

PROPOSAL TO ALTER THE CURRENT UNDERGRADUATE HONORS CRITERIA

Introduction:

The Student Government Association (SGA) has endorsed a policy to change how undergraduate honors are awarded. The current system is based on GPA plus requires that students complete 18 hours (6 of which must be 3000 level or above) in addition to disciplinary and general education requirements. The proposed policy for awarding academic honors would be a strict GPA based system using cutoffs traditionally used in schools across the country.

Rationale:

- The current system, with the requirement for courses outside a student's discipline, makes the achievement of academic honors extremely difficult for students majoring in areas that require a high number of required course hours.
- Over 100 students with GPAs above 3.7 were denied academic honors because they lacked the proper spread of classes – including 2 students with a perfect 4.0 GPA.
- There is a lack of transparency with the current system. Students with GPAs above 3.7 and the proper spread of courses are eligible for academic honors. However, the actual assignment of which Latin honors are appropriate for each student is up to the Honors committee. Students don't find out until after the process is complete.
- Many students are familiar with the traditional means of assigning honors based on GPA (prevalent in high school and the vast majority of colleges across the country). Indeed, a sample of almost 100 college and universities revealed almost 95% used either a strict GPA model or a percentage system when assigning academic honors. Consequently, students often do not even inquire about academic honors until their senior year. As a result, some students with high GPAs are not eligible for honors because they did not adequately plan for these additional 18 hours outside their major (6 of which must be upper division classes).
- Lastly, students with a Latin honor clearly labeled on their transcript are at an advantage over students with no such designation. Students seeking admission into graduate school or employment in their area of expertise will benefit from a system that awards academic honors based purely on GPA.

Current Proposal:

The current proposal removes any reference to required courses outside a student's discipline. Instead, a determination of academic honors will be based solely on GPA. Based on discussion with faculty, we have proposed two means to decide honors—strict GPA and percentage. The decision as to which model to use will be left up to faculty at the Faculty Assembly meeting on April 14, 2009.

The following language would be inserted into the 09/10 Undergraduate Catalog:

Proposal A (strict GPA):

In recognition of superior scholarship, the University awards three levels of honors at graduation: Cum Laude, Magna Cum Laude and Summa Cum Laude. Cum Laude is awarded to those students with a GPA of at least 3.70. Magna Cum Laude is awarded to those students with a minimum GPA of 3.80. Summa Cum Laude is awarded to those with a minimum GPA of 3.90.

Final graduation honors placed on diplomas and transcripts are designated for those students who have fully completed all course work and requirements for their baccalaureate degrees. Academic honors are based on "graded hours" which excludes grades of "pass" or "credit". Honors designations are based on all eligible Webster University courses plus any transfer courses being used by the student to attain his/her 128 credit hours. A minimum of 60 graded credit hours must be taken at Webster University. A minimum of 90 graded credit hours must be accumulated in a student's entire college career. Department chairs and site directors may wish to nominate students who do not meet the general criteria for academic honors due to exceptional circumstances.

Proposal B (Percentile GPA):

In recognition of superior scholarship, the University awards three levels of honors at graduation: Cum Laude, Magna Cum Laude and Summa Cum Laude. Cum Laude is awarded to those students from the 90th through the 94.9th percentile. Magna Cum Laude is awarded to those students from the 95th percentile through the 97.9th percentile. Summa Cum Laude is awarded to those students in the 98th and above percentile in their class.

Final graduation honors placed on diplomas and transcripts are designated for those students who have fully completed all course work and requirements for their baccalaureate degrees. Academic honors are based on "graded hours" which excludes grades of "pass" or "credit". Honors designations are based on all eligible Webster University courses plus any transfer courses being used by the student to attain his/her 128 credit hours. A minimum of 60 graded credit hours must be taken at Webster University. A minimum of 90 graded credit hours must be accumulated in a student's entire college career. Department chairs and site directors may wish to nominate students who do not meet the general criteria for academic honors due to exceptional circumstances.

