

**BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

**REQUEST FOR COMMITTEE AND BOARD ACTION**

**NO.:** BHE 25-50

**BOARD DATE:** June 17, 2025

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**RENEWAL OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE COMMONWEALTH HONORS PROGRAM FOR  
SALEM STATE UNIVERSITY**

**MOVED:** The Board of Higher Education accepts the report of the Commonwealth Honors Council Executive Committee and renews the membership of **Salem State University** in the **Commonwealth Honors Program** for seven years, effective June 17, 2025.

**VOTED:** Motion adopted by the BHE on 6/17/2025.

**Authority:** Commonwealth Honors Program Approval Process Guidelines as Revised by the Board of Higher Education in March 2022; G.L. c. 15A, § 9.

**Contact:** Richard Riccardi, Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Student Success  
  
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# **BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

**June 2025**

## **Salem State University Renewal of Membership in Commonwealth Honors Program**

### **BACKGROUND**

This motion concerns the continuation of Salem 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 will review the program every seven years. The report of the Committee shall be forwarded to the Board of Higher Education for approval.

### **REVIEW PROCESS**

Salem 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 February 20, 2025, the Commonwealth Honors Program (CHP) Visiting Committee (Visiting Committee) conducted a day-long, in-person assessment of the Salem State University 's (SSU) Honors Program. The Visiting Committee consisted of Jenny Shanahan, Assistant Provost and Coordinator of the Honors Program at Bridgewater State University, and Chair of the Visiting Committee; Ginger Hurajt, Coordinator of the Honors Program at Northern Essex Community College; and Amy Shapiro, Chair of the Honors College at UMass Dartmouth. Prior to the visit, the Visiting Committee received and studied SSU's application for reaccreditation of CHP status. The site visit was hosted and organized by Kimberly Poitevin, Honors Program Director at SSU. During the visit, the team met with faculty, librarians, and students active in the Honors Program, Honors Director Kimberly Poitevin, Honors Faculty Fellow Anthony D'Amico, Provost David Silva, and President John Keenan.

The Visiting Committee, in their report, commended SSU's Honors Program in several areas. These commendations included commitment to student community and belonging, support for Honors thesis scholarship, commitment to equity and inclusion, enhancement of workload credit hours of faculty mentors for Honors theses, dedication and effectiveness of the Honors Director, and a robust Honors curriculum.

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

Recommendations from the Visiting Committee, with detailed explanations, included the following:

1. *Enhanced Staffing and Administrative Support* - the Honors Director currently carries responsibilities for recruitment, admissions, advising, event-planning, budget management, fundraising, curriculum oversight, and thesis coordination—alongside teaching and administrative duties. Although a part-time administrative assistant (15 hours/week) and a Faculty Fellow (3 credits APR per semester) provide support, the scope of the Director's responsibilities suggests that additional staffing would allow for improved data tracking (e.g., graduation rates), more systematic advising for 4+1 and transfer students, and expansion of fundraising efforts. We recommend that the university explore expanding administrative staff support for Honors and coordinate collaboration and support from admissions, advancement, institutional research, and assessment. In addition to support from staff in other divisions, a Graduate Assistant with experience in data analysis and/or peer advising could be an important asset to the program
2. *Clarify Honors Curriculum Requirements and Develop Honors Learning Outcomes* - Multiple conversations highlighted a complex and occasionally unclear set of honors credit requirements—often referred to as 21–26 credits, but also 18 and 24, with routine waivers, especially for transfer students and those in 4+1 and heavy-credit programs. The Honors Director has indicated a desire to restructure the curriculum to clarify the requirements, revise the categories of honors electives to better suit students' needs, and to develop and assess honors curriculum learning outcomes. Those are important and time-intensive goals that likely cannot be accomplished on a 6-credit/semester APR during the academic year. We encourage the university to support a formal curriculum review (potentially over a compensated summer or with an additional APR) to clarify and streamline requirements, reduce the reliance on waivers, integrate upper-level honors course opportunities in the majors, and identify and assess a set of learning outcomes. We wonder whether the workload associated with up to 26 honors credits is onerous for some students, especially those in 4+1 programs, double-majors, and/or students with significant transfer credits. Since the CHP minimum is 18 credits, it may make sense to create an 18-credit honors curriculum map with flexibility built in, which could minimize the number of waivers and substitutions and offer clarity for students.

