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CHAPTER 2

# The Commonwealth Honors College Residential Community at the University of Massachusetts Amherst

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This article provides a project overview of the newly constructed Commonwealth Honors College Residential Community, an historical context for the honors college at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, a description of the facility design, information on the collaborative planning process, and a brief discussion of initial impacts on the operations and services of the honors college.

## **PROJECT OVERVIEW**

In 2010 the University of Massachusetts committed to the construction of an honors residential complex. The \$186.6 million complex, which opened August 2013, comprises 515,637 gross square feet in seven buildings and aligns with the university's

broader vision to “establish UMass Amherst as the destination of choice for the next generation of the Commonwealth’s high school graduates” (Joint Task Force on Strategic Oversight, 2013). The university’s 2009 strategic plan called for gradually increasing the size of the undergraduate student body and construction of additional academic space and student facilities, including housing, to accommodate this growth (“Framework for Excellence,” 2009). With 1,500 beds, the Commonwealth Honors College Residential Community (CHCRC) is the most recent major project in the university’s planned expansion of student housing. The CHCRC, however, offers much more than a set of dorms. It is an integrated living and learning environment that fosters a spirit of community among students and faculty.

Eleven sites were initially considered for the new residential area before being narrowed to two. Of the two, one was located at the northeastern side of campus, beyond the Orchard Hill Residential Area; the second was in the heart of campus. Previously, campus master planning located student residential areas on the periphery. The decision to select the site in the center of campus also entailed locating the Commonwealth Honors College there and creating the CHCRC, which would incorporate classrooms, space for events, student services, faculty and administrative offices, and residence halls. CHCRC was planned, according to Juanita Holler, Associate Vice Chancellor for Facilities and Campus Services, to “provide a 24-hour active environment in the core” of campus (Holler). The decision on the location and the decision to make the complex an honors residential community were made together.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Commonwealth Honors College (CHC) opened in 1999, building on the successful 39-year-old campus-wide honors program founded in 1960 and the 105-year tradition of honors education at UMass Amherst. CHC was initially named Commonwealth College by the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education, which designated it as the coordinating entity for honors education within the Massachusetts public system of higher education. The Board also provided

a grant for college startup in Fiscal Year 1999. In FY 2000 the Massachusetts legislature established a separate line item in the state budget to fund CHC, and in FY 2010 the CHC special state line item was combined with the university's overall budget (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, n.d.). In February 2009, the CHC Student Advisory Board had submitted a preliminary proposal to the Chancellor, stating the students' case for a residential honors college, and in fall 2010 the decision was made that the new residential area would be constructed as a residential honors college. As planning of the facility began, the university also committed to additional major investments in CHC, including hiring new tenure-track faculty as joint hires for the honors college and the academic departments. By the time CHCRC opened in fall 2013, 15 new honors faculty had been hired in 15 different departments. Although these initiatives occurred during a period of shrinking budgets, the university responded to state budget cutbacks by revitalizing its commitment to excellence in undergraduate education.

The CHC academic program nearly doubled honors curricular requirements from those of its predecessor honors program, increasing the general education portion of the honors curriculum and making completion of honors research and a thesis a requirement of CHC graduates. CHC accepts 600 incoming first-year students each fall. In addition, matriculated UMass Amherst students may apply based on their university academic record, off-campus transfer students may be invited to enter CHC, and students transferring in good standing from another Commonwealth Honors Program within the state public higher education system are eligible to enter CHC upon entrance to UMass Amherst. There are currently 3,000 students in CHC. Over the past five years, the number of CHC graduates has averaged 599 per year (Office of Institutional Research, n.d.).

