

BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

REQUEST FOR COMMITTEE AND BOARD ACTION

COMMITTEE: Academic Affairs

NO.: AAC 21-13

COMMITTEE DATE: June 15, 2021

BOARD DATE: June 22, 2021

**REAPPROVAL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS DARTMOUTH MEMBERSHIP
IN THE COMMONWEALTH HONORS PROGRAM**

MOVED: The Board of Higher Education accepts the report of the Commonwealth Honors Program Executive Committee and renews the membership of the **University of Massachusetts Dartmouth** in the **Commonwealth Honors Program** for six years, effective June 22, 2021.

VOTED: Motion adopted by AAC 6/15/2021; adopted by BHE 6/22/2021.

Authority: Commonwealth Honors Program Approval Process Guidelines as Revised by the Board of Higher Education in November 2006; G.L. c. 15A, § 9.

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June 2021

University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Reapproval of Membership in Commonwealth Honors Program

BACKGROUND

This motion concerns the continuation of the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth's membership in the Commonwealth Honors Program. According to the Commonwealth Honors Program Guidelines, once Commonwealth Honors Program approval has been obtained by an institution, the Program will be reviewed every six years by the Commonwealth Honors Executive Committee. The report of the Committee shall be forwarded to the Board of Higher Education for approval.

REVIEW PROCESS

The University of Massachusetts Dartmouth prepared a self-study document presenting its Honors Program structure and operation in terms of the Commonwealth Honors Program requirements. The report provided evidence documenting the fulfillment of the following criteria:

1. Alignment of the mission and goals
2. Organization and administration
3. Admissions criteria
4. Transfer criteria
5. Program curriculum
6. Graduation criteria
7. Program resources
8. Curriculum Review Process

VISITING COMMITTEE FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

On November 23, 2020, the Commonwealth Honors Program Review Visiting Committee (Visiting Committee) conducted a day-long assessment, via ZOOM, of the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth (UMD) Honors College. This site visit was originally scheduled for the 2019-20 academic year and was rescheduled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Committee consisted of Meredith Feltus, Director of Development and External Relations for Commonwealth Honors College at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and Chair of the CHP Visiting Committee; Jenny Shanahan, Assistant Provost for High-Impact Practices at Bridgewater State University; and Jason Mazaik, Professor of Business and Professional

Studies/Coordinator of the Honors Program at Mass Bay Community College. Prior to the visit, the Committee received and studied UMD's application for pre-approval.

The UMD Honors Program converted to an Honors College between the time of the self-study and the site review. The Honors Advisory Board met throughout the fall of 2019 to build a new curriculum and to revise the final student project (formerly an honors thesis), now called "APEX." Students recruited into the Honors College starting in the fall of 2020 were required to complete 24 honors credits rather than the 18 required by the earlier Honors Program. The Honors College is part of the University's Division of Academic Affairs, and the Director reports to the Associate Provost. The College also has an Associate Director. Both the Director and Associate Director are members of the UMass Dartmouth faculty, and the Director also oversees the University's Office of Undergraduate Research. The Director and Associate Director are responsible for recruitment, advising, and management of the program.

The Visiting Committee met with the UMass Dartmouth Honors College Director, Prof. Catherine Villanueva Gardner, Associate Director Prof. Brian Ayotte, a large group of students, Honors faculty members, the Honors Advisory Board, Associate Provost Robert Jones, Provost Michael Goodman, and conducted an exit interview with Chancellor Mark Preble and Dr. Jones and Dr. Goodman.

The Committee identified the following commendations for the UMD Honors College:

- The College's honors credit requirements exceed the minimum curriculum requirements for a CHP program.
- The Director, Associate Director, and Honors faculty clearly demonstrated extraordinary dedication to the College and particularly to their students.
- The site visit team was impressed by the College's model of engaging faculty from across campus, and particularly with the new two-year Honors Faculty appointments for faculty from varying UMass Dartmouth departments.
- The site visit team was impressed with the cohesiveness of the Honors curriculum, including building up to the APEX (advanced project or experience) from the first-year Honors course through to the APEX itself.
- The APEX model earned commendation for its respect of student goals and disciplinary diversity.
- The site visit team noted that students were actively involved in the College in multiple ways, including as "student directors," on a student council, in identifying and organizing co-curricular activities, and notably in the design of the new Honors College curriculum and the selection of the current Honors Faculty.
- The site visit team was impressed with the involvement of the Office of Faculty Development and a faculty cohort that crafted guidelines and resources for honors courses.
- The site visit team encourages the Honors College to continue thinking about a template model for potential "carve-out" classes and for implementing them strategically.

The site visit team was impressed by the Honors College at UMD and recommends, without reservation, that UMD Honors College be granted re-approval as a Commonwealth Honors Program.

