

Report of the Faculty Senate Committee on Honorary Degrees

I. Charge to Committee

In 1981, The University of Iowa awarded an Honorary Degree to the President of the University, Sandy Boyd. It has not awarded one since then, although proposals to revive the tradition of honorary degrees at the University have twice in the past decade come before the Faculty Senate, being defeated each time.¹ The University of Iowa remains the only institution among the Big Ten and the other two Iowa Regents' institutions (and also, we suspect, among most comparable institutions) that does not have an active policy of awarding honorary degrees.

In early Summer of 1997, Faculty Senate President Sheldon Kurtz appointed a committee to study the feasibility and advisability of the University of Iowa re-establishing its former practice of awarding honorary degrees, and to propose recommendations for policy. The Faculty Senate Committee on Honorary Degrees consisted of David Bills (Planning, Policy, and Leadership Studies and Committee Chair), Darrell Eyman (Chemistry), Constance Berman (History), Donald Heistad (Internal Medicine), Bernard Sorofman (Pharmacy), and Jae-On Kim (Sociology).

II. Principles

Early in its deliberations, the members of the committee found themselves in agreement on four basic principles. These principles guided all of our discussions and inform the present report. First, we believe that the awarding of honorary degrees needs to be separated from financial considerations, in particular issues of fundraising. The University's efforts at fundraising are crucial to its success and as a committee we support these efforts. We see both fundraising and the awarding of honorary degrees as operating most effectively when decoupled from one another.²

Second, we believe that the awarding of honorary degrees should be decoupled from political considerations. We recognize the gray area inherent in this statement, but observe that many institutions have developed policies to minimize any potentially unseemly political influence in the awarding of honorary degrees.

These first two principles were articulated in the policy on honorary degrees adopted by the University in 1962. That document stated:

¹ While it is not widely known, the University of Iowa does have a policy on honorary degrees, although it has fallen into disuse. We explain this below.

² On this point, as will be the case with virtually every point in this document, we anticipate that some of our colleagues will disagree. We have spoken with colleagues who see no difficulty with an explicit connection between fundraising and honorary degrees.

“It is proper to award an honorary degree to a person who through exceptional devotion and performance has demonstrated his appreciation of the place of a university in society, but financial and political considerations should not be involved in the granting of such a degree.”

Third, the committee believes that any set of policies, principles, and procedures that govern the awarding of honorary degrees at the University of Iowa are ultimately the responsibility and jurisdiction of the faculty. Degrees, of whatever kind, are the most valuable recognition that the University bestows. Faculty should properly maintain control over the criteria for honorary degrees no less than they do for more traditional degrees.

Finally, we believe that any policy to award honorary degrees has to contribute both tangibly and symbolically to the publicly stated mission of the University of Iowa. We are unable to see the benefits of a plan to award honorary degrees unless than plan is formulated with reference to the core values, strategic plan, and overall mission of the University.

III. How We Proceeded

The Committee gathered information from several sources to help us think through the issues that arose in our deliberations. First, we sought information on written policies and practices in comparable institutions. The University of Iowa Foundation provided us with copies of pertinent policies and procedures from other Big Ten institutions and the University of Chicago. We also corresponded by telephone and email with academic leaders throughout the Big Ten, as well as Iowa State University and the University of Northern Iowa. Our goal here was to understand how individuals who are closely involved in the awarding of honorary degrees feel about them. In particular, we asked about the impact of granting honorary degrees on their institutions, how the process works for them, the perceived costs and benefits, advantages and disadvantages, advice they might have for us, and so on.

Second, we consulted with our University of Iowa colleagues. Most of this, and certainly much of our most important activity, took the form of informal conversations. All of us were struck by the diversity of faculty opinion, much of it very deeply held, on the issue of honorary degrees.

We also talked somewhat more formally with a number of present or past administrators and other leaders of the University. Many of these people were especially recommended to us as having special insight or interest in honorary degrees.³

³ This list of interviewees, which may not be exhaustive, included former Provost Peter Nathan, former Faculty Senate President Steve Collins, former University President Sandy Boyd, former Acting Provost Sam Becker, former assistant to several University presidents, Bob Engel, Faculty Senate President Ed Wasserman, former Faculty Senate President Shelly Kurtz, Political Science Professor John Nelson (instrumental in the 1989-90 proposal to reinstate honorary

The third activity we undertook to gather information about honorary degrees was to review the academic literature on the topic. Other than providing some entertaining anecdotes,⁴ this was of little value. Standard treatments of the history of American higher education (such as Brubacher and Rudy's authoritative *Higher Education in Transition: An American History: 1636-1956*, which devotes less than three pages to *Honoris Causa*) have surprisingly little to say about honorary degrees, and what appears to be the standard reference, Stephen Epler's *Honorary Degrees: Survey of their Use and Abuse*, is now over fifty years old.

