New York University
Undergraduate Academic Affairs Committee

Subcommittee Report on Latin Honors
May 10, 2005, revised on June 27, 2005

We welcome the opportunity to clarify the awarding of Latin honors at New York University as part of a general review of a variety of recognition systems for our students. Reviewing Latin honors, in particular, allows us to address concerns about grade inflation, about an over-focus on GPA, and about the national reputation of our university.

The question of Latin honors speaks to honoring meaningfully our very best and highest achieving students and about establishing similar standards for achievement among our various colleges. For NYU to be recognized as a first-class university, we believe there should be consistency across the board in determining Latin honors. Moreover, since there are a considerable number of students from each school taking courses at the others, it also makes sense to have a university-wide practice. Finally, we believe that no more than 30% (or a figure close to that) of any graduating class from any of our colleges and schools should receive Latin honors.

We propose, then, that the same system of percentages be established to determine Latin Honors in all schools; and that this system of percentages take the following shape: the top 5% of each graduating class (according to GPA) would receive Summa Cum Laude; the next 10% of the class would receive Magna Cum Laude; the next 15% would receive Cum Laude. (Hence, a maximum of 30% of each graduating class would receive Latin Honors.) Such a system would not have to be revisited, although minor adjustments might have to be made if there were, for example, too many students with the same GPA to fit neatly into one (or more) of the percentages.

This formula aligns us with the kinds of percentages now in operation at schools we consider to be similar in scope and ambition to NYU: for example, Columbia, Duke, and Yale. Furthermore, we would suggest borrowing Duke’s system of determining GPAs for honors on the basis of the preceding year’s overall GPA percentages, thus resolving the problem of having several pools of graduating students per year.

We are aware of the potential concern that by drawing up percentages, we may be handicapping those programs or departments that already practice strict control of grades. Or, on the contrary, we may be privileging certain departments where grades seem to be, on the whole, higher. There is no prophylaxis against this, and in fact this result can sometimes occur under the present system as well. However, an effort to make Latin honors dependent on percentages, rather than GPA, may help discourage the dysfunctional behavior of students who constantly seek to have their grades changed.
While we do not intend for this proposal to take anything away from students, we are eager to establish a standard that will enhance our reputation and therefore make it easier to judge the true abilities of those who achieve Latin honors. (By granting only 30% of our students Latin Honors, we address in part the actual or perceived problem of grade inflation. We would, indeed, suggest that transcripts include the statement: “Starting in 2006 only 30% of any graduating class will receive Latin honors, and these designations are based on the following percentages: ______.” This would introduce to the transcript an element of transparency.) Departmental honors will, of course, continue to signal those students especially gifted and productive in their area of specialization. The Dean’s List, another noted marker of achievement, will likewise recognize exceptional students.

Subcommittee Members:
Judith Miller (convener)
Fred Myers
Anurag Gupta