

November 10, 2021

Proposal Regarding the Award of Honors and Distinctions to Cornell's Undergraduate Students

Three Recommendations:

1. Replace the diverse approaches to the award of Latin honors with a single approach so that all colleges and schools would confer Latin honors on the bases of percentiles in the colleges and schools, as follows: *Summa cum laude* – top 5%, *Magna cum laude* – next 10%, and *Cum laude* – next 15%;
2. Eliminate dean's list; and
3. Eliminate non-Latin academic honors and distinctions that are determined solely based upon grade point average (GPA) and align the nomenclature used across colleges and schools by adopting a single naming convention for distinctions, "distinction in x," as determined by each college, school, or major.

Background and Rationale

This is a proposal from all the college and school deans; the college and school academic associate deans who comprise the Associate Deans Council; the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, Lisa Nishii; the Provost, Michael Kotlikoff; and the Provost Council. It is aimed at creating consistency across the undergraduate colleges and schools in the award of academic honors and distinctions, and balancing recognition of high achieving students against amelioration of an unhealthy culture of competition at Cornell. The proposal contains three recommendations to achieve these goals: (1) replace the diverse approaches to the award of Latin honors with a single approach so that all colleges and schools would confer Latin honors on the basis of percentiles in the colleges and schools, as follows: *Summa cum laude* – top 5%, *Magna cum laude* – next 10%, and *Cum laude* – next 15%; (2) eliminate dean's list; and (3) eliminate non-Latin academic honors and distinctions that are determined solely based upon grade point average (GPA) and align the nomenclature used across colleges and schools by adopting a single naming convention for distinctions, "distinction in x," as determined by each college, school, or major.

The Associate Deans Group Cross-college Mapping Project

For many years, Cornell undergraduate students have complained that differences in academic policies across the undergraduate colleges and schools create confusion. Moreover, when students believe that divergent academic policies result in inferior treatment for them as compared to other students in the same major but in a different college or school, the "disadvantaged" students may perceive their treatment as unjust. This is particularly true for students enrolled in cross-college majors. (Presently, there are at least ten cross-college majors and for May 2018 graduates, the last year data were collected, 25% of graduates earned a cross-college major.)

In response to these student concerns, and as part of an ongoing effort to identify best practices, the academic associate deans' group convened by Vice Provost Nishii has begun to review academic policies across the undergraduate colleges and schools – the “Cross-college Mapping Project.” In those instances where policies diverge, the associate deans have considered whether the differences advance distinct academic objectives for the colleges and schools, or whether the differences are not warranted and perhaps even arbitrary or problematic. As part of its cross-college and school academic policy review, the associate deans examined academic honors and distinctions for undergraduate students and unexpectedly found wide variations across the university. The associate deans concluded, and the other proponents agreed, that these differences did not advance college- and school-specific missions or goals, and that they could produce the negative effects of which students complained – confusion and perceived or actual inequities.

The proponents also believe that having many types of awards based solely on grades perpetuates an obsession with grades and makes students feel that they are in competition with each other. Students' obsession with grades can impact their choice of courses and make them less likely to take risks in their course selections. The proponents advocate for a more measured approach that affords recognition for academic achievement but does not promote an undue and constant emphasis on grades, while also addressing concerns about inequities across colleges and schools. The three recommendations contained in this proposal, in their totality, are aimed at achieving such a balance: (1) honors and distinctions based solely upon GPA would be reduced to one type, Latin honors, to be conferred only once, after degree completion, and by one unit, the student's college or school, and not by major;¹ (2) the colleges and schools would eliminate dean's lists; and (3) the colleges and schools would strive towards greater shared understanding (and practice) involving distinctions that are awarded upon graduation for excellence that extends beyond GPA alone.

Current Latin Honors Policies at Cornell

There is a huge range across Cornell's colleges and schools in the conferral of Latin honors. As discussed below, at one end of the range, no students in a college or school could receive Latin honors, and at the other end, during the period of spring 2017 through fall 2019, 74% of students received Latin honors. The proposal sponsors found this enormous disparity to be inequitable and unintended. Here are the current policies:

- The College of Architecture, Art, and Planning; the College of Human Ecology; and the School of Industrial and Labor Relations do not confer Latin honors.
- The College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, the College of Engineering, the Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management, and the School of Hotel Administration

¹ As set forth directly below, three colleges or schools do not award Latin honors, but they do award dean's list, which would be eliminated, and, thus, these colleges and schools would not be increasing the number or type of honors and distinctions awarded.

award three levels of Latin honors (*summa cum laude*, *magna cum laude*, and *cum laude*). The award is conferred at the degree level and on the basis of GPA.

