

To: Commonwealth Honors Program Executive Committee
C/o Patricia Marshall, Associate Commissioner for Academic Policy
Massachusetts Department of Higher Education
One Ashburton Place, Room 1401
Boston, MA 02108-1696

From: Scott Nowka, Chair of the Fitchburg State University CHP Visit Committee

Date: November 20, 2019

Re: Review of the Commonwealth Honors Program

Report of the CHP Visiting Committee for Fitchburg State's Re-approval Application

Visiting Committee Membership

Four-year campus member: Scott Nowka, Professor of English/Honors Program Area Chair, Salem State University, 352 Lafayette Street, Salem, MA 01970. snowka@salemstate.edu

University of Massachusetts campus member: Abby Cheng, Program Manager and Science Student Career Mentoring Specialist, Honors College, University of Massachusetts Boston, Wheatley Hall, 100 Morrissey Blvd, Boston, MA 02125. Abby.Cheng@umb.edu

Community college member: N/A. David Kalivas of Middlesex Community College was unable to attend the site visit due to illness.

Summary

On Friday, November 1st the Commonwealth Honors Program (CHP) Visiting Committee conducted a site visit of the Honors Program at Fitchburg State University. In accordance with the approved visit policies, the committee spent the day meeting with key constituencies, including Catherine Buell, faculty coordinator of the Honors Program, some deans of the university, honors program faculty and students, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Alberto Cardelle and Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs Catherine Canney, and University President Richard Lapidus. Professor Buell prepared a comprehensive approval report and provided all the necessary access to program participants.

The site visit committee found the Fitchburg State University Honors Program to be active and successful in fulfilling its mission. The program has committed faculty, engaged students, and a good working relationship with the admissions and housing offices that help support the program. Most importantly, the Honors Program has the support of the university administration.

The Committee recommends

The Committee is unanimous in recommending to the Executive Committee of the Commonwealth Honors Council that the Fitchburg State University Honors Program be re-approved for CHP status. What follows is a description of how the committee found the

program to fulfill the CHP review criteria as well as a short list of recommendations as to how the program might better live up to its stated goals.

Review 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.

The Honors Program has a clearly stated mission in the university catalog which outlines its goal to provide enriched, stimulating courses for the best-prepared and most qualified students. (https://catalog.fitchburgstate.edu/preview_program.php?catoid=36&poid=8307&hl=%22honors+program%22&returnto=search)

The Honors Program emphasizes six skills and areas of expertise, which align with the university's current general education objectives.

- conceptual and applied knowledge
- communication, collaboration, and organization
- problem solving and synthesizing
- initiative and creativity
- ethical reasoning
- citizenship and service

As Fitchburg State University is currently in the process of revising and implementing a new general education curriculum, the Honors Program Advisory Committee will be tasked with revising these Honors Program skills and areas of expertise so that they align with the new general education objectives.

2. The Program mission is aligned with the institution's mission.

The mission statement of Fitchburg State University states

Fitchburg State University is committed to excellence in teaching and learning and blends liberal arts and sciences and professional programs within a small college environment. Our comprehensive public university prepares students to lead, serve, and succeed by fostering lifelong learning and civic and global responsibility. A Fitchburg State education extends beyond our classrooms to include residential, professional, and co-curricular opportunities. As a community resource, we provide leadership and support for the economic, environmental, social, and cultural needs of North Central Massachusetts and the Commonwealth. (<https://www.fitchburgstate.edu/about/university-mission-vision-and-values/>)

Our meetings with the university administration made it clear that the program's mission is in keeping with the mission of the university, and the university sees the Honors Program as an integral part of the future of the institution. Of particular note is the way the honors program

emphasizes the importance of community involvement and service, a key element of the institutional 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.

The Faculty Director of the Honors Program, Professor Catherine Buell, reports to Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs Catherine Canney, in the office of Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Alberto Cardelle.

2. The director/coordinator 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.

The director receives six credits of alternate professional responsibility (APR) per semester. Summer work is compensated with a stipend of \$500 each month during June, July, and August, which is appropriate for the workload.

3. The Program has a faculty Honors Program Committee with provision for administrative and student representation. The Committee shall have clearly defined responsibilities.

The program does have an Honors Advisory Committee staffed by a combination of faculty and administrators. The committee does not have student representatives at this time. This committee has defined responsibilities regarding the curriculum of the honors program, its policies, and the thesis guidelines. A subcommittee of this body is tasked with reviewing candidates for the honors program that are initially screened by the Admissions Office, reviewing the admissions materials of the candidates. However, in this past year the Honors Program Advisory Committee was unable to assist the director in this role and she reviewed the hundreds of applications entirely by herself. The site visit committee was told by Vice President for Academic Affairs Catherine Canney that the advisory committee would have a more active role assisting the director with the AY2019-2020 admissions cycle.

4. Institutional membership in the National Collegiate Honors Council is strongly recommended.

The Fitchburg State University Honors Program is an institutional member of the National Collegiate Honors Council.

