

SPECIAL REPORT
of the
RULES COMMITTEE
concerning
DEGREE GRANTING POLICY AND
THE DEFERRED DEGREE PRACTICE

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- I. **Introduction.** This report brings to the Senate's attention the increasingly problematic, albeit long standing, practice of granting "deferred degrees." The practice of granting deferred degrees at this institution is completely atypical for the nation. The common practice is for universities to set a date by which graduation requirements must be completed. In a recent outside evaluation of the Registrar's Office (January 1981) by the Registrar's Consulting Group, strong recommendation was made that this institution discontinue the present practice and move to the standard approach. Discontinuance of the practice is in line with current policy, compatible with both administrative procedures and high academic standards, and will enhance institutional reporting research.
- II. **History.** Although never a formal policy, through the last several years, the informal practice of granting "deferred degrees" has grown. Through this practice, a student who does not meet his/her graduation requirements on time may request to have his/her degree date set one, two, three, or even ten years into the past (back to the original date on which graduation would have occurred, had the requirements been met on time).
- III. **The Problem from an Academic Perspective.** A deferred degree is not an accurate reflection of either the University's academic standards or the student's ability or progress. While sometimes benign, in other instances the deferred degree misrepresents a student's efforts and abilities. The recent Special Report from the Committee on Admissions and Records on the subject of Academic Records and Transcripts states: "the record must accurately reflect what students do, when it is done, and what actions are taken with respect to what they do." The practice of granting deferred degrees, as it is done at present, is in contradiction to this principle.

The deferred degree practice is also inconsistent with Graduate School policy. As stated by Robert Swasey, "it has been a long standing policy of the graduate school not to award retroactive degrees for those graduate students who might have missed the filing deadline for one reason or another. Of all regulations and policies, I find that this is one of the easiest to enforce."

In yet another area, the University of Massachusetts submits degree granted statistics to outside agencies, most notably HEGIS. Updated deferred degree lists are never submitted to HEGIS or other outside agencies, so that they have no way to update U/MASS degree granted statistics. Therefore, whenever U/MASS is compared nationally through use of these types of statistics, we show an undercount of actual degrees granted. Beside the undesirability, in principle, of presenting inaccurate information, undercounts cannot do anything positive for the University's image (to the extent that our national image is created by such statistics).

- IV. **The Problem from an Administrative Perspective.** The practice of granting deferred degrees makes the administrative task of record keeping enormously difficult: as each degree granting date comes up, (3 times per year) in addition to recording degrees actually "earned" on time, a list of deferred degree recipients is also generated. These deferred degrees go back several years in time, calling for an update in University records each time this occurs. For example, the 1980/81 FACTBOOK for the University of Massachusetts at Amherst contains degree

granted data on five separate tables (page 73-78). Each time a list of deferred degrees is submitted to the Office of Planning and Budget, this ideally would call for a change in each table and graph that appears in the FACTBOOK. It is at best impractical, and sometimes impossible, to update all back records each and every time a new list of deferred degree recipients is generated.

A second area where this problem crops up is in institutional research studies where degree counts are used, for example, as an "output measure" of a department's productivity. Two examples of this problem are the Faculty Activity Analysis study and the Cost by Level by Program study conducted by the Office of Planning and Budget, both of which utilize degree counts in analysis. Since the deferred degree practice means a constantly shifting base of raw data and an inaccurate record of departmental work accomplished for any given semester, such analyses are thrown into question. Presumably, were individual departments to undertake self studies, degree granted dates which do not align with the timing at which work was actually done would present the same problem for them.

- V. Recommendation. In line with the position of the Committee on Admissions and Records that "the University's records should completely and accurately reflect all of the academic and administrative contacts a student has at the University," the informal practice of granting deferred degrees to undergraduates will be discontinued on a phased schedule. Beginning in FY 1982 (September 1981 degree granting period), dates will be set for completion of degree requirements. Consistent with Graduate School policy, if an undergraduate or Stockbridge student completes his or her degree requirements by the specified date, he or she will be granted a degree for the given period. The date of completion would be set to antecede or coincide with the degree granting date. In order to phase implementation of the discontinuance of the deferred degree practice, students hoping to graduate by May, 1981, would be allowed to complete degree requirements through September, 1981. Responsibilities for publicizing the discontinuation of the informal deferred degree practice will be handled by the Registrar's Office. Such publication will include articles in the Collegian, memos to academic deans, publication in the official schedule of courses, etc.

MOVED: That the Faculty Senate recommend approval of the changes in the degree granting
80-81 practice described in Section V of Sen. Doc. No. 81-069.