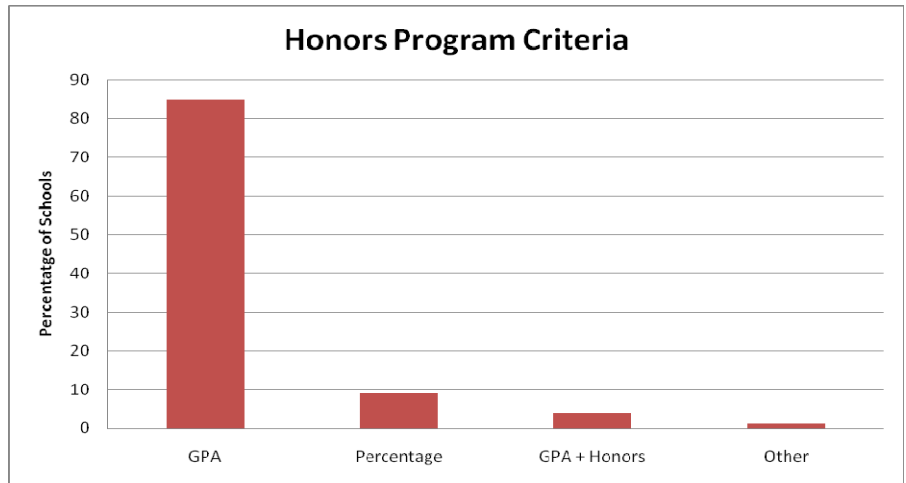
Impact of Proposal on Number of Students Receiving Honors

Honors	Old	Proposal A (GPA)	Proposal B (%)
Summa	33	66 (3.90 GPA)	58 (98 th percentile; 3.91 GPA)
Magna	54	113 (3.80 GPA)	85 (95 th percentile; 3.83 GPA)
Cum	136	152 (3.70 GPA)	146 (90 th percentile; 3.72 GPA)
Total (3 yrs)	223	331	289

Supporting Data:

Types of Honors Programs:

The honors policy for a sample of the B.A. granting institutions for the current Webster University Faculty was collected. Of the 130 schools examined, 97 had information readily available online. The vast majority (95%) of universities around the country subscribe to an honors model that is solely based on GPA. There is not one university with a policy similar to Webster University.



Latin Honors GPA Cutoffs:

Proposal A calls for the following cutoffs: 3.60 (cum laude), 3.75 (magna cum laude), 3.9 (summa cum laude). An examination of 77 schools which used GPA cutoffs revealed the following trends:

Cum Laude	
GPA	Percent
3.00	1.3
3.20	3.9
3.25	2.6
3.30	3.9
3.40	13.0
3.50	53.2
3.60	11.7
3.65	1.3
3.70	3.9
3.75	5.2

Magna Cum Laude	
GPA	Percent
3.40	1.3
3.50	9.1
3.55	1.3
3.60	11.7
3.65	3.9
3.66	1.3
3.67	1.3
3.70	31.2
3.75	23.4
3.80	7.8
3.85	6.5
3.87	1.3

Summa Cum Laude	
GPA	Percent
3.70	3.9
3.75	5.2
3.80	22.1
3.85	6.5
3.90	53.2
3.95	6.5
4.00	2.6

The cutoffs (cum laude, magna cum laude, summa cum laude) for local schools in the area:

1. Washington University (3.5, 3.65, 3.8)
2. Maryville University (3.5, 3.7, 3.8)
3. Fontbonne University (3.6, 3.75, 3.9)
4. Saint Louis University (3.5, 3.7, 3.9)
5. UMSL (3.2, 3.5, 3.8)

Latin Honors Percentile Cutoffs:

Relatively few institutions (N = 5) in a sample of 97 from around the nation used clearly defined percentiles to determine honors. No sampled university in St. Louis used percentiles. The following percentiles were recorded nationally:

Cum Laude: 65th, 70th, 75th, 80th, 84th (M = 74.80)
 Magna Cum Laude: 82nd, 85th, 90th, 92nd (M = 86.80)
 Summa Cum Laude: 93rd, 95th, 97th (M = 95.00)

Required Residence Hours:

Schools vary in the number of hours required for academic honors consideration. Webster currently requires 45 hours in residence. The current proposal recommends increasing the number of required hours at Webster University from 45 hours to 60 hours. Increasing minimum hours would bring Webster in line with other institutions (see table).

Increasing the minimum required hours at Webster would not have a large impact on the number of students who would receive academic honors. Among graduates in academic years 05/06, 06/07, and 07/08, using Proposal A (GPA cutoffs of 3.7, 3.8, 3.9) then 20 (out of 331) students would be denied honors if the required hours changed. The number of students across all campus denied honors would be 28.