Finally, we were fortunate to receive information on honorary degrees at the University of Iowa that had been buried deep in the University archives. We owe a great debt to Duane Spriestersbach for providing us with this information.

IV. Honorary Degrees at the University of Iowa

The University of Iowa adopted a policy on the awarding of honorary degrees in 1962. This policy has never been formally rescinded (so is evidently still on the books), but has certainly fallen into desuetude. The honorary degree function was at that time housed in the Graduate College, and this has never been officially changed.

We see little need to discuss this policy in great detail in the present report, although we

degrees at the University), past Chair of University Strategic Planning Committee Jim Hinrichs, former University Administrator Duane Spriestersbach, Associate Vice President for Finance Mary Jo Small, University President Mary Sue Coleman, and Provost Jon Whitmore.

⁴ For example, Benjamin Franklin, who terminated his formal schooling at the end of the second grade, used the title "Dr." throughout his life. Franklin was awarded several honorary degrees, the first from Harvard College, several of which were from European scholarly societies, rather than universities. Johns Hopkins University President Daniel Coit Gilman in 1887 claimed that unearned degrees were "a sham and a shame," on his way to accepting nine honorary degrees of his own.

We enjoyed running across H.L. Mencken's remark that "no decent man would accept a degree he hadn't earned," and the non-historians among us were happy to learn the term "simony," the practice in the Middle Ages of blatantly selling scholarly degrees. Author Robertson Davies, recipient of a number of honorary degrees, had this to say when receiving one of them: "Let me assure you, however, that I am under no illusion about my position in these ceremonies. Although I have received my degree alone, and am permitted to speak, I am, in truth, the least important graduate here today. I have done nothing in particular to earn my degree; I have undergone no anxiety as to whether, when the moment came, I might be found wanting and sent empty away; I do not depend on my degree to help me toward a place in my profession. Compared with the young people here who are receiving degrees which they have earned, I am a fraud."

will refer to it quite often. Appendix A presents the policy. We do note that the policy lists “three purposes.”⁵ Given the restatement of the University’s values and mission since 1962, this alone suggests the need to revisit this document.

The University of Iowa has never been cavalier about awarding honorary degrees. In the fifty years prior to the adoption of the 1962 policy, the State University of Iowa (as it was then known) awarded only 26 honorary degrees. A 1963 press release revealed that awardees included “two U.S. presidents, two governors of Iowa, U.S. senators and representatives, six former presidents of SUI, justices of the U.S. and Iowa Supreme Courts, as well as distinguished lawyers, scientists, and educators.”

The other document we wish to highlight here is a proposal offered to the Faculty Senate in 1989 and again in 1990, authored by Political Science Professor John Nelson. We include this here as Appendix B. In 1989, a proposal to bring honorary degrees back to the University of Iowa (brought forward by the Committee on Institutional Advancement) lost in the Faculty Senate by a vote of 20 in favor, 17 against, and 3 abstentions.⁶ A revised proposal was defeated in 1990 by a 17-12 vote.

Appendix C presents a few other documents that pertain to the place of honorary degrees in American Higher Education.

V. Honorary Degrees Elsewhere

The University of Iowa is extremely unusual in not awarding honorary degrees. Every other institution in the Big Ten awards honorary degrees, as do the other Iowa Regents’ institutions, the University of Chicago, and (although we have not attempted a formal count) most other Research I institutions. The awarding of honorary degrees is especially prevalent at private institutions.⁷

⁵ These are: 1. to recognize exceptional achievements of a nature which are within the special scope of concern of a university, 2. to reward and encourage such accomplishments, and 3. to emphasize the purposes and ideals of the university, of which such achievements will logically be the exemplification.

⁶ As the pertinent Senate minutes explain, “The Constitution requires a majority of Senators present to vote for a by-laws amendment in order for it to pass. Parliamentarian Michael Green advised President Shane that the chair could not provide the tie-breaking vote on a by-law amendment. President Shane ruled that the amendment failed to pass.”

⁷ Many highly respected institutions have histories of not awarding honorary degrees. These include Bryn Mawr, Vassar, Cornell University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the University of Virginia.

