

BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

REQUEST FOR BOARD ACTION

NO: BHE 22-52

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE DATE: April 25, 2022

BOARD DATE: May 3, 2022

ADOPTION OF THE REVISED COMMONWEALTH HONORS PROGRAM APPROVAL PROCESS GUIDELINES

Moved: The Board of Higher Education (BHE) hereby adopts the revised March 2022 "Commonwealth Honors Program Approval Process Guidelines". (Attachment A).

The revised Commonwealth Honors Program Approval Process Guidelines supersede any past policies or practices of the BHE governing the same matter.

The BHE further charges the Commissioner to work with the Commonwealth Honors Council and the public higher education institutions to ensure the amended guidelines are implemented in time for the 2022-2023 academic year.

Voted: Motion approved and advanced to the full BHE by the Executive Committee on 4/25/2022; and adopted by the BHE on 5/3/2022.

Authority: Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A, Section 9 and 6.

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BACKGROUND

The Commonwealth Honors Program Approval Process Guidelines (*Guidelines*) were drafted and approved in 1997 when the Board of Higher Education (BHE) established the Commonwealth Honors Program (CHP). The CHP is an integrated network throughout Massachusetts' public higher education system designed to challenge its highest achieving students. The *Guidelines* define the CHP mission, program quality and rigor, admission criteria for the establishment of new programs and the process for program reapproval. The *Guidelines* were last updated in 2006.

The Commonwealth Honors Council, in collaboration with the Department of Higher Education (DHE), set about updating the *Guidelines* in response to the growing awareness of equity minded policies and procedures and the expressed desire of Commonwealth Honors Program Directors/Coordinators/Deans for increased clarity around program processes. Alignment with the BHE Equity Agenda catalyzed the collaborative work for reviewing and revising the *Guidelines*.

REVISIONS

The revisions seek to remove access barriers and improve program processes. Key revisions to access barriers include eliminating prohibitive admission language, clarifying the acceptance of course credits taken as pass/fail, and removing restrictive graduation criteria language. Key revisions for improving program processes include increasing the program reapproval cycle from six to seven years, clarifying program administrator release time, adding language on recommended program support for programs exceeding 200 students and formalizing the one-year follow-up review process. The following table summarizes the key recommended changes.

Objective: Remove Access Barriers		
Current Language	Modified Language	Rationale
<p>Admission Criteria <i>For state college and University Honors Programs, freshman admission to the Program includes such factors as high SAT scores, graduation near the top of the high school class, and/or other factors that are predictive of academic success. Freshman admission may also be granted on the basis of recommendation of faculty or admissions officers with the approval of the honors coordinator/director.</i></p>	<p>Current language removed. (Kept paragraphs before and after this one which provide for individual institution admission standards.)</p>	<p>Increase student inclusion and access by reducing equity barriers to CHP systems in the colleges/ universities. Allows for multiple measures.</p>
<p>Transfer Criteria <i>Honors courses completed with a B or better at a given level (e.g., 100, 200, 300) are accepted for transfer at that level.</i></p>	<p>Adding this language: <i>Transfer institutions shall accept P grades in fulfillment of Honors if those grades are sufficient for</i></p>	<p>Clarify the acceptance of course credits taken as pass/fail by using home institution guidelines.</p>

	<i>Honors level work at the home institution.</i>	
Graduation Criteria <i>One honors seminar or colloquium that is interdisciplinary, for honors-level students only, and preferably team taught.</i>	Removed language in blue font	Less restrictive language
Objective: Improve Program Processes		
Current Language	Modified Language	Rationale
Program Review Cycle <i>Once Commonwealth Honors Program approval has been obtained by an institution from the BHE, the Program will be reviewed every six years by the CHP Executive Committee.</i>	Removed language in blue font and changed review from six years to seven years.	Seven-year review cycles are common in higher education and given that the review process requires volunteers from within the system, requiring fewer volunteers each year is a more sustainable practice.
Program Administration <i>The director/coordinator/chair has a minimum of six (6) credits per semester release time and/or an appropriate stipend in lieu of no more than three credits of release per semester. Provision is made to fund work done by the director/ coordinator outside of the regular academic calendar.</i>	<i>Removed language in blue font and added the following: "or a recommended 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 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's budget."</i>	The efficacy of the program is tied to the amount of time the program administrator can spend on it.
Program Support No current language	Added new language as follows: <i>"For programs larger than 200 students, it is recommended that provisions for an Assistant/ Associate Honors Program Coordinator/Director be made including proportional release time/APR reassignment and/or compensation."</i>	To ensure students are well served additional staff (of any type) are needed for larger programs especially programs converting to honors colleges.
Program Site Review Follow-Up No language exists in the body of the Approval Process Guidelines. The BHE voted on a provision for program site review follow-up on May 6,	Added new language as follows, <i>"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</i>	To formalize the one-year review process and to create one comprehensive document.

<p>2011, but it was never formally added into the guidelines.</p>	<p><i>be catalogued with the rest of the approval materials."</i></p> <p><i>The Site Visit Coordinator is charged with keeping the calendar of approval and re-approval timelines.</i></p> <p><i>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.</i></p>	
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VETTING PROCESS

The revised *Guidelines* were brought before the Academic Affairs and Student Success Advisory Council (Advisory Council) for discussion and feedback on March 8, 2022. Following this meeting, Commissioner Santiago sent a memo to the presidents of all institutions of public higher education in Massachusetts on March 23, 2022, seeking comment. The Commissioner provided the institutions three weeks, until April 13, 2022, to review and comment on the revised document.

The Commissioner received responses from eight institutions – five Community Colleges and three State Universities. The five Community Colleges - Bristol, Cape Cod, Holyoke, Massasoit and Northern Essex - all agreed with the changes with an added note of concern by Holyoke Community College around organizational equity when considering needed CHP resources compared to other campus program needs. The three state universities - Framingham, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA), and Worcester - expressed concern with the added language in the program administration and program support sections of the *Guidelines*. The revised language in the program administration section states, *"The director/coordinator/chair has a minimum of six (6) credits per semester release time or a recommended 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 6 credit per semester release time is met."* The rationale for the revised language is anchored in the desire to ensure equity among the three higher education sectors – UMass, State University and Community College - and to ensure the efficacy of the program is tied to the amount of time program administrators spent on it. The new language in the program support section states, *"For programs larger than 200 students, it is recommended that provisions for an Assistant/Associate Honors Program Coordinator/Director be made including proportional release time/APR reassignment and/or compensation."* The rationale for this addition is to ensure students have the necessary supports to be successful through the addition of another staff administrator for larger programs especially programs converting to honors colleges. Commissioner Santiago responded to the concerns raised by Framingham, MCLA's and Worcester by

assuring them CHP's need only be of a size equal to available campus resources and that these additions to the *Guidelines* are recommended and not a requirement.

RECOMMENDATION

DHE staff thoroughly reviewed all comments received from the campuses in response to Commissioner Santiago's memorandum seeking input to the recommended revisions to the CHP Approval Process Guidelines to ensure all concerns were addressed. Staff recommends approval of the "Revised Commonwealth Honors Program Approval Process Guidelines" effective beginning AY 2022-2023.

Attachment A

**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 BHE 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 during the past three years.
 - 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 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 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.

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 (CHC)

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 CHC 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 CHC 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 CHC 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 Program 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 CHC, 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.