3. *Formalize the Honors Thesis Distinction in Non-Honors Capstone Courses* – Honors students completing their honors theses in non-honors departmental capstone courses are not required to demonstrate a distinction between what they are completing as an honors thesis and what the other students in the class are completing as a capstone for the major. While there is a stated expectation that the honors thesis work should be at a higher level than a standard requirement in the major, there is not a verification of that distinction, other than the requirement for honors thesis students to present their thesis/capstone at SSU Research Day and/or MassURC. Learning outcomes specific to the honors thesis could form the basis of such a distinction. Other CHP institutions' models may be helpful too, such as the practice requiring review and approval of honors theses by a committee of three faculty members in the department and/or allied disciplines
4. *Explore Additional Advanced Honors Coursework* - Lower-division courses comprise most of the Honors curriculum at SSU. The student meeting revealed an interest in adding upper-level or major-specific honors courses. Transfer students especially noted that because most honors courses are at the 100- or 200-level and fulfill general education requirements, and because transfer students have often completed general education equivalents before transferring, they end up needing to take lower-division honors courses as electives in their junior and senior years. Creating more upper-level honors courses and/or establishing honors contracts in upper-division courses could help retain advanced students and facilitate honors completion, particularly for students who transfer to SSU or enter as first-year students with AP, dual-enrollment, or early-college credit.
5. *Develop Sustainable Financial Strategies* - Budget constraints have impacted Honors scholarships, conference travel, and co-curricular learning at SSU. The program has been encouraged to use gift funds to replace parts of an operating budget that was sharply reduced in FY25. Without new endowed funds to provide long-term support, Honors opportunities could fade away. Given the positive impact of signature activities (e.g., the annual new-student retreat and Presidents' Day weekend trip), we encourage renewed collaboration with Advancement to cultivate new donors, explore philanthropic opportunities, and articulate the case for ongoing support. This would help sustain high-quality experiential learning and scholarship funding. If the program can demonstrate with institutional research (IR) data that participation in Honors is significantly correlated with student persistence at the university (which we suspect is the case), there may be an opportunity to advocate for a larger share of the Academic Affairs budget, as well. Each student retained represents revenue that allows the institution to thrive. A robust Honors Program is critical to that overall retention effort
6. *Strengthen Data Tracking on Retention and Completion* – While the Honors Program collects data on total enrollment and racial and ethnic demographics of students, it does not have the capacity to maintain systematic longitudinal records (e.g., tracking which cohorts persist to final thesis completion, or how many transfer students earn the Commonwealth Honors Scholar designation). More comprehensive data collection could

illuminate patterns in retention and inform strategies for supporting students, especially those balancing demanding professional majors and/or 4+1 programs. Tracking this data would also be helpful to highlight student success stories and outcomes for prospective donors and prospective students

## **INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE**

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

1. Enhanced Staffing and Administrative Support: program. The program area chair has already initiated conversations with multiple offices on campus to seek additional support with respect to honors recruitment and admissions, advising, and fundraising.
  - Recruitment and Admissions: Beginning in fall 2025, we hope to have the Admissions office take over some of the outreach and mailings currently carried out by the honors program area chair and administrative assistant.
  - Fundraising: The program area chair has had multiple conversations this year with representatives from the Institutional Advancement office. Working with representatives from IA, we have sought out testimonials from current honors students, honors alumni, and honors faculty that can be used to articulate the value of our program to potential new donors. The impact report generated by IA will support us both in our fundraising and recruitment efforts.
  - Advising: We will explore the possibility of securing a graduate assistant who could provide additional advising support in Honors. In addition, we will establish faculty honors program liaisons within each academic department. These liaisons would allow us to provide better and more systematic advising for our honors students, to build stronger relationships with academic departments across the university, and to better identify the needs of honors students within specific majors and our 4+1 programs.
  - Other Partnerships: In coming months, we hope to build on these collaborations and develop more robust partnerships with Institutional Research, the Center for Civic Engagement, and the Center for Research and Creative Activities.

While Salem State is currently unable to offer additional administrative staff designate specifically for honors, an additional 3 credits APR for the program area chair in Fall 2025 will allow more time to secure support from staff in other divisions on campus while tending to the site team's additional recommendations.

