What is Honors at UMass Amherst?

Honors in the U.S.

U.S. colleges and universities began offering honors courses in the early 20th century. Today, many large universities contain an honors college. Honors colleges are quite diverse in their academic philosophies and approaches, but some common features identified by the National Collegiate Honors Council (the national organization of honors programs and colleges) are:

- The curriculum of the honors college constitutes at least 20% of a student’s degree program.
- The honors college requires an honors thesis or honors capstone project.
- The college emphasizes active learning and participatory education by offering opportunities for students to participate in regional and national conferences, Honors Semesters, international programs, community service, internships, undergraduate research, and other types of experiential education.
- The honors college offers substantial honors residential opportunities.

Honors at UMass Amherst

History

Honors has existed at UMass since its first honors theses were completed in the late 19th century. In the 1960s, Professor Howard Quint, then chair of the history department, founded the honors program. In 1999, the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education selected the UMass Amherst campus as the location of Commonwealth Honors College.

Educational Approach

By the time they earn their degrees, CHC students have completed advanced coursework in at least one discipline and usually have completed advanced research. They are excellent candidates in the workforce and as applicants for graduate study. CHC students have also thought about some of the big ideas in human society, including the foundations of contemporary academic inquiry, the history of the sustainability movement, struggles for justice, and art in the world. CHC intends its graduates to be:

- capable of informed, ethical decision making
- eager to hear and understand the ideas of others
- exemplars of success in at least one field
- excellent candidates on the job market and highly competitive for graduate study
Commitment to a learning-centered curriculum

CHC students are the heart of every honors course and special program. A few characteristics of this approach are that

- student cognitive development is valued over learning by rote
- courses are designed to promote genuine engagement in course material
- courses are largely discussion based
- primary texts are used when possible

The Honors Curriculum

Honors College Writing 112H

The ability to communicate clearly and articulately is a core value of honors at UMass. Honors College Writing is designed to give students practice in meeting the literacy demands of their academic, professional, civic, and personal lives. It also includes a unit on the theme of leadership, another core value of Commonwealth Honors College.

Honors 201H

The content of “Ideas that Change the World” is wide ranging but is united by the course’s theme: great achievements in human thought. The core texts in the course range from "The Apology" by Plato to Silent Spring by Rachel Carson to the Essential Writings of Gandhi. The readings put students in conversation with great intellectual figures, to learn from, agree with and disagree with. The point is for students to dive deeply into the texts and develop their passion for exploring influential ideas. Find out more

Honors 391AH

Honors 391AH is a one-credit seminar in which students explore a specific topic in depth, building on their 201H experience. Topics in these seminars are chosen by their professors and range from exploring the neurological connection between mind and body, to examining ancient engineering techniques, to investigating the complexities of Haiti. Every section is open to students of any major, and advanced knowledge of the topic is not necessary. While the subject matter of each section is different, the unifying goal is for honors students to have an engaging experience with a faculty member in a very small class on a topic that the professor is passionate about. Find out more

General education and elective honors courses

General education and elective honors courses introduce honors students to some of the major themes and approaches of various domains of human thought. They also
Honors is not just a list of requirements

While a list is a convenient way to explain what is expected of CHC students, there is much more to the honors curriculum than checking off boxes. Each honors course is an opportunity to engage with course material in a special way. Honors courses encourage participation and consideration of material critically rather than passively. Students should make the most of these special courses as they progress toward graduation.

Discipline-based honors courses

Faculty members take many approaches when designing honors versions of courses. Common characteristics of honors courses are small class size, increased pace, graduate-level readings, deep discussion, and a learner-centered approach, meaning that students are co-creators of their educational experience. Honors students are typically eager participants in such a challenging and engaging format.

Honors research

Research is the culmination of the honors curriculum. When students pursue research activities in their majors, they draw upon the knowledge and skills they have developed over their time in the honors college. Thinking early and deeply about potential areas of research can be very helpful later on. Sophomore and junior honors students should familiarize themselves with faculty research to find potential good matches for their thesis or project committee. Students should use the resources available at www.honors.umass.edu/research to help them plan and carry out their research.

Special programs

In addition to the common curriculum honors students share, there are also many special offerings. For students interested in study abroad, Commonwealth Honors College runs the International Scholars Program, which allows students to integrate international studies coursework and study abroad during their undergraduate years. Students who wish to integrate research within the community into their academics can find assistance from the office of Community Engaged Research. Commonwealth Honors College’s Gateway courses help prepare students for life after college through professional development and leadership training. The honors college also is home to the Bachelor’s Degree with Individual Concentration, which allows UMass undergraduates the opportunity to design their own individualized courses of studies.

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