

BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

REQUEST FOR COMMITTEE AND BOARD ACTION

NO.: BHE 26-60

BOARD DATE: May 19, 2026

**RENEWAL OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE COMMONWEALTH HONORS PROGRAM FOR
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST**

MOVED: The Board of Higher Education accepts the report and recommendation of the Commonwealth Honors Council Executive Committee and renews the membership of **University of Massachusetts Amherst** in the **Commonwealth Honors Program** for seven years, effective July 1, 2026.

VOTED: Motion adopted by the BHE on 5/19/2026.

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

Contact: Richard Riccardi, Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Student Success
Keith M. Connors, Program Director for Academic Affairs and Student Success

BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

May 2026

University of Massachusetts Amherst Renewal of Membership in Commonwealth Honors Program

BACKGROUND

This motion concerns the continuation of University of Massachusetts Amherst's 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 (Executive Committee) will review the program every seven years. The report and recommendation of the Executive Committee shall be forwarded to the Board of Higher Education for approval.

REVIEW PROCESS

University of Massachusetts Amherst 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 October 8, 2025, the Commonwealth Honors Program (CHP) Visiting Committee conducted a day-long, in-person assessment of the Commonwealth Honors College (CHC) at the University of Massachusetts Amherst having previously received and reviewed its self-study for reapproval of CHP status. The Visiting Committee consisted of Committee Chair Len von Morzé, Dean (Interim) and Professor of English, University of Massachusetts Boston; Panteha Sanati, Honors Program Coordinator and Professor of English, Massasoit Community College; and Hillary Sackett Taylor, Assistant Provost for Educational Excellence and Retention and Professor of Economics, Westfield State University.

The Visiting Committee toured several CHC sites, including staff offices, the advising center, the events hall, student study spaces, classrooms, and dormitories. Visiting Committee members

met with Dean Mari Castañeda, the CHC Unit Directors, and other Staff, six CHC faculty, several Honors Program Directors, several CHC Council members, about 30 CHC students, Provost Fouad Abd-El-Khalick, and Chancellor Javier Reyes.

The Visiting Committee lauded UMA's CHC for its complex administrative structure that includes teaching, advising, and residential life with communication across the units; its culture of integrated, sustainable, and meritorious growth such as creating new roles that strengthen interconnectedness and professional development among staff and faculty; its caring and dedicated cadre of professionals and faculty that collaboratively oversee initiatives such as academic support, undergraduate research opportunities, student travel funding, graduate school preparation, advising, and inclusive social opportunities; and, its efforts to not only support academic success and student retention but also encourage meaningful relationships that transcend the classroom, and where students and professors engage in collegial gatherings that break down traditional barriers and foster a sense of community across all levels of the institution.

Listed below are some of the commendations the Visiting Committee identified for UMA's Commonwealth Honors College:

1. A Culture of Care: the CHC places "a culture of care" at the top of its own mission statement, a phrase that is not just a tagline on a document but permeates the everyday life of the College.
2. Dedicated Staffing: the CHC is appropriately staffed, with an outstanding and experienced Dean beginning her second term (who was praised by all constituencies), an Executive Committee, two Associate Deans, two Assistant Deans, and a Director of Community Relations and Strategic Impact.
3. Varied Curriculum: the CHC students enjoy an exceptionally varied curriculum. The curricula include the gateway seminar, colloquia, and independent studies.
4. Clear Graduation Criteria: Standards are clearly articulated, and mechanisms for supporting students at risk of not completing the program are in place, thanks to CHC's outstanding culture of advising.
5. Robust Program Resources: funding resources include the campus's general operating fund, its own endowment funds from targeted donations, and the Honors fee of \$300/student/semester.

The success of the UMA Honors Program is evident. The Visiting Committee unanimously recommended its re-approval as a Commonwealth Honors Program institution.

The Visiting Committee offered the following recommendations to continue strengthening UMA's Honors Program:

1. Assess the Two Honors Tracks – Departmental and Multidisciplinary – with Regards to the Student Experience and Quality of Work: students graduating with multidisciplinary Honors outnumber departmental Honors students raising questions about appropriate student mentoring and comparable preparation for the students' postgraduate lives.

2. Address Student Mentoring and Advising: students struggle to secure faculty advisors. The scarcity of advisors may be a condition of faculty workloads.
3. Consider Steps to Ensure Equal Opportunities for All Majors Across All Colleges: A few colleges (notably Management) are generating low numbers of Honors College graduates, which may point to other areas where the college's administration needs to take more responsibility for supporting an Honors education.
4. Clarify Honors Learning Goals: few Honors faculty understood the primary difference between Honors and non-Honors courses to be the smaller number of students in the former. There did not appear to be a consensus understanding of the specific learning goals of an Honors education. Clarifying those goals might help in the recruitment of other faculty to teaching and mentoring roles in Honors.
5. Strengthen the Accounting on the Collection of Student Fees: special fees from CHC students (\$300/semester) are, according to the Provost, allocated back to CHC, but not in a neat line item, but rather as a discretionary/atypical expense reserve in cases where students may need additional financial support, such as room and board, transportation, etc. In the spirit of transparency and clarity about differential fees, the Provost should discuss this allocation with the Dean to make sure that CHC students are receiving a return on the considerable additional cost.
6. Make Students Aware of the Student Advisory Board: CHC should review its governance structure to ensure that students are aware of the Student Advisory Board.
7. Assess Student Advising: consider providing more hours of walk-in professional advising to match the peer advising hours, and consider more support for non-traditional (older and full-time-employed) students, who reported some obstacles to feeling integrated with the community.

