

BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION
REQUEST FOR BOARD ACTION

NO.: BHE 10-07

BOARD DATE: May 4, 2010

COMMONWEALTH COLLEGE NAME CHANGE

MOVED: The Board of Higher Education approves the request of the University of Massachusetts Amherst to change the name of Commonwealth College to Commonwealth Honors College.

Authority: Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A, Section 9

Contact: Francesca B. Purcell, Ph.D., Associate Commissioner for Academic and P-16 Policy

Background

On June 17, 1997, the 35-year-old Honors Program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst was selected by the Board of Higher Education (ACA 97-27) to become Commonwealth College, the first freestanding honors college in the public system, and to assume a leadership role in coordinating honors program activity for the public sector as a whole. The primary goal was to promote public awareness of the excellence of the public colleges and universities in the Commonwealth and the caliber of their graduates.

Commonwealth College at the University of Massachusetts Amherst is a campus-wide program; qualified students from all majors in every college are eligible to participate. At the time the UMass Amherst Honors Program was designated Commonwealth College, it enrolled 1,600 students. This year marks the 10th Anniversary of the first entering Commonwealth College class. Today, the College enrolls over 3,000 students, offers over 100 honors courses and a variety of educational, service, social, and advising opportunities, and provides leadership and support for the system of public honors programs. The 2009 freshman class of 487 students had an average weighted high school GPA of 4.16 and average critical reading and math SAT scores of 1342, and represented the top 4.5 percent of their high school graduating class.

Other successes include the annual statewide undergraduate research conference that brings together students and faculty from around the states with more than 550 student presentations in 2009; students earning prestigious national and international scholarships including Marshall, Truman, Fulbright, Gates Cambridge, Goldwater, NSF, Boren, and DAAD; and the finding that 82 percent of Commonwealth College graduates pursue graduate study.

This motion concerns a name change from Commonwealth College to Commonwealth Honors College to more accurately reflect the mission of Commonwealth College and to better facilitate the recruitment of high-achieving students. University of Massachusetts Amherst administrators have concluded that many academically qualified high school students are not aware of Commonwealth College and therefore may not apply to the University of Massachusetts Amherst. These prospective students may decide to attend elsewhere because they are more fully aware of honors opportunities at competitor institutions. For example, searching for an "honors college" in an online search engine does not show Commonwealth College for several pages. Further, based upon student surveys, many currently enrolled University of Massachusetts Amherst students who become eligible to join Commonwealth College were not aware of Commonwealth College until they received a letter of invitation. Based upon this information, University of Massachusetts Amherst requests the aforementioned name change.