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## The Master's Degree Grows Up 75

By [Debra Borys](#)

After years of blood, sweat, and tears you are standing in your cap and gown. Perspiration rolls down your back like a metaphor of the time spent waiting for this day. A Master's degree. What an accomplishment. Your parents are proud, your teachers are relieved, and you are oh so ready to prove to the world that all the hard work was worth it.

The American opinion of a Master's degree has come a long way since its inception in 1643 at Harvard College when it was considered an empty token of minimal accomplishment. Until the first years after the Civil War, those colleges that offered the degree did so as little more than an acknowledgement you had paid your diploma fee and, as quoted by Richard D. Mandell, "stayed out of jail."



Even after the University of Michigan offered the first Master of Arts degree in 1850, some academics still considered it nothing more than a step towards the ultimate prize, the PhD. Others viewed it even more negatively, as a consolation prize for students who could not achieve a higher degree.

After all, since the middle ages, all academic degrees awarded in European universities had been restricted to Doctoral degrees. The PhD was meant for scholars interested in furthering the study of knowledge in the field. However, over time some expressed concerns about a lack of practical application. The orientation of the PhD was based on "knowledge for the sake of knowledge," not knowledge that could be put to use in the graduate's life.

### The Master's Degree Meets the 70's

In the 1970's, opinions began to change. Colleges and universities adapted the degree in response to a growing need for advanced, specialized, and practitioner-oriented education. It has become a viable credential, signifying advanced preparation and training in a focused area of study.

Enrollment in master's programs almost doubled in the last quarter of the twentieth century. More than half of all the master's degrees conferred in the history of the United States happened between 1970 and 1990. After 1987, more than 300,000 degrees were granted each year, with 420,000 issued in 1997 alone, an all-time historical high.

This growth has been fueled by demands from students and employers for advanced education. The expansion of a technology-driven, information-centered economy created an increased need for trained professionals in management, finance, information technology and health care.

Eighty-five percent of all master's degrees since the 1980's have been in fields like business administration, education, health sciences, and engineering. Education has seen a dramatic shift from the purely theoretical to the pragmatic so that now many Masters Degree programs are all that is needed for immediate entry into professional work, instead of merely a step on the PhD path. In addition, in some fields a Masters Degree is absolutely essential for entry into a profession.

### The Master's Degree meets the World Wide Web

Distance education has always existed in a way or another. In 6th century BC, Pythagoras of Samos was said to send some lessons from his school in Crotona to former students who couldn't attend his teachings. An ad in the Boston Gazette of March 20th, 1728, quoted an offer for "self-instructional materials in shorthand and correspondence education."

Suitably, in 1960, technicians and scientists at the University of Illinois created PLATO, (Programmed Logic for Automated Teaching Operations) This was the first computer-based learning system that allowed students at terminals to access lessons, tests and other schooling information from remotely located professors.

### Fast Fact: The Master's Degree meets the Beatles

Is the evolution of the specificity of master's programs going to extremes? In 2011, former Miss Canada finalist, Mary-Lu Zahalan-Kennedy was the first person in the world to graduate with a Masters degree in Beatles studies.

The course looks at the studio sound and composition of the Beatles and how Liverpool helped to shape their music. The MA examines the significance of their music and how it helped to define identities, culture and society.

Tim Berners-Lee created the World Wide Web in 1989. That same year, the University of Phoenix opened the first ever distance learning program offering online degrees. Today OnlineColleges.net estimates that roughly half of the 4,500 physical colleges in the U.S. offer online education, including Harvard, who so long ago belittled the value of the Master's degree.

Mike Brocken, founder and leader of the Beatles MA at Liverpool Hope University, said "Mary-Lu now joins an internationally recognized group of scholars of Popular Music Studies who are able to offer fresh and thought-provoking insights into the discipline of musicology."

The Master's degree has gone from being regarded as something of a joke to being the bar by which higher education is measured. As you walk across the stage and accept that diploma, your journey has paralleled the growth of the degree you have finally earned. From there, the next steps are limitless.

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