

COMMONWEALTH HONORS PROGRAM
APPROVAL PROCESS GUIDELINES

Revised November 2006

Approval Process for Commonwealth Honors Programs
(Copies of the Guidelines and an Application Checklist are available
at the BHE Web site: www.mass.edu)

- I. **Common Elements of the Approval Process** Notwithstanding any other procedure to the contrary, the process for approval as a Commonwealth Honors Program is as follows:

A. Application

1. **Contents:** A complete application consists of the following:
 - a. A letter from the president/chancellor of the institution stating support for the application.
 - b. Evidence documenting the institution's fulfillment of the criteria for certification and an accompanying narrative that explains how the institution meets the criteria.
 - c. The number of students enrolled in the Honors Program and in individual honors courses for the past three years.
 - d. A description of all honors courses taught during the past three years.
 - e. A description of the approval procedures for new courses.
2. **Submission**
 - a. An institution seeking to establish a Commonwealth Honors Program must submit an application to the Board of Higher Education.
 - b. The application shall be submitted both electronically and in hard copy. Hyper-links to material on the institution's Web site (e.g., syllabi, catalog copy, etc.) should be provided as needed to supplement the application. If the institution wishes to submit supplementary materials not available electronically, one copy should be sent with the application to the Board and then additional copies sent by the institution to the visiting team members after they have been chosen.
 - c. The Board will notify the institution that the application has been received and will forward it to the Chair of the Commonwealth Honors Council for review.

B. Program Approval

1. The Commonwealth Honors Program Executive Committee serves as the review board for applications from individual institutions in the Massachusetts public higher education system to be approved as Commonwealth Honors Programs.
2. The Executive Committee, acting upon recommendations and information provided by a Visiting Committee, shall determine the applicant's qualifications for initial approval as a Commonwealth Honors Program and make recommendations to the Board of Higher Education.
3. The Executive Committee will forward its recommendations for approval to the Board of Higher Education for consideration and action.

4. Once Commonwealth Honors Program approval has been obtained by an institution from the Board of Higher Education, the Program will be reviewed every six years by the Executive Committee.

II. **Review Criteria** The following criteria constitute the basis for the Executive Committee and Visiting Committee reviews concerning approval for initial and continuing certification as a Commonwealth Honors Program. The Board of Higher Education, on consultation with the Commonwealth Honors Program Council, retains the right to amend these criteria on an as-needed basis. The institution should demonstrate in its application for approval how it meets the following criteria:

A. Mission

1. The Honors Program has a clearly articulated mission, focused upon its purposes, educational goals, and the students it wishes to serve.
2. The Program mission is aligned with the institution's mission.

B. Organization and Administration

1. The Honors Program has a clearly defined director/coordinator who reports directly to the office of the chief academic officer of the institution.
2. The director/coordinator has a minimum of six (6) credits per semester release time and/or an appropriate stipend in lieu of no more than three credits of release per semester. Provision is made to fund work done by the director/ coordinator outside of the regular academic calendar.
3. The Program has a faculty Honors Program Committee with provision for administrative and student representation. The Committee shall have clearly defined responsibilities.
4. Institutional membership in the National Collegiate Honors Council is strongly recommended.
5. Institutions may also provide unique services or Programs for the system as a whole (e.g., experimental courses or faculty workshops/conferences provided by Commonwealth College or summer honors Programs at the University of Massachusetts Boston or at Cape Cod Community College).

C. Admission Criteria

1. The institution has established Honors Program admission standards based on its particular circumstances.
2. For state college and University Honors Programs, freshman admission to the Program includes such factors as high SAT scores, graduation near the top of the high school class, and/or other factors that are predictive of academic success. Freshman admission may also be granted on the basis of recommendation of faculty or admissions officers with the approval of the honors coordinator/director.
3. The Program has defined procedures for the admission of continuing students who by their academic performance have demonstrated that they are capable of honors work.

