Proposal to Lower the University's GPA Cutoff for Latin Honors Eligibility

PRESENTED BY	**William Reed, Chair, Senate Academic Procedures & Standards (APAS) Committee**
REVIEW DATES	**SEC – February 21, 2020	SENATE – March 3, 2020**
VOTING METHOD	**In a single vote**
RELEVANT POLICY/DOCUMENT	**NA**
NECESSARY APPROVALS	**Senate, President**

ISSUE

In summer 2019, a proposal was submitted to the Senate Executive Committee related to the University's procedures for calculating Latin Honors. The proposal suggested that the University should do more to recognize its high-achieving students, and noted that the University's threshold for Latin Honors is much higher than the thresholds at some peer institutions. In August 2019, the SEC voted to charge the Academic Procedures and Standards (APAS) Committee with review of the proposal.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

The APAS Committee recommends that all eligible students who earn a cumulative GPA of 3.900 or above should earn a Latin Honor.

The APAS Committee recommends that the proposed University of Maryland Policy on the Awarding of Latin Honors, as shown immediately following this report, be approved.

COMMITTEE WORK

The APAS Committee began its review of the charge at its meeting on September 19, 2019. It reviewed the provisions on Latin Honors in the Undergraduate Catalog, as well as the current GPA level specifications for Latin Honors in each College. The committee consulted with the proposer, and with representatives of the Office of Undergraduate Studies, the Office of the Registrar, and the Senior Vice President & Provost throughout its review. The committee also reviewed peer institution practices and consulted with the Office of General Counsel (OGC).

During its review, the APAS Committee carefully considered whether Latin Honors should be calculated based on a percentage or a set GPA threshold. APAS felt that disciplinary differences must be honored, and therefore a GPA threshold applied University-wide would not be appropriate. However, APAS also acknowledged the importance of communicating the Latin Honors levels clearly to students, to encourage them to strive for excellence and allow them to plan their coursework accordingly. APAS developed a hybrid solution that retains the current percentage model, to ensure that the honors are reserved for the top percentages of the graduating class while

accounting for disciplinary differences, and incorporates a provision to ensure that all students who earn a 3.900 cumulative GPA will earn at least the honor of cum laude. In Colleges and Schools where the percentage model would set the cum laude threshold above 3.900, the Office of the Registrar will lower the threshold as it sets the cutoffs for the coming year.

APAS determined that there would be value in establishing the Latin Honors provisions as a University policy, since Latin Honors affect the transcript. The committee developed its proposed policy based on the existing language in the Undergraduate Catalog, and incorporated details on the process for calculating Latin Honors in consultation with the Office of Undergraduate Studies and the Office of the Registrar. After due consideration, the APAS Committee voted to approve the change to the University's process for Latin Honors and the proposed policy at its meeting on February 7, 2020.

ALTERNATIVES

The Senate could choose not to approve these recommendations. However, the provisions on Latin Honors would remain in the Undergraduate Catalog rather than policy and the University would lose an opportunity to enhance clarity about the thresholds for earning Latin Honors.

RISKS

There are no risks to the University in adopting these recommendations.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no known financial implications in adopting these recommendations.

PROPOSAL TO LOWER THE UNIVERSITY'S GPA CUTOFF FOR LATIN HONORS ELIGIBILITY

2019-2020 Committee Members

William Reed (Chair)
William Cohen (Ex-Officio Provost's Rep)
Adrian Cornelius (Ex-Officio Registrar Rep)
Shannon Gundy (Ex-Officio Director of Admissions Rep)
Lisa Kiely (Ex-Officio Undergraduate Studies Rep)
Ryan Long (Ex-Officio Graduate School Rep)
Progyan Basu (Faculty)
Nicole Coomber (Faculty)
Lee Friedman (Faculty)
Patricio Korzeniewicz (Faculty)
Marilee Lindemann (Faculty)
Tianzhou Ma (Faculty)
Kellie Rolstad (Faculty)
Dylan Selterman (Faculty)

David Straney (Faculty)
Monica VanKlompenberg (Faculty)
Alice Donlan (Staff)
Paula Nasta (Graduate Student)
Jason Tan (Undergraduate Student)
Kaylee Towey (Undergraduate Student)
Eleanor VanVraken (Undergraduate Student)

Date of Submission
February 2020

BACKGROUND

In summer 2019, a proposal was submitted to the Senate Executive Committee related to the University's procedures for calculating Latin Honors. The proposal suggested that the University should do more to recognize its high-achieving students, and noted that the University's threshold for Latin Honors is much higher than the thresholds at some peer institutions. In August 2019, the SEC voted to charge the Academic Procedures and Standards (APAS) Committee with review of the proposal (Appendix 1).

