

BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

REQUEST FOR COMMITTEE AND BOARD ACTION

NO.: BHE 26-61

BOARD DATE: May 19, 2026

RENEWAL OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE COMMONWEALTH HONORS PROGRAM FOR WORCESTER STATE UNIVERSITY

MOVED: The Board of Higher Education accepts the report and recommendation of the Commonwealth Honors Council Executive Committee and renews the membership of **Worcester State University** 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.

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Worcester State University Renewal of Membership in Commonwealth Honors Program

BACKGROUND

This motion concerns the continuation of Worcester State University'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

Worcester State University 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 24, 2025, the Commonwealth Honors Program (CHP) Visiting Committee (Visiting Committee) conducted a day-long, in-person assessment of the Worcester State University (WSU) Honors Program. The Visiting Committee consisted of Kimberly Poitevin, Coordinator of the Honors Program at Salem State University, and Chair of the Visiting Committee; Jenifer Whitten-Woodring, Dean of the Honors College at the University of Massachusetts Lowell; and Jean Kennedy, Honors Program Coordinator at Quinsigamond Community College. Prior to the visit, the Visiting Committee received and studied WSU's application for reaccreditation of CHP status. The site visit was hosted and organized by Honors Program Director Dr. Nicole Rosa.

During its day-long visit, the Visiting Committee met with honors students and faculty, including faculty fellow Martin Fromm and Deans Linda Larrivee, Russ Pottle, and Raymand Lewis,

Executive Director of Academic Affairs Support Dr. Noah Dion, Provost Lois Wims and President Barry Maloney. The Visiting Committee found strong alignment of WSU's Sheehan Honors Program with the Commonwealth Honors Program Guidelines and the mission of Worcester State University, as well as the strength and flexibility of its curriculum, evidence of student community, and broad support from multiple stakeholders. The Visiting Committee has no reservations about recommending the program for re-approval.

The Visiting Committee identified the following commendations for WSU's Honors Program:

1. Dedication and effectiveness of the Honors Program Director: during its site visit, the Visiting Committee could clearly see that the Honors Program Director, Dr. Nicole Rosa, made significant contributions to the program's success. Nearly every person with whom the Visiting Committee spoke commended Dr. Rosa for her leadership of the program and for her unwavering dedication. In addition to managing a heavy advising load and working to schedule honors courses in a wide array of formats, Dr. Rosa is heavily involved in course development (including a new interdisciplinary sophomore seminar) and has organized special events that foster community among participants and increase the visibility of the Sheehan Honors Program, which is seen as an integral part of the university community.
2. Flexibility in honors course offerings: One of the notable strengths of this program is the flexibility of its honors course offerings, which allows students to complete requirements in ways that most excite and engage them. The curriculum includes a thoughtful mix of all-honors courses (open to the entire student body), honors-only courses (reserved for Sheehan Honors Program participants), and honors subsections within larger classes where students may obtain honors credit through additional assignments and are held to a higher standard. Students may also request and receive honors credit in additional courses with faculty permission. Students may also receive honors credit by taking up to two world language courses.

This multi-format approach makes the program accessible to a wide variety of students aiding them in tailoring the honors experience to their own needs and interests while also maintaining rigor. Many students cited the program's flexibility in honors courses as one of its greatest strengths. Faculty found honors students to be an asset in their classrooms and were enthusiastic about including honors options in their regular courses.

3. Visibility and Student Interest in Program: Since 2018, Worcester State's Honors program has experienced remarkable growth, nearly doubling in size. This growth speaks to the effectiveness of the program's recruiting efforts and its ability to attract a broader range of students who recognize the value of an honors experience. ALANA/BIPOC and Pell-eligible students are well-represented in the program. The program welcomes many internal transfers, suggesting that students who do not initially choose to enroll in honors are convinced of its appeal once on campus. Honors students were enthusiastic

and articulate, and appreciated the opportunities made available to them through the program.