C. Admission Criteria

1. The institution has established Honors Program admission standards based on its particular circumstances.

Honors Program admissions standards are briefly described on the “Honors Program FAQs” page (<https://www.fitchburgstate.edu/academics/honors-program/honors-faq/>).

The program self-assessment describes these criteria in greater detail, specifying that

For the class entering in Fall 2020 Admissions staff employed GPA and SAT benchmarks of 3.5 high school GPA and 1150 SAT-Total score, and considered other factors listed below (under item C2) for evidence of excellence. Admissions uses a 3.2 high school GPA and 1050 SAT to consider students in districts with restricted access to Honors and AP courses (which affect the adjusted high school GPA). Occasionally the Honors Director will review an application that does not meet all of these criteria at the specific request of an applicant provided that there is strong evidence of the applicant’s academic talent and activities/service.

2. For state colleges 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.

As noted above, a combination of GPA and SAT scores are the basic measure for admissions to the program. However, the Honors Director will review the applications of those candidates that do not meet these criteria that otherwise provide strong evidence of academic talent and service.

In addition, Fitchburg State University has a close relationship with the students of the Fitchburg High School Honors Academy (FHSHA), beginning in their freshman year of high school. This relationship, which takes the form of information sessions and service learning projects, has fostered greater enrollment of FHSHA students in the Fitchburg State University Honors Program.

3. 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.

The Honors Program does have defined procedures for the admission of continuing students into the program. As the curriculum of the Honors Program requires that the entire general education curriculum of honors students is fulfilled by honors courses, up until recently current students and transfer students could only apply for entrance into the program as part of an Honors Minor. However, beginning in Fall 2019 a pilot program was initiated allowing up to five current students to be accepted as Honors majors. This is an exciting development which may allow the program to better recruit more diverse students that were unwilling to commit to honors as entering freshmen.

D. Transfer Criteria

1. The Program guarantees admission to all students who graduate from a Commonwealth Honors Program at a community college and are accepted for transfer.

Applicants from an honors program at a community college in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts who meet the Fitchburg State University Honors Program GPA requirements may be offered admission to the Honors Program minor.

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.

Honors students at Massachusetts public community colleges, colleges, or universities may substitute honors courses that they have taken.

https://catalog.fitchburgstate.edu/preview_program.php?catoid=36&poid=8307&hl=honors+program&returnto=search

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.

The Honors Director has the authority to grant program credit for academic work other than honors courses completed at other institutions for transfer admission to the Fitchburg State University 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.

The Honors Program offers all of its honors courses each academic year in either the fall or spring semester, which allows for the timely completion of honors requirements. As the program has grown and entering classes have gone from 18-25 per year to as many as 40, additional sections of required honors courses have been added. As the Fitchburg State model of replacing the entire general education curriculum of honors student with honors classes is somewhat rigid, substitutions are provided for students (especially in education and nursing) with intractable scheduling conflicts.

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.

The Honors Program complements its offerings in traditional academic fields such as English and history with several interdisciplinary seminar courses. The topics covered in these courses change based on the expertise of the instructors and provide the flexibility to address current events. Perhaps the best case in point would be Current Events and Service Learning, in which

students engage with current events at the local and international level in the classroom while becoming actively involved in these issues through service learning opportunities.

3. Honors courses are distinguished by their attention to student inquiry, writing, critical thinking, and oral presentation.

The site visit team met with Honors Program faculty to discuss what distinguishes honors education from their other courses and reviewed nine honors syllabi that were included with the program self-assessment. Honors courses are distinguished from other courses offered at the university, being more writing intensive and requiring oral presentations. These courses are designed to give students the preparation they need for their thesis projects, and require that primary source materials be used. The rigor and focus of the Honors courses was emphasized by students in the program that met with the site visit team.

4. In community colleges the Program provides an honors seminar or colloquium that is interdisciplinary, for honors-level students only and preferably team-taught.

Not applicable.

5. Honors experiences provide opportunities for laboratory or field research, archival or library research, and activities in the creative arts.

Students have opportunities for laboratory or field research, archival or library research, or activities in the creative arts in their six credits developing an honors thesis in their field of interest.

6. The Program ensures that all students have access to an honors advisor as well as an academic advisor.

The Honors Director serves as the honors advisor for every student in the program, which supplements the advising provided by their academic major advisors. This opportunity to meet with a second, honors advisor was highlighted as one of the benefits appreciated by students that met with the site visit team.

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.

The Honors Program provides opportunities for cultural trips to the theatre and museums, lectures by guest speakers, and service learning within the honors course requirements. In addition, the Honor Program Living/Learning Community has a budget of \$1,500 to provide programming for honors program students, and all honors students, regardless of whether they live on campus, are welcome and encouraged to attend.

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:*

Not applicable to state universities.