While this in no way comprises a scientific sample, the individuals with whom we corresponded at other institutions were generally favorable in their attitudes toward honorary degrees. We did not hear widespread testimony of corruption or embarrassment. We do note, however, that a good number of thoughtful people to whom we spoke expressed serious reservations about honorary degrees, in some cases citing specific instances that they believed had been institutionally harmful. Many people cautioned us that the awarding of honorary degrees, if we chose as an institution to pursue that course, required prudence and careful planning.

Of course, it is not difficult to recount less pleasant experiences with the awarding of honorary degrees. Iowa Wesleyan College, for instance, is currently revoking an honorary degree that is recently awarded because of the recipient's alleged involvement with drug trafficking. The Student Administrative Council at the University of Toronto recently voted to "condemn the university's decision" to award an honorary degree to former U.S. President George Bush, and were joined by 100 faculty who sent a letter of protest to the University's president. Similar instances are not uncommon.

Policies in institutions comparable to the University of Iowa vary a good deal. Some (Ohio State University, for example) are very complex. Examining these policies does indicate a few decisions that institutions need to make when developing policies on honorary degrees. We highlight six of these here.

1. Criteria The basic question here is between awarding honorary degrees for scholarly or artistic excellence only, or whether exemplary or distinguished public service should also be acknowledged. Academic excellence is typically taken to include a wide range of activities from the arts and sciences to the performing and visual arts. Many institutions are quite specific about the criteria for awarding honorary degrees for service to society.

The language in the current (if for all practical purposes defunct) University of Iowa policy states the following:

The range of activities for which recognition is given should be very wide: It should include achievement of distinction in science, arts and letters, outstanding public or civic service, and achievement in educational administration. It is presumed that the major proportion of degrees will be awarded for attainment in the field of scholarship.

One option is to award different kinds of honorary degrees. The 11th edition of *American Universities and Colleges* (edited by W. Todd Furniss et al., Washington D.C.: American Council on Education, 1973) lists some twenty different honorary doctorates. These include, among many others, Doctor of Humanities, Doctor of Commercial Science, Doctor of Public Service, Doctor of Science, and Doctor of Canon Law. Differentiating the categories of honorary degrees may permit an institution a means to recognize a broader range of accomplishment.

An institution need not adopt the proliferation of degrees noted in the 1973 ACE report.

More basic categories (e.g., Science, Letters, and Arts) might be more serviceable.

2. Eligibility Institutions need to make a number of decisions about who is eligible to receive an honorary degree. This demands the reconciliation of the following sorts of questions. What do we think about honoring our own faculty? Should University of Iowa alumni be eligible? Should recipients have some sort of important connection to the state of Iowa?⁸ What other restrictions do we want to adopt?

3. Procedures The procedures that institutions adopt to nominate, select, and approve the recipients of honorary degrees vary a great deal. Likewise, issues of oversight and control cover a wide range.

An important question here concerns who may nominate or recommend possible honorary degree awardees. The most common pattern is for nominations to come from the faculty, although many institutions (including the current University of Iowa policy) permit administrators to make nominations.⁹ Clearly, University presidents have a strong and legitimate interest in the use of honorary degrees to advance the institutional mission. How to accommodate this while maintaining faculty control is an important issue.

Institutions typically appoint Honorary Degree committees to receive nominations, evaluate nominees, and recommend awards. The composition and responsibilities of this committee are usually specified in considerable detail.

4. How and When Honorary Degrees should be presented. Former University of Iowa President Boyd was adamant that the awarding of honorary degrees not be used as a mechanism to attract commencement speakers. Of course, this is precisely what many institutions (and many University of Iowa faculty) see as a chief benefit of awarding honorary degrees.

An alternative to using award recipients as commencement speakers was the centerpiece of Professor John Nelson's 1989-1990 proposal. This proposal raised the possibility of using the awarding of an honorary degree as an occasion to celebrate academic excellence. Nelson suggested that it be accompanied by a major intellectual event of some sort, perhaps a seminar, colloquium, reading, or performance. Such activities, whether or not they are associated with the

⁸ The extant University policy is clear on this last point. It states that "it is expected that the honorary degree program would normally be limited to recipients having some connection with the State of Iowa, and would normally provide a selection showing a reasonable balance between academic and non-academic recipients, and among various fields of endeavor." Professor John Nelson's 1989 and 1990 proposals tried to move away from any association between honorary degrees and the recipient's Iowa affiliations, and toward a more national and international emphasis.

⁹ Of course most administrators will also hold faculty appointments.

awarding of an honorary degree, are of course central to the life of the University.

