

SPECIAL REPORT
of the
RULES COMMITTEE
concerning a
NEW HONORS DESIGNATIONS PROPOSAL

Presented at the
679th Regular Meeting of the Faculty Senate
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COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

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Report from the Academic Matters Council

The Special Report of the Rules Committee concerning a New Honors Designations Proposal was approved by the Academic Matters Council on December 3, 2008, with two minor revisions which have been incorporated into Sen. Doc. No. 09-016.

Preamble

Currently, award of high Latin honors (*magna cum laude*, *summa cum laude*) at graduation is restricted to students who complete all Commonwealth College honors requirements, including capstone thesis or project, as established in Senate Doc. No. 99-005A:

STANDARD HONORS:

Cum laude: GPA of 3.2 or higher

Commonwealth College Scholar and *cum laude*: completion of Commonwealth College requirements including a culminating experience and 3.2 GPA or higher.

HIGH HONORS:

Commonwealth College Scholar and *magna cum laude*: Minimum GPA of 3.5, completion of the requirements of Commonwealth College including the completion of a research thesis, project, or a major creative work.

Commonwealth College Scholar and *summa cum laude*: Minimum GPA of 3.8, completion of the requirements of Commonwealth College including the completion of a research thesis, project or a major creative work.

This new honors designations proposal will determine the award of Latin honors by the percentile rank of a student's GPA in his/her school or college. It will also create a new array of distinctive honors for graduates of the Commonwealth College. Implementing this proposal will better serve the University's commitment to honors education by allowing Commonwealth College to more effectively focus its resources, particularly in the key areas of student mentoring by departmental faculty and undergraduate research.

Explanation of the proposed new criteria for Latin honors

Universities similar to ours typically use GPA as the criterion for awarding graduation honors (see *Examples of policies at comparable universities* below). There are several different methods for using GPA. Some institutions establish GPA thresholds that remain constant from year to year. Others use GPA to determine class rank and set the constant threshold in terms of rank. There is also variation in whether the rank is university-wide or within a student's school or college.

The system proposed here, which uses rank in a student's school or college, appears to be the best of these options because it is relatively impervious to differences in grading practices across schools and colleges and to changes in grading practices over time. It also ensures that students will focus on doing as well as possible in all of their courses, instead of focusing on achieving a specific GPA target.

Rationale for making this change

The current system works to the disadvantage of students who are in Commonwealth College and students who are not:

Because universities similar to ours typically award graduation honors based on GPA, the current system does not give sufficiently distinctive recognition to Commonwealth College students who have done work of the highest caliber. Constituencies outside the

University—parents, prospective employers, and admissions officers at graduate and professional schools—are likely to assume that a GPA criterion has been applied in determining Latin honors, just as is done elsewhere. Because our current system is unusual, its subtleties are lost on this external audience. The introduction of a separate designation of Commonwealth College ~~Scholar~~ **honors** with various levels of distinction will signify that a student has successfully completed a rigorous curriculum of honors-level coursework, including a thesis or capstone experience, in addition to maintaining a high GPA.

For the same reason, constituencies outside the University will wonder why a student with a 4.0 GPA did not receive something better than a *cum laude* at graduation. For the 4.0 student, *cum laude* is surely a disappointing outcome for four or more years of hard work and success. It must seem very unfair.

With over 18% of the current undergraduate population, Commonwealth College is unusually large in comparison with honors colleges at similar institutions. This proposal will remove one incentive for students to join or remain in Commonwealth College, thereby helping to reduce the size of the Commonwealth College student body to more manageable numbers. Thus, implementing this proposal will allow Commonwealth College to more effectively focus its resources to best serve honors students.

It should also be noted that while Commonwealth College requirements are designed to complement the University's undergraduate curriculum and are possible for all majors if planned carefully and begun soon enough, there are reasons beyond a student's control that may make it difficult to complete its requirements. For example, some majors have so many requirements and so little inherent flexibility that students may have limited opportunity to integrate the requisite honors course work, especially if they begin honors work too late in their undergraduate careers.

Examples of policies at comparable universities

GPA thresholds:

Buffalo (<http://undergrad-catalog.buffalo.edu/policies/degree/honors.shtml>)

Stony Brook (<http://ws.cc.stonybrook.edu/ugrdbulletin/2007-09/spring2008/pdfs/AcademicPolReg.pdf>, page 88)

Rutgers (<http://sasundergrad.rutgers.edu/academics/requirements/degree/index.html>)

GPA thresholds by school or college:

UConn (<http://www.registrar.uconn.edu/gradhono.html>)

Class rank in school or college:

Delaware (<http://www.udel.edu/registrar/graduatn.html>)

Maryland (<http://www.bsos.umd.edu/for-students/academic-honors--honors-societies/university-honors.aspx>)

Penn State (<http://www.registrar.psu.edu/graduation/distinction.cfm>)

New Honors Designations Proposal:

A graduating senior is eligible for honors designations on diplomas and transcripts if his/her complete academic record shows at least 54 calculable credits at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and meets one or more of the following criteria:

For all students:

- If a student's GPA places him/her among the top 5% of the graduating class of his/her school or college, then he/she will receive the degree *summa cum laude*.
- If a student's GPA places him/her among the top 10% of the graduating class of his/her school or college, but not among the top 5%, then he/she will receive the degree *magna cum laude*.
- If a student's GPA places him/her among the top 25% of the graduating class of his/her school or college, but not among the top 10%, then he/she will receive the degree *cum laude*.
- The Registrar will annually compute the GPA needed to secure a place in the top 5%, 10%, and 25% in each school or college, based on the average of the previous three years' graduating classes. The results will be posted on the Registrar's website and will be used to determine the award of honors for the current year.

For Commonwealth College students:

The Commonwealth College Curriculum Committee and Dean, using criteria that they shall determine, may recommend a student who has completed the requirements of the Commonwealth College for any one of the following designations upon graduation:

- Commonwealth College ~~Scholar~~ honors with the greatest distinction.
- Commonwealth College ~~Scholar~~ honors with great distinction.
- Commonwealth College ~~Scholar~~ honors with distinction.
- Commonwealth College ~~Scholar~~ honors.

A student who meets both criteria will receive the degree with honors of both types—for example, “B.A. *magna cum laude*, Commonwealth College ~~Scholar~~ honors with the greatest distinction.”

MOVED: 17-09 That the Faculty Senate approve the New Honors Designations Proposal, as presented in Sen. Doc. No. 09-016A.