- The College of Arts and Sciences awards three levels of Latin honors, but the award is conferred at the level of the major and the requirements for conferral are set by the department for each major.

For the colleges and schools that confer Latin honors at the degree level, the: (1) GPA requirements and (2) average percentile of students awarded Latin honors for the period of spring 2017 through fall 2019 are as follows:

- The College of Agriculture and Life Sciences
 - *Summa*: ≥ 4.00 , *magna*: ≥ 3.75 , *cum laude*: ≥ 3.50
 - 44.3 % of students on average received Latin honors
- The College of Engineering
 - *Summa*: ≥ 4.00 , *magna*: ≥ 3.75 , *cum laude*: ≥ 3.50
 - 48.5% of students on average received Latin honors
- The Dyson School
 - *Summa*: ≥ 4.00 , *magna*: ≥ 3.75 , *cum laude*: ≥ 3.50
 - 74.1 % of students on average received Latin honors
- The School of Hotel Administration
 - *Summa*: ≥ 4.00 , *magna*: ≥ 3.85 , *cum laude*: ≥ 3.75
 - 21.5% of students on average received Latin honors

The College of Arts and Sciences is the only college to award Latin honors at the level of the major; honors are bestowed based on assessments of students' honors theses. In 2017-2018, 20.9% of students received Latin honors.

Latin Honors at the Other Ivy League Institutions

All of the other seven Ivy League institutions award Latin honors. All but Brown confer three levels of Latin honors. (Brown confers only *magna cum laude*.) All but Princeton confer Latin honors at the degree level as opposed to the major level. Of the six institutions conferring Latin honors at the degree level, five use percentiles to determine eligibility, one uses GPA, and one uses several criteria, including GPA. For the four institutions that use percentiles and confer three levels of Latin honors, all confer *summa cum laude* to students in the top 5% of the graduating class and *magna cum laude* to the next 10%. For *cum laude*, the percentiles range from the next 10% to the next 20% below *magna cum laude*. Thus, the total percentile of graduating students receiving Latin honors range from 25% to 35%. (Several of our non-Ivy peer institutions were sampled; most award three levels of Latin honors using percentiles that also total in the same 25%-35% range.)

Current Dean's List Policies at Cornell

All of Cornell's colleges and schools have dean's list, but the GPA requirement ranges from 3.3 to 3.75, as follows:

- The School of Industrial and Labor Relations = 3.3 (first years), 3.4 (sophomores), and 3.6 (juniors and seniors)
- The College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, the Dyson School, and the College of Engineering = 3.5
- The College of Arts and Sciences = 3.6
- the College of Human Ecology = 3.7
- The School of Hotel Administration = 3.75
- The College of Architecture, Art, and Planning = 3.8

These large differences in GPAs produce significant differences in the percentages of students eligible for dean's list across Cornell's colleges and schools, with the percentages varying twofold in some instances. As with Latin honors, the proponents were surprised by these differences and found them to be inequitable. Also, for most colleges and schools, the percentages were extremely high; the proponents believe too high.²

Dean's List at the Other Ivy League Institutions

Five of the other seven Ivies – Brown, Dartmouth, Harvard, Princeton, and Yale – do not have dean's list.

Other Cornell Honors and Distinctions

In addition to Latin honors and dean's list, across Cornell's undergraduate colleges and schools, there are eight other types of honors and distinctions awarded. A few are based solely upon GPA (which is in effect the same as Latin honors at the degree level, but under a different name), but most are based upon GPA as well as performance in an academic activity such as research or an honors thesis. These honors and distinctions have various titles – distinction in all subjects, distinction and with honors, high distinction and honors, high distinction, high honors, and honors distinction in research.

² Because the recommendation is to eliminate dean's list, it is unnecessary to elaborate further. Suffice it to say, though, that if the recommendation to eliminate dean's list is rejected, the proponents believe it would be essential to adopt a more equitable, uniform approach across the colleges and schools, just as is being proposed for Latin honors.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Replace the diverse approaches to the award of Latin honors with a single approach so that all colleges and schools would confer Latin honors on the bases of percentiles in their colleges and schools, as follows: *Summa cum laude* – top 5%, *Magna cum laude* – next 10%, and *Cum laude* – next 15%

For the reasons stated above, the proponents have concluded that Cornell colleges and schools should have a consistent approach to Latin honors so that all undergraduate students are eligible to receive Latin degree honors upon satisfying a shared set of criteria, which the proponents recommend be percentiles. This would mean that the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning; the College of Human Ecology; and the School of Industrial and Labor Relations would confer Latin honors commencing the 2022-2023 academic year, and that in the College of Arts and Sciences, Latin honors would no longer be conferred at the level of the major by departments.³

For the specific criteria, the proponents recommend that commencing the 2022-2023 academic year, three levels of Latin honors be awarded to the top 30% of graduating students based upon the following percentiles:

- *Summa cum laude* – top 5% of graduating students,
- *Magna cum laude* – next 10% of graduating students, and
- *Cum laude* – next 15% of graduating students.

