

**REPORT OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE
ON HONORARY DEGREE POLICY**

February 16, 1987

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I. INTRODUCTION

Nominations for Honorary Degrees at the University of Michigan are received and reviewed by a Committee consisting of six members of the faculty, four Executive Officers, and two students; the Committee (hereafter, HDC) makes recommendations to the Regents, who have the final authority to award honorary degrees. In the course of our deliberations our advisory Committee has been repeatedly reminded, and believes it important to emphasize at the outset of this report, that the honorary degree decision-making process is value-laden, subjective, symbolic, and not wholly susceptible to rational analysis: for what reasonable test can be applied to measure accurately the benefit to, or other impact upon, either the University or the recipients, as a result of the awarding of honorary degrees?

A process so value-laden, with outcomes so difficult to evaluate objectively, has implications for what an advisory committee such as ours can reasonably be expected to accomplish. On the one hand, we believe that we have considered fully and weighed carefully each of the items listed in our charge, and that we

have identified other issues which deserve the serious attention of the University community; our chief recommendations were reached after much thought and discussion, in an atmosphere of open and frank exchange of views, and of full respect for each member's opinions. On the other hand, an individual's own sense of values comes strongly into play in considering the functions of honorary degrees in the University's value system, and in consequence it would probably be unreasonable to expect this particular Committee, or indeed any substitute, however representative of diverse constituencies, to be unanimous in its major conclusions. The issues surrounding honorary degrees are issues about which reasonable and honorable persons can be expected to disagree.

These introductory observations help to explain the procedure adapted in the following report. The Committee has thought it valuable to select the major issues contained in our Charge, to set forth arguments for and against particular positions, and finally to indicate where, on balance, the Committee stands. Where our conclusions are unanimous or nearly unanimous, we so indicate, and every attempt has been made to state major recommendations as forcibly as our collective thinking permits; conversely, when a majority opinion was narrower, or difficult or impossible to reach, we indicate this openly, preferring instead to be explicit about the degree of consensus rather than to produce a series of individual statements which in the end might seem to deprive a majority report of its proper force.

II. THE OBJECTIVES OF AN HONORARY DEGREE POLICY

The overarching objective in awarding honorary degrees is to provide the University with an opportunity to associate itself and its values with men and women remarkable for their achievements or their potential, and by so doing to inspire students and others to recognize, to respect and to seek to emulate such persons and such accomplishments. The words "associate with" are important. The honorary degree inaugurates and celebrates a new form of continuing relationship between the institution and the individual, who now becomes and should henceforth be treated, as an active and special member of the alumni body, for the rest of his or her life. We question whether our honorary degree practices in the past have sufficiently reflected the importance of this new relationship and have worked to further it; we suspect that the intellectual and other resources which the University expects from its alumni body have not always been expected of honorary degree recipients; we think it important that in the future honorary degree recipients be regarded in this new and different light.

A review of the history of honorary degrees awarded by The University of Michigan (as well as by many other institutions) reveals that the persons so honored fall into two broad categories:

1. persons whose achievements are closely identified with the University's central purposes: those of teaching, research, and scholarship. The degree recognizes the contributions of educators, intellectual discoverers, theorists, creators in the Arts and Sciences--persons remarkable for achievements primarily, though not exclusively, within the academic world. In awarding honorary degrees to such

persons, the University reinforces its commitment to its own fundamental values; in so doing its stance may be said to be one of some detachment from society at large.

2. persons whose achievements were realized in professional life, public service, business, religion, or government: persons, in short, who have made their primary contributions outside the academic world. In awarding honorary degrees to such persons, the University affirms its commitment to furthering broader societal goals, to recognizing non-academic contributions to the improvement of the quality of civilization; in so doing its stance may be said to be one of more integral connection with society at large.

We recognize, of course, that in practice the line between these two categories cannot always be so sharply drawn. Distinguished practitioners in the arts, for example, or distinguished inventors, could reasonably be assigned to either category. Nonetheless, the broad distinction between achievement intrinsic to and extrinsic from the university world seems generally valid, and the Committee has found it to be a helpful distinction in thinking about honorary degrees.

