

BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

REQUEST FOR COMMITTEE AND BOARD ACTION

COMMITTEE: Assessment and Accountability **NO.:** AAC 09-31

COMMITTEE DATE: May 29, 2009

BOARD DATE: June 4, 2009

**RENEWAL OF WESTFIELD STATE COLLEGE 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 **Westfield State College** in the Commonwealth Honors Program for six years, effective June 4, 2009.

Authority: Commonwealth Honors Program Approval Process Guidelines as Revised by the Board of Higher Education in November 2006.

Contact: Francesca B. Purcell, Ph.D., Associate Commissioner for Academic and P16 Policy

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June 2009

Westfield State College

Renewal of Membership in Commonwealth Honors Program

Background

This motion concerns the continuation of Westfield State College's membership in the Commonwealth Honors Program (CHP). 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. This is the first renewal cycle for Westfield State College.

Review Process

Westfield State College prepared a self-study document presenting its Honors Program structure and operations in terms of the Commonwealth Honors Program requirements. The report provided evidence documenting fulfillment of the following criteria:

1. Alignment of the mission and goals of the Honors Program with those of Westfield State College
2. Organization and administration
3. Admissions criteria
4. Transfer criteria
5. Program curriculum
6. Graduation criteria
7. Program resources
8. Approval procedures for new courses
9. Student enrollment for past three years
10. Approval procedures for new courses

Review Team Findings and Recommendations

On February 5, 2009, a review team (Susan McPherson, Associate Professor and Honors Program Coordinator, Quinsigamond Community College; Joanna Gonsalves, Associate Professor of Psychology/Honors Program Coordinator, Salem State College; and Meredith Feltus, Director of Outreach and External Programs, Commonwealth College, University of Massachusetts Amherst), appointed by the Commonwealth Honors Council, conducted the six-year review. Prior to the on-campus visit, the team reviewed the self-evaluation prepared by the College. The site visit was hosted and organized by Honors Program Chair Dr. Ricki Kantrowitz. The team also met with College President Dr. Evan Dobelle, Vice President of Academic Affairs Dr. Robert Hayes, Dean of Undergraduate Studies Dr. Marsha Marotta, Honors Committee members, faculty and students.

On the basis of the campus visit, the review of the self-evaluation, and the materials received during the on-campus visit, the team concluded that Westfield State College Honors Program substantially satisfies the CHP criteria. The review team recommended to the Commonwealth

Honors Executive Committee that it renew the membership of Westfield State College in the Commonwealth Honors Program.

The review team made the following recommendations:

1. Adopt an honors component option or honors colloquium method for enrolling students in regular courses designated to provide honors enrichment.
2. Implement priority registration procedures for honors students for all their classes.
3. Develop with chairs a routine schedule of honors core course offerings.
4. Consider a junior-level workshop to support the formulation stage of the senior honors project.
5. Create forums with lower classmen to encourage the Commonwealth Honors Scholar track over the College Honors track.
6. Promote community engagement by incorporating service learning in honors courses, encouraging student-led volunteer projects and/or service-based honors projects.
7. Strengthen the honors learning community with honors housing.
8. Strengthen the honors learning community with a larger Honors Center (with space for group meetings, the Honors Chair's office, and secretarial support).
9. Explore fundraising as an avenue to establish Honors Program scholarships.
10. Explore an honors section of the "J-term" travel courses.

Institutional Response

The following is Westfield State College's (WSC) institutional response to the CHP site team's report, which is grouped as short-term, medium-term, and long-term responses.

