both Latin and Greek were required as heretofore for a bachelor's degree. Candidates for the master's degree therefore were presenting these two languages among their units for the Bachelor of Arts degree.

In this year also candidates, if not presenting undergraduate credits, might satisfy the Faculty of their fitness for postgraduate work by written examinations. A ruling was also made at this time that the student might not have two of his required courses under the same professor. He must also designate one of his three subjects as his major and write his thesis in that field. Each professor must assign, in each of the fields selected, work requiring one-third of the candidate's time if in residence. "These prescribed courses shall be subject to the approval of the Faculty." The candidate for the degree in absentia must report for examination at least once a year.
In the catalogue of 1899 is recorded the following:

It is highly important that the candidate should possess, at the outset of his post-graduate work, a reading knowledge of French and German to be tested by the professor of modern languages.

This proviso, though frequently attacked in the Faculty, remained in force until the organization of the Graduate School in 1928, when it was cancelled.

About the turn of the century the recently organized Southern Association of College Women undertook to evaluate the work of the numerous so-called colleges for women scattered over the South. This objective was for many reasons difficult to reach satisfactorily but, imperfect as the Association knew it to be, the reports of the committees had great influence toward the raising of undergraduate standards and the cancelling by schools not equipped to offer postgraduate courses of work leading to a master's degree in those courses.

The University catalogue of 1903 presented a summary of requirements for the degree of Master of Arts as follows:

The degree...will be conferred upon a student with a University of Mississippi bachelor's degree who completes in residence work in two or more schools equivalent to from 15 to 18 units provided such work has not been counted for a bachelor's degree, and provided that it be selected from work indicated in the catalogue as for graduates and undergraduates and provided he submits an acceptable thesis for the master's degree.

In 1904 occurs this passage in the catalogue:

Candidates must have a baccalaureate degree or they must do at this University as undergraduates an amount of work sufficient to satisfy the Faculty that their general educational training is such as to fit them for entering upon the course for the Master of Arts degree.

This requirement could be met, however, by the candidate's standing written examinations to the satisfaction of the Faculty. In apparent conflict with the latter requirement is this entry:

If the candidate is not a graduate of the University of Mississippi or another institution of equal standing he must spend one session at least in residence immediately before or during his work for the M.A. degree.
With the confusion in these statements it seems that the faculty felt the need for a co-ordinated program. This confusion resulted partly at least from amendments to previous requirements, proposed in open faculty meetings by various professors. Accordingly in 1906 a "Committee on Graduate Study" was created consisting of Dr. A. M. Muckenfuss, Dr. Franklin Riley, and Dr. Calvin S. Brown, Chairman. All three had taken their doctoral degrees, Dr. Muckenfuss in pure science, Dr. Riley in social science, and Dr. Brown in the liberal arts. In the 1906 catalogue also the importance of a reading knowledge of French and German is stressed.

In about 1907 or 1908 Dr. Brown organized the candidates for post-graduate degrees into a graduate club. This organization, with its own elected officers was a social club but, to quote the 1939 Bulletin of the Graduate School, topics of intellectual interest usually appeared on its programs and it was addressed from time to time by speakers who were authorities in their fields.

The catalogue of 1908 again mentions that a year in residence is required for the master's degree. The summary of requirements continues:

Work for the degree...must be selected from closely related schools. A thesis of an original character representing the equivalent of a course of two lectures per week for a year is required. This thesis must be approved by the three members of the Faculty constituting the candidate's examining committee.

By 1914 the candidate must have completed the undergraduate courses in his field, as well as other courses which may be deemed preliminary to the graduate course...At the present stage of graduate study in this institution courses offered as "for graduates and undergraduates" will...constitute the basis for graduate work. In such courses the graduate student must make a grade of 85% to receive credit.

In the catalogue of 1929 the degree of Master of Science is offered to be conferred "upon those students who have specialized in scientific subjects."

In 1928 the growth of the graduate department of the University was considered to justify the organization of a separate school for graduate study, and this change was accordingly made.