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE

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

1. Assess the Two Honors Tracks - Departmental and Multidisciplinary – with Regards to the Student Experience and Quality of Work: The multidisciplinary track of the Commonwealth Honors College curriculum is one of the greatest strengths in the college since it aligns with the best practices of Honors education at the national level and provides a unique and interdisciplinary experience for our Honors students. The CHC dean and her staff are happy to explore the feasibility of such an assessment between the multidisciplinary and departmental tracks. We currently know, based on SRTIs (our university's teaching evaluation system), that students are very pleased with their Honors academic experiences and deep engagement with their faculty mentors in both the MH and DH tracks. We also have data from our submission platform, called PATHS, regarding the quality of Honors Theses for both MH and DH through faculty assessments, including the number of theses recognized as exemplary.
2. Address Student Mentoring and Advising: The Dean of Commonwealth Honors College is part of the Provost's Leadership Council and Dean Castañeda is indeed an important voice in the council. Along with all the other colleges and schools, CHC features

prominently in the ongoing university-level assessments regarding faculty workload and is participating in the university's current efforts to assess faculty engagement and advising, including Honors Thesis supervision. The relationship with the Five College Consortium is also critically important and Provost Abd-El-Khalick meets regularly with the Provosts and Presidents at those colleges. Additionally, Commonwealth Honors College regularly accepts and counts Five College courses as Honors courses, thus allowing Honors students at UMass Amherst to fulfill their Honors curricular requirements through enrollment in Five College courses. And faculty members from the Five College have historically and currently teach a Discovery Seminar at CHC, thus broadening the relationship between UMass and the Five College Consortium. Lastly, the staff at CHC will explore ways to further inform honor students of Five College resources.

3. Consider Steps to Ensure Equal Opportunities for All Majors Across All Colleges: The Dean of Commonwealth Honors College is in regular conversation with the deans of each school and college at UMass Amherst regarding the experience of their shared Honors students and providing equal access to Commonwealth Honors College to students from all the majors interested in the Honors curriculum and meeting the GPA threshold. The Visiting Committee accurately points out that a smaller proportion of students from the Isenberg School of Management complete the CHC curriculum in comparison to students from other fields. While there may be some natural tendency in this direction among students whose ambitions may be more career-focused than oriented toward potential graduate study, there remain possibilities for developing deeper relationships to ensure buy-in from all the colleges, schools, and departments. In fact, both Dean Castañeda and Dean Massey have met regularly to discuss ISOM Honors students and recently developed an MOU to ensure that Honors courses were being provided in ISOM.
4. Clarify Honors Learning Goals: UMass Amherst has 80 departmental Honors Programs, and each one has its unique set of theoretical, empirical, creative, and pedagogical approaches that is important to honor to ensure academic freedom, faculty governance, and the transformative educational experiences for Honors students. Indeed, the Honors College benefits from the very rich distinctive pedagogical methods that exist across the campus and staff agree that publicizing its impact on students is an excellent suggestion. Additionally, the departmental Honors Programs all have Honors Programs Directors (there are 80 faculty members serving in this capacity), and the Associate Dean of Curriculum and Academic Oversight meets monthly with the HPDs. At these meetings, HPDs share pedagogical strategies, student mentoring, and Honors Thesis supervision. Given that HPDs often rotate year after year, Dean Castañeda and CHC staff agree that ongoing discussions about the characteristics of Honors courses and the learning goals of an Honors education would be fruitful, especially since CHC has already established learning goals that are shared with faculty when they develop Honors courses and thesis seminars. CHC will also ensure that faculty are well informed of the College's mission, vision, and values.

5. Strengthen the Accounting on the Collection of Student Fees: In the 2010-2011 academic year, the UMass Board of Trustees instituted a fee for the college, which would be centrally administered on the UMass Amherst campus. The rationale for the fee was to support CHC's advising center, faculty positions, administrative staff, Honors courses, and programming. The Dean of Commonwealth Honors College will work with the Vice Chancellor of Administration & Finance to better clarify the usage of the CHC fee to CHC students.
6. Make Students Aware of the Student Advisory Board: Commonwealth Honors College agrees that the existence and role of the CHC Student Advisory Board can be better publicized and looks forward to doing so with student input, including revisiting its governance structure. The CHC Council is a council of the Faculty Senate, and its responsibilities are delineated in the Senate bylaws, Chapter 5, Section 6. The Visiting Committee noted that not all members of the CHC Council are members of the Faculty Senate and there was some confusion among CHCC members about the responsibilities of the Senate vis-a-vis the CHC Council. Thank you for this insight. This is a good opportunity for the CHC Council to review its charge from the Faculty Senate at the beginning of each academic year.
7. Assess Student Advising: The CHC Bloom Advising Center is a pillar of Commonwealth Honors College and its professional advisors and peer advising assistants are considered as models for the rest of campus, especially since its framework is known as the "Network of Care." Additionally, the CHC advising staff reimagined their advising appointment structure a few years ago, which includes the expansion of virtual appointment hours to 8:00pm on some weekdays to accommodate the needs of students with different scheduling needs. Certainly, there is always room for improvement and thus, the Senior Assistant Dean for Academic Success will work with the advising team to assess the appointment structure and walk-in hours as well as ways to ensure robust support for non-traditional students. Dean Castañeda will also assess and discuss with Provost Abd-El-Khalick whether more advising staff is needed.

On April 10, 2026, the Commonwealth Honors Council Executive Committee voted to recommend reapproval of University of Massachusetts Amherst'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 **University of Massachusetts Amherst** in the **Commonwealth Honors Program**.