

BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

REQUEST FOR COMMITTEE AND BOARD ACTION

NO.: BHE 23-56

BOARD DATE: June 20, 2023

RENEWAL OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE COMMONWEALTH HONORS PROGRAM FOR MASSACHUSETTS COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS

MOVED: The Board of Higher Education accepts the report of the Commonwealth Honors Council Executive Committee and renews the membership of **Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts** in the **Commonwealth Honors Program** for seven years, effective June 20, 2023.

VOTED: Motion approved and advanced to the full BHE by the Executive Committee on 6/12/2023; and adopted by the BHE on 6/20/2023.

Authority: Commonwealth Honors Program Approval Process Guidelines as Revised by the Board of Higher Education in March 2022; G.L. c. 15A, § 9.

Contact: Winifred Hagan, Senior Associate Commissioner for Strategic Planning & Public Program Approval

Keith M. Connors, Program Director for Academic Affairs and Student Success

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Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts Renewal of Membership in Commonwealth Honors Program

BACKGROUND

This motion concerns the continuation of Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts' membership in the Commonwealth Honors Program in accordance with the Commonwealth Honors Program Guidelines. Once Commonwealth Honors Program approval has been obtained by an institution, the Commonwealth Honors Council Executive Committee will review the program every seven years. The report of the Committee shall be forwarded to the Board of Higher Education for approval.

REVIEW PROCESS

Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts 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 April 5, 2022, the Commonwealth Honors Program Visiting Committee (Visiting Committee) conducted a day-long, in-person assessment of the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts' (MCLA) Honors Program. The Visiting Committee consisted of Jenny Shanahan, Assistant Provost at Bridgewater State University, and Chair of the Visiting Committee; Kate Martin, Coordinator of the Honors Program at Cape Cod Community College; and Jennifer Whitten-Woodring, Dean of the Honors College at UMass Lowell. Prior to the visit, the Visiting Committee received and studied MCLA's application for reaccreditation of CHP status. The site visit was hosted and organized by Drs. Hannah Hayes and Mohamed Junaid, Co-Directors of MCLA's Honors Program.

The Visiting Committee, in their report, commended MCLA's Honors Program in several areas. These commendations included MCLA's inclusive approach to Honors admissions, the high-level of satisfaction with cross-listed courses for honors and non-honors students, and close student to faculty relationships with strong mentorship.

However, the Visiting Committee also found that the recommendation from the last site visit report back in 2015, concerning low program graduation rates, was not addressed. Despite this concern and some other matters, the Visiting Committee considered the current MCLA Honors Program's co-directors' plans for increasing the number of Commonwealth Honors graduates feasible and well planned, and recommended program reapproval to provide the program time to carry out its plans.

Some of the other recommendations from the Visiting Committee included the following:

1. Progressively increase the number of CHP graduates from 1-2 per year to more than half of the CHP seniors: By the time of the next Commonwealth Honors site visit (due in 2029), at least 50% of MCLA's honors seniors graduate with Commonwealth Honors.
2. Collect CHP evaluation and assessment data: Use the findings for analysis of program practices and for continuous program improvement.
3. Increase CHP course offerings in disciplines/departments underrepresented in the curriculum: Nearly all the honors courses are in the arts and humanities with a few in the social sciences. The lack of disciplinary diversity in the CHP curriculum is stated as a major reason for students leaving CHP.
4. Increase funding for CHP scholarships/fellowships, student conference travel and programming: These financial supports help boost program retention and enrollments.
5. Build a more disciplinarily diverse Honors Advisory Board with fixed terms and more defined responsibilities: The current advisory board consists of faculty who currently teach or have taught honors courses. A more diverse advisory board could help broaden honors course offerings and student retention and completion.
6. Increase program visibility: Promote the visibility and recognition of the Honors Program on campus and to alumni, donors, and prospective students, by featuring current honors students and their research.

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE

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

1. Progressively increase the number of CHP graduates from 1-2 per year to more than half of the CHP seniors: The MCLA Honors Program will introduce a new required 1-credit

course called "Introduction to the Honors Program" for students who have chosen to join the program. The course, focused on research, will run over 7 weeks, and will be taught by interdisciplinary honors faculty and, whenever possible, by former honors students who have successfully completed their honors thesis. The goal for the course is threefold: 1) to introduce students to the Honors Program and the honors faculty, delineate for them the path toward a successful participation in the program and show how they can plan for the honors thesis projects; 2) to get students excited about "research" as a process of systematic thinking and planning based on faculty and former students sharing their own experiences; and 3) to build a strong honors program cohort from the start.

2. Collect CHP evaluation and assessment data: MCLA agrees with the increased evaluation and assessment data. regarding unique offerings such as those of the Integrated Learning programs.
3. Increase CHP offerings in different disciplines/departments underrepresented in the curriculum: Faculty workshops are planned to further clarify the process of becoming a faculty advisor for honor thesis projects and to increase the diversity of course offerings. Also, but somewhat unrelated, MCLA is decreasing the GPA requirement from 3.4 to 3.2 to provide greater student access to CHP without compromising program rigor.

On May 5, 2023, the Commonwealth Honors Council Executive Committee voted to reapprove Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts 's Commonwealth Honors Program.

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 renewal of the membership of **Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts** in the **Commonwealth Honors Program**.