The development of graduate programs of study in what we now refer to as the biomedical sciences at this institution has a long and complex history. Dr. John C. Forbes pioneered the initiation of graduate study at the Medical College of Virginia in the 1930s. In an age when biomedical research has been a national priority for decades, it is difficult to appreciate the wisdom, foresight and enthusiasm for science which Dr. Forbes displayed in championing the value of scientific research and the benefit of providing a training ground for research scientists.

Two students initiated study with Dr. Forbes in 1934 and were awarded M.S. degrees in 1936. Jeanette S. McConnell and James Henry Willis became the first advanced degree awardees, receiving the M.S. from the Department of Biochemistry. Coincident with the initiation of the graduate study program, Dr. Forbes also organized what was referred to as the Biological Seminar, a weekly lecture series featuring presentations of research developments. This seminar series which would now be characterized as an interdisciplinary forum, continued into the early 1980s.

Oversight of graduate education in this initial phase of development was the responsibility of a faculty Graduate Committee, appointed by Dr. W. T. Sanger, then Chancellor of the Medical College of Virginia. Dr. Forbes served as the Chair of this Committee from 1934-1947. Through this period, enrollment of graduate students continued at a modest level. During the Second World War, institutional priorities were directed to physician training for the war effort. Nonetheless, by 1947 graduate work had been initiated in an additional five departments: bacteriology, pathology (1942), physical medicine (1947), physiology, pharmacology (1947).

In 1947, Dr. Ebbe Hoff became Chairman of the Graduate Committee, and would provide administrative leadership of graduate education through 1966. In 1948, Dr. Forbes initiated action to expand graduate education at the Medical College of Virginia to include Ph.D. training. In June of 1952, Archie W. Miller, Jr. was awarded the first Ph.D. from the institution, graduating in pharmacology.

In this same period, organizational changes were initiated which would influence the administrative evolution of graduate education. Then, as now, the basic science departments, although administratively housed in the School of Medicine, taught in the School of Dentistry, the School of Pharmacy, and the School of Nursing. At the request of the Deans of the other MCV Schools, an arrangement was adopted wherein the Basic Science Departments were transiently placed under the administrative jurisdiction of a Committee of the Deans chaired by the Dean of the School of Medicine. As was the intent at the time of this transition, eventually this “Division” of the Basic Sciences became the School of Basic Sciences with its own Dean.

As these changes were taking place, the stature of graduate education became formally recognized with the creation of the position of Dean of the School of Graduate Studies. Dr. Ebbe Hoff accepted an appointment in this new position. The “Graduate Committee” later termed the MCV Graduate Committee became the administrative home for all advanced degree programs at the Medical College of Virginia. This body, chaired by Dr. Hoff was composed of faculty representatives from all Departments housing graduate programs. A status report on graduate education in 1959 appeared in the “Scarab”, the journal of the MCV Alumni Association and is appended to this article. National data from this period indicate that 2580 students were undergoing advanced degree training in biomedicine in the U.S. in 1958 (11 percent of whom
were non-citizens). The 21 students enrolled in graduate programs at MCV in 1958, the only biomedical graduate students in Virginia at that time, placed Virginia as 21st in the U.S.

In 1966, the School of Basic Sciences was formally established and aegis over graduate education was incorporated. Thus the new administrative unit was the School of Basic Sciences and Graduate Studies. Dr. Daniel T. Watts was recruited as the first Dean of the new School. The specific charge to Dr. Watts was the enhancement of the quality of health professions instruction, research and graduate education. Dr. Watts would serve as Dean for the period of 1966-1982. Through much of this period of enhanced development of research and graduate education, Dr. Charles C. Clayton served as Assistant Dean until his untimely death in 1977. Along with Dr. Forbes and Dr. Hoff, Dr. Clayton played a critical role in recapturing the momentum for graduate education at the end of World War II and establishing Ph.D. training at the Medical College of Virginia. As is evident from the record of M.S. and Ph.D. graduates in programs now resident in the School, graduate education blossomed under the leadership of Dr. Watts. In the mid to late 1970s, the production of Ph.D. graduates in the basic science disciplines was among the highest in the United States. Data published in the Journal of the American Medical Association in this period indicates that the level of Ph.D. graduates was the 8th - 9th highest nationally for 1977-78.

In 1968, Virginia Commonwealth University was established, incorporating the Schools and programs of the Medical College of Virginia into the new comprehensive institution. Responsibility for the administration of graduate education for the institution was shifted to a more senior level shortly thereafter. The School of Basic Sciences and the MCV Graduate Committee continued, however, providing oversight for graduate education on the Medical College of Virginia Campus.

In 1973, an annual program was initiated to recognize excellence in research at the Master's and Doctoral levels within the School of Basic Science, Medicine and Pharmacy. This program of student presentations and an invited seminar continues to this day and is now termed the John C. Forbes Research Colloquium in recognition of the pioneering work of Dr. Forbes.

In 1982, Dr. Watts retired and Dr. S. Gaylen Bradley was appointed to succeed Dr. Watts. In 1984, a program of poster presentations of ongoing research was initiated, taking place in the Fall term to complement the Forbes Research Colloquium which is held in the Spring term. These presentations are termed the Daniel T. Watts Research Symposium recognizing Dr. Watts’ leadership in advancing graduate education to its current stature.

In the latter part of the 1980s, Dr. Bradley initiated the creation of a Department of Biomedical Engineering. This Department was to become the core of the School of Engineering, established at Virginia Commonwealth University in 1995.

In 1994, the School of Basic Health Sciences was incorporated into the School of Medicine. Administrative coordination of advanced degree programs was placed in the newly created Office of Graduate Education with the position of Associate Dean of Graduate Education established and occupied by Dr. Jan F. Chlebowski.

In 1995, a Certificate program was established to provide enhanced training in the basic sciences for students seeking entry into professional school as a career objective.