

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON  
COMMITTEE ON HONORARY DEGREES

**STANDARDS AND PROCEDURES FOR HONORARY DEGREES**

*(effective 03/11/04; rev. 5/1/2015)*

The University of Wisconsin-Madison typically awards an honorary degree in recognition of a career of extraordinary accomplishment. In many cases, there will be some single, supreme achievement for which a candidate is best known; but an honorary degree is not given to celebrate a deed alone or upon the simple meeting of a set of minimum standards. Because the honor is conferred upon a person, the Committee on Honorary Degrees looks to sustained and characteristic activity as its warrant—uncommonly meritorious activity exhibiting values that are esteemed by a great university. The committee is eager to receive the nominations of worthy women and minority candidates.

**Conditions of Eligibility**

1. The committee is obliged by faculty legislation to “give preference in its nominations to persons who are connected in some significant way with the state or with the university,” although a Wisconsin connection is not a pre-requisite to an honorary degree.
2. The committee will not recommend an honorary degree for an emeritus faculty member of our university solely on the basis of her/his performance while at UW-Madison.
3. The committee will not recommend awarding honorary degrees to serving members of the Wisconsin legislature or the Wisconsin congressional delegation, elected and appointed officials, members of the state judiciary, serving members of the University of Wisconsin System Board Of Regents, or anyone currently employed by any university of the UW System or by UW System administration. Such persons are eligible for consideration two years or more after they have vacated office or terminated employment.
4. UW System policy generally limits to one the number of honorary degrees any individual may receive from the UW System.
5. The committee seeks to avoid involving the university in partisan politics.
6. The committee will not award an honorary degree solely in recognition of past or prospective gifts to the university.

**Procedures**

The Committee on Honorary Degrees is a central agency in the process of awarding honorary degrees. The committee is composed of twenty-eight members, including the chancellor and the UW System president or their designees. Sixteen members are selected by the faculty, four from each of the four faculty divisions of the university (arts and humanities, biological sciences, physical sciences, social studies). Ten members from the faculty or the administration are appointed by the chancellor.

In mid-March of the academic year, the chair of the Committee on Honorary Degrees sends a notice to all members of the university faculty, academic staff and Board of Regents inviting preliminary nomination dossiers of candidates for honorary degrees with a mid-April deadline for submission. This dossier need only contain:

1. A one to two-page letter documenting the nominee’s extraordinary contributions to a field or profession, and to society, and
2. The nominee’s curriculum vitae, or in its absence, information about the nominee ordinarily presented in a curriculum vitae.

Due to the need for confidentiality, outside letters of support should not be requested for the preliminary nomination dossier.

Submission of a nomination does not ensure its successful outcome. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that potential candidates NOT be informed that a nomination is under consideration. Strict confidentiality of a nomination protects the nominating unit and the university from a nominee's disappointment should a candidacy not advance.

Most nominations originate by a formal resolution of an academic unit of the university, commonly a department or professional school. The strong support of an academic unit is usually essential to the success of a nomination, especially when the nominee's accomplishments reflect the values and interests of the unit. The nominating unit must be willing and able to invest the time and effort required to submit a complete and persuasive proposal. Whenever possible, the nominating department should seek co-sponsorship from another department that can further provide context to the significance of the nominee. Often the faculties of two or more departments collaborate in endorsing a nomination. Faculty legislation requires that nominations originating from any source other than a department, school or college be referred by the chair of the Committee on Honorary Degrees to an appropriate department, school or college for recommendation.

The committee evaluates the preliminary dossiers, and where in the judgment of the committee the documentation reflects significant prospects for success, the nominating academic unit is invited to assemble full documentation. The committee may ask that the sponsoring unit respond to specific points or questions so the nomination can advance. The second-stage dossier should illuminate and document fully the distinguished and sustained achievements of the candidate including the individual's record of excellence, innovation, and previous awards and recognitions. **The key to a successful nomination is not the size of the dossier, but convincing evidence of the candidate's extraordinary accomplishments.**

Departments are asked to include among the *second-stage* nominating materials:

1. A cover letter or essay that presents the case in a manner that can be appreciated by nonspecialists. Include the vote of the sponsoring unit(s) in support of the nomination and concrete responses to any questions from the Committee on Honorary Degrees.
2. Nominee's curriculum vitae, or in its absence, information about the nominee ordinarily presented in a curriculum vitae.
3. Letters of support from academic units and from other persons prominent in the candidate's field, who may include but must go beyond UW-Madison faculty. The committee made a formal recommendation to ask for **a maximum of 5 letters supporting a nominee's service.**

These can be helpful if they contribute substantive additional perspectives for the committee. Letters from referees should specifically address the basis on which the candidate is being nominated and evaluate the significance of the candidate's accomplishments and contributions.

4. Documentary evidence of the impact of the nominee's career.
5. A 100-word abstract and a suggested degree title (e.g., Doctor of Science, Doctor of Fine Arts, Doctor of Humane Letters, Doctor of Laws, etc.).

The full dossiers, if requested, are due in advance of the committee's September meeting. Each member of the committee receives the dossiers in advance of that meeting.

Second-stage nominating departments are invited to send representatives to the committee's September meeting to testify on behalf of the nominees and answer questions from committee members. Following the testimony of these representatives, the committee discusses the nominations. After their deliberation, the members of the committee cast written ballots to determine which candidates should be recommended and the degree appropriate for each candidate being endorsed. The committee ordinarily aims to award three to six honorary degrees at Spring Commencement. All discussions of nominees are conducted in executive session. *Robert's Rules of Order* inform the committee's parliamentary proceedings.

The chair of the Committee on Honorary Degrees sends a written report of the committee's actions to the chancellor. This report, which contains the preliminary abstracts of the degree citations, is submitted by the chancellor to the Board of Regents for the board's review and approval at its October meeting; if questions or concerns are raised regarding a candidate, the Board of Regents reviews the nomination again at its November meeting. In December, the chair of the Committee on Honorary Degrees reads the report to an executive session of the Faculty Senate. After discussion, the senate casts written ballots—a three-fourths affirmative vote being required for confirmation. The chancellor conveys the nominations that have received senate approval to the Board of Regents.

The chancellor invites the honorary degree candidates who have been confirmed by the Faculty Senate and the Board of Regents to attend the May commencement ceremony. Honorary degrees are not awarded *in absentia*. A degree may be awarded posthumously to a candidate, if after accepting the chancellor's invitation, his/her death occurs before the scheduled conferral.

Preliminary consideration of candidates for honorary degrees is conducted with the high degree of confidentiality appropriate to matters of personnel. Only the chancellor may authorize the public announcement of honorary degree recipients.