## **FACILITY DESIGN**

The decision to combine the new residential area with further development of the honors college advanced several key goals of the university's strategic plan. The CHCRC design aligned with several

campus objectives: to construct new classrooms and increase classrooms in residence halls, to expand living-learning communities, and to strengthen academic-student affairs connections. The vision for CHCRC was based on a residential college model where student life and academic life coexist. Combining honors student housing with services and operations of the honors college was an intentional decision to create an academic environment in a residential area. The design incorporates both informal and formal gathering spaces that add many opportunities for academic and social interactions between students and faculty. The buildings, courtyards, and pathways are laid out to connect and open the honors community to the broader campus and encourage interaction between the students in the CHC residential community with those in other residential areas. For example, a major pedestrian promenade traverses CHCRC, connecting Southwest Residential Area, the campus' largest student housing area, with the heavily used recreation center. Additionally, the students in CHCRC eat many of their meals in another residential area where the nearest dining commons is located, and faculty and students from across the campus frequently gather at the CHCRC café.

The CHCRC facility was designed to house 1,500 honors students in six residence halls. These halls include approximately 600 spaces for first-year students in two traditional buildings that consist mainly of double rooms with a glass-walled study lounge on each floor. The remaining 900 spaces, in four buildings, house upper-level students in a mix of suites and apartments. Each of the buildings includes a large lobby for interaction and some programming. The buildings cluster around small-scale courtyards that add a sense of spaciousness and provide pleasant seating areas, including an outdoor amphitheater. In addition to four residence hall staff apartments, two faculty apartments located in the multi-year residence halls ensure a connection between faculty and students and add to the sense of academic community. To this end, the facility includes a classroom wing of nine small classrooms with full technological capabilities as well as a flexible exhibit/gallery space. There is a 24-hour café where students can meet friends and faculty

for lunch, dinner, or a late-night snack. This complex also features the CHC advising center, administrative offices, and faculty offices within the Residential Community; this arrangement increases both visibility of the honors dean, faculty, and staff as well as access to their offices (Design & Construction Management, n.d.).

The 290-seat event space may be divided into two rooms with a movable wall. One half of the hall can accommodate 120 people in auditorium-style seating, while the other half can be reset with tables and couches or opened to connect to the café area. Both sides are equipped with full A/V capability. This flexibility is conducive to a range of programming alternatives: informal gatherings, study groups, small-group advising, workshops, Pizza and Prof seminars where faculty discuss their research, Dialogue Series discussions on timely issues of national and international significance, visiting speakers, and meetings.

## **COLLABORATION WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF RESIDENTIAL LIFE**

Early in the project planning process, CHC and Residential Life formed a partnership. The Dean of Commonwealth Honors College and the Executive Director of Residential Life held initial meetings to discuss major aspects of the residential honors college and approved formation of a joint planning committee. The CHC-Res Life Joint Planning Committee created a planning agenda and timeline to develop a final proposal for presentation to the Dean and Vice Chancellors addressing the following matters:

- **Overall Program Plan:** Develop a shared vision, goals, and assessment plan as well as a clear understanding of how to involve others in planning for the Residential College, review guiding documents and related literature, and share information related to honors students (their demographics, how students join CHC, etc.).
- **Living-Learning Communities:** Determine the academic programs for the first-year student communities.

- **Room Selection and Eligibility:** Design the assignment process, eligibility criteria, and timeline for students to select their housing placement.
- **Staffing:** Decide student and professional staffing for the new space, the means by which communication will take place between Residential Life and CHC following occupancy, as well as the necessary training for both the CHC staff and the Residential Life staff.
- **Communication/Marketing:** Determine timeline for publications, tours, and a communication plan for stakeholders and the broader community, both on and off campus.
- **Budget Development:** Determine shared expenditures.
- **Program Planning and Student Leadership:** Plan orientation for new honors students, appropriate student government structure, and collaborative programming.
- **Facilities and Space Planning:** Develop action plan for facilities issues including regular maintenance, cleaning, furnishings, and setup of events space.
- **Administration:** Clarify operations of CHC offices and changes to be implemented as a result of the new space, as well as which Res Life offices will be located in the new space, how mail will be distributed, and what the move-in and safety plans for the students will be.
- **Technology:** Handle classroom and events space technology features as well as card-access to the residence hall spaces.

