

MEMORANDUM

To: Sara Watson, Secretary of the Faculty Senate
From: Larry Garvin, Chair, Senate Honorary Degrees Committee
Date: September 25, 2026
Re: Annual report, 2025-2026

This year was considerably busier than its predecessor, in part because nominations have started to trickle in and in part because we conducted a thorough review of our governing rules and policies. These shall be addressed in turn.

1. Nominations

In last year's report, I noted the complete absence of nominations left for our consideration by the previous year's committee, as well as the difficulty in publicizing our call for nominations. Since the start of that year, we have started to receive nominations, many of which make quite plausible cases for conferring honorary degrees upon the nominees. Last year we received two completed dossiers for honorary degree candidates, which we put into final form with a committee report and forwarded to University Senate for a vote. Both nominations were approved by Senate and sent to the Board of Trustees. The Board did not take action in the 2025-2026 academic year, but in its September meeting approved both nominations.

Last year we received four nominations and fielded inquiries about a few more. Of the three we received, one was for a major benefactor to the University. It is the view of the Committee that honorary degrees to benefactors should be handled by the President, not University Senate, given the President's close interactions with benefactors and sense of how benefactors should most appropriately be recognized. We therefore sent that nomination to the Office of the President, explaining our reasons both to the President and to the nominators. The other three nominations were more traditional. In two cases, we approved the nomination for the development of a dossier. We have since received a completed dossier for one of the two. In the other, we were not asked to give the nomination preliminary approval, but instead have been presented with a completed dossier.

Once these are done, however, we will again have no nominations under development. This was and is concerning. It seems likely that a couple of the inquiries I

have received will become formal nominations, but our flow of nominations is considerably below what is necessary to meet the historical standard of four or so honorands per academic year. We continue to discuss ways to encourage members of the University community to make nominations. My own attempts to encourage colleagues throughout the University to make nominations have with very few exceptions yielded mild interest but nothing more. Possibly we would do better to speak directly to departments, divisions, and centers rather than to the University community as a whole, on the one hand, and to individual faculty, on the other. We intend to pursue that in the coming year.

II. Evaluation of rules and procedures

At the request of University Senate, we, as well as other committees, reviewed both our faculty rules and our internal procedures this academic year. In doing so, we identified some ambiguity within the rules and some divergence between standard practice and the rules in place. We also decided to modify the rules in the interest of providing more information about nominees to University Senate and the Board of Trustees. Our internal procedures needed some revision, in particular loosening the rules about administrative supporting letters and the balance between outside and inside letters. After the circulation of drafts and discussion, we approved a package of changes. The changes to the Committee's rules were approved by University Senate and the Board of Trustees.

As part of our review, we were asked to consider whether to add staff members or students to the committee, either to expand the size of the committee or to displace faculty members. After much discussion, we decided not to change the committee's membership. In our view, deciding whether to grant an honorary degree requires considerable experience and sophistication in evaluating academic dossiers, neither of which is necessarily found among staff members or students.

III. The 2026-2027 academic year

As already noted, we have three nominations in varying stages of development. We hope that some of the inquiries we have received ripen into nominations. In any case, we will try to identify ways to increase awareness and interest among members of the University community. In the recent past, our attempts to send messages to deans, directors, and department chairs were turned down; we will try again.

Since our recent package of rule and procedure changes, it was suggested that the Committee consider shortening its term length. At present the term is five years, which is, I

think, the longest of any Senate committee. This may explain in part the fairly modest number of applications for appointment to the committee over the last few years. As it happens, none of our terms expire in 2027, though it is always possible that a current member will step down. But unless there is a compelling reason to retain a five-year term, the committee may well wish to reduce its term length to three years, the default term length and the one used by most Senate committees.

Finally, the Committee will need to find a new chair. This is my third consecutive year as chair, so I will be obliged to step down (though remaining a member of the Committee). Because we are not scheduled to gain new members in AY 2027-2028, it is my hope that one or more current committee members will be interested in the position.