

# Ask Geoff

By Geoffrey Williams,  
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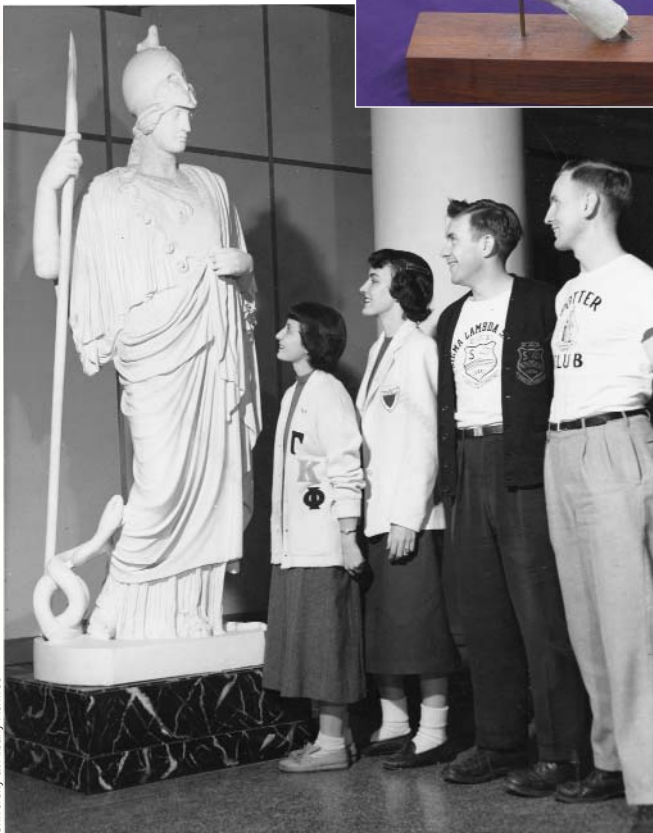


## Q. What can you tell me about the Minerva statue? Why does Minerva have a snake at her feet?

A. My colleague Katie Mullen, collections conservator in the University Libraries' Preservation Department, posed these questions. Katie also asked about the nature of the restorations performed on the statue.

Minerva was the Roman goddess of dawn, the home, rustic life and wisdom. Later associated with Athena, the Greek goddess of war – hence the breastplate and spear – Minerva was revered as a patron of the arts, crafts and guilds, and medicine, and as the inventor of musical instruments. She was also linked with birds and animals, particularly the owl and the snake. The snake at

*For half a century, Minerva was a popular meeting place for students. This group gathered at the goddess' feet in the late 1950s.*



Henry Madej, B.A. '67, M.P.A. '68

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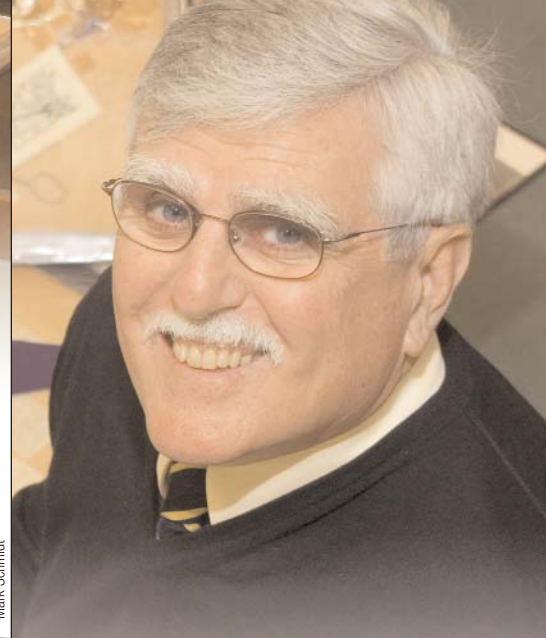
Minerva's feet is associated with the Greek myth of Erichthonius, regarded as the hero and helper of Athens, and often portrayed, at Athena's side, as a snake. Our Minerva is an exact copy of the Vatican's "Athena Giustiniani," which can be viewed at <http://www.theoi.com/Gallery/S8.9.html>.

Anna E. Pierce, New York State Normal School Class of 1884 and faculty member from 1885-1933, noted that the statue was purchased in 1888 with \$1 fines students paid for make-up exams. Since Minerva was plaster, she could be easily moved – a fact that enabled janitor Charles Wurthman to save her from the fire that destroyed the school's Willett Street building in 1906. Later installed at the entrance to what is now Draper Hall, on the Western Avenue campus, she became a popular meeting site; "Meetcha at Minnie" was a common expression until Minerva moved to the uptown campus five decades later. According to tradition, freshmen could not walk in front of her until after freshman-sophomore Rivalry ended.

Minerva's mobility landed her in some interesting predicaments. In the 1920s, she was sometimes found in the men's room; on one occasion in the early '30s, she was smeared with red paint – allegedly by basketball rivals from RPI. (The janitor of that time, fearful of being fired for not having guarded her well enough, stayed up all night cleaning her with paint thinner.) By the 1960s, Minerva was often discovered sporting various articles of clothing.

