

HD.26.02, Internal Review of the Honorary Degree Award Process

Rationale

This internal review of the honorary degree award process is prompted by the recent rejection of an honorary degree award nominee, Shahid Khan, and the resultant administrative “pause” on the nomination process requested by Chancellor Jones in April 2025. Further details are outlined below. In short, the pause was implemented in reaction to the Senate’s rejection of the proposal to award Shahid Khan an honorary degree award on December 9, 2024. At the Senate meeting on September 15, 2025, the UIUC Senate rejected a proposal to form an ad hoc committee to examine the issue. Nevertheless, the Senate Executive Committee directed the evaluation instead to the recent Ninth Senate Review Commission. While the circumstances are unique in this scenario, some members of the Senate Committee on Honorary Degrees (HD) advocated for an internal review as a logical way to address the pause as such a review is an expected function of all 31 Senate committees.

Background

The Senate sent an honorary degree award nomination for Shahid Khan back to HD in 2013. Covered extensively by the media, the proposal brought into question an “Executive Session” the Senate entered to discuss the candidate, which was likely in violation of the Illinois Open Meetings Act (OMA). In response, the Urbana Senate followed OMA guidelines in the nomination process afterwards, including an open floor Senate discussion to approve all honorary degree award nominations.

The Urbana Senate rejected an honorary degree award nomination for Shahid Khan on December 9, 2024. Contested debate ensued on the floor of the Senate, which was not in violation of OMA, but allowed for open and public debate. Media covered the majority vote of 75-37-29 to reject the proposal as well as pushback from administration and the Board of Trustees (BOT). News media coverage reported the BOT Chair Don Edwards requested that President Tim Killeen review the *Statutes* and procedures pertaining to the honorary degree award process across the system. No official charge or request was communicated to the senates. Chancellor Jones requested a pause to discuss the matter of privacy and respectful floor debate further. The Senate Executive Committee communicated the pause to HD in April 2025. The hold is still in place today.

Current Honorary Degree Award Procedures

This section outlines the process for honorary degree awards. University of Illinois system *Statutes* (II.1.d) provides *each campus authority to determine how honorary degrees are awarded*, including how the faculty recommends candidates to the chancellor/vice president to be conferred by the president under the authority of the Board of Trustees.

At the Urbana-Champaign campus, the Senate Committee on Honorary Degrees has the charge to initiate and review nominations for honorary degrees and make recommendations to the Senate. The committee consists of five faculty members, two student members, and one designee of the Chancellor (*ex officio*).

At present the general process proceeds as follows: Initially the committee considers proposals from a nominator with the support of an academic unit after first receiving approval from the college dean. This is done in order to decide to solicit referee support for at least four “professionally-distinguished individuals.” When four refereed letters come in, the committee meets again to discuss the nomination as a whole including letters from nominating units and letters. The committee then votes to advance to the Senate for a vote. After the committee approves, notification is sent to the University administration and the Board of Trustees for their approval before proceeding to the Senate.

The *Statutes* state that “each senate shall recommend candidates for honorary degrees and shall determine for its university the manner in which the faculty shall recommend to the chancellor/vice president candidates for earned degrees, diplomas, and certificates to be conferred by the president under the authority of the Board of Trustees.” The chair of HD presents the nomination to Senate for a vote, following any discussion, pursuant to Senate *Bylaws* and governing rules.

Current Criteria for Honorary Degree Awards

The University states that an honorary degree award is conferred to honor a “distinguished individual’s contributions to a specific field or society in general” to recognize “exemplary, extraordinary, and distinguished contributions to knowledge and creativity in a specific field, or sustained activity of uncommon merit.” The award publicly signals a relationship between Illinois and the recipient.

The candidate should fulfill demonstrated criteria (“distinction” and “sustained activity of uncommon merit”) in one or more of the following, non-exhaustive fields: scholarship or creative activity, professional development and achievement, public service to the world, nation, state, or community, and excellence in any calling or occupation which “visibly

contributed to the development of society and serves as a model for present and future generations.” The award should recognize achievements over an entire career rather than a single achievement. Current or recent employees or students of the University or BOT or elected or appointed officials of the State of Illinois or members of the Legislature during their terms in office are not eligible.

Crucially, nominations “must not be” solely in “recognition of philanthropy or the main criterion for recognition. Nominations where philanthropy or the possibility of future endowments are the main focus will not be considered.” While philanthropy is not formerly a criterion for selection, and philanthropy was not discussed during HD deliberation, the public discourse around the Khan proposals clearly indicated there is a perception that donors *should* be recognized for their financial contributions to campus.

Solutions

Former UIUC Chancellor Robert Jones and the current SEC have articulated that the privacy of nominees must be maintained. Still, it is unclear why privacy is of the utmost importance in honorary degree award discussions and not in situations involving faculty without administrative and philanthropic influence. As a public body committed to transparency, privacy is not in the purview of honorary degree award deliberations, as candidates for a public honorary award are often public figures, like Shahid Khan or Larry Gies, whose activities have been covered by the national and international press. It also seems that privacy in this case is conflated with an idea of avoiding public embarrassment. As a public university the maintenance of “privacy” as reputation management is inimical to its values. Any attempt to cloak the proceedings runs against the public right for information regarding the business of public bodies as outlined in the Illinois Open Meetings Act.