*b. To graduate as a **Commonwealth Honors Program Scholar from a State College or University Commonwealth Honors Program**, students need at a minimum:*

The graduation criteria for graduating as a Commonwealth Honors Scholar, which meet or exceed CHP requirements, are published in the academic catalog (https://catalog.fitchburgstate.edu/preview_program.php?catoid=36&poid=8307&hl=honors+program&returnto=search). Students must take at least six honors courses and complete six credits of work on an honors thesis. The required cumulative GPA is raised from 3.2 to 3.3 at Fitchburg, but the requirement that honors courses must be completed with a grade of B or better is not clearly specified in the academic catalog or the “Honors FAQs” page (<https://www.fitchburgstate.edu/academics/honors-program/honors-faq/>).

G. Program Resources

1. The Program has a budget appropriate to carry out the mission and goals of the Program.

The Honors Program has an operating budget of \$9,500 for office expenses, teaching and research supplies, event catering, travel for honors course enrichment experiences, and travel for individual honors students and the Honors Director. In addition, the program has \$1,700 to fund a part-time work study student to provide some administrative support for the Honors Director, and the Honors Residential Living Community (RLC) has a separate budget of \$1,500 to provide social and academic events for students in the program.

The program operating budget has been level-funded since FY2017 (in FY2015 and 2016, \$500 more was allocated each year), despite the fact that enrollment in the program has grown. This has made the budget much tighter. And while Academic Affairs has stated that additional funds will be added to the budget as needed and Professor Buell has led the program admirably with these limited funds, it is undeniable that the Fitchburg State University Honors Program is provided substantially fewer financial resources than programs at peer institutions. Other Honors Programs at four-year state universities in the CHP have two or three times the operating budget or more, and these funds make important honors programming, course enrichment experiences,

cohort-building experiences, and university-wide events possible. As the program continues to grow, it would be advisable to revisit the budget to consider what truly is necessary 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 are provided for entering, continuing, and/or graduating students.

Students joining the Honors Program as entering freshman receive a generous renewable scholarship of \$2,000 per year. As of Fall 2019 five additional scholarships of \$2,000 were added for students who join the program after their first semester at Fitchburg State University. Additionally, Honors Program students that attended the Fitchburg High School Honors Academy receive an additional \$500 in scholarship funds per year.

b. Support exists for student research and associated travel.

There is limited funding for student research materials which may be arranged with the Honors Director. A portion of the operating budget funds class travel for students in the honors humanities class as well as enables two or three students annually to attend the Northeast Regional Honors Council (NRHC) conference.

c. There is an office for the director/coordinator

The Honors Director has an office in the Honors Common.

d. There is consistent and adequate secretarial and support staff for the Honors Program.

As of Fall 2019 the Honors Program has been provided partial support by an administrative assistant that serves four other offices in addition to the Honors Program. While this support is appreciated and needed, being given 17% of an administrative professional's time, even with the additional help of a work-study student, is not enough for the program's needs. As many reports regarding admissions and student progress cannot be generated by the Honors Director and must be provided by an administrative assistant with the proper access and training, more dedicated time is needed.

e. There is an identifiable Honors Center

The Honors Commons is an attractive, welcoming space in the Hammond Hall Campus Center that includes the office of the director, a meeting room, a lounge, computers and a

printer. The students that met with the site visit team described this as a lively space that many frequent often, and honors students have access to the room whenever the student center is open.

f. Resources are provided for outside speakers.

The program has a budget for outside speakers.

g. Public service opportunities, internships, exchange programs, and capstone experiences are provided.

Public service opportunities are provided for honors students as part of their Current Events and Service Learning course. In addition, all honors students complete an Honors Thesis as a capstone experience.

h. Social activities are included in the Program.

The Honors Program hosts a reception at the beginning of the academic year, welcoming new students into the program and welcoming back returning students, as well holding two or three other social events each semester. Such events include things like a scavenger hunt, trivia night, or pizza night. In addition the Honors Residential Learning Community (RLC) offers programming open to all honors students.

H. Description of Approval Procedures for New Courses

1. The institution has a curriculum review process that provides for both the initial approval and periodic review of honors courses.

Fitchburg State University has a rigorous process for the review of honors course offerings that effectively works within the university's governance structure. This process ensures that new courses meet the requirements of honors education. All proposed courses are first reviewed by the Honors Directory and then submitted to the All University Committee and its Curriculum Committee for approval.

As Fitchburg State University is currently in the process of revising its general education curriculum, the Honors Program Advisory Committee will review all of the honors courses and the honors curriculum overall in light of these changes.

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).*

The Honors Program has the power to designate courses as honors courses on a temporary basis, which provides flexibility in course offerings while formal approval of a new course offering is pending.

Recommendations

The Site Visit Committee found the Fitchburg State University Honors Program to be active and successful in fulfilling its mission. In particular, we would like to commend Professor Buell, the Honors Director, for fostering so successfully the honors community on her campus. Her work has earned her the approbation of her students, her peers on the faculty, and her administration.

We make the following recommendations:

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