The pranks took a physical toll on Minerva. However, the Class of 1967 and its president, Henry Madej, stepped in to restore her in preparation for her move to the new uptown campus. At the suggestion of the art department's Ed Cowley, who had assisted in past restorations, a new spearhead was made; the class also replaced the statue's old wooden base with a new Vermont marble base. The rejuvenated Minerva was located under the stairs at the Campus Center entrance, then transferred to various locations inside the University Library. After more "cosmetic surgery" in 1986-87, she was returned to the Library entrance – minus the marble base, which disappeared while the repairs were made. In 1999, Minerva took up residence in the Science Library atrium, where she remains today.

Minerva's first photo, taken at Draper Hall, was published in the 1911 student yearbook. From 1918-52, she was featured on both the College catalogue cover and the school's official seal. She achieved national "cover girl" status in 1962, when the *Saturday Review* used her picture to illustrate a David Boroff article on the College-to-University transition.



Mark Schmidt

Minerva continued to be prominently displayed on memorabilia and on the University seal but was downplayed for a number of years on official publications. In the 1990s, then-President H. Patrick Swygert reintroduced her as the University's official symbol.

**Q. What was the wording on your diploma, and when did you receive it?**

**A.** I asked that question in the Spring 2007 *UAlbany*, and 43 alumni responded. Many of them indicated they were confused by the University's frequent name changes, particularly in the period 1958-62.

Since about 1949, I learned, the phrase following *State University of New York* on diplomas has read:

*College for Teachers at Albany* (about 1949-59)

*College of Education at Albany* (1960-61)

*College at Albany* (1962)

*State University at Albany* (1963-75)

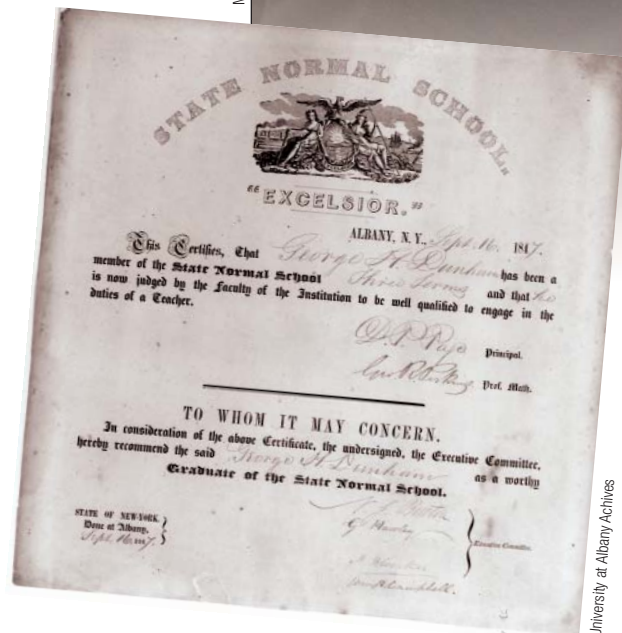
*University at Albany* (1976-approximately 1983)

*University Center at Albany* (about 1987-98)

*University at Albany* (1999-present)

A few alumni reported wording that did not match that noted by other classmates; until the recent use of electronic signatures by printers, a replacement diploma carried the University name used at the time the replacement was issued – not the name used at the time the diploma was originally presented. For example, Charlie Self, B.A.'70, reported that his diploma reads *University Center at Albany* under *State University of New York*; other respondents from his class noted that their diplomas were imprinted *State University at Albany*. Charlie confirmed that his was a replacement issued in the late 1980s.

Mysteries remain, however. *New York State College for Teachers* appeared on diplomas issued between about 1914 and 1947. When did the term *State University of New York*, *College for Teachers at Albany*, first appear? SUNY was created in 1948, but the College didn't become part of the university system until 1949, so I suspect that 1949 is when *College for Teachers at Albany* was first used on diplomas. Graduates from 1948 could confirm this by letting me know what wording appears on their diplomas. Another mystery: When was *University at Albany*, used consistently from 1976-83, dropped in favor of *University Center at Albany*, and why was this change made? What wording appears on diplomas for class years 1984, '85 and '86?



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*Our oldest existing diploma, that of George H. Dunham, Class of 1847, was signed by our first Executive Committee (Board of Trustees).*

Different names were also used at commencement. Esther Heilmann Sheppard, M.S.'66, pointed out that her leather diploma case was inscribed *State University of New York at Albany*, but *State University of New York*, *State University at Albany*, was imprinted on the diploma. Larry Yother, M.L.S.'71, M.S.'73, C.A.S.'74, told me that his degrees denoted *State University at Albany*, while his teaching certificate contained the familiar *State University of New York* on the first line and *at Albany* on the second. Larry recalled that most people used *Albany State* in general conversation; Donna Guyette Farquhar, B.A.'65, and Matt Kirschenbaum, B.A.'92, said they commonly used the term *SUNY Albany* when referring to the school. University letter-head during 1976 was imprinted *State University of New York at Albany* or *The University at Albany*, according to Deborah Beza, M.P.A. '76, who prefers "the latest and greatest" appellation: "the informal *UAlbany*."

**To submit a question for "Ask Geoff," e-mail [gwilliams@uamail.albany.edu](mailto:gwilliams@uamail.albany.edu).**