

TO: Senate Executive Committee

FROM: Nolan Miller, Chair
Ninth Senate Review Commission

DATE: February 27, 2026

SUBJECT: Review of the Honorary Degree Award Process

Charge

The Ninth Senate Review Commission (SR9) undertook this review of the honorary degree award criteria and process pursuant to the October 7, 2025 charge issued by the Senate Executive Committee under Article VI, Section 10 of the Senate Constitution, directing SR9 to “conduct a comprehensive review of the current honorary degree award criteria and process and make recommendations for improvement.”

SR9 approached its work as a comprehensive structural reconsideration of the honorary degree award process in light of statutory obligations, shared governance principles, institutional objectives, and structural realities. While institutional history informed deliberations, this report does not revisit prior nominations or individual cases; it evaluates the design of the process itself.

While questions of nominee privacy have received considerable attention in recent discussions, SR9’s review was not limited to concerns of confidentiality. SR9’s primary focus was on deliberative quality: ensuring that nominations are evaluated through disciplined application of written criteria, that institutional endorsement reflects substantive judgment rather than procedural forwarding, and that nominees and sponsoring units are treated with seriousness and respect at every stage of the process.

Process and Deliberation

SR9 met on the following dates:

Fall 2025: October 30; November 13; November 20; December 4; December 11.

Spring 2026: January 8; January 22; January 29; February 12; February 19 (continued February 20); February 26.

SR9’s deliberations were informed by formal consultations with:

- **Franci Miller**, Committee Support Staff, Senate Committee on Honorary Degrees (Office of the Senate) – November 13, 2025
- **Matthew Wheeler**, Former Chair, Senate Committee on Honorary Degrees – November 20, 2025
- **Prasanta Kalita**, Chair, Senate Committee on Honorary Degrees – December 11, 2025

- **Laura Wilhelm-Barr**, Former Senior Director, Special Events – January 29, 2026
- **Jon Hale**, Chair *pro tempore*, Senate Committee on Honorary Degrees – February 12, 2026
- **Pollyanna Rhee**, Committee Member, Senate Committee on Honorary Degrees – February 12, 2026

SR9 received a draft report on January 29, 2026 from the ad hoc committee established by the Senate Committee on Honorary Degrees (HD). The final version of that report was issued on February 19, 2026 and is expected to be forwarded to the Senate Executive Committee by HD itself.

At the time SR9 formulated its recommendations, it had the HD ad hoc committee's draft report and its conversations with current and former HD members available for consideration. SR9 views its report as a standalone structural effort informed by those discussions but independent of HD's internal review.

Principal Structural Recommendation: Establishment of JACHD

SR9 unanimously recommends replacing the current Senate Committee on Honorary Degrees with a **Joint Advisory Commission on Honorary Degrees (JACHD)** to conduct substantive, criteria-centered evaluation of nominations.

JACHD is conceived as a representative joint advisory body similar in structure to the **Joint Advisory Committee on Investment, Licensing, and Naming Rights (JACILNR)**: the Senate elects a list of faculty, student, and AP members from which the Chancellor must choose. JACHD would not function as a standing or subsidiary body of the Senate but as a joint advisory body operating pursuant to authority delegated through Senate *Bylaws* consistent with the *University Statutes*, Article II, Section 1(g).

JACHD would:

- Evaluate potential candidates for honorary degree awards with respect to criteria adopted by the Senate, potentially including a new standard of professional integrity and conduct;
- Confirm nominee consent prior to advancing the nomination to a public body;
- Issue a documented evaluative record;
- Render a substantive recommendation regarding advancement of the candidate.

SR9 concluded that advancement should reflect a substantive endorsement by JACHD, not merely procedural certification. The sponsoring unit bears responsibility for initiating the nomination and defending its substantive merits; JACHD functions as an independent evaluative body.

Responsibility for establishing and revising criteria remains with the Senate.

Alternative Models for Final Authority to Recommend Candidates

SR9 evaluated several possible structural approaches and ultimately focused its detailed comparative analysis on two fully developed and viable models for final recommendatory authority.

Model A – Final Recommendation by JACHD

JACHD would forward its recommendation to the administration. The recommendation would be placed on the Senate agenda as a Report for Information. Consistent with Senate rules and agenda-setting

practices, Senators would have the opportunity to discuss and provide feedback on the nomination, but the Senate would not take final dispositive action on individual nominees. The substance of any public Senate discussion would be recorded in the minutes and may be conveyed through the administrative chain to the Chancellor and, as appropriate, to the President and the Board of Trustees.