Short-term:

- Honors housing has been established and will be operating as of September 2009. The Resident Assistant will be a member of the Honors Program. In an effort to further strengthen the honors learning community, regularly scheduled meetings and coffee hours with honors faculty will be held in a special lounge that is located just above the honors living unit. (Recommendation #7)
- A proposal to establish priority registration for honors students has been drafted and presented to academic chairs for their comments. The proposal has been submitted to college governance. WSC intends to have priority registration in place for the spring 2010 semester. (#2)
- WSC is working to address the low numbers of students graduating with Commonwealth Honors Scholar status. The College data management system allows the Chair of the Honors Program to do careful advising with each honors student and to discuss options for completing honors requirements that highlight the Commonwealth Honors Scholar track. All honors students will be invited to attend the April/May presentations by seniors who have completed senior honors projects. Ten WSC students, from first year to seniors, attended the Northeast Regional Honors Council's conference in Annapolis, Maryland, in March. All ten students won student travel grants from the Office of Academic Affairs. The Honors Program budget provided additional support to pay for this trip. A number of honors students, including first year, will present at the Undergraduate Research Conference at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in May. These opportunities help newer students learn presentation skills and feel more comfortable about developing their own senior honors projects. (#5)

- The Honors Advisory Committee recently submitted to College governance a change in the definition of College Honors Scholar, making the grade requirement in honors classes for this track equivalent to the requirement for Commonwealth Honors (B in each of the required number of honors classes). (#5)

Medium-term:

- A study group of interested members of the Honors Advisory Committee has been meeting to discuss the development of an honors component or honors colloquium method of offering honors enrichment options for students in regular classes. This group is also examining the possibility of designing discipline-specific honors courses in majors with intensive requirements. Sandra Nearing, Director of the Honors Program at Bridgewater State College, has been invited to WSC to discuss the college honors versus department honors option at Bridgewater. An honors program consultant, paid for in part by a National Collegiate Honors Council consultant grant, will be coming to WSC to participate in a one-day honors retreat and to provide further information about the development of honors components, colloquium, and discipline specific honors courses. WSC intends to submit a development plan, resulting from this retreat, to College governance by the end of the 2009-2010 academic year. (#1)
- WSC has established an international program, with-study abroad short courses offered in January and May (J-terms). The Honors Program intends to establish an honors section of a J-term travel course, as well as develop a means by which honors students can design honors components in regular J-term courses within the next two years. (#10)
- The Chair met with juniors on a one-to-one and small group basis during the recent advising period to discuss the development of senior honors projects. A junior-level workshop will be developed and instituted next year to support the formulation stage of the senior honors project. (#4)
- WSC appreciated the recommendation to promote community engagement by incorporating service learning in honors courses, encouraging student-led volunteer projects, and/or service-based honors projects. At a recent dinner for current and future honors faculty, this was discussed; and faculty were encouraged to develop these options in their honors classes. (#6)
- The Honors Program Web site will be improved during summer 2009 to increase visibility, aid in recruitment of incoming and transfer students, and clarify policies for admission and retention. The College bulletin will be reviewed, and descriptions of policies and procedures will be updated as necessary.

Long-term:

- The recommendation to develop a routine schedule of honors core course offerings is an excellent suggestion. While academic department chairs have been reluctant to make commitments to more than one semester ahead, Westfield has recently replaced lost faculty lines that will allow chairs to commit to a routine schedule. A committee, reviewing common core requirements, has recently submitted a report to College governance, asking for a number of changes in the core. Honors Program requirements may need to be adjusted in response to any changes that are instituted, which may affect the development of a routine schedule. (#3)

- The Honors Program has more than doubled in the past two years, and there are plans to increase it to about 200 students. The lack of a larger honors center space reflects a space problem throughout the WSC campus. There are plans for further building on campus, as well as expansion to the downtown Westfield area, and the Honors Program has expressed its wishes for a more suitable space to the long-range planning committee. (#8)
- The Chair has met with the Vice President of Advancement and College Relations and with staff of the WSC Foundation, Inc., to explore fund raising options as an avenue to establishing Honors Program Scholarships. This will be an on-going discussion. (#9)

Westfield State College will provide a status report on its response at the spring 2010 Commonwealth Honors Council meeting.

Recommendation

Board of Higher Education staff thoroughly reviewed all documentation received from the CHP Executive Committee and recommends that the Board approve the renewal of the membership of Westfield State College in the Commonwealth Honors Program.