5. Relationship to other University Awards. - The University of Iowa has a variety of ways to acknowledge achievement beyond the traditional awarding of degrees. We note in particular the Alumni Foundation Distinguished Service Awards. The relationship of honorary degrees to other recognitions for distinction needs to be carefully thought through.

6. Limits on the Number of Awards - Even institutions that are active (or sometimes aggressive) about awarding honorary degrees often place restrictions on the number that may be awarded in a given period.

The 1962 University of Iowa policy addressed this issue in this way:

It is expected that the number of honorary degrees to be awarded will be small, and will usually be in the order of three or four such degrees each year. It is presumed that the number would seldom be so great as five, and would rather more frequently be as small as one or two. It is assumed that in some years there may be none.

VI. Costs and Benefits of Awarding Honorary Degrees

Our committee debated at great length about the potential costs and benefits of the awarding of honorary degrees. It is probably not possible to resolve these conflicts to anyone's satisfaction in this report. We indicate instead what proponents and opponents of honorary degrees see as their merits and demerits.

Arguments in Favor of Awarding Honorary Degrees

1. Honorary degrees offer role models to students. Commencement is an appropriate and powerful opportunity to present this.
2. Honorary degrees provide an institution with a way to recognize deserving people. They can serve as a celebration of achievement.
3. Honorary degrees can bring good will to the University. This may, at least indirectly, have positive impacts on fundraising and productivity.
4. Honorary degrees can bring recognition and visibility to the University.
5. Not awarding honorary degrees deprives us of a valuable means to advance institutional goals. One administrator observed that our inability to award an honorary degree to Simon Estes on his recent visit to the University of Iowa was a regrettable foregone opportunity.

Arguments Against Awarding Honorary Degrees

1. Honorary degrees might "cheapen" or devalue real degrees. Some have raised concerns about the possible "selling" of degrees.
2. Honorary degrees can create significant potential for embarrassment to the University if inappropriate choice are made. For example, awardees might be discovered to have ethical or legal problems, or awards may be disproportionately given to popular but not otherwise worthy public figures.¹⁰
3. Awarding honorary degrees will impose costs, many of them perhaps hidden. The most obvious are the costs of whatever event accompanies the awarding of a degree.¹¹ Perhaps more important, certainly in the minds of many of our colleagues, would be the costs of faculty time to nominate, evaluate, and select awardees. This could well be considerable. Some have noted that the most significant costs may be the "politicking" and subsequent divisiveness that often accompanies this sort of activity.¹²
4. Any procedure for awarding honorary degrees, no matter how carefully developed, holds the potential for mischief. Examples that we encountered in our deliberations included: What of the sensitivities of nominees who are not selected? What of the possibilities of opportunistic administrators "short-circuiting" formal policies or faculty decisions when it is expedient to do so? What of the potential conflict of interest considerations? The "politics of getting awards" concerned us all. We note that other institutions have grappled with these same questions, in many or even most cases developing what they apparently regard as satisfactory sets of safeguards.
5. The decision by The University of Iowa to reject honorary degrees makes it a leader among its peer institutions.

¹⁰ The 1990 minutes of the Faculty Senate quote one Senator as characterizing the awarding of honorary degrees as "a self-serving exercise in public relations which will lower the reputation of the University."

¹¹ There are of course various ways to handle this. Some institutions require the recipients of honorary degrees to cover their own costs of traveling to receive the award. Our committee discussed the advisability of using state funds to cover costs associated with honorary degrees when there is undeniably discontent among the faculty who are getting by on little or no travel funds of their own.

¹² In a conversation that one of us had with Duane Spriestersbach, he observed that in his time in the Graduate College, he received many unsolicited nominations for honorary degree recipients from citizens throughout Iowa. These were often legitimate but also often frivolous, yet all had to be responded to in a timely and serious manner.

Most of these issues can probably be resolved. Whatever the advantages and disadvantages, costs and benefits, or merits and demerits of awarding honorary degrees, however, none gets to the heart of the question. We believe that the question with which the faculty most needs to wrestle is simply, "What purposes are to be served by awarding honorary degrees?"

VII. Recommendations

The individuals on our committee of course have strong, diverse, and often conflicting beliefs and commitments of their own about honorary degrees. It is probably fair to say, though, that *as a committee*, we bring a certain agnosticism to this report. We are impressed by the arguments in favor of honorary degrees and agree with the goals of many supporters. We also find the reservations expressed by many of our colleagues quite compelling.

Ultimately, it is up to the University faculty, not this committee, to decide the issue of honorary degrees. We propose here what we believe would have the best chance to be a workable and effective policy, guided by the four principles we set out early in this document, *if* the faculty determine that the awarding of honorary degrees at the University of Iowa is a good idea.

