Open for Learning

By Patricia Sullivan
Photos by John Solem
Life in the new Commonwealth Honors College Residential Community
“Body, Mind, and Soul,”

The new Commonwealth Honors College Residential Community—open in layout, open in concept.
water bottles and laptops on a long table for the seminar “Ideas That Change the World.” She’s reminding them of Gandhi’s belief that education is “an all-round drawing out of the best in child and man—body, mind, and soul.”

Drawing out the best in UMass Amherst students is precisely the purpose of the Commonwealth Honors College Residential Community—seven new buildings that have transformed the campus and will transform honors education at UMass Amherst. UMass has had a campus-wide honors program since 1960 and the honors college was established in 1999, but the new buildings mark the start of a new era for the 3,000-student Commonwealth Honors College. In fact, at a cost of $192 million, the complex is the largest capital project in campus history. The buildings are already bringing the honors college greater prestige and—as manifested by their enthusiastic comments and a visible boom in UMass hoodies—making honors students proud.

The sleek new multi-story buildings on Commonwealth Avenue across from the Mullins Center have been home to honors students since Labor Day weekend. They are an accomplished group: the 623 students who entered CHC in the fall had average critical reading and math SAT scores of 1356, high school GPAs of 4.21, and were in the top 4 percent of their high school classes.

The first semester of the new community was a time for questions, starting with the practical: How will we move in 1,500 residents, their futons, and refrigerators? But the most pertinent questions were tougher: How can we provide an intellectually challenging honors curriculum for the 21st century? How do we increase diversity in Commonwealth Honors College? How will we encourage connections among students?

Daniel Gordon, interim dean of Commonwealth Honors College, grapples with these issues in his office in the new headquarters of the college’s administrators, faculty, and advisors, in the heart of the CHCRC. From his desk he can see into residence halls in nearby Oak House and Maple House. The cluster of buildings gives faculty and staff “a much more vibrant relationship to our student body,” Gordon says. “Students are making greater use of the Bloom Honors Advising Center because it’s next to where they live. We’re seeing higher attendance at special events such as Pizza and Prof night.” And the residence halls are drawing honors students closer. Says Gordon, “When honors students live together they can keep the discussions they had in class alive and have ongoing exchanges of big ideas.”

Last semester, as the new buildings turned the honors college from an academic concept into brick-and-limestone reality, the foremost question on Gordon’s mind was: How do we ensure that this community is as inclusive as possible in relation to the rest of the UMass Amherst campus? “This wasn’t a large issue when Commonwealth Honors College was perceived as a list of requirements,” Gordon says. Others on campus, including some faculty members, shared his concern.

To avoid excluding the honors college, the CHCRC was designed to pull in students from all across campus. A wide brick walkway through the center of the complex is a direct route between the Recreation Center and the Southwest Residential Area. Students, faculty, and staff from all over stop for a meal or a latte at the new Roots Café—the only 24-hour eatery on campus. Many activities in the 300-seat CHCRC Events Hall are open to the entire campus community.

While its modernity sets it apart, the CHCRC does not stand alone. Twenty-five percent of the courses held in Elm’s seminar-style classrooms are not honors courses; honors students attend most of their classes elsewhere on campus and they leave the complex for dining hall meals; students at large are welcome in many honors classes.

In addition to its open layout, Commonwealth Honors College is open in concept. For the most part, students not admitted in their first year can study their way in with strong grades. Some high-achieving UMass Amherst students choose not to be part of the honors college, and CHC students can opt to live in residence halls outside the honors community or off campus. It’s all in step with the fluid, eclectic character of UMass, says Gordon.

And, he argues, providing a top-tier honors education is also in step with the mission of the state’s flagship public university. “High performing high school students and their parents have no choice but to attend private colleges. And that’s not equal in my book. It’s precisely because we are public that we need an honors college.”

In his role as professor of history and associate dean of CHC, Gordon oversaw the design of the required “Ideas That Change the World” interdisciplinary seminar, which currently includes works by Plato, Gandhi, Rachel Carson, and Orson Welles. The course is intended to inspire students. Today, as interim dean of Commonwealth Honors College, Gordon echoes Gandhi’s ideas about education for the body, mind, and soul when he says, “It’s important to me that the students relate to these new buildings not just as a set of creature comforts, but as a learning center, a place where they will be challenged. It’s on the cutting edge of what we want to achieve on campus as a whole—integrating social and academic life for all UMass students.”
First-year students Marni Burk (left) of Tiverton, Rhode Island, and Julia Schnabel of Wrentham, Mass., who share a double in Sycamore House, were matched randomly. Already they have the teasing rapport of longtime friends: “We have a lot of the same clothes,” says Marni. “We get along well because I’m willing to put up with her,” says Julia.