Recommendations from the Visiting Committee included the following:

1. Mission Statement: The new Honors College's mission statement is currently under revision. The mission statement for the prior Honors Program was more of a descriptor than a mission statement. The site visit team recommends that the current review and revision of the Honors College's mission statement continue.
2. Administrative Leadership: The site visit team, while recognizing the very clear challenges of the current financial environment and recognizing the substantial new investment in student support staff, expressed concern about the Director's workload, particularly given the conversion from Program to College. Between the Director and the Associate Director, the two course releases per semester meet the minimum requirements of a CHP program. However, the 2014 CHP review recommended a two course per semester release for the Director which has not been implemented. The self-study indicated that the Board of Trustees approved UMass Dartmouth's proposal to transition to an honors college in August of 2019. The approved proposal projected implementation of a Dean position in FY21. The committee encourages continued implementation of the approved proposal, and in the meantime recommends additional course release time for the director to support the transition to a College.
3. Growing and Maintaining the Honors College: The site visit team recommends that the Honors College continue identifying ways to make it easier for students in highly regimented disciplines and smaller majors to participate. The College has already identified some promising ideas, notably the flexibility of APEX (advanced project or experience) to fit within major requirements. Additionally, while the students with whom the site visit team spoke were enthusiastic about their experience, they noted attrition among other students, particularly in technical and smaller fields. The College may be well-served by better articulating the value of the Honors Program to students.
4. Increase Program Resources: While positions have been added in alignment with the proposal to transition from a Program to a College, it appears that the operating budget has remained flat for the past 4 years. Notwithstanding the current pandemic-related budget challenges, the committee encourages the university to continue investments in the College in alignment with the approved college proposal as soon as practicable. Committee members have found that utilizing data regarding the retention and graduation rates of honors students can be a pragmatic means of making the case for program resources. As the Honors College grows, a budget increase may be needed to maintain the quality of the curriculum and programming, all of which likely contribute to honors students' stronger persistence and 4- and 6-year graduation rates.

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE

UMB offered the following responses to the recommendations made by the Visiting Committee:

1. Mission Statement: Subsequent to the site visit, the Honors College core team and affiliated faculty have continued to revise the mission statement so that it addresses purpose and aspiration. Associate Director Dr. Brian Ayotte is leading a sub-committee of the Faculty Senate's Honors Committee to complete the revision of the mission statement. Their work will be completed by the end of the spring semester of 2021.
2. Administrative Leadership: The team's second recommendation called for two actions. First, to proceed with a search and screen process to hire a Dean for the Honors College. And second, to increase the course release time for the current director. The initial institutional plan was to proceed according to the Board of Trustees' approved proposal to transition to an honors college and search for a Dean to assume the role in FY21. However, unforeseen financial exigencies and the advent of COVID-19 caused a postponement of the search for a college Dean. UMD is fully in support of a reporting structure headed by a Dean for a fully scaled Honors College. UMD intends to return to the original plan for the administrative staffing of the college as fiscal pressures ease and the number of active students in the college increases. UMD anticipates revisiting the workload and compensation of the Dean as part of our ongoing planning process. UMD is committed to providing the Honors College with the leadership and administrative support that will be required to continue its growth while preserving and enhancing the quality of Honors program offerings and activities.
3. Growing and Maintaining the Honors College: The Honors College plans to offer major-specific "carve-out" classes beginning in the fall semester of 2021. These courses will address the regimented nature of the curriculum in the College of Engineering (COE) and some small programs the College of Visual & Performing Arts (CVPA). The College of Nursing & Health Sciences (NCHS) already has these built into their recently revised curriculum. Carve-out sections will give Honors the ability to offer courses beyond the lower-level or University Studies (general education) courses that currently make up the majority of its offerings. Carve-out sections have also been proposed by faculty in departments in the College of Arts & Sciences. The goal of a carve-out is not to give more assigned work as students do not earn additional credits. Rather, carve-out courses are intended to offer a more "immersive" learning experience for Honors students to produce greater intellectual engagement with the material. Examples include real-world application of learning, working with an instructor on a small portion of their research or teaching materials, group projects, class presentations, more intensive research papers, and service learning. The near-term goal is to offer seven to eight such sections per semester.

The Honors College has produced a set of guidelines and a process for offering carve-out classes to ensure consistency and to maintain standards. The Honors College is meeting with individual Deans of degree-granting colleges to create a shared process between Honors and their colleges. The goal is to have a fully outlined process for requesting and assigning carve-out sections to support the scheduling of additional course options in the spring 2022 semester.

In addition to increasing major-specific, upper division course offerings, the team suggested that retention could be improved by better articulating the value of an Honors education. Towards this end, Honors College affiliated faculty member, Dr. Jennifer Mulnix, has produced a document outlining the value of an Honors education. Dr. Mulnix is a former Associate Director of the Honors Program. This document contains different elements that can be used in syllabi and marketing materials to inform students about the merits of the Honors College experience.

4. Increase Program Resources: UMD is in full agreement with the visiting team that growth in enrollment should be accompanied by additional investment designed to support that growth. Based on the quality of the programming and growing interest in honors colleges, UMD expects a continued upward trajectory for program enrollments. The university is committed to providing the funding and other resources necessary to maintain the high standards of the Honors College and to ensure that its Honors students receive the support required to provide them with an excellent learning environment.

RECOMMENDATION

Department of Higher Education staff thoroughly reviewed all documentation received from the Commonwealth Honors Program Executive Committee and recommends that the Board approve the reapproval of the membership of the **University of Massachusetts Dartmouth** in the **Commonwealth Honors Program**.