

Distinction criteria varies from GPAs to activities

By Deb Shanahan

The nomination of seniors for graduation with distinction or high distinction varies from college to college.

The criteria used ranges from grade point averages to extra-curricular activities to senior theses.

Students in the College of Arts and Sciences write theses for the honor, usually on the advice of someone with whom they have been doing research, according to Donal Burns, chairman of the college's committee on academic distinction and awards for students.

The theses is read by the student's department advisor and one other person, Burns said. The student also is given an exam over the work before a recommendation is written to the committee, he said.

Graduation with distinction is granted automatically if the student's grade point average falls within the top 10 percent of the class.

Students graduate with high distinction if their GPA's fall in the top 5 percent, he said.

The honors paper enables students to move up a level — from high distinction to highest. If the student did not qualify for distinction, any student who writes a thesis can be considered, Burns explained.

"We are expecting 30 theses this semester for May graduation. We have seen some exceptional work in the past," Burns said.

Graduating with distinction or high distinction is based almost entirely on grade point averages in both the College of Business Administration and in the College of Engineering and Technology.

CBA dean, Gary Schwendiman, said the top 6 percent of business students are graduated with distinction or high distinction.

He said the selection is based entirely on GPA. The cut-off point usually is 3.85 or 3.9. The associate dean decides who is eligible, then the names are voted on and approved by the faculty, he said.

The College of Engineering and Technology has a committee to review which seniors will be graduated with the honor, according to Associate Dean Lyle Young.

The decision is primarily based on GPA, he said. The top 2 percent are eligible for high distinction and the next 6 percent for distinction, he said.

The committee is necessary because people from both the Lincoln and Omaha campuses have to be reviewed, he said.

The grading system is different in Omaha — they don't have pluses — so the

committee spends a lot of time figuring equivalents," he explained. Faculty approval is required, he said, but "they usually go along with what the committee decides."

These differences in the way colleges determine who graduates with distinction and high distinction bother some people, including Josie Weber, associate professor of journalism.

"If the students are wearing the same little red or white cords at graduation, it should mean the same thing," she said. The honor means more to students who have to do something for it than to students who are chosen from a list or are nominated by their advisers, Weber said.

"It doesn't seem fair to not have the same measuring stick. All students should be rated equally for the same honor," said Weber, suggesting that a universitywide committee might be the answer.

Gordon Culver, chairman of the Teachers College committee on degrees with distinction, disagreed.

"I think it's a plus to the university that each college has its own criteria for this honor," he said. This difference reflects differences in college requirements, he said.

"We're turning out a person who will be working with people of all ages. It's important that this person be a well-rounded individual, and not just able to do well with the books," Culver said.

"I've known a number of brilliant people who could make terrible teachers. They shouldn't be graduated with distinction from a Teachers College," he said.

Culver said his committee makes its final decision after looking at three areas — grades, student teaching experience, and extra-curricular activities. Recommendations from the faculty also are important, especially for students not seeking certification who do not student teach, he said.

Schwendiman also favors the idea of individual colleges determining which seniors will receive degrees with distinction.

"Different colleges have different standards and the average GPA would be lower in colleges, such as engineering and business, where the standards are tougher," Schwendiman said.

"There's not a great deal of unevenness across the colleges, although at the bottom end there may be some discrimination," he said.

"I'd be delighted if a group of students got together and came up with a better way of doing things," he added.

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