Based upon data collected for spring 2017 through fall 2019, the top 5% (*summa*) represents a GPA of approximately 4.00 across Cornell's undergraduate colleges and schools, which is the GPA currently used for the award of *summa cum laude* for all of the Cornell colleges and schools that confer Latin degree honors – the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, the College of Engineering, the Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management, and the School of Hotel Administration. The next 10% (*magna cum laude*) represents a GPA of approximately 3.88, and the next 15% (*cum laude*) represents a GPA of approximately 3.73. These GPAs for *magna cum laude* and *cum laude* are consistent with the GPAs currently used by the School of Hotel Administration but higher than the GPAs used by the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, the College of Engineering, and the Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management. The academic associate deans for these latter three

³ For undergraduate students presently enrolled at Cornell, the colleges and schools that currently confer Latin degree honors would use either their present eligibility criteria or the eligibility criteria set forth in this proposal, whichever are more advantageous for the students.

colleges/schools believe that these heightened GPAs are warranted to reduce the percentiles of students receiving Latin honors, which the associate deans believe are now too high.⁴

The proponents recommend using percentiles rather than GPAs because using GPAs produces great disparities across the colleges and schools. The proponents do not believe there is a principled basis for this disparity and find it inequitable. As indicated earlier, currently, the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, the College of Engineering, and the Dyson School use identical GPAs of 4.00, 3.75, and 3.50 for the three levels of Latin honors. According to the previously cited GPA data from spring 2017 through fall 2019, for the Dyson School, these same GPAs result in a significantly different percentile of students eligible for Latin honors (see data on page 3). Using the same 2017-2019 GPA data, and applying them to the remaining colleges and schools, if all of Cornell's colleges and schools were to confer Latin honors on the bases of these GPAs, the ranges across the colleges and schools would be exceedingly large:

- Using a GPA of 4.00 for *summa*, eligibility would range from 1.6% to 18.1%.
- Using a GPA of 3.75 for *magna*, eligibility would range from 23% to 51.4%
- Using a GPA of 3.50 for *cum laude*, eligibility would range from 47.2% to 78.2%

For *magna*, if we use a GPA of 3.85, as is currently used by the School of Hotel Administration, the eligibility range across colleges and schools would be 11.7% to 31%.

As these data demonstrate, for *summa*, there would be an elevenfold difference in conferral rates; for *magna*, depending upon whether the GPA is 3.75 or 3.85, there would be either a twofold or almost threefold difference; and for *cum laude*, while the proportionate difference is not as huge, there is a 30% difference in conferral rates in one college as compared to another. Moreover, the percentage of students graduating with Latin honors at all levels is so large as to undermine the expectation that Latin honors are awarded based upon high academic achievement.

⁴ Assuming the 2017-2019 trends continue, the GPAs that would be required for Latin honors (4.00, 3.88, and 3.73) are high, but the group does not recommend lowering the GPAs to increase the percentiles of students receiving Latin honors beyond what is the norm at the other Ivy and peer institutions. Nonetheless, the proponents do not object to increasing the eligibility for *cum laude* to the top 35% of graduating students (the next 20% below *magna cum laude*) if members of the Faculty Senate prefer this approach. However, based upon the above-referenced 2017-2019 data, this change would not have much impact on the requisite GPA, as the top 40% of graduating students had a GPA of 3.64 as opposed to a GPA of 3.73 for the top 30%.

In contrast, if we use the proposed percentiles (5%, 15%, 30%), while there is still a range in GPAs, the disparities across colleges and schools are not so substantial and the number of qualifying students is not excessive. Based upon the 2017-2019 data, the ranges correlating to the proposed percentiles would be:

- Top 5%: GPA ranges from 3.92—4.09
- Top 15%: GPA ranges from 3.82—3.99
- Top 30%: GPA ranges from 3.67—3.88.

Most important, the proportion of students receiving honors would be the same in each college and school, so this approach best promotes the fundamental goal of equity. This approach is also the one used at most of the other Ivy League institutions.

