APEX MENTOR HANDBOOK

2025-2026

Honors College
UMass Dartmouth

1. Overview

The APEX (Academic Project or Experience) is the culmination of Honors education at UMass Dartmouth. Every student in the Honors College must complete an APEX to graduate as a Commonwealth Honors Scholar. The project may take the form of research, critical or philosophical analysis, computer program, performance, art exhibit, public service project, or other original work making a significant contribution to the field of study. Through the APEX, the student will demonstrate the ability to work independently and innovate in a chosen field—precisely the quality sought by all employers and graduate school admissions committees.

Faculty mentors play a crucial part in the student's experience. The Honors College encourages students to develop APEX ideas that align with the faculty mentor's interests. Although faculty members are not obligated to serve as an APEX mentor, there are several benefits for acting as a mentor, including, but not limited to:
- It will count towards Teaching and Advising on your FAR and promotional material
- Working with some of the best students on campus on work that is oftentimes directly related to the mentor's scholarship
- Providing an opportunity to broaden or focus the scope of scholarly work
- Contributing to students' development as a scholar
- Improving teaching/mentoring skills

There are three "tracks" to complete the APEX, all of which are outlined in this handbook. Students are free to choose any track but should have a discussion with their APEX mentor and/or Honors academic advisor to choose the track that is most appropriate for the student's project and career/education plans.

2. General Requirements

Regardless of track, there are several general guidelines for the APEX. Track-specific guidelines and rubrics will be discussed later in the handbook. Generally, all projects require the following:

- An individual and original creative/scholarly/experiential component. Students can work in groups, but each student needs to have a clear individual contribution.
- A UMass Dartmouth faculty member to serve as the APEX mentor. Students will work closely with their mentor in the design and completion of the project.
- Submission of several forms, including a proposal form, a progress report, and a final approval form. Additional details are included later in the handbook. These forms all require a mentor signature.
- Registering for a minimum of three APEX credits through the Honors College or through the student's major department (e.g., independent study credits, internship, etc.). Please consult with the Honors College to determine if the departmental course qualifies.
- A final written product. Although the nature of the final written product may differ depending on APEX track (see section 3 for tracks), it must include the components outlined in Section 2.5.

- A public presentation of the project (e.g., a poster presentation at the annual Honors College convocation, a publicly announced APEX defense, a presentation at a professional conference, etc.).
  - If the student is presenting at the Honors College convocation, the mentor submits the poster to the Honors College after approving it.

2.1 General APEX Learning Outcomes

The APEX has three primary learning outcomes. Because student work can vary depending on the track, the Honors College developed track-specific rubrics (see Appendix A), which are based on these general learning outcomes. Using these rubrics is not required and mentors should feel free to modify them to reflect the project. The three primary APEX learning outcomes are:

1. Develop rigorous scholarly inquiry skills
   a. Use a systematic approach in assessing evidence, data, context, and interpretations.
   b. Critically evaluate and critique the knowledge base within an area of inquiry.
   c. Identify gaps in understanding.
   d. Formulate and pursue original scholarly endeavors.
2. Promote creativity and divergent/convergent thinking skills
   a. Synthesize findings, ideas, and/or theories in innovative ways.
   b. Apply existing skills in different settings.
   c. Formulate solutions to novel problems.
3. Hone oral and written communication skills
   a. Clearly explain (orally and in writing) findings, thoughts, and ideas to experts and non-experts.
   b. Respectfully and civilly debate positions with people who may disagree.

2.2. First Steps and HON301: Research Across the Disciplines

The first step in the APEX is to determine which track the student will pursue and if they need to take HON301. For most students, HON301 will be a required course and is a valuable experience that helps them choose an APEX track, decide on a topic, and find a mentor.

However, HON301 can be waived on the APEX Proposal Form for students who are:
- already working in a research lab or on a larger project with faculty mentor commitment.
- planning to complete the APEX as part of a major capstone course.
- planning to pursue the internship/service track.

Regardless of whether students take HON301, a proposal must be submitted (see section 4.1 for details).

2.3 APEX Credits

Credits earned for work on the thesis/project cannot be counted toward the minimum 21 credits of Honors coursework required for graduation as a Commonwealth Honors Scholar. Students can take three APEX credits if the work can be completed in one semester or six credits if it will take two semesters. There should be a substantive reason to take six APEX credits. Although the decision of whether to take three or six credits should ideally be made prior to taking the APEX credits, there may be rare cases where the project required more work than planned and an additional semester is needed. Students should NOT take additional APEX credits if there is not a compelling reason (please note that not completing planned work is not a compelling reason).

There are several methods for earning APEX credits:

2.3.1 HON490/491

If the student is undertaking an interdisciplinary project, or if the major department does not have suitable thesis/project or independent study courses, the student may register for HON490 (first semester) and HON491 (second semester, if needed). If the student is undertaking an interdisciplinary project, or if the major department does not have suitable thesis/project or independent study courses, the student may register for HON490 (first semester) and, if needed, HON491 (second semester). The student must request a permission number from the Honors Dean to enroll. The Honors Dean serves as the formal instructor of record by default, but the APEX mentor supervises the work and determines the grade.

2.3.2 Department-Specific Independent Study Courses

Many departments have 400-level course numbers set aside for theses, projects, and/or independent study. The APEX mentor serves as the instructor of record and assigns a grade at the end of each semester. It is important to note that departmental thesis/project and independent study courses are not normally listed in COIN until a student expresses the intention to take one of them and finds a faculty mentor willing to serve as instructor. Once an APEX mentor is identified, the mentor and department chair will ask the Registrar to create a section for the relevant semester. There may be additional requirements for departmental courses (e.g., PSY498 and PSY499 require the student have a committee).