One feature of the awarding of honorary degrees, both at Michigan and elsewhere, deserves to be noticed here: the award is embedded within a public ceremony, normally that of commencement (or a comparably official congregation), an academic ritual drawing together the entire University community, and thereby providing the greatest potential impact for (and symbolic meaning of), the conferral of the honorary degree. Awarding the honorary degree at commencement creates the presumption that the persons so honored will mean something special to graduating students and their families who are at the center of attention

at Commencement; and also that the entire University community, in the form of its representatives officially assembled, will feel itself collectively honored by the honorary degree recipients.

III. SHOULD THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN CONTINUE TO AWARD HONORARY DEGREES?

The Committee considered a number of arguments against the practice of awarding honorary degrees:

1. As already mentioned, the difficulty of accurately measuring the benefit to the institution (or to the individuals) of the awards might be said to constitute some grounds for discontinuing the practice.

2. The practice is by no means universal: a number of other Universities, including Cornell, MIT, Iowa, Stanford and the University of California system, do not award honorary degrees; there is general satisfaction with the alternative systems of recognition for distinguished achievement which are in place in such institutions.

3. The growing number of honorary degrees awarded throughout the academic world (as many as 5000 per year according to one recent estimate [Nilsson & Seminoff, Arizona State University report of 9-2-86]) has been held to detract from the meaning of the honorary degree itself (many recipients are repeaters), as well as to detract from the value of the earned degree.

4. As implied in II above, the awarding of honorary degrees for different categories of achievement, at commencement ceremonies where graduates are the center of attention, requires a balancing of type and category of achievement which presents complexity and practical difficulties for the HDC, and which some

participants at commencement itself find unsatisfactory. (For example, an honorary degree to a distinguished scholar might please the faculty, but be found uninteresting to students; an award to a highly controversial figure from public life could result in extreme reactions from the audience, reactions which are at cross purposes with a ceremony intended to be joyous and celebratory.)

Despite these and other possible drawbacks inherent in the practice, the Committee believes that the objectives listed under II above are valid; we unanimously recommend that the University of Michigan continue to award honorary degrees.

1. We believe, first, that the opportunity to make public the values which the University affirms, through this form of recognition, is wholly appropriate.

2. We believe, second, that the building of long-term associations between honorary degree recipients and the University, and an emphasis upon conferrals which have special relevance and pertinence to our University, can and should be extremely valuable for both parties.

3. We believe, third, that the awarding of such degrees at commencement broadens this ceremony for graduates beyond the mere academic formality of receiving a degree and presents them with tangible evidence of a wider world of distinguished academic, public, moral and cultural achievement.

4. We believe, fourth, that the practical difficulties which sometimes stand in the way of maximizing the opportunities which such degrees afford ought not to

discourage the University from continuing to try--and to try more effectively--to maximize them.

5. We believe, fifth, that our own historical traditions count for something, and emphasize that, when the question was last formally examined, in 1973, the Board of Regents accepted the recommendation of a faculty body and the Academic Vice President, and did not change the practice.

6. We believe, finally, that more University attention, rather than less, could profitably be given to awards, acts of recognition, and honors of various types, and that the collective celebratory imagination of the University of Michigan needs to be further developed, rather than checked or restrained.

IV. TO WHOM SHOULD THE UNIVERSITY AWARD HONORARY DEGREES?

An academic community is unquestionably better equipped to make judgments about what constitutes intellectual or creative work of high quality than about societal contributions more broadly defined. The Committee thus sees some merit in the longstanding policy of the University of Chicago, where Honorary degrees are awarded only to persons who fall within the first of the two broad categories described in II (above): persons whose achievements are closely identified with the University's central purposes (teaching, research and scholarship). Such a policy permits the University to restrict these awards to the areas and fields which a university knows and understands best, and where it can thus be said to have a comparative advantage. The policy has the added benefit of liberating the HDC from the difficulties inherent in weighing the merits of nominees from many different walks of life, whose careers exemplify multiple types of achievement.

