

BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

REQUEST FOR COMMITTEE AND BOARD ACTION

NO.: BHE 24-52

BOARD DATE: June 11, 2024

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

MOVED: The Board of Higher Education accepts the report of the Commonwealth Honors Council Executive Committee and renews the membership of **University of Massachusetts Lowell** in the **Commonwealth Honors Program** for seven years, effective June 11, 2024.

VOTED: Motion approved and advanced to the full BHE by the Executive Committee on 6/3/2024; and adopted by the BHE on 6/11/2024.

Authority: Commonwealth Honors Program Approval Process Guidelines, as amended by the BHE in March 2022; G.L. c. 15A, § 9.

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University of Massachusetts Lowell Renewal of Membership in Commonwealth Honors Program

BACKGROUND

This motion concerns the continuation of University of Massachusetts Lowell 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. [Commonwealth Honors Program Approval Process Guidelines, March 2022](#)

REVIEW PROCESS

University of Massachusetts Lowell 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 February 7, 2024, the Commonwealth Honors Program (CHP) Visiting Committee (Visiting Committee) conducted a day-long, in-person assessment of the University of Massachusetts Lowell's (UML) Honors Program. The Visiting Committee consisted of Amy Shapiro, Dean of UMass Dartmouth Honors College, and Chair of the Visiting Committee; Binnur Ercem, Director of Commonwealth Honors Program at Middlesex Community College; and Nicole Rosa, Director of Commonwealth Honors Program at Worcester State University. Prior to the visit, the Visiting Committee received and studied UML's application for reaccreditation of CHP status. The site visit was hosted and organized by Honors College Dean, Prof. Jenifer Whitten-Woodring and her staff. The Honors College is part of the University's Division of Academic Affairs, and the Director reports to the Vice Provost. The site visit team met with the full Honors College Staff, a large

group of students, Honors College Faculty Liaisons, members of the Faculty and Staff Leadership Circle, Vice Provost Julie Nash, Provost Joseph Hartman, and Chancellor Julie Chen.

Since its last site review in 2016, the Honors College has seen many changes. It moved to an expanded space in Allen House (the former Chancellor's residence), which is a spacious and impressive building that provides the college with offices, advising space, and student meeting space. The enrollment has grown from 1,100 students in 2016 to 1,700 students today. The number of graduates from CHP has also grown more than 50% from 59 to 178 in the same period. The College prides itself on its enrollment diversity, which mirrors the racial and ethnic demographics of the campus. The administrative structure has changed since 2016, with a series of leadership circles developed that serve as advisory bodies providing a well-rounded base of perspectives to the Dean. A major change approved by the Faculty Senate is a new transcript designation, "Honors College Distinction," awarded to students who complete either the required coursework but not the thesis, or the thesis but not the coursework required in the CHP program.

The Visiting Committee was impressed by the Honors College at UML and recommends, without reservation, that UML's Honors Program be granted re-approval.

The Visiting Committee identified the following commendations of the UML Honors College:

1. The site visit team was impressed by the College's model of engaging faculty from across campus, and the faculty are very enthusiastic about the mission and impact of Honors at UMass Lowell.
2. The Dean and her staff clearly demonstrated extraordinary dedication to the College.
3. The Provost and Chancellor expressed strong support for the Honors College and the Dean, and the Dean feels supported by the administration.
4. The system of Leadership Circles creates buy-in from stakeholders in the College and provide feedback to the College from multiple perspectives.
5. The College is engaged in a cycle of continuous improvement by engaging in a retention and completion analysis to more accurately assess and understand completion rates.
6. The staff and faculty are very appreciative of and devoted to the Dean.
7. The College and upper administration demonstrated commitment to the diversity of Honors enrollment.
8. Allen House is a large and comfortable space for the College, which remains open until 9:30 pm for student meetings, studying, and social gatherings.
9. The Honors College represents 20% of the campus enrollment. While this is double the size recommended by NCHC and has created difficulty finding mentors for each student, the college is exploring the use of community mentors to fill the gap.
10. Immersive scholarships provide enrichment opportunities for students through study abroad and internships. The college's commitment to study abroad experiences is a successful hallmark of their program.
11. Honors housing contributes to Honors community cohesiveness and is an attractive benefit for Honors students.

Recommendations from the Visiting Committee included the following:

