

## Frequently Asked Questions in Biology Honors Advising

Last updated March 2017

### **Q1: What are the options for completing Departmental Honors?**

In addition to receiving a grade of B or higher in two Biology honors courses, one of which is at the 300 level or higher, you must complete a two-course Honors Thesis or Seminar (see <https://www.honors.umass.edu/capstone-experience/>). An Honors Thesis involves taking BIOL 499Y and 499T while conducting and writing up independent research (see **Q5** for more details).

For some students, completing an **Honors Seminar** (usually 499C) may be more appropriate for their career paths or interests. To find options for Honors Seminar courses, go to <http://honorsapp.honors.umass.edu/courseguide/>.

Select your desired semester, include all possible subjects, and check “Honors Thesis and Project Seminars” at the bottom. This will provide you with all available possibilities.

For Departmental Honors, only Honors Seminars pertinent to Biology would be considered. Recent examples include Honors 499C (BIOTERRORISM: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE ON INTERNATIONAL, POLITICAL AND SCIENTIFIC CHALLENGES, or HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE INEQUALITY IN THE UNITED STATES).

Note that we encourage you to think broadly about your educational experience at UMass. If a non-biology related Honors Seminar is of interest, this can satisfy honors requirements for Multidisciplinary instead of Biology Departmental Honors.

### **Q2: Can I do my Honors Thesis in a lab outside the biology department? Does this mean I'm doing Multidisciplinary Honors instead of Departmental Honors?**

You can absolutely conduct your Honors Thesis in a lab outside the biology department, and this can be a great way to find opportunities (see **Q3**). As long as the research is in the life sciences, this would be considered Departmental Honors. If your thesis is in a different area (e.g., art, business, Japanese studies), this would be Multidisciplinary Honors.

### **Q3: I'm frustrated by my attempts to find a lab for my Honors Thesis. No one has any space. Do you have any advice?**

We are aware of how challenging this is for our honors students, and wish there was an easy solution. Biology has no control over how many Honors Biology majors are admitted to UMass. There are currently approximately 300 Honors Biology majors and 40 faculty.

BURA, emailing faculty directly, and visiting faculty during their office hours can all be great ways to make contact. Be sure to make your communication is professional and tailored to the specific lab to show your interest (e.g., sharing a polished and current resume/CV, reading and commenting on some recent publications from that lab).

We also encourage you to seek opportunities outside the biology department. The departments of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, Microbiology, Vet and Animal Science, Environmental Conservation, the departments of Public Health, Kinesiology, and Psychology all have excellent options for a Biology Honors Thesis. Note that, regardless of the Department, many labs do not

accept students in their Senior year, and prefer to accept students during their Freshman or Sophomore years. In short, start early and be persistent to find a lab.

CHC encourages students to consider their education in the broadest possible context. Many humanities departments are actively recruiting honor students to conduct theses. If your interests are broad, consider expanding your horizons and making connections between disciplines to create a multidisciplinary honors thesis experience.

**Q4: I'm currently doing research in a lab that is off-campus, or I did an REU with someone outside of UMass. I'd like to pursue this experience for my Honors Thesis. Can I do this?**

Taking advantage of off-campus experiences can be a great way to complete your honors thesis, but note that there must be someone at UMass who is willing to serve as your official advisor for approving your 499Y and T proposals (see Q5) and assigning a grade. Your UMass advisor and your off-campus mentor should work together to make sure everyone is in agreement about how you will be advised and evaluated in your thesis work.

**Q5: What is the process and timetable for registering for an independent research Honors Thesis?**

The first semester of the Honors Thesis is BIOL 499Y (for Year), and the second is BIOL 499T (for Thesis), typically taken for 3 or sometimes 4 credits (1 credit = approximately 3 hours/week of effort). These are usually completed in Fall and Spring of a student's senior year, but it is also fine for a student to start in the spring (499Y) and finish the next fall (499T). Students conducting field research can do their research in the summer before officially taking the Honors Thesis classes.

You cannot register for 499Y or 499T on SPIRE. For each class, you must submit a proposal via the CHC Paths system. CHC provides explicit directions for both proposals here:

<https://www.honors.umass.edu/capstone-experience-independent-capstone-proposal>

Be sure to follow these directions exactly, including specifying every requested deadline in the Timeline, to avoid having your proposal returned for revisions.

CHC would like you to submit proposals for the Fall course by the end of the previous spring semester, but the absolute deadline is August 14. The deadline to submit proposals for the Spring semester is December 14. Note that the proposal for 499T involves substantially more work than for 499Y; plan your time accordingly.

After your proposal is submitted, it will be reviewed by your faculty advisor (and committee member for 499T), then your HPD, and then the CHC. If any of these reviewers have concerns, they may not approve it, and send it back to you for revisions. Once it is approved by the CHC, the course will be added to your SPIRE.

**Q6: I have more questions and would like to meet with a Biology Honors Program Director. Who is my advisor, and how do I contact them?**

We are happy to meet with you to discuss questions related to options about research, careers in biology, and navigating your departmental honors experience. Currently, the HPDs are Lynn

Adler ([lsadler@bio.umass.edu](mailto:lsadler@bio.umass.edu); students with last names beginning with A-L) and Gerry Downes ([gdownes@bio.umass.edu](mailto:gdownes@bio.umass.edu); students with last names beginning with M-Z). If you are working in a lab or already meeting with an HPD other than the one assigned to you, it is fine to continue working with that person as your HPD. If you are not sure who to contact, you can send a general email to [honors@bio.umass.edu](mailto:honors@bio.umass.edu), and it will be directed to one of us.