We have received the impression that the difficulties confronted by the HDC may be most pronounced when nominees for honorary degrees are persons prominent in public life, especially in political life. Our own opinions diverged most sharply in discussion of this category of achievement. Some members of the Committee question the appropriateness of routinely awarding the honorary degree to governors of Michigan. The practice can be defended on the grounds that it symbolizes the close existing relationship between the University and the State, and that it is a uniquely "Michigan" tradition; on the other hand, we are concerned that the awarding of any honorary degree thus routinely may under-

mine the special meaning of any other individual award, for both the University and the recipient. Some members favor the explicit adoption of a policy (currently in effect in some other universities) which prohibits the awarding of honorary degrees to persons currently occupying elective office, and who are (or are likely to be) candidates for election (or re-election). It should be stressed that no member of the Committee objects in principle to making awards to persons whom later events may prove to be controversial, politically or otherwise. Controversy is not only likely but inevitable in some such cases, and certain to surface in an academic community, where values are pluralistic and must occasionally conflict. On the other hand, members of the committee view the commencement ceremony, where the primary emphasis is upon celebration, and upon the congratulation of graduates, as an inappropriate setting for public disturbance or for strong expressions of dissent, and hence for awards likely to provoke these.

Thus, there may sometimes be troubling consequences of awarding honorary degrees to public figures, consequences which the more purely "academic" policy of the University of Chicago would enable the University to avoid. But in the judgment of the majority of the Committee, such a policy would prove to be unduly restrictive for the University of Michigan. A publicly assisted institution, with a long and distinguished tradition of professional training as well as of academic education, Michigan has always considered broader societal obligations to be a part of its mission. Moreover, as Clark Kerr, an experienced observer of American universities, has recently observed, during the past forty years higher education as a whole has become much less a sector apart from, and far more an integral part of, society at large.¹ It would seem oddly retrogressive to shift back again now to

¹ Clark Kerr and Marian L. Gade, "The Contemporary College President," The American Scholar 56 (Winter, 1987), pp 30-31.

a more restrictive honorary degree policy, and so to ignore these broader societal connections. More importantly, at various times, institutional objectives can be expected to intersect closely with broader social objectives (e.g., increasing opportunities for women and minorities), and Michigan's honorary degree policy ought, in the committee's view, to be sufficiently comprehensive to enable the University to employ this form of recognition in order to affirm its commitment to such values.

Thus, for the aforementioned reasons, the Committee strongly recommends that the University maintain an honorary degree policy which recognizes diversity of achievement, multiple forms of distinction--categories 1 and 2 in II above--including signal achievement in public life. In so recommending, however, we also urge that persons selected from this second category be expected to display the qualities of mind and character which are consistent with the basic values of the university--for example, that the quality and nature of the public service, or other contributions, rendered by a person should count for more than political celebrity or other prominence, *per se*. We recommend that, so far as is practicable, diversity of accomplishment be recognized at each commencement, and that at least one person conspicuous for achievement in each of the two broad areas identified above be awarded an honorary degree. We further recommend that the HDC, and the University community as a whole, make much greater efforts to identify recipients to whom the degree will have special meaning, and for whom our University's conferral of the degree is particularly appropriate. We urge the university to exercise initiative and imagination in recognizing men and women whose contributions may be slightly ahead of their time, men and women who have not already entered the twilight of their careers or received many such awards from other institutions, men and women so remarkable for their combination of talents, energies and per-

sonal qualities that conferral of an honorary degree by the University of Michigan will be perceived as a gesture which is at once timely, inspired, exciting, and wise. Finally, we agree that identifying the strong, even compelling, reasons for the University of Michigan to offer any particular degree should always be a fundamental responsibility of the HDC.

V. THE IN ABSENTIA PROVISION

Almost all universities accept the principle, endorsed also by the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, which requires recipients of honorary degrees to attend graduation ceremonies so as to accept these degrees in person. The requirement is no mere formality, but an essential means of expressing the meaning of the award, both to the person and to the institution. As we have already noted, to award an honorary degree is to create a reciprocal relationship between two entities: the university which, when its president confers the degree, obligates itself to continuing and special recognition of the recipient as a graduate of the institution, with the rights and privileges accorded all other persons of graduate status; and the recipient who, from the moment when he or she has been personally invested with the doctoral hood, pledges continuing allegiance to the institution as an active member of its alumni body. The ceremony of commencement is integral to inaugurating and confirming this reciprocal relationship: the community senses itself more united and collectively honored when its honorary degree is personally accepted, and the event takes on greater meaning to the recipient when university officers, Regents, faculty and other graduates are assembled in official convocation. The act of hooding, within the ceremony of commencement, creates and confirms this new form of relationship between the honorary degree recipient and the university.

