



Commonwealth College

THE HONORS COLLEGE • UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Who We Are

As the **honors college** for the Commonwealth at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, our mission is to provide an **enriched undergraduate** education to **academically talented students** from all backgrounds, and to **prepare them** for responsible engagement in society by fostering intellectual curiosity, leadership skills, interdisciplinary analysis, focused study, and academic rigor within a supportive, socially just community.

Outcomes

Commonwealth College asked honors alumni about their experiences. We learned:

- 84% of alumni who have been out five years or more have pursued graduate or professional degrees.
- 54% of alumni indicated that community service is an important part of their lives.
- Alumni cited research/thesis experience, intellectually rigorous courses, the connection with other dedicated students, and value as highlights of their experiences.
- More than 95% of alumni would recommend Commonwealth College to eligible students.

Accessing Commonwealth College

- Incoming freshmen who apply to UMass Amherst are invited on the basis of their high school performance. Incoming freshmen in the fall of 2008 scored an average 1320 on the SAT, were in the top 5% of their high school class, and earned an average weighted GPA of 4.0.
- UMass Amherst students may apply to join Commonwealth College on the basis of their college performance.
- Transfer students from off-campus may be invited to join based on their prior college performance.
- 3,600 students are members of Commonwealth College.

Why Commonwealth College?

“Smaller classes, more attention, academic excellence, pride, critical thinking, courses that enhance your verbal and written communications and prepare you for those skills post-college, the professors, my thesis, the challenge...”

“UMass Amherst has lots of great resources and opportunities...for me Commonwealth College was a concentration of those resources.”



Once in Commonwealth College, students incorporate small, intellectually rigorous honors courses into their general education and major requirements. Before graduation they complete a capstone project or thesis. During their time in Commonwealth College, they enjoy dedicated advising, residential learning communities, intellectual and social activities, community service learning courses and programs, study abroad programs, grant programs to support their projects, and guidance to take full advantage of the opportunities of the flagship state university campus. They look forward to graduating with the Commonwealth College distinction on their diplomas and transcripts. We asked our alumni to describe the key components of their experiences.

Key Majors

- Commonwealth College students may pursue any of the more than 90 majors at UMass Amherst. The College now also houses BDIC, which guides students to design their own majors.
- The most popular majors are Psychology, Engineering, Management, Biology, English, Political Science, and Computer Science.

Key Residential Academic Programs

- About 70% of incoming Commonwealth College freshmen choose to live in a residential academic program, in which students live together and take one or two classes together.
- Learning communities at UMass Amherst have been shown to increase both students' academic performance (as measured by grade point average) and students' self-reported satisfaction.

“Learning communities offer a built-in support system that you just can’t replicate any other way.”

Key Small, rigorous honors courses

- Students integrate small, interactive honors courses into all four years of their curriculum, taking honors courses to meet many of their general education and major requirements.

“The small classes were great. Not only did the professors push me to do my best work, but also my fellow students pushed me to think about questions in ways that I hadn’t considered. In addition, these small classes allowed me the opportunity to get to know faculty members and get their advice on the career I would chose after graduation.”

“Being challenged in smaller courses was huge – I didn’t realize it at the time, but once I was in graduate school I did.”

Key Capstone Projects and Thesis

- All Commonwealth College students are required to work closely with a faculty member or committee to design a capstone project or thesis before graduation.

“Doing the honors thesis and working closely with the thesis committee (was most valuable). My honors thesis was subsequently published in Science, and was instrumental in gaining admission to graduate school.”

“I found myself employing the scientific method to solve problems for which there were no published answers. This experience – including writing a thesis and its defense – provided me with better scientific skills than most of my medical school classmates.”

“(Writing) a thesis taught me a lot about the discipline that is required to handle self-guided work. I continue to use the skills I honed during that process in my personal and professional life every day.”

Key Access to opportunities

- Students have access to dedicated advisors to help them meet their honors requirements and make the most of their college experience.
- Commonwealth College students can earn Commonwealth College Honors in addition to the campus’s Latin honors distinctions.
- Students are actively involved in a tremendous array of organizations, sports, clubs, and activities on campus.
- Commonwealth College itself sponsors the UMass Office of Community Service Learning, offers grants for research projects and assistantships, and offers a wide variety of intellectual, practical, and social activities through Pizza & Prof Nights, Weekly Wednesday Workshops, and socials.

“Being part of Commonwealth College helped me to find a group of friends that I learned a great deal from and fit in well with. It works as a tool to help you make the most of such a large, incredible university.”