

## **Resolution Regarding the Award of Honors to Cornell's Undergraduate Students**

### **The Resolution has three interconnected parts:**

- I. Continue having colleges and schools award honors that are based on academic achievements that go beyond grade point average (GPA) alone; the eligibility criteria will be determined at the college- or school-level or by departments at the major-level based upon academic activities they choose or a combination of GPA and academic activities; however, consistent nomenclature will be used across colleges and schools to eliminate inequities and enhance transparency (i.e., "Honors," "High Honors," and "Highest Honors").
- II. Eliminate dean's list.
- III. Replace the current divergent approaches to the award of honors based solely on GPA with a standard approach across all colleges and schools, and create a single approach such 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%.

### **Sponsors**

College and school deans; 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.

### **Background**

The three resolutions are 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 level of competition at Cornell.

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 relative to other students in the same major but in a different college or school, the "disadvantaged" students perceive their treatment as unjust. While this problem used to be an outlier, it has quickly become commonplace with the rise in cross-college majors (in fall 2021, the percentage of juniors and seniors affiliated with cross-college major was 54% in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, 40% in the College of Arts and Sciences, 39% in the College of Engineering, and 12% in the College of Human Ecology with an additional 30% soon to be added for students who affiliate with the Brooks School of Public Policy).

In response to these student concerns, the Associate Deans Council examined academic honors and distinctions for undergraduate students and found wide variations across the university. The group concluded, and the other sponsors agree, that these differences did not advance college- and school-specific missions or goals, and that they produce the negative effects of which students complained – confusion and perceived or actual inequities. The wide variability across colleges and schools in the types of honors awarded, what they are called, and eligibility criteria also make it extremely difficult for graduate programs and employers to interpret Cornell transcripts. The sponsors also believe that having many types of awards that are based solely on grades exacerbates mental health strain and perpetuates an unhealthy obsession with grades. Students’ obsession with grades can impact their choice of courses and make them less likely to take risks in their course selections.

The sponsors 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-part resolution, in its totality, is aimed at achieving such a balance. (For a discussion about the current practices at Cornell, including an analysis of data revealing great disparities across Cornell’s colleges and schools in the award of honors and distinctions, and for comparisons to practices at the other Ivy league Institutions, see the sponsors’ background documents: *Proposal Regarding the Award of Honors and Distinctions to Cornell’s Undergraduate Students and GPA-based Latin Honors and Scholarship-based Honors*\_Faculty Senate Presentation 4.20.22.)

### **Honors for academic activities beyond GPA alone**

*Whereas* 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 with various titles; a few are based solely upon GPA, but most are based upon GPA as well as performance in an academic activity such as research or an honors thesis, with some awarded at the level of the degree versus others at the level of the major;

*Whereas* at all the other Ivies, awards for an academic activity such as an honors thesis are conferred as distinctions or honors, at the department level, not as Latin honors;

### **Dean’s list**

*Whereas* because dean’s list is awarded repeatedly, it continuously promotes the centrality of high grades, thereby increasing student academic stress and encouraging students to have a grade-centric approach to their education;

*Whereas*, 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;

### **The awarding of degree-level honors based on GPA (Latin honors)**

*Whereas* there is inconsistency across Cornell’s colleges and schools in the conferral of honors based on GPA, including (a) whether they are awarded (all colleges/schools except AAP and ILR confer GPA-based honors); (b) what they are called; and (c) the eligibility criteria; and this enormous disparity is unintended, confusing to both students, and people who read Cornell transcripts, and inequitable;

*Whereas* the divergent approaches to the award of GPA-based honors should be replaced with a single approach so that all colleges and schools would confer Latin honors on the bases of the same percentiles at the degree level;

*Whereas* currently across Cornell’s undergraduate colleges and schools, such GPA-only honors are awarded at the level of the degree;

*Whereas* all of the other Ivies except for Princeton confer Latin honors at the degree level, based solely upon GPA, and five of the other Ivies use percentiles;

### **The interconnected recommendations**

*Be it resolved* that colleges and schools continue to award distinctions at level of the degree (college- or school-level) or major based upon academic activities they choose or a combination of GPA and academic activities (but not GPA-alone, which shall be conferred as degree Latin Honors); but the nomenclature used across colleges and schools be aligned through a single naming convention: Honors, High Honors, and Highest Honors;<sup>1</sup>

*Be it further resolved* that dean’s list be eliminated;

*Be it finally resolved* that the current divergent approaches to the award of Latin honors be replaced with a single approach so that all colleges and schools confer Latin honors based on percentiles in the colleges and schools, as follows: *Summa cum laude* – top 5%, *Magna cum laude* – next 10%, and *Cum laude* – next 15%.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The specific criteria used to differentiate among Honors, High Honors, and Highest Honors would be determined at the local level (e.g., GPA cut-offs if applicable, evaluation rubrics for independent projects, etc.). However, consistent with the spirit underlying the proposal, we recommend that all majors and colleges/schools that offer scholarship-based honors use the same three levels.

<sup>2</sup> 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.