The Honorary Degree Committee serves as a screening and review panel for possible recipients of honorary degrees. It provides the President and the Trustees with consultation and advice on faculty perspectives, but does not have actionable power. Final decisions rest with the Board of Trustees. Faculty committee members this year were: Daryl Dance, Claudia Ferman, Gary Greenfield, Erling Sjovold, Peter Swisher, and Jonathan Wight (chair). In addition, Ann Lloyd Breeden (Secretary to the Board) and Shay Moore (Office of the President) participated in discussions.

The Committee invited nominations of candidates from the University Community via Spiderbytes in early September, with a deadline of September 16. Categories of potential honorary awards are: Doctor of Laws, Doctor of Science, Doctor of Commercial Science, Doctor of Letters, Doctor of Fine Arts, Doctor of Humanities, Doctor of Leadership, Doctor of Social Science, and Doctor of Divinity. Nominees are to be “stellar representatives of the University's core values, who have distinguished themselves through professional, civic or humanitarian achievements.”

Nominations and supporting materials were received electronically. The Committee received 23 new nominations. All of the nominations were of exceptional individuals. The criteria used to evaluate candidates were these (not in order): (1) the candidate’s accomplishments within his/her field; (2) the candidate’s length of career service; (3) the strength of the candidate’s relationship with the University of Richmond; (4) potential student interest and/or connection. Of the 23 new nominations received, 9 candidates’ names were forwarded to the President and the Board of Trustees as being exceptionally worthy and ready for recognition. In addition, a number of candidates that received the Committee’s endorsement in previous years (but were not granted honorary awards in those years) were also kept active and put forward again for the Board’s consideration.

It was noted that fewer Honorary Degrees might be awarded this year than in the last year. This year Honorary Degrees will be awarded to: Mary Bitterman, President of the Bernard Osher Foundation, with an Honorary Doctor of Commercial Science degree conferred at SCS Commencement (Dr. Bitterman had been approved by the Committee and the Board earlier and was unable to accept the degree at that time); and Viola Baskerville, Secretary of Administration for the Commonwealth of Virginia, with an Honorary Doctor of Laws degree to be awarded at the undergraduate/graduate Exercises. Dr. Paul Farmer of Harvard University was also invited to receive a degree but is unable to be present due to international travel, so the degree will not be conferred.

One additional issue the Committee discussed is the role of faculty governance. In the past some honorary degrees have been awarded by the Board without soliciting input from this Committee. We recognize that special opportunities appear and that the Board has the ultimate power to grant honorary degrees. In some cases an expedited process may be necessary because of time constraints and/or confidentiality issues. However, we recommended to the Board that even in these unusual cases consultation should be the expected and normal procedure, so as to promote a transparent and credible process. Ms. Breeden indicated that she believed it is the Board’s intention to act in consultation with the Committee and that any previous nonconforming cases were anomalous.

Respectfully submitted,
Jonathan B. Wight, Chair
April 19, 2008