Some Thoughts  
about  
Graduating with Honors at the University

It has been said that what is honored in a country grows there, and there is indeed psychological evidence to back up this view. Thus we should not take lightly what we decide to honor at this university since what we honor will determine the kinds of people who grow here.

Any suggestion that honors be given on grade point average should be rejected out of hand. First, grade point averages themselves are ridiculous. As any one with an elementary knowledge of mathematics knows, you do not multiply or divide nor even add or subtract numbers on an ordinal scale and grading scales are ordinal scales. An A is not worth twice as much as a C nor is the difference between an A and a B equal to that of the difference between a B and a C. It is ridiculous for a large university dedicated to science to devote a great deal of time pointing out the nature of mathematics to its students and then to spend thousands and thousands of dollars in time and effort devoted to operations based on such faulty assumptions and thus to inculcate in its students a dedication to such assumptions which no amount of classroom oratory can overcome.

A second objection is that to use any classroom measure as a device for honors rewards the student for being a good slave rather than for becoming an independent educated man. If the student seeks a broad interest in the university life -- its lectures, its plays, its discussions, its library -- he will be disadvantaged with respect to the student who devotes himself only to the material specified for him by his classroom instructors. If in the class he finds himself an original, more suitable way of learning class material, he may well be disadvantaged with respect to the student who concerns himself with class discipline, handing in certain required assignments and, in general, being a good boy but not necessarily learning efficiently or effectively. Furthermore, if in this same course he learns material which the instructor does not deem of great importance or which is irrelevant to the instructor's particular interest, he will be disadvantaged with respect to the student who ignores his own particular insights and interests, to model himself narrowly after his instructor -- his instructor's choice of topics and even his instructor's views on debatable topics. We should not seek to honor the student whose superior abilities to blind his own senses and to ignore inconsistencies enable him to follow slavishly the instructions, and to adopt obediently the thoughts of any other man set in authority; we should rather honor the person who has a good fund of knowledge of the best in our cultural heritage from the
humanities and from the sciences, who can integrate this knowledge meaningfully both within itself and with his own experiences, and who demonstrates such mastery by making creative use of this knowledge.

Therefore, I would suggest that the university develop a general screening exam testing broad knowledge in humanities and the sciences -- physical, biological and social -- which would be followed by some special test of competence devised for those selected from among this group, an honor's thesis or an original work or a creative performance. Those who perform well on these bases would merit honors at this university.

Such a program would take quite a bit of planning and work on the part of the faculty, but here we have a chance to free our students from the narrow robotization of the current pattern of training. Let's use this opportunity rather than adopt a process whose only virtue is to make the problem go away quickly.

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