Required Hours	
30 or less	10.0
40	4.0
43	2.0
45	10.0
48	2.0
50	2.0
54	4.0
56	8.0
60	46.0
64	6.0
90	6.0

Analysis of Past Webster Graduates:

Students who graduated in academic years 05/06, 06/07, and 07/08 were examined to determine how many students received honors and whether any students with a high GPA were denied academic honors. To facilitate the analysis, only students enrolled at the Webster Home campus were examined. GPA refers to the cumulative GPA (including transfer courses).

- Characteristics of Students Awarded Honors:

There were approximately 2,775 graduates from the Webster University Home campus during the specified time period. Academic honors were awarded to 223 students (8%).

There did not appear to be a consistent GPA cutoff for the various Latin honors—particularly cum laude. Students (N=136) who received cum laude had GPAs that ranged from 3.54 to 3.99. The GPA of students (N=54) who received magna cum laude ranged from 3.78 to 3.91. Those students (N=33) who achieved summa cum laude had GPAs that ranged from 3.95 to 4.00.

The following majors were represented among graduates that received Latin honors (Due to double majors total will add up to greater than 223):

ACCT 1	ADVT 13	AMST 3	ANTH 3	ART 8	AUDI 5	BIOL 6	BRDJ 2	BUSA 2	BUSN 2
COSC 6	DANC 4	ECON 1	EDUC 29	ENGL 22	FILM 6	FLPR 3	FPMG 1	FRCH 2	GRMN 2
HISR 7	HIST 7	INDM 2	INTL 8	INTR 1	INTS 2	ISTD 1	JOUR 6	LGST 3	MATH 7
MEDC 10	MNGT 23	MUSC 9	MUTH 1	NONP 1	NURS 2	PBRL 6	PHIL 5	PHOT 7	POLT 5
PSYC 14	RELS 5	SOCI 1	SOCN 6	SPCM 1	SPNS 3	THEA 2	VIDE 6		

- Characteristics of Students Not Awarded Honors (w/High GPAs):

Students eligible for academic honors (3.7 GPA, proper spread of courses, residency requirements) were compared to those students with a GPA over 3.7 and the proper residency requirements. Roughly half the students were excluded from academic honors. Specifically:

Of the students denied honors with a GPA between 3.9 and 4.0 (including 2 students with a 4.0 GPA) the following majors were represented: ACCT, ART, AUDI, ADVT, BUSA, BUSN, COSC, EDUC, FILM, FLPR, INDM, INTR, LGST, MEDC, MNGT, PBRL, PHOT, & POLT.

Students with the following majors with a GPA between 3.8 and 3.89 were denied academic honors. These included students with majors in ADVT, AMST, ART, AUDI, BIOL, BRDJ, BUSA, COSC, EDUC, ENGL, FINC, FILM, FLPR, INDM, INTL, JOUR, LGST, MATH, MEDC, MNGT, MUSC, MUSE, MUTH, NURS, PBRL, PHOT, POLT, PSYC, SOCI, & SOCN.

Students with a GPA between 3.7 and 3.79 denied academic honors majored in the following disciplines: ACCT, ADVT, ART, AUDI, BIOL, BRDJ, BUSA, BUSN, COSC, DANC, EDUC, ENGL, FILM, FLPR, HIST, INDM, INTL, JOUR, LGST, MEDC, MNGT, MUSC, MUSE, PHOT, POLT, PHIL, PSYC, SPCM, SPNS, & VIDE.

Proposal prepared by:

Dr. Michael R. Hulsizer

Nick Stevens & Daniela Vayas

Honors data compiled by:

Shaun Wall

Past graduate data compiled by:

Norm Senaldi

Appendix A: Current Academic Honors Guidelines:

University-wide academic honors (*summa cum laude*, *magna cum laude*, *cum laude*) are awarded to students who have achieved a high grade point average across the curriculum. Students' academic records must demonstrate excellence in a variety of academic disciplines, including upper-division work outside their fields of study.