D. Transfer Criteria

1. The Program guarantees admission to all students who graduate from a Commonwealth Honors Program at a community college and are accepted for transfer.
2. Honors courses completed with a grade of B or better at a given level (e.g., 100, 200, 300) are accepted for transfer at that level.
3. Honors Program coordinators/directors may allow students to substitute other academic work in meeting honors course requirements for transfer admission to the Honors Program.

E. Program Curriculum

1. The Program provides a sufficient number of honors courses so that honors students may complete the requirements in a timely manner.
2. Honors courses are offered in both traditional academic fields and as special topics (e.g., addressing issues or recent developments at the international, national, or local level).
3. Honors courses are distinguished by their attention to student inquiry, writing, critical thinking, and oral presentation.
4. In community colleges the Program provides an honors seminar or colloquium that is interdisciplinary, for honors-level students only and preferably team-taught.
5. Honors experiences provide opportunities for laboratory or field research, archival or library research, and activities in the creative arts.
6. The Program ensures that all students have access to an honors advisor as well as an academic advisor.
7. Additional honors activities and learning options are available, such as outside speakers, seminars, workshops, and social activities. These may include public service opportunities, internships, and exchange programs.

F. Graduation Criteria

1. The institution has clearly specified and published criteria for students to maintain standing in the Commonwealth Honors Program and to graduate as Commonwealth Honors Program Scholars. Graduation criteria must meet or exceed the following:
 - a. To graduate as a **Commonwealth Honors Program Scholar from a Community College**, students need at a minimum:
 - (i) A cumulative grade point average of 3.2 (on a 4.0 scale);
 - (ii) Three honors courses (nine credits), with a grade of B or better. The Program provides students an option to substitute an honors thesis or project involving independent research for one of the three required honors courses;
 - (iii) One honors seminar or colloquium that is interdisciplinary, for honors-level students only, and preferably team-taught.

- b. To graduate as a **Commonwealth Honors Program Scholar from a State College or University Commonwealth Honors Program**, students need at a minimum:
 - (i) A cumulative grade point average of at least 3.2 (on a 4.0 scale);
 - (ii) Six academic honors courses (at least 18 credits), one of which shall constitute a thesis or project, with a grade of B or better;
 - (iii) The thesis shall include a public presentation by the student and is subject to final approval by an appropriate faculty committee. Creativity is encouraged in the development of theses and projects.

G. Program Resources

1. The Program has a budget appropriate to carry out the mission and goals of the Program.
2. In addition to an appropriate budget, the Program will be evaluated based on how well it addresses the following budget categories:
 - a. Honors Program scholarships are provided for entering, continuing, and/or graduating students.
 - b. Support exists for student research and associated travel.
 - c. There is an office for the director/coordinator.
 - d. There is consistent and adequate secretarial and support staff for the Honors Program.
 - e. There is an identifiable Honors Center.
 - f. Resources are provided for outside speakers.
 - g. Public service opportunities, internships, exchange programs, and capstone experiences are provided.
 - h. Social activities are included in the Program.

H. Curriculum Review Process

1. The institution has a curriculum review process that provides for both the initial approval and periodic review of honors courses.
2. Flexibility is found in the approval process, allowing the institution to respond rapidly to student interest in non-traditional areas (e.g., rapid approval of courses on an experimental basis for a semester or year).

III. Program Approval Review Process

A. Initial Program Approval

1. The Executive Committee of the Honors Council, in consultation with the applicant institution, will select and appoint a Visiting Committee to participate in the Program evaluation.
2. Visiting Committees

