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A Brief History of High Distinction Checks

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The following article was originally written in 1994 by Director Lewis during her tenure as University Registrar as a memorandum regarding a question which arose at a College Curriculum Council meeting.

Following your question at yesterday's CCC meeting about the proper use of distinction marks, I reviewed the minutes of Faculty Meetings and those of the Committee on Academic Standing (CAS) to clarify the historical development of high distinction marks on final grade reports. For many decades, the CAS has been the faculty committee charged with determining which students will be graduated with Latin honors. With the passage of the dual grading system (A,B,C,/NC and S/NC) and the consequent abolition of GPA calculations, the task of identifying students to receive degrees with distinction became extremely difficult. In the early years of the New Curriculum, the faculty considered several proposals to abolish degrees with distinction entirely. However, the proposals were always rejected and the faculty continued to assign CAS the responsibility for identifying graduates to receive degrees with distinction. To carry out its responsibilities, the CAS devised what became known as "S checks." In February of each year, faculty were sent a list of prospective graduates who had received a grade of S in their courses. Faculty were asked to indicate which of the students had completed their work with high distinction. This information was then conveyed to the CAS to be used along with traditional grades in determining the *magna* list.

This procedure seems to have been in effect from at least 1971 until 1975. During that period there are several references to the "S check" system in Faculty Minutes. In the many discussions of grading and degrees with distinction which took

place in the early 70's, concern was often expressed that the S/NC option might be undermined by efforts to include pass-fail courses in *magna* selection. To prevent the "S check" system from turning into the equivalent of an "S+", it was decided that distinction marks would not appear on student records. (See, for example, Faculty Meeting Minutes of 5/31/74.) Even in those early days, when the system was discussed frequently and at great length by the faculty, there was concern that whatever system was being employed was not being used consistently.

The distinction check system was not formally incorporated into *Faculty Rules* until May of 1975, following another round of debate concerning what proportion of students should receive degrees of distinction, whether to have multiple levels of distinction, whether to restrict distinction checks to S-graded courses only, and whether to make the checks openly available on student records. At that meeting, the faculty voted to award *magna* to approximately 20% of each year's graduating class and to "designate those students (regardless of grade option) whose academic performance in this course merits consideration at the appropriate time for the awarding of the Bachelor's Degree *magna cum laude*." This information "will be transmitted at the appropriate time to the CAS, together with whatever other information the CAS may deem relevant, to serve as a basis for the identification of those students eligible to receive the Bachelor's Degree *magna cum laude*." The *Rules* go on to stipulate that the information should be made available to students on request and to Faculty "where reasonable need exists," but they specify that "[t]his information will not be entered upon the student's official transcript, and will not be released outside the University." Following this vote, the high distinction column was added to final grade reports.

Unfortunately, the *Faculty Rules* do not give any guidance as to the basis for awarding a high distinction mark. Over the years, practice among faculty has varied considerably. While there is nothing to prevent faculty from using the distinction mark to indicate an A+ in their own personal grading scheme, there is no clear basis for this designation in the historical record.

Two things have not changed over time, however. The CAS has consistently been the body charged with identifying *magna* graduates and CAS has consistently based that determination on courses in which a grade of A is assigned or in which a grade of S is accompanied by a high distinction mark. The addition of a distinction mark to a grade of A does not carry extra weight in the calculation made by CAS.

A couple of years ago, in response to requests for clarification of the use of distinction marks, the memo sent out with final grade sheets by the Registrar's Office was changed to ask faculty to use the high distinction check to identify students receiving a grade of S whose performance was equivalent to A-level work. This is in

keeping with the use of the mark made by CAS. However, in future versions of this memo, we will also include the actual wording from the *Faculty Rules* in order to make it clear that distinction marks are not restricted to S-graded courses and may be used regardless of grade option.