Selection Process:

1. Students may gain entry into the pool of candidates who will be considered for University-wide honors in one of the two following ways:
 - a. All students whose transcripts include all of the following will automatically be included in the pool. (*Note: "graded hours" excludes grades of "pass" or "credit"; "cumulative grade point average" includes all Webster University courses plus any transfer courses being used by the student to attain his/her 128 credit hours.*)
 - i. A minimum of 45 graded credit hours at Webster University.
 - ii. A minimum of 90 graded credit hours accumulated in the entire college career.
 - iii. A minimum cumulative grade point average of 3.7.
 - iv. A minimum of six graded courses outside of the major in addition to the general education requirements for the student's degree. (*Note: students in the School of Communications must take only three graded courses outside their major in addition to their general education requirements.*)
 - v. A minimum of two graded upper-division courses (3000 level or above) outside the student's field of study.
 - b. Department chairs and site directors may wish to nominate exceptional students whose course of study puts them outside the parameters of the average student's curriculum vitae (e.g., Conservatory students, students from the international campuses). Chairs and directors should be guided by the general criteria of breadth and depth across disparate disciplines in addition to high grades.
2. Students who meet the minimum criteria listed above or who have been nominated by department chairs or site directors compose the pool of candidates to be considered for honors. The Honors Board will examine the pool and determine honors on the basis of cumulative G.P.A. and breadth and depth across the curriculum. The Board reserves the right to use its discretion in making these evaluations.
3. After due deliberation the Board will award honors according to the traditional labels of *cum laude*, *magna cum laude*, and *summa cum laude*.

Appendix B: Expanded Issues Associated with the Current Selection Criteria:

1. Requiring Courses Outside of Student's Major:

- The current system makes it very difficult for some students to receive honors because their degree requires a large number of required credits. For example, students in Biology with an emphasis in Biotechnology have only 10 elective credit hours available—far too few to meet the spread of courses required by the current honors requirements.
- Students seeking degrees in disciplines with relatively fewer required credit hours have significantly more opportunities to seek upper level courses outside their major to fulfill the honors requirements. For example, philosophy majors have 65 elective hours at their disposal—making it much easier to take additional courses outside their discipline.
- Can students seeking double majors receive academic honors? The published criteria do not address this issue. Does policy on this issue shift depending on the makeup of the committee?
- In short, besides academic ability, a student's ability to receive academic honors depends largely on his/her chosen area of study and the number of courses required for graduation. Academic honors should be based on ability, not whether a student's major requires few required courses.

2. Rationale:

- The existing policy defines academic honors as applicable to those students who have "achieved a high grade point average across the curriculum. Students' academic records must demonstrate excellence in a variety of academic disciplines, including upper-division work outside their fields of study."
- The Webster definition of academic honors is very unusual in higher education (see the data analysis section below). Furthermore, it appears to confuse the need for a general education system (which is already in place) with the traditional definition of academic excellence.
- Although the desire to achieve excellence in a variety of disciplines is admirable, the reality is that disciplines across campus have been steadily requiring more and more credit hours within the discipline. This trend has made it increasingly difficult for students to achieve excellence in their chosen field of study and obtain academic honors (as defined by Webster University).
- Strengthening the general education system is the best recourse for increasing the spread of courses that students must obtain prior to graduation. The academic honors policy is not the appropriate venue for this goal. Too many academically gifted students are denied honors.

3. Lack of Transparency:

- The current system does not specify how students are selected for the three academic honors (e.g., cum laude, magna cum laude, summa cum laude). The policy only dictates a GPA above 3.7 plus the additional courses outside a student's major. Consequently, students are often unsure which honor they will be receiving until it is on their transcript.
- Although the current system does allow for the nomination of exceptional students that do not fall within the honors requirements, there are inherent problems in the manner by which these requests are processed. For example, what criteria are used to judge exceptional cases? Does this standard change as a function of committee membership?

4. Exclusion & Disadvantages:

- Students come to Webster expecting academic honors to be assigned based purely on GPA—the standard typically used in high schools across the nation. Many students do not even consider academic honors until their senior year. Unfortunately, this is often too late. The unique requirement that students have a significant number of courses outside their major necessitates that students plan these courses into their schedules in their first three years of college.
- Most students, employers, and graduate programs recognize the standard GPA-based system for granting honors. Consequently, students from Webster University who do not receive honors despite high GPAs are potentially at a competitive disadvantage. Employers and graduate programs will react favorably to the inclusion of a Latin honor versus a GPA.