For these reasons, the Committee advocates retaining the provision that honorary degree recipients ought to be present in order to receive the degree. But since the Regents have on at least seven occasions in the past waived this proviso (most recently in 1967), and awarded an honorary degree *in absentia* to persons

who had died after accepting the invitation, or whose physical condition prohibited them from attending commencements, the Committee has needed to ask itself whether the policy ought to allow explicitly for exceptions and if so, under what conditions. The question has proved to be particularly challenging since some members of the University community now advocate extending the kinds of exception allowed in the past to cover a different kind of case: that in which a proposed degree recipient is unable to attend the ceremony by reason of coercion, whether it be imprisonment, denial of a passport, or similar forcible restraint.

Here our opinion is divided. Some members of the Committee believe that the creation of the special form of association and relationship between university and individual which the award of the honorary degree inaugurates cannot occur when one of the two parties is not present. They believe that the kind of reciprocity implied in the relationship is so integral to the concept of the honorary degree that to fail to apply the principle consistently, by making any exceptions, is to abandon the concept of the honorary degree itself. They believe that physical presence is an essential requirement for inaugurating this form of reciprocity: whereas, in the case of a normal degree recipient, the bond has been created through years of study at, and association with, the institution, for the honorary degree recipient the moment at which she or he formally enters the institution--normally, at commencement--provides the basis for the new and special bond between recipient and institution.

While strongly committed to the values of a free society, and admiring of the moral courage of persons prepared to suffer in defense of those values, these members believe the University's honorary degree process to be an unsuitable vehicle for expressing such convictions and such concerns. They believe that the

numbers of talented, honorable, but overlooked potential candidates for recognition are such that the University need never resort to conferring such a degree in absentia. They believe that the new reciprocal relationship which the honorary degree inaugurates cannot be sustained and bolstered under the conditions in which exceptions have been allowed in the past and are currently being proposed for the future. These members would urge that in future cases, where severe illness or death occurs after an invitation to receive a degree has been issued and accepted, conferral in the case of illness be withheld until the individual has recovered and is able to be present. They believe that in cases of death, or in cases where the University may think it appropriate to express an institutional position about the forms of coercion mentioned above, alternative mechanisms of recognition be identified and adopted instead. In summary, these members of the Committee recommend consistent adherence in practice to what is stipulated in the last sentence of Section 9.03 of the Regental Bylaws: "No honorary degrees shall be conferred in absentia."

A majority of the members of the Committee, although they accept several of the above premises, have reached a different conclusion. They endorse the view that the principle of reciprocity is integral to the concept of the honorary degree, and believe that the kind of relationship between university and individual which the conferral of the degree inaugurates is of critical importance, to be strongly encouraged. They agree that the number of talented, honorable, but overlooked candidates for such recognition is ample, and believe that the University need rarely resort to conferring such a degree in absentia. On balance, however, they believe that such exceptions as have been made in the past are valid, and would be prepared to extend them, on rare occasions, to cover cases in which a potential recipient is constrained, as a result of the kinds of coercion mentioned

above, from exercising his or her choice to attend the commencement (or other ceremony). They believe that to permit exceptions of this type would enable the University, rarely, to award honorary degrees to distinguished persons with whom the University would wish to enter into the relationship which the honorary degree implies, but who are prevented from attending the commencement ceremonies. They recommend a revision of the language of Bylaw 9.03 so as to reflect these objectives and this intent.

VI. PROCEDURAL AND OTHER CONCERNS

In the sections above, the Committee has attempted to address the major issues contained in our charge. During our meetings, a number of other, more procedural, matters were also discussed; we offer the following observations in the hopes that they may be of some future value to the HDC, the President, and the Regents, as they implement the University's honorary degree policies.

