

COMMONWEALTH HONORS PROGRAM

APPROVAL PROCESS GUIDELINES



Revised March 2022

Approval Process for Commonwealth Honors Programs
(Copies of the Guidelines and an Application Checklist are available
at the DHE 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, since the last approval, or if a new approval for the past three years.
 - d. A list of all honors courses taught since the last approval, or if a new approval for the past three years from the course catalog.
 - 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 via the Commonwealth Honors Council Chair.
 - b. The application shall be submitted electronically. 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.
 - c. The Director/Coordinator/Dean of the Commonwealth Honors Program/College submits the application including the Self Study to the Chair of the Commonwealth Honors Council who forwards the application to the Commissioner of Higher Education or the Commissioner's designee, and the Site Visit Team, in preparation for the Site Visit. The Site Visit Coordinator assists in this process. The Department of Higher Education is responsible for cataloguing and archiving all applications (See II.B.3).

B. Program Approval

1. The Commonwealth Honors Council 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 Commonwealth Honors Council Executive Committee will review complete approval applications twice a year to recommend for approval. The Site Visit Coordinator is responsible for compiling applications for this approval. These recommendations will then be sent to the Commissioner of Higher Education or the Commissioner's designee, by the Commonwealth Honors Council Chair. (See Section III "*Program Approval Review Process*" below for understanding of the full process.).

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

II. **Review Criteria** The following criteria constitute the basis for the Commonwealth Honors Council 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 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/dean who reports directly to the office of the chief academic officer of the institution.
2. The director/coordinator/chair has a minimum of six (6) credits per semester release time or half-time release/APR reassignment per year, whichever is greater. Each institution has the flexibility to determine the appropriate amount of release time as long as the 50% per year/6 credit per semester release time is met. For work outside the contractual calendar year, Honors Program director/coordinator/deans should be compensated out of the institution budget.
3. For programs larger than 200 students, it is recommended that provisions for an Assistant/Associate Honors Program Coordinator/Director should be made including proportional release time/APR reassignment and/or compensation.
4. The Program has a faculty Honors Program Committee with provision for administrative and student representation. The Committee shall have clearly defined responsibilities.
5. Institutional membership in the National Collegiate Honors Council is strongly recommended.
6. Institutions may also provide unique services or Programs for the system as a whole (e.g., experimental courses or faculty workshops/conferences or summer honors Programs).

C. Admission Criteria

1. The institution has established Honors Program admission standards based on its particular circumstances.
2. 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 or complete 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. Transfer institutions shall accept P grades in fulfillment of Honors if those grades are sufficient for Honors level work at the home institution.
3. Honors Program coordinators/directors/deans 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; and
 - (iii) One honors seminar or colloquium that is interdisciplinary.
 - 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.

- c. To graduate as a **Commonwealth Honors Program Scholar from a UMass Commonwealth Honors Program/College**, 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), with a grade of B or better;
 - (iii) An Honors project/thesis.

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/fellowships 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/dean.
 - d. There is consistent and adequate clerical/administrative 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 Site Visit Coordinator, in consultation with the Commonwealth Honors Council 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 the member institutions of the Commonwealth Honors Council.
 - 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 observers 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 Commonwealth Honors Council 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 Commonwealth Honors Council will forward the report to the Commissioner or the Commissioner's designee, who then sends it to the President/Chancellor of the institution with a request for a response.
 4. The Commonwealth Honors Council 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, as compiled by the Site Visit Coordinator and archived on the Department of Higher Education repository.
 5. On the basis of that evaluation, the Commonwealth Honors Council Executive Committee shall take action, by formal vote, to recommend for Board of Higher Education approval, disapproval, or deferred action on the application.
 6. The Chair of the Commonwealth Honors Council shall forward applications that are recommended for approval to the Commissioner or the Commissioner's designee to be voted on by the Board of Higher Education, including the Visiting Committee report, the written response of the institution, and the formal vote and recommendation of the Commonwealth Honors Council Executive Committee.
 7. The Commissioner or the Commissioner's designee will review the materials and make a specific recommendation to the Board of Higher Education. The Board of Higher Education 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 seven years by the Commonwealth Honors Council Executive Committee.

1. One year after approval/re-approval, the President/Chancellor shall provide a written update to the Commissioner with regards to recommendations made in the Site Visit Report. This report shall be catalogued with the rest of the approval materials.
2. The Site Visit Coordinator is charged with keeping the calendar of approval and re-approval timelines.
3. The Commissioner's designee in collaboration with the Commonwealth Honors

Council Executive Committee is responsible for the online repository of Commonwealth Honors materials, including full approval applications, past and current, CHC documents and bylaws. This repository is hosted on the Department of Higher Education's website.

IV. Commonwealth Honors Program Governance Structure

A. Commonwealth Honors Council

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. The Commonwealth Honors Council will be composed of the Honors Program directors/coordinators/deans (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 Commonwealth Honors Council 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 Commonwealth Honors Council will meet in full session at least twice a year to discuss the broad issues related to Honors Programs and to make recommendations to the Board of Higher Education. Council members may bring students, as guests 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 Council Executive Committee

1. The Commonwealth Honors Council Executive Committee will be comprised of the Dean of Commonwealth College (University of Massachusetts Amherst), nine other members from the Commonwealth Honors Council, 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 Commonwealth Honors Council. The Committee members will be elected by the respective subcommittees of the Commonwealth Honors Council. Members will serve three-year staggered terms. The 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.
2. The Commonwealth Honors Council 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 Commissioner of Higher Education concerning the status of Honors Programs within public higher education.