4. Broad Support from Faculty, Deans, and Administrators: administrators, faculty, and deans emphasized the Sheehan Honors Program's value to the institution as a whole. This benefit was evident in the willingness of faculty to design and teach honors courses, and to provide honors experiences to students in subsections of courses or via independent mentoring activities. Further, the program receives notable support from the university deans, who emphasized the program's role in increasing faculty engagement with undergraduate research. Deans do their best to provide stipends to support faculty and student research collaborations over the summer months. Faculty mentoring of undergraduate research is recognized in tenure and promotion decisions. The Deans, Provost, and President all cited the Sheehan Honors Program's value in raising the profile of WSU and its role in enhancing retention and student success at the institution.
5. Community and Belonging Among Honors Students: The Sheehan Honors Program offers several opportunities for students to socialize outside of their classroom experiences. Students spoke enthusiastically about overnight trips to Boston and New York, which deepened their connections with each other while also exposing them to new places and experiences. Arts and crafts nights, game nights, art contests, and local field trips provide additional opportunities for students to build friendships and connect. The program requires students to participate in at least two campus events each semester (within or beyond the Honors program), an expectation that encourages student involvement in the wider college community.
6. The Program is Named and Supported: The program is named for Lt. Col. James F. Sheehan and supported through a donation from the Sheehan estate. The Sheehan estate offers a significant sum—\$50,000 per year— to support student grants and programming.

The Visiting Committee recommended reapproval of the Commonwealth Honors status for the Sheehan Honors Program at Worcester State University.

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

1. Continue work to increase the number of students completing honors thesis projects and graduating as Commonwealth Honors Scholars.

The two-tiered system for Honors students at Worcester State University allows many students to participate in Honors, but relatively few (less than 20 each year) complete the requirements to graduate as Commonwealth Honors Scholars. Students expressed some confusion about the requirements for an honors project or the meaning or value of the

Commonwealth Honors Scholar designation, and a few (including at least one senior) were unaware of the thesis option.

The site visit report suggests that the new required interdisciplinary seminar, HO 200, was designed, in part, to introduce students to the scholar project. The Visiting Committee agreed that integrating information about the project into the course will be beneficial for students, but additional work may be needed to increase participants.

By pairing stronger messaging about the benefits of a Commonwealth Honors thesis with practical supports such as workshops, accessible online materials, and a clear process for matching interested students with thesis advisors, more students might be encouraged to embrace this significant experience.

a. Improve Communication to Students about the Commonwealth Honors Project (Thesis).

Specifically, the Visiting Committee recommended more intentional communication to students about the value of an undergraduate thesis— both as a capstone to the honors experience and as a credential that can strengthen graduate school and career opportunities. Further, the Visiting Committee noticed that none of the recruitment and program materials in Appendix E of the Self-Study specifically mention the Commonwealth Honors thesis project or the ability to graduate as a Commonwealth Honors Scholar within the program.

While the program’s website does include some information about the “Commonwealth Honors Project,” this information is presented separately from other information about the Honors program. The Commonwealth Honors thesis/ project isn’t mentioned at all in the webpage's FAQ section, for example, but is instead included in its own section on “CHP & grants” at the bottom of the page. This placement (and the failure to mention the thesis in recruitment/ program materials) may reinforce the impression students in the program have that the CHP/ thesis is something separate from the program. (Including the project in the FAQ section— e.g. “What is the Commonwealth Honors project?”) and mentioning it in other materials could help students better see the thesis/ project as a significant part of the program.

b. Create scaffolds/supports to aid students in the process of proposing a thesis, finding a thesis advisor, and completing their project.

Students suggested they would benefit from more structured support to help them connect with potential thesis project advisors and to navigate the research, writing, and project management involved. Most of the students the Visiting Committee spoke with did not consider the thesis option to be a valuable use of their time or valuable preparation for their post-graduate plans (like law school). Several were intimidated about the process of finding a thesis advisor, and at least one seemed to believe that the thesis was something students had to

complete in addition to the other 6 or 7 honors program requirements needed for graduation.

The Visiting Committee suggested that developing a series of workshops for students interested in the thesis process, or a specific course to support juniors and seniors as they complete their project might lead more of them to take advantage of this opportunity.

c. Create a repository of successful Commonwealth Honors projects (online or in the Honors Center) for students to access.