CURRENT PRACTICE

At the University of Maryland, the Latin Honors of summa cum laude, magna cum laude, and cum laude are bestowed to recognize academic excellence among graduating seniors. The University of Maryland Undergraduate Catalog explains the current practice for calculating and awarding Latin Honors. Latin Honors are awarded to the top 10% of the class in each College, with students who earn a cumulative GPA in the top 2% of the graduating class earning summa cum laude, the next highest 3% earning magna cum laude, and the following 5% earning cum laude. These thresholds were established by the University Senate, effective in the 1975-1976 academic year (Senate Document #72-73-8).

While the thresholds for Latin Honors are set to award the honors to the top 10% of the class, the University calculates minimum required GPAs for each Latin Honor level by individual College or School (Appendix 2). The Office of the Registrar determines the Latin Honors GPA levels for summa cum laude, magna cum laude, and cum laude annually before the start of the fall semester to make students aware of the minimum GPA level required to earn a Latin Honor. The Latin Honors levels are based on the cumulative GPA averages of the previous academic year's three graduating terms in each College or School. While the minimum GPA cutoffs for Latin Honors may

change from year to year, once they are calculated for a given year, they will remain static for all graduating terms during that academic year.

In order to be eligible for Latin Honors, a student must have a final cumulative GPA that meets or exceeds the minimum required GPAs for that year. The student must also have:
- at least 60 credits earned at the University or through a program where credit is counted as University of Maryland resident credit;
- no more than 6 credits within the 60 credit minimum that were taken pass/fail or satisfactory/fail; and
- a final, cumulative GPA of 3.300 or higher.

Latin Honors are calculated after graduation, so as to incorporate grades from a student's final semester, and they are noted as pending in the Commencement program (Senate Document #12-13-03). Once calculated, Latin Honors are officially annotated on the transcripts and diplomas of the students who have graduated.

COMMITTEE WORK

The APAS Committee began its review of the charge at its meeting on September 19, 2019. It reviewed the provisions on Latin Honors in the Undergraduate Catalog, as well as the current GPA level specifications for Latin Honors in each College. The committee consulted with the proposer, and with representatives of the Office of Undergraduate Studies, the Office of the Registrar, and the Senior Vice President & Provost throughout its review. The committee also reviewed peer institution practices and consulted with the Office of General Counsel (OGC).

The committee worked with the Office of the Registrar to understand the effect of the current Latin Honors procedures on the number and percentage of students earning Latin Honors, as well as to consider various alternate scenarios. Data from 2013 to present on Latin Honors show that there has been no significant increases or decreases in the GPA cutoffs and that the number of students receiving the honors are relatively stable. Throughout its consideration of the charge, APAS received data simulations from the Office of the Registrar showing what the impact of a change in the calculation method would be under various scenarios, including scenarios where the percentages were retained but changed to the top 5%, the next 5%, and the following 5% of the graduating class, or where GPA thresholds were used instead, at various levels.

The APAS Committee reviewed information on Latin Honors at Big 10 and other peer institutions (Appendix 3). The committee found that there is a wide range of variability on whether the honor is awarded based on a percentage or absolute threshold; applied uniformly across the institution or varied by college; and if the calculation of cutoffs are associated with the prior year's cohort or based on a percentage of the current class. The majority of peer institutions apply Latin Honors uniformly across the university, but six peers apply Maryland's approach of differentiating by college. The majority of peers reserve the distinction for the top percentage of the graduating class each year. Some institutions define a lower bound where a Latin Honor cannot be received, or indicate that students who are within a small buffer range for each level could still earn that honor.

In discussions with the committee, the proposer raised concerns that the Latin Honors levels are too high and may prevent students from advancing professionally or academically when compared with their peers at institutions with more generous Latin Honors thresholds. APAS searched for scholarly literature on this point, and found one study indicating a slight advantage in the job market for students with a Latin Honor in the first five years out of college. After the five-year mark, employers

tend to value skills and experience over accolades. APAS also consulted with the University Career Center, which reported that a student's GPA is a stronger indicator that they will be a competitive applicant in the job market than a Latin Honor, as the GPA is a more concrete comparison tool for employers.

The proposer also raised concerns that using percentages to determine the GPA levels for each Latin Honor creates confusion for students, in that the GPA they need to earn is not clear to them until the fall of their senior year. During its review, the APAS Committee carefully considered this concern as it discussed whether Latin Honors should be calculated based on a percentage or a set GPA threshold. The current method of using percentages allows students to be compared to their peers within their field, and accounts for variations by College and disciplinary differences. It also increases the distinction of receiving a Latin Honor, as the honor is clearly limited to a small number of students. However, when the percentages are based on a prior cohort of students and calculated on an annual basis, the thresholds can be difficult to predict and thus difficult for students to plan for. If the University were to move to a set GPA threshold for each honor level, students would be better able to plan to meet a certain honor level, and students and employers would both have a better understanding of what a Latin Honor from the University of Maryland means. However, GPA thresholds cannot account for disciplinary differences, and are less able to accommodate shifts in GPAs over time while ensuring the honor is reserved for the top students.

