MEMORANDUM

From: Professor Larry Garvin, Chair, Honorary Degrees Committee
To: Faculty Council
Date: November 4, 2026
Re: Report of Honorary Degrees Committee

I. Procedures and Standards

A. Honorary Degrees Committee Nominations

The Honorary Degrees Committee, as its name declares, reviews candidates for honorary degrees. This is one of the two paths by which the University identifies honorands. Both paths end at the Board of Trustees, which has the final say. In our path, members of the University community nominate potential recipients of honorary degrees. The Committee reviews these for plausibility. If we think the nominee may meet the University's standards, we ask the nominator to assemble a dossier. This consists of six supporting letters, at least two of which must be from outside the University and at least three of which must be from inside the University. Once those are submitted, the Committee reviews the candidacy again, this time asking whether in our view the nominee does meet the University's standards. If we think the nominee does, then the Committee prepares a memo summing up the candidate's accomplishments and sends it, along with the supporting material, to University Senate for an electronic vote. If the nomination is approved by Senate, it goes to the Board of Trustees. The Committee operates on a rolling basis. Honorary degrees are ordinarily conferred at a University Commencement ceremony, though in exceptional cases they may be conferred in absentia.

The standards that the Committee and presumably other bodies are to apply are necessarily broad. In various places recipients are described as "individuals who have made significant contributions to the human condition in the national and international arena," a person who "has made contributions far beyond the expected high standards of the profession," and a person with "extraordinary distinction." Additionally, "[t]he individual who receives an honorary degree must exemplify the purposes and ideals of the University." A recipient need not be at the end of their career; if someone ultimately gets ten honorary degrees, better to be the first than the last—provided, of course, that we are sufficiently certain that the work will stand. Nor is it necessary that a nominee have a connection with the University or with Ohio generally, though that is certainly a plus. Finally, "balance should be kept between various fields of endeavor." The Committee, following

recommendations from President Carter, has not entertained nominations of active politicians, and would not be inclined to consider retired politicians unless they made contributions to higher education in general and the University in particular that went well beyond what someone with those positions might reasonably be expected to do.

B. Presidential Nominations

The other path is much shorter. The President may nominate anyone he thinks suitable, and, after conferring with the Steering Committee of University Senate, may submit the nominations to the Board of Trustees for approval. Ohio Admin. Code §3335-1-03(A)(3). This rule contains no standards for the granting of degrees. The only restriction stated is that the President may nominate no more than eight per academic year. In practice, recent Presidents have proposed very few candidates—the median over the last ten or fifteen years is probably zero per year.

There is no clear demarcation between the President's nominees and ours. If, however, we receive a nomination of someone who is either (a) a public figure or (b) someone whose nomination rests on benefactions to the University, we send that recommendation to the President for his consideration. Recent Committees have taken the view that for the first category, we are not in a good position to know what the consequences of honoring any particular public figure might have on the University, especially in how the University might be perceived. For the second, we recognize that large donors have been honorands pretty much as long as universities have existed—see, e.g., Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Vanderbilt, Johns Hopkins. But the Committee does not know, as it were, the going price—more delicately, we do not know how the President may use the granting of honorary degrees as one means of recognizing benefactors to the University. That judgment is peculiarly within the President's compass, and we happily defer to him.[1]

C. Number of Degrees per Year

We do not have any particular number of honorands in mind when we review files. I looked recently at the practices of other Big Ten schools and a selection of leading American universities to get some guidance. A handful of first-rate universities give none. At the other extreme, some of the Ivies and one or two others give a dozen or more every year. The median is probably around four to six per academic year. President Carter was inclined to

[1] In addition, our guidelines state that "[h]onorary degree selection shall not be based upon financial or political considerations." We read this to limit the Committee, not the President. Certainly the University has conferred many of its honorary degrees on benefactors or those within the political sphere, as a glance at the complete list of honorands (https://senate.osu.edu/sites/default/files/documents/Honorary%20degree%20list%20%28combined%29.pdf) will reveal.

treat four as an upper limit. We have received no contrary guidance from President Bellamkonda (though in fairness we haven't asked). Neither the lack of guidance nor the exact upper limit have been problems for us, as I will discuss shortly.

D. Committee Membership

The Committee consists of seven faculty members who serve for five-year terms. This may explain in part the modest number of applicants we get when vacancies arise. The Committee is considering whether to join the great bulk of other committees and move to three-year terms. We recently discussed, but voted against, a suggestion that we add staff or students to the Committee. In our view, assessing a nominee's academic reputation is outside the normal expectations for staff and students, and we can hardly require a screening test to ensure that an interested party is able to place scholarship in its broader context and read a vita with due attention to its academic strengths and weaknesses.

II. Projects and Challenges

The Committee's work is in no way vital to the functioning of the University, as witness the impressive institutions that confer no honorary degrees. Nevertheless, we think it important to recognize extraordinarily distinguished people, and in turn to be honored by their presence. And if a University is to give honorary degrees at all, a committee like ours performs a necessary gatekeeper function. Honorary degrees given principally to academics and scholars can far better be evaluated by the collective wisdom of the Committee and Senate than by the President alone, however polymathic their knowledge and broad their experience.

A. Recent Accomplishments

Last academic year we reviewed and rewrote the Committee's operating procedures and governing rules with the goals of bringing the written procedures in line with the Committee's standard practice and of assembling and distributing helpful information about candidates to the groups that will pass on their nominations. We are current on our nomination reviews, and indeed have none pending before the Committee—a mixed blessing, as discussed below. In addition, as Chair of the Committee I sit on an ad hoc committee on graduation speakers, assembled after a recent and calamitous Presidential choice. So far we have managed to avoid disaster, which is a negative accomplishment of sorts; after all, most memorable commencement addresses are memorable for the wrong reasons.

B. Current Challenges

Our principal challenge is a lack of nominees. Looking at the last several years, we might receive three or four in a year, about half of which are either insufficiently meritorious or outside the Committee's scope. And not everyone who submits a nomination takes the step of soliciting and collecting the supporting letters. The result is that the University has conferred very few honorary degrees over the last few academic years—four in AY 2023-24, one in AY 2024-25, and none in AY 2025-26. We will have at least two in AY 2026-27, but at the moment we have only two nominations in the pipeline. I think the quality of recent honorands has been up to the University's standards, but we would prefer to be able to choose among nominees rather than to wait patiently for one to arrive. Past attempts to send announcements have not been fruitful. The Committee will soon send a request for nominations to deans, directors, and department chairs; perhaps that request will get to colleagues who can think of a suitable honorand and are willing to go to the trouble of preparing a nomination and then soliciting supporting letters. We would be grateful for any ideas about how we can encourage colleagues to make nominations.