

TO: All College Faculty members
FROM: College Faculty Honors at Graduation Committee
Rob Thompson, chair
DATE: 24 October 2007
RE: Proposal to institute General Honors and to modify Department Honors

Attached are two motions to be made by the CF Honors at Graduation Committee at the November 2007 College Faculty meeting. The Committee has been investigating honors issues and developing a set of proposals over the past two academic years. During winter and spring 2007, we invited comment from department/program leaders, the Registrar, the Dean of Studies, the Student Senate, the Arts & Sciences Dean, the Conservatory Dean, the College EPPC, *Phi Beta Kappa*, and others. This fall we asked for comment from the entire faculty. We carefully considered the comments and suggestions we received and have constructed this final document for your consideration.

Motions from the College Faculty's Honors at Graduation Committee

(1) **General Honors** shall be awarded in the College of Arts & Sciences at Oberlin College, beginning for diplomas presented at the spring 2009 Commencement ceremony. The total number of students awarded General Honors shall not exceed 25% of the graduating class. Eligible students shall have at least 42 graded credit hours at Oberlin and at least twice the number of graded Oberlin hours as ungraded Oberlin hours. Students shall be awarded General Honors based on the overall GPA at the beginning of their final semester at Oberlin:

| | | |
|------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Summa Cum Laude</i> | 3.90 and higher * | (top 3% of students) |
| <i>Magna Cum Laude</i> | 3.78 – 3.89 * | (next 7% of students) |
| <i>Cum Laude</i> | 3.64 – 3.77 * | (next 15% of students). |

* The overall GPA values for the different levels of General Honors shall be set each year using 3-year rolling averages and maintaining the percentage guidelines. The 2004-07 values are given here.

Department Honors shall be awarded in the College of Arts & Sciences at Oberlin College with regard only to the honors project and any other criteria set by the department/program beginning for diplomas presented at the spring 2009 Commencement ceremony. The College no longer shall establish/enforce major GPA requirements for level of honors (Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors). Departments/programs may set major GPA guidelines or use major/overall GPA as a criterion at their discretion.

(2) The College Faculty's Honors at Graduation Committee shall be disbanded at the end of the academic year 2008-09, and oversight of the honors programs (General Honors, Department Honors, and the Senior Scholars program) shall be transferred to the Office of the Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences. This office shall receive recommendations for Department Honors from departments/programs and make the final decisions based on these recommendations. This office shall administer the funds to support outside Honors examiners. This office shall regularly review and recommend changes (if any) in the requirements for honors, particularly the overall GPA values for levels of General Honors. This office shall make an annual report to the College Faculty on the honors program.

Rationale

The set of motions supports a culture of achievement at Oberlin College and addresses the following problems with our current honors program. High achieving students who for some reason or another cannot complete Department Honors receive no special recognition for their accomplishments. Students who blossom academically senior year and display considerable talent for independent work are limited by major GPA guidelines in the degree of Department Honors they can attain or even in their participation. Members of the Committee on Honors at Graduation are engaged in what is almost entirely administrative work. Below are more specific comments on each of the motions.

(1) The Committee understands that Latin Honors was discontinued in 1971 in the wake of the credit/no entry system. With the more recent changes in our grading system, it is the right time to reexamine the Latin system and to consider reestablishing a reward for high overall GPA.

As it stands now, the honors award is a convolution of major GPA and achievement in a senior project. We believe it would be best to disentangle the two by creating separate awards for achievement in coursework over 4 years (General Honors) and achievement in a senior research/performance project (Department Honors).

General Honors on the diploma and on the final transcript would signal a stellar transcript and serve as an honor to both qualified Department Honors students and to those qualified students who for one reason or another could not complete Department Honors. General Honors would serve as a signal to outsiders that this is one of our top graduates.

On the diploma, General Honors would read, for example:

summa cum laude

The level of honors awarded for completion of the Department Honors would no longer have a required link to the major GPA or performance in earlier coursework. Rather, the award of Department Honors would focus on the senior capstone experience, normally involving research/performance in the major or related area. Departments/programs have and would continue to have wide latitude in the design of their honors programs. They may set minimum major GPA standards for invitation to Honors and may include major GPA or overall GPA as a part of their Honors evaluation (as is true for some departments currently).

Honors in a department/program on the diploma and on the final transcript would honor a student for successful completion of an intensive, year-long project culminating in a thesis/performance. The award would signal the outsider that this is a student who can do research/scholarship/creative work at a high level.

On the diploma, Department Honors would read, for example:

High Honors in History

(2) Nearly all of the Committee's work is administrative record keeping and, as such, could effectively be passed along to an administrator, relieving the faculty's service burden. No significant faculty governance rights or responsibilities would be lost. Placing the administrative work in the A&S Dean's Office retains the faculty-centered nature of the honors programs.

Attachments

Catalog copy

Survey of honors programs at other colleges

Issues with which the Committee wrestled

Suggested Catalog Copy

General Honors. General Honors recognizes students for their outstanding academic achievement in the regular course of study and is awarded with the degree on the basis of overall grade point average (GPA) at the beginning of the last semester enrolled at Oberlin. Eligible students have at least 42 graded credit hours at Oberlin and at least twice the number of graded Oberlin hours as ungraded (Pass) Oberlin hours. Those earning General Honors receive diplomas marked with the appropriate Latin designation. A degree summa cum laude is awarded to students whose GPAs are in the top three percent (3%) of the graduating class; a degree magna cum laude is awarded to students whose GPAs are in the rest of the top ten percent (10%) of the graduating class; and a degree cum laude is awarded to students whose GPAs fall with the remainder of the top twenty-five percent (25%) of the graduating class. The overall GPA values for the different levels of General Honors shall be set each year using 3-year rolling averages and maintaining the percentage guidelines.