There is no grounding or memorandum that prevents HD from going forth with their work and the nomination process. The process as outlined by the *Statutes* and University procedure worked in 2024. Shared governance, which includes the right to reject poorly contextualized and argued proposals—as was the case on the floor of the Senate in 2024—was upheld. It is not flawed as it stands by following OMA in awarding honorary degree awards since 2013. If the process must be changed, or the *Statutes* need to be revised, the Senate should follow a directive communicated by the BOT, the University Senates Conference, or the Urbana Senate. To date, there is no directive and there is no need for a complete overhaul of the process yet there is space for further clarification and reasonable modification in the honorary degree award process.

As such, modifications are warranted, regardless of the recent controversy over the 2024 vote. Consideration of modifications include:

- Greater clarity in the process and order of operations in the *Bylaws* and the “Nominations for Honorary Degree” page located in the main menu of the Office of the Senate site. It is also unclear why this information is located on the main menu when other committees are not located there.
- Consider a process of evaluating candidates through a faculty peer review where the committee participates in ethics training based on the criteria and expectations of the Senate, University and the larger system.
- Different criteria for the *honorary* degree award, including a candid acknowledgement that philanthropy, no matter how altruistic, is not a criterion for the award to dispel popular misconceptions about award criteria.
- Upholding the ideals of the award and the importance of conferring an honorary degree award when institutions are under scrutiny by the BOT, which includes immediately ending the current pause and confirming the next honorary degree award awardee.
- Adopting a definition of privacy likened to the function of a press in a free society, especially if nominations are a public figure (see Appendix A).
- Given the significance of HD, as evidenced by the recent public discourse, the chair of HD should hold a seat on the SEC.
- When the Senate considers a candidate for an honorary degree award, the HD chair should share and project UIUC criteria for the honorary degree award and also share for reference prior to the Senate vote.
- Inform deans and department heads that candidates for an honorary degree award are subject to questions and statements about the merits of the nomination by the Senate, including publicly available information. They should be willing and able to respond to comments and questions at Senate meetings. To that end encourage using other routes to recognize individuals through college and department level awards.
- Clarify criteria of excellence and accomplishments that qualify an individual for an honorary degree award.

- Further emphasize that the HD committee does not consider philanthropy in its deliberations, though the topic sometimes comes under discussion during Senate floor debate.
- Encourage Senators during debate on honorary degree award candidates to limit statements to substance.
- HD should adopt a statement that ensures that precautions are taken to ensure strict confidentiality during the honorary degree award process. In particular, there should be no personal communication with prospective degree candidates after they are informed of their nomination, during the entire review and approval process.
- Better records and public disclosure of past honorary degree award recipients, including an Honorary Degree Award recipients for the past 15 years listed on the HD website, in addition to the Commencement website.

HONORARY DEGREES

Prasanta Kalita, Chair

Jon Hale, Chair *pro tempore*

Bisola Adeleke

Paul Davidson

Patrick Holt

Gayle Magee

Pollyanna Rhee

Anna Simon, *ex officio*

Appendix A

The process at Urbana-Champaign is consistent with a sample of Big Ten institutions. Big Ten schools generally have public votes, but processes can differ considerably. Below is a representative selection of processes (12 out of 18 institutions of the BTAA).

University of Oregon

The university has an Honorary Degree and Distinguished Service Awards Committee that includes the president or designee, chair of the Faculty Advisory Council, president of the University Senate, and other individuals including five members of the teaching faculty that solicits and screens nomination. The University Senate, in Executive Session, discusses the candidates presented by the Committee. **A majority vote of members of the University Senate is necessary for the nomination to be approved and if approved the name is placed in a pool of approved nominees.** The president of the University Senate formally informs the President of the University of the outcome of any vote related to honorary degrees.

<https://policies.uoregon.edu/vol-2-academics-instruction-research/ch-8-academics-other/honorary-degrees-granting>

The University of Wisconsin

At the University of Wisconsin the faculty senate votes via a written ballot <https://policy.wisc.edu/library/UW-878>], but the process generally follows those of UIUC. “The Committee on Honorary Degrees considers candidate ideas, votes on and prepares nominations to advance (often conducted in two stages) and sends a written report of the committee’s actions to the chancellor. The chancellor forwards approved nominations to the UW System Board of Regents for review. The chair of the Committee on Honorary Degrees presents approved nominations to an executive session of the Faculty Senate. Nominations must be supported by an academic unit, typically a department or school/college, before presentation to the Senate. **After discussion, the Senate casts written ballots on the nominations with a three-fourths affirmative vote being required for confirmation.** The Office of the Secretary of the Faculty conveys the nominations that have received Senate approval to the UW System Board of Regents. The chancellor invites the honorary degree candidates who have been confirmed by the Faculty Senate and the UW System Board of Regents to attend the May commencement ceremony.”