- a. Members of the Visiting Committee shall be selected from among professionals with appropriate credentials and demonstrated professional experience in an Honors Program as an administrator or faculty member and/or other relevant activities within institutions of higher education.
 - b. Visiting Committee members shall have a disinterested professional commitment to the assignment of evaluation as charged by the Committee and to the task of rendering objective findings and recommendations based upon empirical evidence and informed judgments.
 - c. As a general rule, Visiting Committees shall include persons from all three segments of the system. Persons with experience in Honors Programs from outside of the system may also be included as members of a Visiting Committee.
 - d. A Visiting Committee will review the materials submitted by the institution, will visit the institution, and will submit a report to the Chair of the CHP Executive Committee containing recommendations regarding the requested authorization. The report should be submitted within 20 business days of the evaluation.
 - e. When possible, the Visiting Committee will hold an exit interview with the president and chief academic officer.
3. Within five business days of receipt of the report, the Chair of the Executive Committee will forward the report to the institution with a request for a response.
 4. The Executive Committee will evaluate materials submitted by the institution, the written report of the Visiting Committee, the written response from the institution, and any additional information submitted by the institution.
 5. On the basis of that evaluation, the Executive Committee shall take action, by formal vote, to recommend for Board approval, disapprove, or defer action on the application.
 6. The Chair of the Executive Committee will inform the institution of actions taken by the Executive Committee.
 7. The Executive Committee shall forward applications that are recommended for approval to the Board of Higher Education, including the Visiting Committee report, the written response of the institution, and the formal vote and recommendation of the Executive Committee.
 8. Board staff will review the materials and make a specific recommendation to the Board. The Board shall take action by formal vote.
- B. Review Process: Continued Program Approval** Once Commonwealth Honors Program approval has been obtained by an institution, the Program will be reviewed every six years by the Executive Committee. The use of external review committees will be determined on a Program specific basis by the Commonwealth Honors Program Executive Committee. The report of the Committee shall be forwarded to the Board of Higher Education.

IV. Commonwealth Honors Program Governance Structure

A. Commonwealth Honors Council (CHC)

1. An advisory council will be formed for the purpose of identifying and responding to issues which affect the delivery of Honors Programs and related services to students attending all public institutions of higher education within Massachusetts. Eventually, the CHC will be composed of the Honors Program directors (or equivalent position) from each Massachusetts institution of public higher education with an approved Honors Program and a staff member of the Board of Higher Education, ex-officio.
2. The CHC will be divided into subcommittees by institutional type (community college, state colleges, and University campuses) to address issues that are unique to their type of institution. The CHC will meet in full session at least once a year to discuss the broad issues related to Honors Programs and to make recommendations to both the Executive Committee (see below) and the Board of Higher Education. Council members may bring one student, as a guest but with no vote, from the local board to the Commonwealth Honors Council meetings. Prior notice must be given to the host of the meeting.

B. Commonwealth Honors Program Executive Committee

1. The Executive Committee will comprise the Dean of Commonwealth College (University of Massachusetts Amherst), nine other members from the CHC, with three members coming from each constituency of community colleges, state colleges, and University campuses, a staff member of the Board of Higher Education, ex-officio, **and officers of the CHC**. The Committee members will be elected by the respective subcommittees of the Commonwealth Honors Council. Members will serve three-year staggered terms. The initial committee will have one-third of the membership appointed for one-, two- and three-year terms respectively, so that one-third of the committee membership will be replaced each year. One Chief Academic Officer from each of the three public higher education sectors is invited to attend Executive Committee meetings on an ex-officio basis. In addition, the Executive Committee will send all agenda, minutes and other appropriate publications to the Chief Academic Officers within the system.
2. The Executive Committee will have the following functions
 - a. Act on recommendations and information provided by a Visiting Committee, determine an applicant institution's qualifications for initial and continuing approval as a Commonwealth Honors Program, and make recommendations to the Board of Higher Education on such items as changes in Program criteria, approval procedures, and governance structure.
 - b. Report annually to the Chancellor of Higher Education concerning the status of Honors Programs within public higher education.
 - c. Appoint a program committee to plan and implement an annual Commonwealth Honors Conference for faculty and Honors Program directors.

- d. Be responsible for working with the Dean of Commonwealth College and other Honors Program directors to plan an annual undergraduate research conference involving all Honors Programs within public higher education.