Department Honors. Through the Department Honors program, students of proven ability and independence may extend their competence in their major field of study or in related fields. Departments, programs with majors, and (for students having individual majors) the Individual Major Committee may establish Honors programs as they see fit, including admission criteria and grading rubrics. Departments and programs may, if they desire, open their Honors programs to students other than their own majors. An Honors candidate whose project demonstrates the requisite degree of excellence is awarded the Bachelor of Arts degree with Honors, High Honors, or Highest Honors in the major field.

Honors projects vary but always involve independent, creative work. This may be done in seminars or private readings, in research, in the preparation of a thesis, exhibition, or performance, but always under the close supervision of appropriate faculty advisors. Every candidate for Honors must pass a special examination at the end of the senior year (written or oral or both) and have the independent work evaluated. Outside examiners may be invited to conduct the examinations of candidates and evaluate the projects.

Recommendations for the level of honors are made to the Dean of Arts & Sciences by departments, by programs with majors, or by the Individual Major Committee. The Individual Major Committee may make such recommendations only for students whose Honors work is in the field of their individual majors. The Dean of Arts & Sciences makes the final decisions on all recommendations for Department Honors, maintaining reasonably uniform standards for the award of Department Honors at graduation.

Students wishing to enter the Department Honors program should consult the chairperson of their major department or related department by the beginning of the second semester of the junior year.

Survey of Honors Programs at Other Colleges (2006-07)

| College | Dept. Honors* | General Honors | Levels for General Honors |
|----------------|--------------------------|--|--|
| Amherst | Yes | English Honors ("with Distinction") | Top 25%: summa, magna, cum laude |
| Bowdoin | Yes | General Honors | Top 2% summa, next 6% magna, next 12% cum laude |
| Brown | Yes | Yes | Top 20% awarded magna cum laude |
| Carleton | Yes | No | |
| Colgate | Yes | University Honors | 3.8 summa, 3.5 magna, 3.3 cum laude |
| Connecticut | Yes | Latin Honors | 3.8 summa, 3.67 magna, 3.3 cum laude |
| Grinnell | Yes | No | (semester Dean's List) |
| Haverford | Yes | College Honors | summa, magna (not cum laude) |
| Kenyon | Yes | College Honors | 3.9 summa, 3.7 magna, 3.5 cum laude |
| Middlebury | Yes | Commencement Honors | summa, magna, and cum laude |
| Oberlin | Yes | No | |
| Pomona | No | Graduation Honors | Top 25%: summa, magna, cum laude |
| Reed | No | No | (semester Commendations) |
| Swarthmore | Yes | No | |
| Trinity | Yes | University Honors | 3.875 summa, 3.75 magna, 3.50 cum laude |
| Vassar | Yes | General Honors | Top 20% |
| Wellesley | Yes | Yes | 3.90 summa, 3.75 magna, 3.60 |
| Wesleyan | Yes | University Honors | HH in dept.; pass oral exam |
| Williams | No | Graduation "with Distinction" | Top 2% summa, next 13% magna, next 20% cum laude |

* Department honors generally involves independent study, scholarly research, and a formal written thesis with oversight by a faculty committee. Two or three levels of department honors are awarded, depending on the college. Some schools have a minimum major GPA.

Issues/Decisions with regard to General Honors and Department Honors

Listed below are some of the issues that arose during our discussions in the Committee and with GF members. Possible choices are listed, with the one that was chosen in bold. A very brief rationale is given.

1) What should we call these honors based on overall GPA?

Latin Honors or College Honors or **General Honors**

Latin Honors – refers to our past practice; could be confused with other types of honors

College Honors – could be interpreted to refer only to College of A&S

We decided to follow the lead of several other schools and call the program General Honors.

2) How many students in the graduating class should receive General Honors?

Based on overall GPA values, the top 20% or **top 25%**

We decided to reward more rather than fewer students. Note: our earlier Latin Honors program gave honors to the top 25% of the graduating class.

3) How many different levels of General Honors should we have?

Two or **three** or more

Nearly all other schools use three levels akin to Latin Honors. We decided to take this same classic approach.

3) How should the levels of General Honors be decided?

GPA standing in the graduating class based on percentages or **GPA values**

We decided to use GPA values so that the honors levels and decisions were transparent to everyone and to provide students and advisors with a tangible goal. However, it is the percentages of graduating class that serve as the basis of the GPA criteria. We chose 3%, next 7%, next 15% as the limits, where the fraction of the class is roughly doubled each subsequent level.

The Registrar will determine annually 3-year rolling averages for the corresponding GPA cutoffs. For example, the top 10% of the class fell at GPA values of 3.77444, 3.78170, and 3.80056 for the past three graduating classes. The 3-year rolling average is 3.78557. All students in this year's graduating class with a GPA equal to or greater than 3.78557 shall receive honors above *cum laude*.

4) What student population should be used to derive the GPA limits?

May grads or **all grads during the year**

A&S only grads or **A&S and double degree grads**

We decide to be as inclusive as possible in determining GPA cutoffs.

5) When should student records be evaluated for General Honors?

At graduation or **at the start of the last semester enrolled at Oberlin**

We preferred to set the awards at graduation when students' transcripts are complete, but practicalities in the Registrar's Office make this impossible. Evaluation at graduation does not give the Registrar enough time to code and print the diplomas. Because of this, most schools evaluate after 7 semesters (penultimate semester). We intend the same.

6) How many different levels of Department Honors should we have?

Two levels (Honors, High Honors) or **three levels (Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)**

The Committee was divided on this issue. Some preferred two levels in anticipation/recognition of grade inflation. Others preferred three levels to provide more differentiation and to retain the *status quo*. In the end, we decided to make the least changes in this program, retaining the three levels.