Northwestern

Northwestern’s process also follows closely to UIUC: “Pursuant to the University Statutes, **recommendations of the Committee on Honorary Degrees are reviewed and voted on by the Faculty Senate in late spring.** The Senate then transmits its recommendations to the Board of Trustees for final approval. The final decision of the Honorary Degrees recipients to invite for the Commencement ceremony will be made by the President from the slate duly selected by the Faculty Senate and Board of Trustees. Any additional selections who are not invited during the year they were nominated may carry forward to the following year(s) for further consideration. Honorary Degrees are conferred at Commencement

ceremonies. Recipients must be present in order to receive the award.”

<https://www.northwestern.edu/provost/about/committees/honorary-degrees/selection-process.html>

University of Maryland

Maryland has a more concentrated process for honorary degrees. President, or his designee, shall appoint a Committee on Honors and Prizes, whose responsibility it will be to solicit and review nominations for Honorary Degrees from members of the campus community. All voting members of the Committee shall be members of the faculty or academic administrators. The Committee majority vote whether each recommendation will be forwarded to the President. Those forwarded to the President shall include a recommendation for the type of degree to be awarded.

<https://policies.umd.edu/academic-affairs/university-of-maryland-procedures-for-awarding-honorary-degrees>

University of Michigan

Michigan (unlike us, NU, and Wisconsin but their senate is every member of the faculty, as well as others) has a process that contrasts with ours.

(<https://facultysenate.umich.edu/faculty-senate/>), <https://president.umich.edu/honors-awards/honorary-degree-committee/>: “The Honorary Degree Committee receives nominations and recommends recipients for honorary degrees. The dean of the Rackham Graduate School chairs the committee; faculty members representing the Ann Arbor, Dearborn, and Flint campuses, students and alumni are appointed by the Board of Regents on the recommendation of the president. The president and several executive officers serve ex-officio. Nominations may be submitted at any time using the [Honorary Degree Nomination Submission Form](#). The Honorary Degree Committee typically meets two to three times a year in the Fall, Spring, and/or Summer to consider nominations and forward recommendations to the president and the Board of Regents. Nominations may be submitted at any time.”

University of California, Los Angeles

The University of California states that “honorary degrees may be awarded upon recommendation of the President of the University and approval by a three-fourths vote of the members present at a meeting of the Board next following the meeting at which the recommendation of the President of the University was made.”

That said, the Regents also have this statement: “At the September 1986 meeting, the Regents discussed the moratorium on honorary degrees that had been in effect since 1972 and decided to continue that moratorium. In the meantime, some campuses have instituted the award of medals to honor individuals who have provided distinguished service to the campus. The President recommends and The Regents concur that the moratorium on honorary degrees be continued into the future.”

<https://regents.universityofcalifornia.edu/governance/policies/2302.html>

Michigan State University

Michigan State has a faculty committee on honorary degrees that develops a list of candidates and nomination packets must be approved by a dean before submission to the Committee, but the process is not further outlined.

<https://research.msu.edu/honorary-degrees>

University of Minnesota

Minnesota has an All-University Honors Committee manages the process and submits recommendations to the president, who makes recommendations to the Board of Regents. They also include a confidentiality statement as follows: "During the nomination process, no disclosure is to be made to the nominee or others. Efforts will be made to maintain confidentiality with respect to the nomination process, consistent with applicable law."

<https://uawards.umn.edu/university-awards/honorary-degree>

University of Nebraska

Nebraska states "Each campus of the university shall create a committee to solicit suggestions and nominations from all sources on its respective campus. After preparing the recommendations and **following the procedures established for faculty approval**, the committee shall present the recommendations to the Chancellor of the campus. The Chancellor will review the recommendations and forward them to the Executive Vice President and Provost, with his or her recommendations

<https://nebraska.edu/-/media/projects/unca/docs/board-of-regents/awards-and-recognition/honorary-degrees/honorarydegreespolicy.pdf>

Pennsylvania State University

Penn State's criteria simply states, "Each university, in consultation with the Council of Trustees, shall develop a policy that shall address the awarding and revocation of honorary degrees"

https://www.passhe.edu/policies/documents/BOG_Policies/Policy%201984-12-A.pdf

Rutgers

Rutgers does not clearly outline the nomination process, but notes "The university seeks recommendations of honorary degree and speaker nominees who reflect the cultural diversity and international character of Rutgers. We invite all members of the Rutgers community and the public to nominate candidates for consideration. We keep nominations confidential, and nominees should not be contacted."

<https://governingboards.rutgers.edu/about-office-secretary/commencement-speaker-and-honorary-degree-recipient->

[nominations#:~:text=The%20nominee%20for%20an%20honorary,an%20auxiliary%20field%20or%20endeavor.](#)

University of Washington

Washington has a special committee of unspecified composition that screens nominations and delivers names to the President who selects nominations to present to the Board of Regents.

<https://www.washington.edu/ceremony/honorary-degrees/procedures/>