1. What is the approximately optimal number of honorary degrees to be awarded annually? The Committee notes that through the 1970s between ten and fifteen honorary degrees were awarded each year; in 1980-81 the number declined to six, rose to eight the next year, and subsequently has declined again to between three and five. The Committee believes that, owing to the abolishment of Summer Commencement, present numbers may be appropriate for the time being; and in any case that numbers are less significant than excellent choices. It would be fully consistent with the major recommendations of this report to expand the numbers of honorary degree recipients in years to come.

2. Should honorary degrees be awarded only at a single (Spring) commencement? The Committee believes that the awarding of honorary degrees adds such a positive component to commencement proceedings, that these should be conferred at every commencement, where also attempts should be made, as far as is practicable, to ensure a sufficient number of awards are conferred so as to recognize diverse forms of accomplishment and achievement.

3. Should honorary degrees be conferred only at commencement ceremonies? The present language of Regents Bylaw 9.03 states that "Honorary degrees may be conferred either at Commencement, at University convocations, or at special convocations of the several schools or colleges." The Committee believes the present language to be entirely appropriate.

4. Present practice excludes present University appointees from consideration for honorary degrees. The Committee believes this to be prudent. Exclusion of retired University appointees seems more problematic. Not all of us are convinced that exclusion of faculty emeriti/ae is appropriate: experience at other institutions suggests that such honors to retired faculty or to other retired University appointees, have had extremely beneficial impact.

5. All commencement speakers in recent years have received honorary degrees, but it is not self-evident to the Committee that awarding the honorary degree to a commencement speaker is either necessary or always desirable. For example, the Committee sees considerable merit in inviting University faculty members, from time to time, to deliver the commencement address, especially if this practice were to increase the interest of faculty in commencement.

6. The Committee also discussed the composition of the existing Honorary Degree Committee and its activities. Although present practices may be adequate and appropriate, the Committee believes some reconfiguration of the membership of the Honorary Degree Committee might be considered. It could be argued for example, that the Committee would be enriched by the inclusion of a representative from the body of alumni. The Dean of the Graduate School, who is a standing member of honorary degree committees in other institutions, might bring a useful

perspective to the work of the Honorary Degree Committee, given his expanded role in the University's efforts to increase academic honors and awards. It might also be of value to have the student representatives serve two year terms, staggered so that one new and one experienced student would always be part of the Committee.

7. It has been alleged that at some institutions the conferral of an honorary degree has been used as a mechanism to cultivate material returns, political or financial, from the recipient to the institution. There is good reason to believe that such efforts are seldom effective, but even if they were the Committee would reject such practices as a perversion of the proper objectives of an honorary degree policy.

8. The Regents currently have the option to confer a number of awards in addition to honorary degrees (see Appendix B). The deployment of the full range of available honors might well serve to enrich a variety of University ceremonies; the Committee encourages greater realization of the potential which such forms of recognition provide.

VII. CONCLUSION

In this report, the Committee has laid great stress upon the special form of association between the University and the recipient which we believe to be integral to the concept of the honorary degree. Implicit in this view is our sense that greater attention could and should be given to ways of drawing honorary degree recipients more closely into the life of the University of Michigan, both during the period of commencement and subsequently. During the period surrounding graduation, increasing the opportunities for meaningful interaction between honorary degree recipients and University Regents, Officers, Deans, faculty, and students may enable the University better to realize the unusual benefits which these awards present, and may also increase the sense in which the University feels itself to be collectively honored by entering into this unique relationship. Subsequent to commencement ceremonies, communication with honorary degree recipients could be improved, through mailings of appropriate University publications, through invitations to special events, through requests to participate on visiting committees, and through solicitation for advice, counsel, and support of various kinds.

Active cultivation of relationships of this kind will assuredly require the coordinated and sustained efforts of the Offices of the President, the Alumni Association, the Vice President for Development and Communication, and others, as well as the appropriate offices in individual schools and colleges. The Committee recognizes that such efforts, if they are to be successful, will also require considerable imagination and fresh thinking; we further recognize that they may require additional resources. We nonetheless recommend that the University make the investment--both in the honorary degree process, and in alternative forms of

recognition. As we have noted above, we believe that the entire University community stands only to gain from efforts to expand the celebratory imagination of the University of Michigan.