College History

Commonwealth Honors College builds on a long tradition of academic excellence at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. An honors college of national distinction in the public sector, Commonwealth Honors College has become a model throughout the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the nation.

In 1894, 23 undergraduate honors theses were archived in the library. As the university grew and expanded from Massachusetts Agricultural College to Massachusetts State College to the University of Massachusetts, more departments offered honors tracks for their students. In 1960, the campus established a campus-wide Honors Program, with honors courses available not only in the arts and sciences, but also in the professional schools. In 1977, 400 students were enrolled in the Honors Program; over the following decade that number increased to 600. The Honors Program continued to expand through the 1980s and 1990s. Today, there are more than 3,000 students in Commonwealth Honors College.

The Honors Program transformed into Commonwealth College in the late 1990’s, after the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education proposed the concept for an honors college for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1996. The Board voted unanimously to accept the model proposed by the University of Massachusetts Amherst based on the strength of the existing Honors Program and the breadth of academic options available to students. Commonwealth College welcomed its first official class in the fall of 1999, offering small honors classes, residential programs, Community Service Learning courses and programs, and a community for academically talented students.

Commonwealth College also took the lead in the newly-formed Commonwealth Honors Program to collaborate with and strengthen honors programs on other campuses in the Massachusetts system of public higher education. Students participating in any of the Commonwealth Honors Programs on the state college, community college, and other UMass campuses also benefit from automatic transferability of their honors coursework from one institution to another.

The Bachelor’s Degree with Individual Concentration program (BDIC) was incorporated into the College in 2008. BDIC allows self-directed students to design their own majors under the guidance of faculty mentors. Many BDIC students are also members of
Commonwealth Honors College.

During the 2009-2010 year, the College celebrated its 10th anniversary, continuing a long tradition of advanced scholarship at UMass Amherst and beginning its second decade as a leader in honors education.

To build on the College's first decade of success and to better express its mission, the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education approved the University of Massachusetts's recommendation to change the name to Commonwealth Honors College in May 2010.

CHC offers an honors curriculum that incorporates general education and advanced scholarship for undergraduates in any of the University's majors. Specialized academic programs, supportive advising, close connections with faculty, extensive opportunities for research, and leadership development are available to all honors students. Commonwealth Honors College prepares students not only for professional careers and graduate studies, but for life.

Building on the steady growth of Commonwealth Honors College, the University erected the Commonwealth Honors College Residential Community (CHCRC). Adding nearly 500,000 square feet of residential, classroom, social and administrative space, the CHCRC opened in the fall of 2013. It is now a place for Honors students to call home and for the campus to enjoy.