

Dear members of the Class of 2024 and beyond,

At the most recent faculty meeting, at the request of the College Standards Committee, the College faculty voted to institute three changes to Commencement awards and recognition. First, beginning with Commencement 2024, we will institute the practice of designating the student recipient of the Algernon Sydney Sullivan as the “Senior Speaker” at Commencement. Second, also effective for 2024, student leaders will be asked to determine a process for identifying the student who offers the traditional greeting. Finally, the College will institute the Dean’s awards for scholarship to recognize those students who have the most outstanding academic record, and I actually will begin awarding these starting with this year’s Commencement (2023). These changes will allow greater student voice in identifying their representative speakers and will allow for academic recognition beyond two students.

Your student leaders have been involved in the conversations that resulted in these changes. The chair of the Standards Committee met with leaders last year, when the proposal was first coming into shape, and then again this semester to review the nearly final form. Your fellow students recognized the weaknesses of the existing model and agreed that instead of amending a flawed system, they would rather initiate a new approach, one that is more inclusive and would give students a voice in identifying the individual who would speak for the class—a senior speaker.¹ They also agreed that opening up the form of the greeting, as well as the initiation of the Dean’s Scholar awards, would create a more welcoming and inclusive celebration.

With these changes, we will eliminate the honorary designations “salutatorian” and “valedictorian” (literally, “the one who brings greetings” and “the one who says farewell”), though we will still have students offer both a greeting and a farewell. Common conceptions of *valedictorian* and *salutatorian* associate the honorifics with class rank as determined by GPA. Yet neither GPA nor class rank is included in Sewanee’s stated criteria: according to the current College Catalog, the valedictorian and salutatorian “must be members of the Order of the Gown and must have pursued a full college course of study (128 credit hours) at Sewanee. Exceptions may be made for students spending no more than two semesters at an officially sanctioned off-campus program.” (See <http://e-catalog.sewanee.edu/arts-sciences/degrees/honors-vaedictorian-salutatorian/>.) The College Standards Committee is charged with declaring the valedictorian and salutatorian.

One might suggest that we simply revise the criteria to include specific reference to GPA. However, we already have experience with focusing on GPA: after determining who is eligible for valedictorian / salutatorian based on the stated criteria, the Standards Committee has made their decision based on the students’ final GPAs. And in focusing on GPA, the Committee has come to recognize that doing so is a far from perfect approach.

¹ Sewanee would be far from alone in designating a student speaker for Commencement. Among others, Bates, Carleton, Centre, Colby, Denison, Furman, Gettysburg, Hamilton, Kenyon, Macalester, W&L, and Whitman all have a senior speaker who is not specifically the first in their class. Of note, some others—Davidson, Dickinson, and Rhodes—do not seem to have *any* student speaker at Commencement, based upon their public information.

The Committee knows that differences in final GPAs have sometimes been measured by the thousandth—a point of precision beyond what students see in their Banner record. Among those members of the class of 2023 who meet the stated minimal standard for the “program of study,” the top three GPAs are 3.9868, 3.9725, and 3.96754: a difference of 0.01926 separates first from third. For the class of 2024, the difference between first and third is even more miniscule: 0.009. (And we have 11 members of the class of 2025 with a GPA of 4.0: a tie is surely inevitable.)

Some might argue that a razor-thin difference in GPAs is still a measurable difference. But more importantly, and more illustrative of the inherent flaw in trying to use GPA and/or class rank as an ultimate measure, the Standards Committee has recognized how students have very different academic records in terms of hours earned, hours graded, hours on campus, hours per semester, number of majors or minors, honors or other recognition, etc. One of the hallmarks of a Sewanee education is how each student creates their own academic experience: the ways students move toward graduation are as varied as the student body itself, and yet the current system assumes a high degree of uniformity among students and their Sewanee education—so much so that the only measure of difference is apparently .01 (or less) of a final GPA. As one member of the Standards Committee commented, “To order our students and their divergent academic experiences with precision using a subjective ordinal measure that may lack reliability and validity is just a bad practice. Add on correlations with socio-economic background, race, gender, and field of study and we move from a bad idea to a pernicious one.”

Then there’s the limitation against transfer students within the current approach which requires a minimum number of graded hours taken at Sewanee. The parameters are not without logic: transfer students have fewer graded hours at Sewanee, making for an unbalanced consideration. As well, transfer students are likely to have satisfied many if not all general education credits and can begin a major in earnest, and data fully demonstrate that students’ major GPAs are higher than their overall GPA. (That makes sense: students choose a major because they are interested and already successful in the discipline.) Yet it seems unfair to disqualify transfer students from recognition *prima facie*: they too have tremendous academic experiences, and it is right to find a way to acknowledge their contributions and successes.

So: how will we determine the senior speaker? The Standards Committee and student leaders agreed: who better to be the senior speaker than the recipient of the Algernon Sydney Sullivan award?

As noted in past Commencements, the Sullivan award is “the most distinguished award for graduating seniors in the College of Arts and Sciences” and is granted to the student who best demonstrates character, achievements, leadership, and success. Heretofore the award has been announced at Commencement, and there have been times when both the graduating class and the faculty as a whole have greeted the recipient not just with applause but with a standing ovation in recognition of all they have done for the Sewanee community. With our new approach, this is the

student who will be given the honor of serving as the representative of the class and offering reflections that speak to the whole class.

Unlike the current administrative process for declaring the valedictorian, the process for selecting the Sullivan winner is an inclusive one with a strong student voice. Students can nominate their peers for the award, and the selection committee includes two students (juniors) along with four faculty and four staff. Of course, the selection committee will have to identify the recipient prior to Commencement to allow them sufficient time to prepare and practice their farewell address.

We will still want a graduating senior to offer the formal welcome to Commencement (the task of the current salutatorian), and student leaders will be asked to develop a process for determining that student. I will note that the faculty strongly assert that the greeting need *not* be in Latin (or only in Latin), and student leaders will be encouraged to think about how the greeting can set a truly welcoming and inclusive tone.

Finally, the College—or more precisely, I—will institute the Dean’s awards for scholarship to recognize those students who have the most outstanding academic record. Currently, only two students (the valedictorian and salutatorian) are identified publicly at Commencement for their overall academic achievement. These awards will be more inclusive; I will not be bound to the top two, nor will transfer students be deemed ineligible. Faculty will be involved in the process of determining the recipients.

To be clear, other Commencement honors will continue. Graduates will still be recognized for being members of Phi Beta Kappa and/or for graduating *summa cum laude* (for the top 5%), *magna cum laude* (for the next 10%), or *cum laude* (for the next 10%). We will still note departmental honors and other academic prizes in the Commencement program. (Students will continue to know their final class rank as recorded in SODA—certainly not something we’ve ever published at Commencement, but of interest to some students.)

As noted, I will offer the Dean’s awards for scholarship in May 2023, and the changes concerning the formal welcome and farewell will go into effect with the class graduating in May 2024. In preparation, my office will be coordinating with student leaders and with staff colleagues to confirm membership on the Sullivan award committee and to determine a means of identifying the student who will offer greetings. It will be an exciting effort as we frame processes that are more open, more representative, and without question more student-centered.

Sincerely,

Terry L. Papillon
Dean of the College