

Proposed Models of Honorary Degree Governance at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Executive Summary

This Executive Summary accompanies the report of the Ninth Senate Review Commission (SR9) concerning the honorary degree award process. SR9 was charged to conduct a comprehensive review of the current honorary degree award criteria and process and to make recommendations for improvement.

The summary below outlines the Commission's principal findings, shared reforms, and the two alternative models considered for final authority to recommend candidates.

1. The Nature of the Honor

Honorary degrees are awarded by the University and represent one of its highest institutional honors. The Senate is entrusted by Statute with recommending candidates for honorary degrees, but the distinction itself is best understood as an honor given not by the Senate alone, but by the entire University community.

The University of Illinois has a longstanding tradition of shared governance in which faculty, students, staff, and administrators participate in institutional decision-making through established structures and articulated standards. In this context, "shared" does not signify a single procedural mechanism or the existence of a veto, but rather a commitment to meaningful participation and informed academic judgment. Because honorary degree awards are academic recognitions, faculty judgment should play a primary role in their evaluation.

For any nominee, the sponsoring unit has determined that the individual is deserving of one of the University's highest honors. The process, therefore, should reflect the seriousness of that judgment and treat nominees with institutional respect, whether or not an honorary degree award is ultimately conferred. While confidentiality in the consideration of awards is often desirable, respect for nominees may also be maintained through clarity of standards, disciplined deliberation, and adherence to articulated procedures.

2. Objectives and Structural Constraints

The review of the honorary degree award process has been guided by institutional objectives and structural constraints.

Objectives

The governance structure should:

- Preserve meaningful faculty voice.
- Ensure disciplined application of written criteria at all stages of deliberation.
- Ensure that nominees are treated with institutional respect, including confirmation of consent before advancement to public deliberation.
- Clarify allocation of responsibility between evaluation, advocacy, and final recommendation.
- Maintain institutional credibility and alignment with statutory language.
- Provide a structure capable of sustained, careful consideration of complex questions.
- Support timely coordination with administrative and Board of Trustees processes.
- Ensure that the process embodies the university-wide nature of the honorary degree award.

Structural Constraints

Any model must operate within the structural realities of the Senate and the University:

- The Senate is a large deliberative body operating under the Illinois Open Meetings Act (OMA).
- The Senate meets on a fixed schedule and addresses multiple categories of statutory and governance business.
- Senate deliberation occurs in public session, with limited opportunity for iterative reconsideration outside noticed meetings.
- The University *Statutes* assign the Senate the exclusive authority to recommend candidates for honorary degree awards; the Senate must provide a mechanism for carrying out that responsibility.
- Upon the recommendation of the Senate, the Board of Trustees has final authority to confer honorary degree awards.
- Individual senators retain the right to speak and vote according to conscience under Senate rules and applicable law.

3. Shared Reforms (Applicable Under Either Model)

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

The Senate retains authority over the criteria governing honorary degree awards. SR9 recommends that the Senate *consider* adopting a Professional Integrity and Conduct criterion. Any such criterion should clearly delineate the nature of the standard that will be applied and explicitly state any grounds for disqualification. Lawful political positions, advocacy, or partisan affiliation should not constitute grounds for disqualification.

In addition, SR9 recommends:

- Clarification and reaffirmation of written criteria to ensure disciplined, consistent application.
- Increased documentation of internal faculty and stakeholder support prior to advancement of a nomination.
- Clear expectation that the sponsoring unit bears responsibility for substantive defense of the nomination.
- Explicit reaffirmation that philanthropy to the University, on its own, is not a sufficient criterion, while recognizing that philanthropic contributions may be considered as part of a broader record.
- Nominee consent safeguards prior to advancement to public deliberation.
- Periodic monitoring and review of the process to ensure continued alignment with statutory obligations and institutional objectives.
- Referral to the Senate Committee on University Statutes and Senate Procedures (SP) to consider amendments clarifying and separating the statutory provisions governing honorary and earned degrees.

4. Central Reform: Establishment of JACHD

SR9 recommends the establishment of a Joint Advisory Commission on Honorary Degrees (JACHD) to conduct substantive, criteria-based evaluation of nominees, replacing the current Honorary Degrees Committee in this role. This reform is common to both governance structures below.

