

The Roots and Meaning of Latin Honors

The system of honoring students with *summa cum laude*, *magna cum laude*, and *cum laude* began in medieval European universities to recognize students who excelled in their studies. Honors were created in Latin, the lingua franca of the time, and remains the language we use for honors today. *Summa* means “highest,” *cum* means “with,” and *laude* comes from *laudare* meaning “to praise” or “to commend.” *Magna* comes from *magnus* meaning “great” or “considerable.”

Today, Latin honors are primarily used at American universities but can be found in other universities around the world. Latin honors tend to be used mostly for undergraduate programs, whereas graduate schools might have different systems for recognizing academic excellence in their graduates.

American universities have used Latin honors beginning with Harvard University in 1869. Under the administration of President Seeley*, Amherst College also adopted this system. A passage from *A History of Amherst College during the administration of its first five presidents: from 1821 to 1891* explains the system when it was instituted.

“And instead of attempting to fix the rank of every individual student by minute divisions on a scale of a hundred as formerly, five grades of scholarship were established and degrees were conferred upon the graduating classes according to their grades. If a student was found to be in the first or lowest grade, he was not considered as a candidate for a degree, though he might receive a certificate stating the facts in regard to his standing; if he appeared in the second grade the degree of A.B. [Bachelor of Arts] was conferred upon him *rite*; if in the third, *cum laude*; if in the fourth, *magna cum laude*; while if he reached the fifth grade he received the degree *summa cum laude*. The advantages of this course, as stated to the trustees by the president, are that it properly discriminates between those who, though passing over the same course of study, have done it with great differences of merit and of scholarship, and that it furnishes a healthy incentive to the best work without exciting an excessive spirit of emulation.” (pp. 237-238)

Accordingly, honors today are usually given according to GPA, and depending on the university or college, class rank or a capstone thesis might also be used as criteria for bestowing honors.

Nitobe College chose to use them as they are recognized around the world so if Nitobe College students apply for graduate programs or work in other countries, their

achievements can be easily seen by the honors they received. Not only do honors signify that students are exceptional, but they also indicate that students are intellectually prepared, have high motivation, and excellent potential.

Undoubtedly, this is an appropriate and apt description of Nitobe College students.

* President Seeyle was the President of Amherst College when the first Japanese student, Nijjima Jo, entered the college. Seeyle was a great inspiration to Nijjima Jo when he was at Amherst College and it was Nijjima who recommended Amherst to Uchimura Kanzo. In *How I Became a Christian: Out of My Diary*, Uchimura describes his first meeting with President Seeyle: “A large well-built figure, the leonine eyes suffused with tears, the warm grasp of hands unusually tight, orderly words of welcome and sympathy . . .” (p. 111) Uchimura stated “But none influenced and changed me more than the worthy President himself.” (p. 113)

Tyler, William Seymour, *A History of Amherst College during the administration of its first five presidents: from 1821 to 1891*, New York: F. H. Hitchcock, 1895.

Uchimura Kanzo, *How I Became a Christian: Out of My Diary*, Uchimura Kanzo Complete Works, Vol. 3, Iwanami Shoten, 1982.