Finally regarding the benefits of a consistent approach to Latin honors across Cornell, to the extent that Latin honors are significant to prospective employers and graduate and professional school admission officers, the current approach may make it difficult for them to understand the basis for and significance of Latin honors for any given student. With a standard approach across the university, it will be possible to use a uniform transcript notation.

The proponents are aware that there might be inequities in Latin honors eligibility across majors because of disparate GPAs in the majors, but the proponents do not believe the solution is to confer Latin honors at the level of the major as this approach would create a new set of difficulties. For example, for cross-college majors, students in any given cross-college major might be held to very different sets of degree-level requirements, thereby creating inequities for those students. Another problem arises with majors too small to award some or even any Latin honors to a single student. During the 2019-2020 academic year, there were 34 majors with one to nineteen students meaning that the top 5% of enrolled students constitutes less than a single student, so none of these 34 majors could award *summa cum laude* to any student in the major. For 2018-2019, there were 33 such majors and for 2017-2018 there were 39 such majors. During these three academic years, there were also numerous majors with less than seven students so that not even a single student could receive *magna cum laude* (17 such majors in 2019-2020, 18 in 2018-2019, and 21 in 2017-2018). For these three years, there were majors so small (less than four students) that 30% of the declared majors did not amount to a full student so that not a single student in that major could even receive *cum laude*. Another complication would arise with students who have double majors.

In sum, while neither the approach of conferring Latin honors at the level of the college/school or at the level of the major is perfect, the proponents believe that the former approach creates less problems and is less administratively onerous, and it is recommended that the colleges and schools seek to address internal inequities within their units.⁵

Recommendation 2: Eliminate Dean’s List

The proponents believe that eliminating dean’s list is an important step towards accomplishing the goals of this proposal. Because dean’s list is awarded repeatedly, eight times during a typical four-year college career, and, by its very title “dean’s list,” it signals that the college and school leaders deem a high GPA to be the achievement most worthy of the deans’ commendations, it continuously promotes the centrality of high grades, thereby feeding grade obsession, increasing student academic stress, and encouraging students to have a grade-centric approach to their education. Students may thus be discouraged from exploring the curriculum more broadly and taking more intellectual risks than they otherwise would if not so focused on grades. The repetitive nature of the award, and its timing throughout the students’ academic career, make it likely that dean’s list causes students more academic stress and has more sway over course selection than Latin honors, which is awarded to students only once and after they have completed all their coursework.

Moreover, unlike Latin honors, the majority of other Ivies do not have dean’s list, so there is no concern that eliminating its award would put our students at a lesser footing vis-à-vis students at the other Ivies.⁶

⁵ Nonetheless, if the Faculty Senate determines it preferable to award Latin honors at the level of the major instead of the degree, pursuant to consistent standards across the colleges and schools, the proponents would not object. The proponents appreciate that there are pros and cons to both approaches, and both would accomplish the essential purpose of achieving consistency across colleges and schools.

⁶ Eliminating Latin honors could also attenuate competition and grade-driven course selection, but for the reasons just stated, the proponents believe that eliminating dean’s list would better accomplish the goals of this proposal and none of the sponsors advocate eliminating both awards. Additionally, because the majority of other Ivies confer Latin honors, eliminating Latin honors would create an anomalous approach vis-à-vis the other Ivies, potentially putting our students at a disadvantage.

The proponents recommend a uniform transcript notation indicating that dean’s list was eliminated commencing the 2022-2023 academic year. Prior dean’s list notations for students currently enrolled at Cornell would continue to be included on transcripts.

Recommendation 3: Eliminate non-Latin honors and distinctions that are determined solely based upon GPA and align the nomenclature used across colleges and schools by adopting a single naming convention for distinctions, “Distinction in X,” as determined by each college, school, or major

Finally, integral to this proposal, the sponsors recommend reducing the number and types of non-Latin honors and distinctions, presently eight, to one – “distinction in X,” and eliminating honors and distinctions based solely upon GPA because they resemble if not replicate Latin honors. Colleges and schools could award as many types of “distinctions in X” as they choose, based upon academic activities they choose or a combination of GPA and academic activities, as is the norm now, including requiring a minimum GPA for eligibility. However, while there would not be a limit on the number of ‘distinctions in X’ that could be awarded by a college, school or major, it would be antithetical to the intent of this proposal if they were to proliferate and, thus, it is recommended that the colleges, schools, and majors limit the “distinctions in x.”

As is currently the case, colleges and schools could choose to confer “distinction in X” at the college- or school-level or by departments at the major-level. While the “distinction in X” would continue to be defined and operationalized at the level of the college, school or major, the impact for cross-college majors will need to be carefully considered, as this is the context in which inconsistent academic policies and practices are most confusing and vexing for our students.