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A Question of Degrees

The degree of doctor of philosophy was awarded for the first time in this country by Yale University 100 years ago tomorrow. It was modeled after the German Ph.D. and was designed to be the highest earned academic degree and to certify mastery of a subject-matter field and the performance of original research.

The degree is now well established, and it is one of the best known of the 1600 different degrees currently awarded. But this was not always so: in its early days the high prestige of the degree led some universities and colleges to begin awarding it as an honorary degree, a practice that blurred its significance as an earned degree with a research requirement. The number of honorary Ph.D.'s steadily increased and reached a peak of 50 in 1889. Even by 1881 the abuse had become so flagrant that the American Philological Association passed a resolution, concurred in by the AAAS, which deprecated "the removal of this degree from the class to which it belongs . . . and its transfer to the class of honorary degrees." By 1896 the organization of graduate schools (Federation of Graduate Clubs) resolved that "the degrees of Ph.D., Sc.D., M.D. and Pd.D. should never be given *honoris causa* or in absentia." Despite this caveat and others, the number of honorary Ph.D.'s showed no rapid decline; there were 23 in 1900, 35 in 1901, and 20 in 1907.

The battle to maintain the integrity of the degree was won—or nearly won—as a consequence of the academic outcry that arose when Gonzaga University conferred an honorary Ph.D. on Harry L. (Bing) Crosby in 1937. Few institutions have had the temerity to award one since.

The number of earned doctorates (and from 1920 on this includes the degree of Doctor of Education) has shown a continuous increase. About 177,000 were awarded between 1861 and 1960. In 1920, the number was 615; in 1930, 2299; in 1940, 3290; in 1950, 6633; and in 1960, more than 10,000 (the compilation of figures is not yet complete).

So much for statistics; but what do you call a Ph.D. to his face, Mister or Doctor? Everyone knows that a surgeon is called "Mister" in England, but that physicians are called "Doctor" both socially and professionally in the U.S. The British novelist Pamela Hansford Johnson, in an article entitled "It's Easy to Get Americans All Wrong," in the *New York Times Book Review* on 1 January, confesses her bafflement about academic titles. "In America, the usage seems to vary from campus to campus. On some, 'Professor X' or 'Doctor' gives way to the over-all 'Mister'. On others, the title is used, and is expected to be used. How shall a foreigner . . . get these things right?" The confusion is not confined to foreigners. In some universities the administrators call all Ph.D.'s "Mister," but students and colleagues call them "Doctor." Often, but not always, Ph.D.'s are "Misters" socially. In industry and government, both socially and professionally, they are "Doctors," as they are also in the pages of the *New Yorker, Time,* the *Saturday Review*, and the New York *Times*. The Washington *Post* reserves the title for those in the health fields, but occasionally slips up on Dr. Wernher von Braun and Dr. George Gallup.

We hope this brief essay will add nothing to the confusion of either natives or foreigners. Doubtless during the next century the number of Ph.D.'s will continue to increase, and some stabilization in the form of address will occur.—G.DuS.

[The information given above was derived largely from *Academic Degrees*, by W. C. Eells and H. A. Haswell (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1960), and *American Universities and Colleges*, Mary Irwin, Ed. (American Council on Education, ed. 8, 1960). The figures for 1960 were supplied by L. R. Harmon of the National Academy of Sciences–National Research Council.]