Paul Travers (left), a biochemistry and molecular biology major from Staten Island, New York, and chemical engineering major Owen O’Connor from Raynham, Mass., built a model of her favorite molecule, cyclohexane, for her organic chemistry class. “It’s a beautiful ring,” said her roommate, a biology major. “I’m always impressed with how quickly you build it.”

Tree House Life
First-year students live in Oak House and Sycamore House, most in traditional doubles with a central corridor and shared bathrooms at the ends of the hall. Sophomores, juniors, and seniors live in Birch, Maple, Elm, and Linden, in either suites or apartments. Many CHCRC rooms have breathtaking views of the Holyoke Range, and all have carpet, air-conditioning, large windows, and energy-saving features.
Honoring Honors Supporters

SPECIAL AREAS of the Commonwealth Honors College Residential Community bear the names of supporters who helped make it possible.

MELVIN HOWARD SOUTH CLASSROOM WING and MELVIN HOWARD EAST CLASSROOM WING
Two classroom wings are named for Melvin Howard ’57, founding chair of the Commonwealth Honors College Advisory Board, in honor of his involvement and his $1 million commitment to the Commonwealth Honors College Residential Community.

BLOOM HONORS ADVISING CENTER
Peter Bloom ’78 and Denise Bloom ’79 are longstanding supporters of UMass Amherst. “How can you not want to give back to a place that supports such a strong caliber of students?” asks Peter Bloom. The Blooms committed $500,000 to Commonwealth Honors College.

LOUIS & HILDA GREENBAUM GALLERY and LOUIS S. GREENBAUM CLASSROOM
The CHCRC Gallery and Classroom 301 are named in honor of Louis and Hilda Greenbaum who donated $250,000 to Commonwealth Honors College. Professor Emeritus of History Louis Greenbaum co-founded the UMass Amherst Honors Program with Professor of History Howard Quint, and served as its first director from 1960 to 1963. “We started honors education at UMass with nothing and now we are entering a joyous future,” Greenbaum says.

AARON AND IRMA SPENCER CLASSROOM
Aaron D. Spencer has been called the godfather of Commonwealth Honors College. He championed the creation of the college while serving on the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education. Aaron and Irma Spencer have given $100,000 to CHC; Classroom 226 is named in their honor.

PRISCILLA M. CLARKSON PLAZA
Funds are being raised to name the main plaza in the Commonwealth Honors College Residential Community in honor of Priscilla M. Clarkson ’69, ’73G, ’77PhD, a Distinguished Professor of Kinesiology, in honor of her accomplishments as Dean of Commonwealth Honors College and her 36-year career as a scientist. The department of kinesiology is also raising funds for a graduate endowment in her name.

In addition, the Commonwealth Honors College Advisory Board has pledged 100 percent participation in the UMass Rising Campaign in support of Commonwealth Honors College.

To support Commonwealth Honors College: www.honors.umass.edu/alumni/building
The glass walls of the classrooms, residence hall lounges, and Events Hall (above) foster sociability. The Commonwealth Honors College Residential Community was designed by celebrated architects William Rawn Associates of Boston, who have designed Boston’s W Hotel, the Ozawa Hall at Tanglewood, and residence halls for Bates, Berklee, Bowdoin, and Brandeis—to name just the B’s.

Katie Callahan ’14 (left) consults with advisor Delsey Thomas ’90G at the Bloom Honors Advising Center. Katie was in “countdown time,” applying to 10 graduate schools for biochemistry. Advisors report that students drop in more frequently at their new site, with questions, problems, or just to check in.
Clarkson’s Legacy

As a distinguished professor and nationally recognized kinesiology researcher, the late Priscilla M. Clarkson ’69, ’73G, ’77PhD understood the value of rigorous and comprehensive academics. In her seven-year tenure as dean of Commonwealth Honors College, she waged a high-energy campaign to strengthen the honors curriculum.

Speaking at Clarkson’s packed October 3 memorial service at the CHC Events Hall, Provost James Staros listed the many ways Clarkson influenced honors education. “This world-class residential honors college will stand as a lasting tribute to her,” he said.

Staros said Clarkson had a vision of forging new partnerships across academic areas. The dual-hiring program she implemented created positions for faculty members who serve both the honors college and an academic department. “She understood how this program adds strategically to the campus’s tenure-track faculty and deepens the campus’s research and teaching strengths, while adding to the educational depth made available to honors college students.” Staros said. Since 2011, 15 faculty members, in disciplines ranging from economics to theater, have been hired in dual positions.

Clarkson’s lasting impact on CHC further rests with the design of the Commonwealth Honors College Residential Community; she worked closely with the architects and executive director of Housing and Residence Life Eddie Hull to ensure that the new community is connected physically and socially to the greater campus. In addition, her dedication to CHC’s inclusivity extended to flexible admissions policies. For instance, students who are not admitted to CHC in their first year may be accepted as upper-division students after earning strong grades.

The CHCRC’s nine seminar-style classrooms are used for both honors and general courses and as meeting spaces for student groups.