

## Editor's Note

Rules endure only as long as they are followed. Even when they are written down and codified, they lose their effectiveness when we ignore them. In these pages you will read of dress, academic and otherwise, that changed despite the rules in the University of Sussex, in Oxford's collegiate choirs, and in the portraits of the archbishops of Armagh.

Another change to academic dress happened in the US. The Academic Costume Code, the successor to the 1895 Intercollegiate Code that governed American academic dress, is no more.

I was surprised this summer when, after seeing a social media post that made me want to review the American rules, I searched for them on the site of their sponsor I found this message: 'The American Council on Education no longer hosts information about academic regalia and ceremonies, as current policies vary.'<sup>1</sup>

What happened? A phone call in July to the Council's director of public affairs, Audrey Hamilton, yielded some details. The Council decided to end its connection with cap and gown around 2022, she said, because the person on the Council's staff who had fielded questions had retired, leaving no one qualified to answer incoming queries.

Changes beyond the Council's roster contributed to the decision. Hamilton pointed out that colleges and universities had been doing what they wanted with academic dress. With less attention to the Code, its importance dwindled.

Whether its demise should be mourned or celebrated is another question, and the reality that its passing went unnoticed for two years by so many of us tells the real story. Universities and society have changed immeasurably since the first Code identified the eight fields of education. One set of rules for 4,000 universities just didn't work.

Allowing each college to select its own scheme of academic dress in the twenty-first century reflects the way Americans dress today, with the emphasis on individuality rather than membership in a group. As early as 1967, the Council's costume committee noted that 'it is impossible (and probably undesirable) to lay down enforceable rules', and over the years departures grew.<sup>2</sup> Most bachelors' gowns, for example, lost their pointed sleeves many years ago. When it comes to trim colour, virtually no university or robe-maker could agree whether the hood's should reflect the name of the degree (Arts, for example) or the field of study (such as Music)—Kenneth Suit Jr.'s work in *Transactions* Volumes 15, 18 and 21 notwithstanding.

To Americans who actually paid attention to the Code, variations like these could be maddening. To those who worried that the Code risked making fossils of academic dress, its end is a relief.<sup>3</sup>

When its wearers change academic dress, it remains a living thing, growing and evolving to meet changing needs.

—Stephen Wolgast

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1 American Council on Education, 'Academic Regalia and Ceremonies,' at <[www.acenet.edu/Programs-Services/Pages/Regalia-Redirect.aspx](http://www.acenet.edu/Programs-Services/Pages/Regalia-Redirect.aspx)> [retrieved 25 August 2024].

2 Memo, 'Regulations affecting academic costume,' from the Commission on Academic Affairs, ACE, to 'Member institutions,' 9 November 1967, Columbia University in the City of New York, University Archives. See also David T. Boven, 'American Universities' Departure from the Academic Costume Code,' *TBS*, 9 (2009), pp. 156–74.

3 See Nicholas Groves and Bruce Christianson, 'Wearing Mummy's Clothes: An Introduction to Academical Archaeology,' *TBS*, 4 (2004), pp. 42–43.