2. Clarify Honors Curriculum Requirements and Develop Honors Learning Outcomes: The Honors Program Advisory Committee (HPAC) has already begun work on developing honors program outcomes, which will be finalized this academic year. In its remaining meetings for this year, the committee will discuss the site visit team's recommendations with respect to curricular revisions. With input from HPAC, the program area chair will develop a revised flowsheet/ honors degree map, honors course certification criteria, and curriculum committee proposals needed to implement these changes. These changes would include (1) reduce the number of required courses needed to complete the honors curriculum at Salem State; (2) establish clear criteria for certifying new honors

courses at Salem State; and (3) develop at least one additional upper-level course that could serve the needs of our transfer students and 4+1 students. With the support of an additional APR/ course release in Fall 2025, and in collaboration with other honors program faculty, the program area chair will craft and submit these materials to university governance with the goal of implementing these changes by fall 2026.

3. Formalize the Honors Thesis Distinction in Non-Honors Capstone Courses: The site visit team suggests that our program can do more to formalize and to communicate the requirements for honors thesis work. Rubrics used in previous years to assess honors student thesis work can be revised and more widely shared with all faculty members advising honors thesis projects, be they via directed studies, honors designated courses, or non-honors designated courses within a student's major. SSU appreciates the suggestion of exploring the possibility of requiring review and approval of honors theses by a panel of 2-3 faculty members within a student's home department and/or allied disciplines. While it may be unfeasible to require this of all honors students, it does seem to be a reasonable way of distinguishing thesis work completed in a non-honors course capstone from other capstone experiences. SSU anticipates being able to implement these new guidelines for students completing honors theses in major capstone courses in AY 2025-26
4. Explore Additional Advanced Honors Coursework: The site team report rightly notes that most honors course offerings at Salem State are 100- and 200-level courses that fulfill general education requirements. The lack of upper-level courses in honors poses barriers both to transfer students as well as to first-year students who enter Salem State with college credits earned through AP/ IB exams and to Salem State students who enter our program after their freshman year (and thus have already completed most Gen Ed requirements). Currently, NUR 601H (Nursing Research I), and our junior and senior seminars (IDS 600H and 601H) are the only upper-level honors courses available, though students are permitted to use one graduate-level course as well as a travel course/ semester abroad course (which may or may not be offered at an upper level) to satisfy an honors course requirement.

Allowing students to use more than one graduate course to satisfy an honors course requirement is an easy first step to expanding upper-level course offerings for honors students and for easing the burden on our 4+1 students. Getting other upper-level honors courses on the books will be more of a challenge, as it will require the cooperation of faculty members and chairs in other departments. The governance process for approving new courses at Salem State is lengthy, and it is unlikely we would be able to officially implement any new upper-level honors courses until fall 2026.

We have begun conversations with the Politics, Policy, and International Relations department about developing an upper-level honors course focusing on civic engagement, one of our university's core values. In fall 2025, we will pilot a version of this course within the existing course POL 307 (Applied Policy Research). This course, offered within our North Shore Policy Lab, hones students' skills in data collection,

analysis, and presentation, and introduces them to community partners and team-based community-based research. While this course is open to all students, those seeking honors course credit will complete an additional assignment (a literature review) within the course that helps further the course goals. We believe that honors students who elect to take this course will be well-prepared to conduct community-based thesis projects the following semester or year if they choose to do so. The honors program area chair will work with the Politics, Policy, and International Relations department to put a formal proposal for an honors version of this course into governance by next fall.

Nursing, Biology, Psychology, and Business have been the most popular majors among honors students for several years. The Honors Program area chair will approach each of these departments and seek their support in creating new upper-level honors courses that might serve majors within their departments.

5. Develop Sustainable Financial Strategies: A recent \$20,000 gift from an honors program alum will help us support honors student scholarship and travel experiences for the next two years. In addition, President Keenan has agreed to allocate an additional \$15,000 to operating budget in the 2025-2026 academic year. The honors program will continue to work with the office of Institutional Advancement to cultivate potential new donors for the honors program
6. Strengthen Data Tracking on Retention and Completion: The Honors program coordinator will meet in the new few weeks with Institutional Research to develop a plan for better tracking honors students longitudinally. We agree that being able to access this data will allow us to highlight the role of honors in retention and graduation at Salem State, which may help us make a stronger case for additional funding. Longitudinal data will also allow us to identify potential barriers and bottlenecks in our program and to develop better strategies for supporting our students (particularly our transfer and 4+1 students)

On April 11, 2025, the Commonwealth Honors Council Executive Committee voted to reapprove Salem 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 **Salem State University** in the **Commonwealth Honors Program**.