We do not offer a fully fleshed out plan here, reasoning that such an effort is premature until such time as the faculty elects to endorse the implementation of honorary degrees at the University of Iowa. We offer instead the outlines of what such a plan might look like.

1) Our first recommendation is to formally **rescind the current University of Iowa policy on honorary degrees**. This is less because of any defects in the policy than the opportunity that it provides for a clean slate. Whatever its merits, the 1962 policy was developed in a very different time and has fallen into disuse. It remains a valuable document, but one that needs to be brought into the realities of the current era.¹³

2) Second, we recommend that The University of Iowa **institute an honorary degree**, which would be clearly designated as such. Such a degree would be awarded in for excellence in science, arts, and letters.

3) Third, we recommend that The University of Iowa honorary degree be **grounded in the four principles** stated in section II of this document.

4) Finally, we recommend that the **following issues be integrated into any policy** (and

¹³ At the same time, though, there is a great deal of tradition and continuity at the University of Iowa, and the 1962 document reflects that. Thus, the recommendations we offer here make significant reference to the existing policy. We also borrow liberally from the policies and frameworks developed at other institutions and other internal documents.

subsequent procedures) that establishes an honorary degree at The University of Iowa:

Honorary degrees at The University of Iowa are to be awarded to those who are eminent scholars, performers, artists, or practitioners in academic fields. Honorary degrees are intended to acknowledge outstanding contributions to knowledge, scholarship, and artistic endeavor.

Sustained achievement and distinction of national or international significance in an activity consonant with the mission of the University of Iowa is the principal criterion for an honorary degree.

Honorary degrees are ordinarily limited to not more than three awards each year.

Alumni of the University are eligible for the degree in addition to other awards which exist for the purpose of recognizing alumni services and contributions to the University. The purpose of the honorary degree is distinct from these other awards.¹⁴

Persons serving as faculty, administrators, or staff of The University of Iowa are not eligible, nor are persons currently serving as members of the Board of Regents or other employees of the Board of Regents, as officials of the State of Iowa and its subordinate units or members of the Legislatures, during their terms of office; nor are spouses or immediate family members of the foregoing persons eligible.

Honorary degrees shall not be based in any way upon financial, political, or other considerations unrelated to scholarship or artistic accomplishment.

The Committee on Honorary Degrees shall be appointed by the Faculty Senate. It shall consist of distinguished faculty.¹⁵ It shall represent the University as broadly as possible, with at least one member from each of the University's colleges. Because this is an award that is to be bestowed by the faculty, all committee members must be faculty. A representative from the Office of the Provost will serve as liaison between that Office and the Committee.

Once a year, the Committee will issue a call to the faculty for nominations for honorary degrees. Nominations may be made by individual faculty members or the faculties of units (e.g.,

¹⁴ The University of Iowa already has a number of ways to recognize and honor contributions and achievements in areas other than those we propose for honorary degrees. We believe we should carefully develop a process that distinguishes all of these worthy awards from the honorary degree.

¹⁵ What qualifies as "distinguished" can be worked out. What we have in mind is something comparable to but probably somewhat less exclusive than the committee that reviews nominations for endowed chairs. Rules on terms of service, reappointments, etc. should follow general Faculty Senate guidelines.

departments, divisions, etc.). The Committee will receive all nominations.

Using the criteria given above and any more specific criteria that the Committee develops, the Committee may recommend up to three recipients for academic degrees per year. The decision to recommend an individual for an academic degree must be, if not unanimous, then an overwhelmingly consensual decision.¹⁶

The Committee will forward its recommendations to the Provost. The Provost in turn forwards them to the President, who in turn forwards them to the Board of Regents.

It will be the responsibility of The President of the University to contact individuals approved by the Board of Regents as recipients of honorary degrees.

The Committee on Honorary Degrees will submit an annual report to the Faculty Senate and to the President of the University.

The honorary degree will be formally awarded at a public event (which may or may not be Commencement).

The reinstatement of honorary degrees and the Committee on Honorary Degrees will last only three years, unless the Senate acts after the third round of honorary degrees to renew the Committee's mandate to make it a standing committee of the Senate.

¹⁶ The current policy calls for eight affirmative votes from an eleven person committee. This general concept strikes us as reasonable, although we would favor a procedure that more efficiently used faculty time. One possibility is to establish a small subcommittee to work up a final list of no more than perhaps ten "processed" candidates. This list could then be debated by a group of distinguished faculty whose only work is to look at that final decision.