

Richard S. Lapidus, Ph.D.

PRESIDENT

February 3, 2020

Commonwealth Honors Program, Executive Committee
C/O Dr. Patricia A. Marshall, Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs & Student Success
Massachusetts Department of Higher Education
One Ashburton Place, Room 1401
Boston, MA 02108

Dear Executive Committee for the Commonwealth Honors Program:

We are writing in response to the Commonwealth Honors Program Site Visit Report received on January 16, 2020. First, let me take this opportunity to thank the Site Visit Team members for their thorough review of the Fitchburg State University Commonwealth Honors Program. Their obvious preparation and interest in our program led to valuable conversations and dialogue during their visit to campus. These meaningful collaborations are productive as we strive to continue to offer the best program for our honors students. I would also like to thank Fitchburg State's Honors Program Coordinator, Dr. Catherine Buell, whose continual and immeasurable leadership in overseeing this program has facilitated its positive development.

Within the visiting team's report, submitted by Chair Scott Nowka, five recommendations are provided. The following are those recommendations along with the university's responses:

Recommendation 1: Professor Buell should continue to be supported in her very effective leadership of the Honors Program.

Response 1: Dr. Buell began her role as Coordinator of the Honors Program in July 2018, and we are pleased with all that she has accomplished. Her commitment to the program and its students is regularly demonstrated. Dr. Buell has monthly standing meetings with the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs to facilitate communication and provide opportunities to address program needs and problem-solve issues. Most importantly, they provide the opportunity for the Provost's Office to give support to Dr. Buell so that she can continue to effectively oversee the program.

Recommendation 2: As the program has grown from 76 students to 130 in the past six years, the university should explore creating a faculty supporting role to assist the Honors Director. Such assistant coordinator or faculty fellow positions are common at other schools in the CHP. This additional position would provide support for the director in areas that have already been identified in this report, including reviewing of applications (Section B.3), sharing the advising

load (Section E.6), providing some administrative assistance (Section G.2.d), and, most importantly, developing and providing meaningful programming for students in the program.

Response 2: We are pleased to see growth in our Honors Program, and it does represent an attainment of one of the institution's objectives in the 2015-2020 Strategic Plan. With this expansion, we are learning and assessing the impact of having additional students and simultaneously the necessary adjustments, plausible and appropriate. We have looked at other Honors Program management models and will consider the appropriate model for Fitchburg State, keeping in mind a realistic set of duties for the program coordinator. This includes our ability to provide, as the Site Visit Team Chair describes, "meaningful programming for the students in the program." Items to be considered include greater support in the form of additional faculty release time or involvement from academic affairs staff focused on student success. This will all be reviewed during this year's budget process.

Recommendation 3: To fully provide the administrative support the program needs, more than 1/8 of the time of an administrative assistant should be dedicated to supporting the Honors Program.

Response 3: On the face of it, having such a dedicated administrative assistant may seem small; however, this is a newly-created administrative assistant position designed to support our Student Success initiatives including the Honors Program. Previously it was the Coordinator's home department assistant that provided the help, which was a model that presented even greater limitations. Given this is a new model, we need to give it more time to determine both its benefits and limitations. Since not all of the programs supported by this administrative assistant have the same volume of work, we have encouraged the Honors Program Coordinator to utilize the assistant as needed and go beyond the technical splitting of hours amongst the managers. Utilizing the assistant more fully will allow the university to assess if this model works or if additional support is needed for the areas currently supported with this one assistant.

Recommendation 4:

The Honors Program Advisory Committee and the Curriculum Committee should explore how relaxing the current honors course requirements (which currently replace the entire undergraduate general education curriculum) would reflect the real experience of honors students and make it more possible for transfer students and students from underrepresented groups to enter and succeed in the program.

Response 4:

The Honors Program Advisory Committee has already been in discussions about revisions to the current program requirements. In spring 2019, Fitchburg State passed a new Liberal Arts and Sciences (i.e. general education) Curriculum Program to be offered beginning in fall 2021. The Honors Program needs to realign their requirements to this new general education curriculum, presenting a perfect opportunity to move away from mapping the Honors curriculum one-to-one to general education courses. This revision will provide more flexibility, thus creating opportunities for additional students to challenge themselves in the Honors Program. This work will need to be completed prior to the implementation of the new general education curriculum.

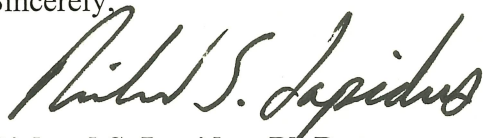
Under the leadership of Honors Program Coordinator Dr. Catherine Buell this past year, the program piloted the acceptance of new Honors students for the spring semester awarding scholarships previously reserved for incoming freshmen. The available openings were easily filled with capable, eager, and diverse students so we envision this process continuing. A revised curriculum will further facilitate the development of this initiative to open the program to a larger pool of students joining in their first year at Fitchburg State.

Recommendation 5: As the operating budget of the Honors Program has been effectively level-funded since FY2017, the university should review the operating budget and consider how increases might allow the implementation of cohort-building freshman retreats, study abroad experiences, or research grants that are currently not possible.

Response 5: As is the case with many universities, overall declining undergraduate enrollments have required level funding or reductions to departmental and program budgets. It should be noted that level funding has, therefore, meant that we have intentionally tried to hold the program harmless. It should also be noted that although the Honors Program's budget is limited, there are other sources of funding that support the program including admissions, the office of the provost, and Residential Learning Communities. We are committed, however, to securing funding for critical programs and will continue to seek funds outside the Honors Program operating budget to support initiatives. We will also work with our advancement officers to continually seek new funding sources. We will also regularly review the budget against the current number of students and determine available funding.

We extend our appreciation for the Site Team's visit review and feedback and look forward to moving through the rest of the renewal process and continuing our commitment to offer the Honors Program opportunity to students.

Sincerely,



Richard S. Lapidus, Ph.D.
President
Fitchburg State University

CC: Dr. Alberto Cardelle, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs
Dr. Catherine Canney, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs
Dr. Catherine Buell, Honors Program Coordinator
Dr. Scott Nowka, Chair of the Fitchburg State University CHP Visit Committee