Latin Honors requirements in A&S

LA&J Committee on Academic Standing and Honors
November 2, 2016

Arguments for changes to requirements for Summa cum Laude in A&S.

Over the past couple of years, the Committee on Academic Standing and Honors has noticed some shortcomings in the current system of awarding highest Latin honors - summa cum laude - that we would like to discuss.

A&S currently has some “numerical criteria” for Summa; these include a GPA requirement, a requirement that the student receive 6 A’s in the major, and a requirement that the student receive an A in 4 of 5 distribution areas. Additionally, there is a requirement that the student’s major department (or program) make a recommendation for Summa. (See below for the text of the criteria taken from the Bulletin).

The committee notes the following shortcomings of these criteria:

• **Lack of consistency across departments**: The requirement for departmental nomination of individual students for summa has led to some inconsistency. For example, we have seen students who would almost certainly have received summa in one department denied it in others, sometimes for vague or subjective reasons.

• **Mismatch with external understanding**: Most peer schools award summa on the basis of GPA alone. Tufts is one of few schools in which the discretion of the department plays a role in the award of summa. Graduate and professional schools and potential employers reading the transcripts of our students are unlikely to recognize this higher standard.

• **Inefficiency**: Administration of the existing requirements requires a rather large effort by this Committee (and others). This effort includes verification that a student has the required number of “A’s” in distribution and major requirements, a criterion that almost all students with a GPA of 3.8 meet in any case. Moreover, the committee often has to remind departments and advisers to provide letters in support of summa candidacy. We have also noticed that some departments provide detailed and lengthy letters in support of candidates, while letters from other departments are substantially more terse.

We wonder: what is being “bought” with the current procedures? Might this effort be used in a better way?

Possible Changes

The following suggestions should be viewed as a starting point for discussion! See attached for the current language in the Bulletin describing the criteria for Summa.

• Eliminate the open-ended “departmental recommendation” requirement; replace it with a requirement that students receive (something like) “departmental honors”, which should be awarded if a student satisfies a department-specific list of (objective) criteria. See below for examples of such criteria.

• Eliminate the requirement of a “departmental letter”; replace by confirmation of departmental honors.

• possibly eliminate “A’s in major/A’s in distributions” requirements. Arguably “6 A’s in major” could be part of the criteria for departmental honors.
Data

For the past few academic years, spring graduation has seen roughly 200 candidates referred to the committee for evaluation for Summa. Roughly 3/4 of these go on to receive Summa. Between 5 and 10 of the 200 typically fail to receive enough "A's in distributions or A's in the major", often because they are transfer students. We have observed that most (?) students in this position ultimately fail to achieve a 3.8 GPA.

Arguments against a change to Latin Honors requirements

- Substantial change could arguably dilute a long-standing tradition at Tufts University.
- It is not entirely clear how to administer/enforce “departmental honors”.
- Large departments may feel “departmental recommendation” are superior to objective criteria in determining fitness for Summa.

Examples of “objective requirements"

These descriptions are taken from the website of the indicated departments.

- **Psychology**: “In recommending students for honors and awards, the Psychology Department gives special attention to research done by the student. To graduate summa cum laude, a student MUST do independent empirical research deemed relevant to psychology; sponsored either by a faculty member in a department at Tufts, or by an individual outside of Tufts.”

- **Drama**: “We expect each Drama major to gain experience in the creative aspects of drama and/or dance through involvement in the department’s production program. Graduation magna cum laude or summa cum laude with a drama major is contingent not only on scholastic achievement, but also on significant participation in productions.”

- **American Studies**: “In recommending summa cum laude, program faculty will look for additional evidence of academic distinction (including but not limited to the completion of an SSP, HT, substantial independent project, or a record of significant coursework at an advanced level (100+ or Integrative Seminar level courses in excess of the basic major requirements).”

- **Biology**: “to be eligible for summa honors in Biology, students are expected to have had at least one research experience during their undergraduate career.”

(The Biology concentration checklist then asks for details about “Research experience [not required for the major; required for candidates for summa cum laude]” )
Current Summa Requirements

The following description is taken from the Bulletin:

Grades in courses taken at institutions other than Tufts shall not be considered as criteria for honors. Exceptions to this rule are courses taken through cross-registration, the domestic exchange programs, the Mystic Seaport Program, or Tufts programs abroad.

See also Thesis Honors Program.

• Distinction (cum laude) is conferred at commencement on liberal arts students who achieved a record of five credits of A or A- in satisfying their concentration requirements, including related fields, and whose cumulative average for all Tufts courses is 3.50 or higher.

• High distinction (magna cum laude) may be conferred at commencement on liberal arts students who achieved a record of six credits of A or A- in satisfying their concentration requirements, including related fields, and whose cumulative average for all Tufts courses is 3.65 or higher. Students must be recommended in writing by their departmental major.

• Highest distinction (summa cum laude) may be conferred at commencement on liberal arts students who achieved a record of six credits of A or A- in satisfying their concentration requirements and whose cumulative average for all courses is 3.80 or better. Such candidates must also have earned at least one credit of A or A- in four of the five areas of the distribution requirement. All of these A or A- grades must be received in courses offered by a department or interdisciplinary program at Tufts or in Tufts Programs Abroad. Please note that Advanced Placement scores are not interpreted as grades.

It is important to emphasize that the numerical criteria for magna cum laude and summa cum laude determine only eligibility for consideration; actual award of these honors is contingent on departmental recommendation. A description of additional departmental criteria (such as independent research) for honors recommendations is available from each academic department or program. In addition, for students recommended for summa cum laude, the department must supply a letter supporting the recommendation. Finally, summa cum laude is awarded only by special vote of the entire faculty, recognizing extraordinary achievement in the breadth, as well as the depth, of the student’s intellectual development. Students whose record includes a serious disciplinary infraction will not normally be eligible for summa cum laude honors. Exceptions to this policy can be made only after disclosure by the Dean of Student Affairs of the details of the infraction and subsequent vote by the faculty.

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1 The stipulation “for all Tufts courses” seems redundant with the first paragraph of this section.
2 or programmatic?
3 The committee currently requires a vote as well as “recommendation in writing”, though this vote is not quite explicitly stipulated.
4 Again, redundant with the first paragraph. Perhaps that first paragraph should already include the remark given here about AP credit?
5 Redundant – the requirements for Magna and Summa already stipulate departmental recommendation, though the required form of that recommendation is not stated explicitly.
6 The committee has observed that the degree of detail in these letters varies a good bit.