To provide additional input for the Joint Planning Committee and a greater range of honors perspectives, the directors of each of the units in Commonwealth Honors College and the CHC Associate Dean met weekly. This step became useful in both updating the staff on new CHCRC developments and bringing faculty and staff perspectives to the joint planning meetings.

While the CHC Student Advisory Board continued to provide input to the Dean on a biweekly basis, in order to involve students

more broadly, the Joint Planning Committee invited a group of students—three fourths of whom were honors students—from various units of Student Affairs and Academic Affairs to meet regularly with representatives of CHC and Residential Life. This focus group provided student perspectives from a broader range of constituencies. Students came from the following areas:

- Student Government Association,
- Residence Hall Association,
- Resident Assistants,
- Peer Mentors,
- University Tour Guides,
- Center for Multicultural Advancement and Student Success,
- CHC Student Advisory Board, and
- Student Staff from the CHC Student Programming unit.

In addition, incoming accepted students were surveyed in April to gather information on the kinds of events they would like to see in the fall.

## **IMPACTS ON OPERATIONS AND SERVICES**

The new facility affords many opportunities to enhance a sense of community among honors students and faculty across departments. Honors classes associated with Residential Academic Programs, many senior Honors Thesis Seminars, and most general education honors courses are held in the new classrooms located in Elm House. Since the classrooms have a maximum student capacity of 24, non-honors courses of 24 or fewer are also scheduled in available time slots.

The number and range of CHC events have been greatly enhanced and expanded by the opening of CHCRC. CHC has formed cooperative agreements with UMass Amherst academic departments and the Five College consortium (composed of Amherst College, Hampshire College, Mount Holyoke College,



Smith College, and UMass) to bring visiting speakers and scholars for both lecture events and small group meetings with students. The events space is also used for faculty meetings. CHC holds regular meetings with the 71 Honors Program Directors from academic departments on campus (some of whom simultaneously serve as Undergraduate Program Director or Department Chair), and monthly meetings with the 30-member CHC Council, a council of the Faculty Senate, and its subcommittees. CHC faculty who teach the honors seminar, “Ideas that Change the World,” meet several times each semester, and the new tenure-track honors faculty meet regularly as a pedagogical honors community across departments. The new CHCRC Faculty-in-Residence also host informal gatherings with honors faculty, as well as with students.

Now that the CHC advising center is located in the midst of a residential community, it has experienced an increase in student traffic; it now offers advising for small groups in the residence halls as well as workshops in the events hall. An art history professor and a group of her honors students curate the small gallery/exhibit space adjacent to the classroom wing. The students selected the theme of the inaugural exhibit to coincide with the university’s 150th anniversary. While studying museum and gallery exhibit methods, they combed the university archives to mount a photo exhibit of 150 years of student life at UMass Amherst.

## **CONCLUSION**

The process of planning for occupancy of CHCRC formed many new connections between CHC and Student Affairs and reinforced long-established connections between CHC and other academic colleges and departments on campus. The first semester in CHCRC was a trial period of ups and downs, adjusting to new demands and responsibilities, accommodating visits from print and broadcast media, and rejoicing in the enthusiasm of new and continuing students and their families. On August 25, 2013, two weeks after CHC faculty and staff moved into their new offices, Priscilla Clarkson, CHC dean since 2006, died following a long battle with breast cancer. Dean Clarkson, who had lobbied continually for new space

for the college and oversaw the planning process for CHCRC, continued to work and came into the office up until two weeks before the CHC move. A campus celebration of her life was held in the new CHC events space in early October 2013. The hall, filled to standing room, had 1,000 many-colored origami cranes, folded by CHC students the month before, hanging from the ceiling. A tradition of CHC since 2009 in observance of National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, the cranes hang attached to strings in groups of eight, the bottom crane in each group colored pink—the color representative of breast cancer awareness. Dean Clarkson’s energy is reflected every day in the bustle of the café; students playing Frisbee on the lawn; and lively discussions in the classrooms, dorm rooms, and courtyards of CHCRC.

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