JACHD would:

- Operate as a joint advisory body distinct from the Senate.
- Conduct holistic, criteria-based evaluation of nominees.
- Confirm nominee consent prior to advancement.
- Provide a documented evaluative record.

The sponsoring unit remains responsible for initiating the nomination and providing a substantive defense of the nominee's qualifications under the published criteria. JACHD's role is evaluative and independent; it does not function as a procedural clearinghouse for sponsors' submissions.

Establishment of JACHD is not intended as a criticism of the current Senate Committee on Honorary Degrees (HD). Rather, it reflects recognition that a standing Senate committee is itself an OMA body subject to many of the same structural constraints as the full Senate. The current members of HD are expected to play a key role in the transition to the revised structure. This includes assisting in clarifying and, if necessary, refining the written criteria, consulting on implementation of a more robust evaluative process, and serving as a natural pool of initial recommendations for membership on JACHD in order to preserve institutional knowledge and continuity.

Under both models described below, responsibility for adopting and revising the criteria governing honorary degree awards remains with the Senate.

5. Two Models for Final Recommendation

The models differ principally in where final authority to recommend candidates resides.

Model A – Final Recommendation by JACHD

- JACHD issues the final recommendation to the administration.
- The recommendation is placed on the Senate agenda as a Report for Information.
- Senators may discuss but do not vote on individual nominees.
- Final action proceeds through the administrative and Board of Trustees processes.

This model separates substantive evaluation from final public disposition while preserving Senate discussion and structural oversight.

Model B – Final Recommendation by Senate

- JACHD conducts substantive evaluation and advances nominees to the Senate.
- A mandatory First Read allows discussion without a vote.
- Written follow-up questions may be submitted and responses circulated.
- At a subsequent meeting, the Senate conducts an “up-or-down” vote.
- Ordinary parliamentary procedures are followed.

This model retains the Senate’s visible vote while incorporating staged deliberation and criteria anchoring to support careful consideration within structural constraints.

6. Comparative Considerations

Both models share the same core deliberative structure through JACHD and the same shared reforms. They differ primarily in:

- Whether the Senate conducts the final vote on individual nominees.
- The degree to which final action occurs within the full Senate format.
- The form in which the Senate’s authority is exercised.

The choice between the models ultimately turns on judgments about how best to align substantive evaluation, shared governance principles, the manner in which the Senate exercises its role in shared governance, and the structural realities under which the Senate operates.

7. Implementation Requirements

Implementation of either model would require the following actions:

1. Clarify Statutory Language.

Refer to the Senate Committee on University Statutes and Senate Procedures (SP) the current statutory language addressing honorary and earned degrees for consideration of amendments to clarify and separate those provisions.

2. Establish JACHD.

Adopt a *Bylaw* amendment creating the Joint Advisory Commission on Honorary Degrees (JACHD) as the body responsible for substantive evaluation of nominees.

3. Determine Final Recommendation Structure.

Select either Model A (Final Recommendation by JACHD) or Model B (Final Recommendation by Senate) as the structure for final Senate action on individual nominees.

4. Affirm Senate Authority Over Criteria.

Confirm that responsibility for adopting and revising honorary degree criteria resides with the Senate and direct an appropriate standing committee to review and, if approved, incorporate the proposed criteria clarifications.

5. Authorize Bylaw Drafting.

Refer the selected model and structural framework to the Senate Committee on University Statutes and Senate Procedures (SP), or other appropriate body, for preparation of necessary bylaw revisions and implementation language.

6. Confirm Statutory Consistency.

Affirm that the proposed structure is consistent with the Senate's statutory duty to recommend candidates for honorary degree awards and with its existing authority to delegate statutory duties through *Bylaws*. The structure is also consistent with other institutional governance practices, including the use of joint advisory bodies for consequential decisions such as naming.

7. Provide for Structural Review.

Include in the implementing language a requirement for annual light monitoring and a comprehensive structural review after 3–5 years to assess whether the adopted model is functioning as intended.

8. Clarify Transition.

Specify the effective date of the revised structure and the treatment of nominations currently in process.