Model B – Final Recommendation by Senate

JACHD would conduct a substantive review and advance nominees to the Senate. The Senate would retain final recommendatory authority through a public up-or-down vote following open discussion on the Senate floor.

Under Model B, the Senate may incorporate additional procedural steps designed to improve deliberation within the structural constraints of a large public body. These steps may include a no-vote First Read, a period for submission of written questions, and circulation of written responses prior to final action. Such measures may be implemented by the SEC under its existing agenda-setting authority when deemed appropriate to enhance deliberative clarity and fairness.

A majority-negative vote would result in the nomination not moving forward. Positive recommendations would proceed through administration to the Board of Trustees for consideration of conferral.

Commission Preferences

SR9 voted **9–3 in favor of Model A.**

The majority concluded that Model A better aligns substantive evaluation with the structural realities of the Senate as a large deliberative body. The Senate meets on a fixed schedule, carries a broad statutory agenda, operates in public session, and must resolve complex questions within limited meeting time. While procedural refinements can improve deliberation, the majority determined that individual-case adjudication of complex nominations is more effectively conducted within a smaller, representative body capable of sustained review. Model A preserves meaningful Senate voice through control of criteria, structural oversight, and public discussion, while still locating final authority to recommend candidates where deliberative capacity is best aligned with the nature of the decision.

The minority favored Model B, emphasizing the importance of the Senate’s publicly visible vote in fulfilling its statutory role to recommend candidates and expressing concern that removal of the final vote could be perceived as diminishing Senate authority.

SR9 recognized that both models are viable. Preference depends upon how one weighs competing objectives: structural robustness, visibility of Senate action, concentration of evaluative authority, protection of the dignity of the nominee and the institution, tolerance for floor-level adjudication dynamics in the public sphere, and the impact the honorary degree award process has on the reputation and perceived effectiveness of the Senate as a whole.

Shared Reforms Under Either Model

SR9 identified several reforms that should apply regardless of the governance model selected.

Most significantly, SR9 concluded that the current statutory language addressing honorary and earned degrees in a single sentence is poorly constructed and fails to reflect the distinct nature of each of these functions. SR9 recommends that this language be referred to the Senate Committee on University Statutes and Senate Procedures (SP) for consideration of possible amendments to clarify and separate the provisions governing honorary degree awards from those governing earned degrees.

In addition, SR9 recommends:

- Clarification and reaffirmation of written criteria by the Senate, including consideration of whether an explicit standard of professional integrity and conduct should be adopted;
- Increased documentation of internal faculty and stakeholder support prior to advancement;
- Clear expectation that the sponsoring unit bears responsibility for substantive defense of the nomination;
- Explicit reaffirmation that while philanthropy may play a part in recommending a candidate, philanthropy to the University, on its own, is not a sufficient criterion;
- Reconsideration of the role and weight of support from external letters relative to statements of support from internal stakeholders;
- Nominee consent safeguards;
- Calendar discipline and avoidance of compressed deliberation;
- Reconsideration of the current practice of conferring honorary degree awards only during the May commencement weekend;
- Periodic monitoring and structural review.

Possible Inclusion of a Professional Conduct Criterion

SR9 discussed the possibility that a professional conduct criterion should be added to the criteria for honorary degree awards on the theory that, although discussion and debate on the Senate floor cannot be restricted, if such factors will bear on the debate, it may be desirable to explicitly state expectations as a guide to sponsors in preparing their nominations. SR9 felt that, if such a criterion were added, it should not be a general morality clause. Rather, since honorary degree awards are conveyed by the university community, in effect welcoming the recipient into our community, the expectations for honorary degree award candidates should be the same as those imposed on faculty, staff, or students.

SR9 thoroughly discussed the issue and felt that any final language on this issue is best left to the body that will be formalizing and periodically reviewing the criteria.

Implementation

Implementation will require:

- Following reporting to the Senate Executive Committee, SR9's report and recommendations should be reported to the Senate;
- Following adoption in principle of any recommendations by the Senate, the matter should be referred to the Senate Committee on University Statutes and Senate Procedures to consider necessary amendments to the Senate's governing documents;
- Clarification of transition provisions;
- Consideration of statutory revision as noted above.

Closing

SR9 respectfully submits the attached Report and Executive Summary for Senate consideration.

The Commission believes the proposed reforms strengthen shared governance, protect nominee dignity, and better align the honorary degree award criteria and process with institutional objectives and statutory obligations.

NINTH SENATE REVIEW COMMISSION

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