1. North Campus Presence: Allen House is a remarkable space for Honors students to study, seek advisement, and commune. There is no similar space in the north campus and students, faculty, and administrators all recognize that the physical barriers between the campuses disengages North Campus students from Honors. Many students from the North Campus report a feeling of disconnection from the Honors College because they seldom travel to South Campus and have no connection to the college where they live and work. We recommend the campus establish a social and advising space on the north campus to better integrate students in the sciences into the Honors College.
2. Budget: The Honors College General Operating budget was \$190,000 in FY2020. As a result of necessary campus-wide budget reductions, the general operating fund was reduced to \$56,000. The Provost roughly doubled that with some discretionary funds, demonstrating his support for the College even in times of financial exigency. The site visit team, while recognizing the very clear challenges of the current financial environment, recommends the administration set a future goal of 50% of Honors College student fees returned to the Honors College budget.
3. Increased Honors Housing: The Honors College currently provides 430 beds in Honors housing, which accommodates only a fraction of demand for Honors housing. Given that Honors housing attracts students to Honors and serves as a point of social connection that boosts student retention rates, the committee recommends increasing dormitory space in Honors housing to 850 beds.
4. Honors College Distinction: The Honors College Distinction transcript notation may provide incentive for students not to strive for completion of the CHP credits, which is at odds with the College's stated goal of increasing completion rates. We recommend monitoring completion rates of CHP requirements and consider modifying the policy if CHP graduate percentages decrease. We also recommend that reported completion rates of the CHP and Honors College Distinction tracks be reported as separate and distinct data points.
5. CHP Completion Rates: To increase completion rates of the CHP requirements, we recommend the college investigate the root causes of why students are opting out of the senior thesis, and why faculty are reluctant to mentor students. We suggest that clearer guidelines and directions about the senior thesis for both the students and the faculty may be a useful component in this approach.
6. College Staffing: The number of FTE staff in the Honors College is slightly higher than in the past, yet staff members feel overburdened at times. This is understandable as enrollment has grown, as has the number of activities supported by the College. The committee recommends the College assess the value of each of its initiatives to discern whether it can "right size" the office by cutting lower impact initiatives, increasing staff, reassessing staff job descriptions, or some combination of these approaches.

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE

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

1. North Campus Presence: The University is planning to develop a “Student Hub” on the North Campus, ideally in Cumnock Hall, which houses many of our student supports, including advising, tutoring and our Asian American Center for Excellence and Engagement. This hub will provide space for students to mingle and work. The space will also include individual offices for staff to hold private meetings. These offices would be allocated to entities such as Honors, RHSA, and others.
2. Budget: The site visit team recommended that the administration set a future goal that 50% of Honors College student fees be returned to the Honors College budget. The loss of operating funding over the past three years has been dramatic due to the drop in overall university enrollments. As those enrollments build back to our expected levels, operating funds will be restored. The Provost and new CFO are intent on making the budget process more transparent with fee distribution tied more directly to enrollment, not historical allocation. This will take time. In the meantime, the Provost will continue to support the needs of the Honors College as Academic Affairs has been spared the brunt of cuts across campus.
3. Increased Honors Housing: The site visit team recommended that the Honors College housing be increased from 430 beds to 850 beds. As the University embarks on developing a new East Campus plan, we will replace older housing units and increase the total number of beds available. We will work closely with the planning group and residence life to increase the number of beds allocated to Honors according to our projected needs.
4. Honors College Distinction: The site visit team was concerned that the Honors College Distinction transcript notation may provide incentive for students not to strive for completion of the CHP credits and recommended monitoring completion rates of CHP requirements and modifying the policy if CHP graduate percentages decrease. The purpose of the Honors College Distinction is to recognize the accomplishments of students who have achieved most of the Honors Requirements (either everything except the Honors Project or the Honors Project but not all the course requirements) and to recognize, in a scaffolded way, the accomplishments of students as they make their way to becoming Commonwealth Honors Scholars. Research has shown that recognizing accomplishments along the way can increase completion rates. The Honors Distinction is one way of doing this. In addition, one of the concerns about having such a large honors college is that we risk disappointing students who are unable to complete the Honors Project or who complete the Honors Project, but who have transferred and who are unable to complete the Commonwealth Honors credit requirements. Sometimes students have very good reasons for not completing the Honors Project or the course requirements (e.g., they need to start a job, and they cannot complete the

Commonwealth Honors requirements and graduate on time). We will track the Honors College Distinctions and the Commonwealth Honors Scholars completions. If we find that the Honors College Distinctions come at the expense of the Commonwealth Honors completions, we will remove the Honors College Distinction as an option.

5. CHP Completion Rates: To increase completion rates of the CHP requirements, the site visit team recommended the college investigate the root causes of why students are opting out of the Honors Project, and why faculty are reluctant to mentor students. We have a former employee of the Honors College who conducted a program evaluation of the Honors College for her dissertation. A primary focus of this research is to identify the factors that influence a student's likelihood of completing the CHP requirements. These results have just become available, and we plan to make changes based on this research. Additionally, we are now conducting exit interviews to better understand the reasons why some students fail to complete the Honors Project. As noted above, there are sometimes very good reasons for students not to complete the Honors Project.
6. College Staffing: The site visit team noted that the number of full-time staff is low, given increased enrollment in the Honors College, and that staff at times are overburdened. We are working to mitigate this through the adoption of Sutable, a student engagement application that also tracks student participation and completion of many honors requirements. We are also putting processes in place to streamline each employee's responsibilities. Additionally, we are looking to make better use of our expert team of part-time staff and have them take on some of the responsibilities that fall within their area of expertise. We will continue to evaluate and address this issue.

On May 3, 2024, the Commonwealth Honors Council Executive Committee voted to reapprove University of Massachusetts Lowell'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 Lowell** in the **Commonwealth Honors Program**.