Students suggested that being able to see models of what an honors project looks like would make them more likely to consider completing one. While Worcester State does award a Commonwealth Honors Project prize at the annual Celebration of Scholarship and Creativity, the Sheehan Honors Program could consider publishing student theses/ projects online or displaying completed projects in the Honors Center. Having access to prior student projects could provide both students and potential faculty mentors with models for success.

d. Develop specific guidelines for the completion of a Commonwealth Honors thesis or project.

The Visiting Committee did not see any specific guidelines within the self-study about what standards or expectations may exist with respect to the Commonwealth Honors thesis project at WSU. Developing clear guidelines and standards may help both students and potential faculty advisors better understand the requirements for a Commonwealth Honors project as well as the available resources that might aid them over the course of its completion.

2. Enhance staffing and administrative support while supporting continuity in program leadership.

Given the current size of the program (around 350 students), and the heavy portfolio of responsibilities carried by the director, the Visiting Committee recommended additional staffing or administrative support in order to sustain the program's growth and ensure its continued success, particularly if the program wishes to have more students completing thesis projects needed to graduate as Commonwealth Honors scholars.

During its visit, the Visiting Committee learned that the usual contract for an honors program director at Worcester State is just one year (though Dr. Rosa was able to obtain a three-year contract). The Visiting Committee strongly recommend multi-year renewable contracts for both the chair and faculty fellow to ensure better continuity in leadership in the program.

In addition, the Visiting Committee strongly recommended increasing the compensation accorded to the Honors faculty fellow from 3.0 APR (one course release) for the entire academic year to one full course release (3.0 credits) per semester. Because honors

directors often come into their positions with prior experience as assistant directors or faculty fellows, the additional time afforded to this position will not only better recognize the fellow's work; it will also allow them to acquire a deeper understanding of the various tasks involved in the program.

3. Maximize the potential impact of the Sheehan Bequest Funds.

Worcester State's Honors Program has doubled over the past six years (from 166 students in 2018 to 331 in 2024), but the operating budget for the program has decreased significantly—from more than \$42,000 in 2019 to less than \$14,000 in 2025. The Sheehan bequest provides an additional \$50,000 in funding per year to support student programming as well as funding for student research, travel, or study abroad.

Many of our state universities have faced budget constraints in the year following the pandemic. Yet given the important role of the Sheehan Honors Program at Worcester State University, the Visiting Committee recommended increasing the program's operating budget when possible so that the Sheehan bequest funds can be reserved for the purpose of supporting students more directly.

4. Strengthen Honors Director's Access to Academic Leadership.

At present, the Honors Program Director reports to Dr. Noah Dion, the Director of Academic Support Services. The Visiting Committee was informed that Dr. Dion communicates any information and concerns related to the Honors program to the Provost's office. The Visiting Committee was unclear about whether this reporting structure satisfies the CHP requirement for the honors director to report "directly to the office of the chief academic officer of the institution." The current reporting structure does not appear to provide the same level of access to senior academic leadership typical among other Commonwealth Honors programs and colleges in our consortium. To better ensure compliance with state guidelines and to strengthen the program's institutional standing, the Visiting Committee recommended that the director be given more direct access to the Provost's office and meet at least periodically (once a semester) with the Provost as well as with the Director of Academic Support Services. It also noted that the Honors director is not currently included in the college's all-chairs meetings, which may limit her ability to participate in key academic discussions and decision-making processes. The director's inclusion in at least some of these meetings could help strengthen communication between the program and faculty leadership and provide the director with opportunities to advocate effectively for honors students while collaborating on initiatives that might benefit the broader academic community.

5. Clarify Honors Transfer Credit Requirements.

Worcester State University currently allows students to transfer no more than three of their previous honors courses into the Honors program at Worcester State and requires transfer students to take at least 50% of their honors courses (9 credits) at WSU.

Students expressed some uncertainty about whether and how honors credits earned at their previous institutions (including community colleges) might transfer to Worcester State. CHP requirements at some of our community colleges include four honors courses, and our state colleges and universities currently have different policies around honors transfer credits. The Visiting Committee believed that inability to have all transferred honors courses "count" at WSU could be a source of frustration for students and would encourage WSU to consider how its transfer credit policy might pose a barrier for some of its students. Regardless of what policy WSU adheres to, transfer students may need clearer information about the process for transferring honors credits.