APAS felt that disciplinary differences must be honored, and therefore a GPA threshold applied University-wide would not be appropriate. However, APAS also acknowledged the importance of communicating the Latin Honors levels clearly to students, to encourage them to strive for excellence and allow them to plan their coursework accordingly. APAS developed a hybrid solution that retains the current percentage model, to ensure that the honors are reserved for the top percentages of the graduating class while accounting for disciplinary differences, and incorporates a provision to ensure that all students who earn a specific cumulative GPA will earn at least the honor of cum laude. In Colleges and Schools where the percentage model would set the cum laude threshold above the chosen GPA, the Office of the Registrar will lower the threshold as it sets the cutoffs for the coming year.

In considering where to set the specific GPA threshold for this hybrid solution, the committee considered whether there is an objective line amongst GPAs that can be drawn to clearly delineate academic excellence. While APAS acknowledges that there is room for disagreement on what constitutes excellence, the committee feels strongly that a cumulative GPA of 3.900 indicates a sustained pattern of excellence in academic work and is deserving of a Latin Honor. While points below 3.900 may also be deserving of recognition when contextualized among a student's peer group, a 3.900 would be represented on the transcript by a clear pattern of high marks in the majority of a student's coursework. The APAS Committee developed language to set 3.900 as the chosen GPA threshold at which all eligible students would earn a Latin Honor.

In the course of the committee's review, APAS considered whether Latin Honors information should remain in the Undergraduate Catalog or if it should be codified into a University policy. Over the past few years, the University has been converting items outlined in the Catalog into policy in order to maintain consistency and codify expectations. APAS noted that information in the Catalog may be interpreted more as guidelines, whereas information set forth in policy tends to have a more binding and consistent understanding across campus. After considering examples of similar items that were converted from Catalog items to policy, the APAS Committee determined that there would be value in establishing a University policy, since Latin Honors affect the transcript.

The committee developed its proposed policy based on the existing language in the Undergraduate Catalog, and incorporated details on the process for calculating Latin Honors in consultation with the Office of Undergraduate Studies and the Office of the Registrar. After due consideration, the APAS Committee voted to approve the change to the University's process for Latin Honors and the proposed policy at its meeting on February 7, 2020.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The APAS Committee recommends that all eligible students who earn a cumulative GPA of 3.900 or above should earn a Latin Honor.

The APAS Committee recommends that the proposed University of Maryland Policy on the Awarding of Latin Honors, as shown immediately following this report, be approved.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 — Charge from the Senate Executive Committee
Appendix 2 — Latin Honors GPA Cutoffs 2019-2020 Academic Year
Appendix 3 — Latin Honors Peer Institution Comparison

XX-X.XX(X)   UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND POLICY ON THE AWARDING OF LATIN HONORS

I.   Purpose

The University of Maryland awards Latin Honors to recognize high-achieving undergraduate students for academic excellence over the course of the student's undergraduate career. Summa cum laude, magna cum laude, and cum laude are the highest honors the University bestows to signify sustained excellence in scholarship.

II.   Policy

A. The University bestows the Latin Honors of summa cum laude, magna cum laude, and cum laude.

B. Latin Honors are awarded to the top ten (10) percent of all students graduating in each College or School, and are calculated based on the average cumulative GPAs of the previous academic year's graduating classes from the specific College or School.

1. Summa cum laude is awarded to students with a cumulative GPA equal to or greater than the highest two (2) percent of the GPAs;

2. Magna cum laude is awarded to students with a cumulative GPA equal to or greater than the next highest three (3) percent; and

3. Cum laude is awarded to students with a cumulative GPA equal to or greater than the next highest five (5) percent, as well as to all students with a cumulative GPA of 3.900 or greater who would not otherwise be eligible for a Latin Honor.

III.   Eligibility for Latin Honors

A. To be eligible for Latin Honors, students must have earned at least 60 semester hours either at the University or through a program in which credit earned is counted as University of Maryland resident credit, as defined by the Office of the Registrar.

B. No more than six (6) credits with pass/fail or satisfactory/fail grades will be counted towards the 60 semester hours minimum.

C. Coursework completed in a student's final semester will be included in the calculation of Latin Honors.

D. No student with a GPA of less than 3.300 will be considered for Latin Honors.

IV.   Implementation of Latin Honors

A. The Office of the Registrar will calculate and publicize the minimum GPA cutoffs required in the current academic year for each Latin Honors level for each

College or School.

B. While the minimum GPA cutoffs for Latin Honors will change from year to year, once calculated, they will remain static for the entire upcoming academic year and will not be recalculated during that academic year.

C. Since Latin Honors calculations include grades earned in a student's final semester, Latin Honors will be annotated in the commencement program as tentative and unofficial pending the submission and calculation of all final grades for the semester of commencement.

D. Latin Honors will be recorded on the transcripts and diplomas of students who have earned the honors and who have graduated from the University.