6. Strengthen Data Tracking and Reporting Mechanisms.

Appendices included in the self-study indicate gaps in the program's data tracking, including the absence of information distinguishing CHP Scholars from Honors program graduates in 2020 and efforts between 2022 and 2024 to update rosters to remove students no longer enrolled at WSU or no longer active in Honors. The lack of consistent and reliable data makes it difficult to assess program outcomes and trends over time. The Visiting Committee recommended WSU support the honors program in developing more robust data tracking mechanisms that can accurately capture student progression, retention, and completion in the Sheehan Honors Program. Clear and consistent reporting will strengthen internal assessment while also providing valuable evidence of student success to external stakeholders.

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE

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

1. Continue work to increase the number of students completing honors thesis projects and graduating as Commonwealth Honors Scholars. Including the following:

a. **Improve communication with students about the Commonwealth Honors Project.**

We agree that improved communication with both students and faculty about the Commonwealth Honors Project is necessary. With the assistance of student interns this fall, we launched a social media campaign to increase awareness and understanding of the thesis process. We have also begun sending targeted emails about this during our advising period and reaching out to students and faculty involved in independent study courses that culminate in scholarly projects. Moving forward, we will hold information sessions for students and faculty as well. We will also update the Commonwealth Honors website and marketing materials to ensure clarity and accessibility.

b. **Create scaffolds/supports to aid students in the process of proposing a thesis, finding a thesis advisor, and completing their project.**

Student support is also key to increasing the number of students completing a scholar project. To better support students through every stage of their thesis, we will develop additional scaffolds and resources. These will include workshops,

potential matchmaking events to connect students with faculty advisors, and the development of materials designed to guide students through the proposal and research process.

c. **Create a repository of successful Commonwealth Honors projects (online or in the Honors Center) for students to access**

We appreciate the suggestion to create a repository of projects and plan to create this resource for students considering or engaged in the scholar process. This effort will also help document works submitted to our annual Fall Honors Showcase and Celebration of Scholarship and Creativity.

d. **Develop specific guidelines for the completion of a Commonwealth Honors thesis or project**

We recognize the need for clear expectations and guidelines to support thesis completion. We have begun to gather information from peer institutions to aid in drafting formal guidelines for students. These guidelines will include suggested steps and timelines to ensure timely completion of projects that extend beyond traditional formats and modalities.

2. Enhance Staffing and Administrative Support While Supporting Continuity in Program Leadership: We appreciate the team's recognition of the strengths of the Program Director and the need for continuity of leadership. To this end, the current Program Director is in year two of a three-year contract with the option to renew at the end of her term. The current Faculty Fellow is in year one of a two-year contract with the option to renew. We will continue to revisit compensation for the Faculty Fellow position based on the ability to support additional release time across the university.
3. Maximize the Potential Impact of the Sheehan Bequest Funds: The Sheehan Honors program is well-supported financially through a combination of university operating funds and the Sheehan Endowment. Thanks to the Sheehan Endowment and recent increases in operating funds the program can fully fund all activities. We continually evaluate program expenses and are committed to meeting all funding needs.
4. Strengthen Honors Director's Access to Academic Leadership: We thank the site team for this recommendation and have already begun to incorporate the Program Director into conversations with upper-level administration. Dr. Rosa has been added to the Provost Council, which will afford her the opportunity to interact with the Provost and her team on a regular basis. In addition to inviting the Program Director to participate in this meeting, the Provost has confirmed her willingness to meet with the Director individually as needed. Dr. Rosa will also present to the University Cabinet this Spring.
5. Clarify Honors Transfer Credit Requirements: Transfer students represent a significant portion of our Honors population and we recognize the importance of clear communication around the transfer credit process. To support program completion for transfer students, we recently increased the number of accepted honors transfer courses from two courses to three courses. We regularly meet with admissions staff to ensure students are offered admission when coming from Commonwealth Honors Programs

and Colleges. We will continue to explore ways to streamline and automate the process of assigning course credit for prior honors work.

6. Strengthen Data Tracking and Reporting Mechanisms: We acknowledge the data gaps identified during this review cycle and have already begun addressing underlying process issues by establishing routine data and coding reviews each semester. We will continue to improve accuracy and completeness moving forward by collaborating with Institutional Advancement to ensure accurate and up-to-date program data.

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