2.3.3 Internship/Clinical Courses

Students can use an internship/clinical class to satisfy the APEX requirement if the experience includes an individual and original scholarly endeavor. For example, a nursing student can integrate the APEX into a clinical internship course, or a psychology student can use a counseling placement as part of the APEX. They need simply to do a project in their placement (qualitative or quantitative) or critical review based on that experience.

2.3.4 Capstone Courses

A capstone course can also provide a foundation for an APEX. Typically, students will need to add some type of component to a capstone project to make it appropriate for an APEX.

For instance, students in an engineering capstone can add a component to the group capstone project that will be conducted alongside, or as part of, the group project (e.g., add additional functionality, do efficiency analyses, or user testing of the system). An English or Interior Architecture capstone course that requires the development and completion of a creative work could also count as the student's APEX if the student adds something like a process book, more detailed renderings, etc.

If the capstone course does not fully meet the requirements of the APEX, the student could complete the work in an independent study course through the department or Honors (i.e., HON490). For example, if an illustration major completes a project for a capstone but the project does not fully meet the APEX requirements, the student could continue the work through an independent study or through HON490.

2.4 Grading for APEX Credits

Grades for APEX work are determined by the APEX mentor. Grading policies, expectations, and rubrics should be made clear to students prior to the beginning of the work, and preferably in the APEX contract. Sample grading rubrics are available in Appendix A.

If students are taking two semesters of APEX credits, the grade for the first semester should be based on the work that was completed during the semester. For example, mentors may consider factors such as:

- Did the student complete the work that was planned on the proposal timeline?
- Did the student make meaningful progress on the project?
- Attendance and preparation for student/mentor meetings
- The quality of participation and submitted work (e.g., drafts, stimuli development)

If the work planned for a semester is incomplete at the end of the semester, the student should submit an **Incomplete Grade Request Form**. All University policies on unfinished work and the assignment of incomplete grades apply. Per the Registrar, a **grade of In Progress (IP) is not an option** (it is literally not an option in the pull-down menu when assigning grades in COIN).

Again, the Honors Dean serves as the formal instructor of record by default, but the APEX mentor supervises the work and determines the grade. The mentor should e-mail the grade to the Honors Dean by the deadline for grade submission.

To fulfill the APEX requirement, students MUST earn a B or better in their APEX credits. If the student earns a B- or lower, the APEX credits must be retaken.

2.5 Written and Oral Requirements

Some APEX products are entirely written, while others, such as those in the visual or performing arts, consist of both written and non-written components (see Appendix B for past examples). **However, all projects require a written component** that demonstrates the track's learning objectives (see Appendix A for sample rubrics) and includes the following elements:

- An abstract summarizing the project's scholarly background, purpose, methodology or work done, results, and concluding discussion and/or implications on the wider field
- The purpose of the APEX, such as the question addressed, artistic goal, or purpose of the internship
- A scholarly review of what has been done before, such as the prior literature on a research topic, an analysis of previous artistic works and traditions that set the stage for the current project, or a detailed review and comparison of industry-wide practices relevant to the internship
- A written description of the individual work, which may include illustrations or other visual materials
- An explanation and discussion of the contribution to the field in which the student has chosen to work, including policy recommendations and/or suggestions for future work, or analysis and evaluation of the practices used at the internship site and what the student learned

All students must present their APEX at least once in an appropriate public venue. Students are encouraged to present their APEX in poster format at the annual Honors Convocation in April, which is sufficient to meet the Honors College requirements. In practice, many Commonwealth Scholars present their work in more than one public venue prior to graduation, which may be a traditional thesis defense before the student's committee, a public performance or display, and/or conference presentation.

2.6 Optional Committee Member(s)

Some projects may benefit from adding committee members to the project, who serve as consultants to the student in addition to the primary mentor. This can be especially helpful if the project is interdisciplinary or requires skills (such as statistical analysis, graphic design, or programming) that may be outside the mentor's primary areas of expertise. The addition of committee members is not required for the APEX project, but is recommended in some cases, and may be needed as a requirement if a student enrolls in certain courses for their APEX credits (i.e. PSY 498/499).

3. APEX Tracks

3.1 Traditional Research

For this track, "research" is broadly defined and can include scientific experiments, critical literature evaluations, human subject research, etc. The scope and length of the written paper should reflect the norm for undergraduate theses in the major field. It should be written in a professional or academic style characteristic of the subject matter or discipline of the thesis (e.g., APA or MLS style), and it should contain documentation that is appropriate to the field. The APEX mentor will determine what is appropriate.

3.2 Creative Work/Performance/Expression

This track is often appropriate for creative endeavors such as public art installations, musical performances, art exhibits, screenplays, poetry, and fiction writing. Marketing or business plans

are also appropriate. This track requires a written APEX paper that will vary in content depending on the nature of the APEX work. For a performance or piece of art, it might be a description of the problem space the work addresses, a review of work related to the topic, and an explanation of the method and solution (in addition to submission of the work itself). It should be of sufficient scope and quality to demonstrate competence in the field.

3.3 Applied/Service/Internship

This track is for students who are doing work in an applied setting such as internships or community service. This track allows students to explore a question in the "real world" (e.g., the internship site). Depending on where the placement is held, the information gathering can be done in the archives of a museum, interviews with company staff, questionnaires to customers or employees, surveys to employees or executives within the relevant industry, outcomes of work the student engaged in during the placement, or other activities. The methods are very flexible but there must be some original scholarship that can be written into an APEX paper. How the paper is structured (e.g., chapters addressing different learning outcomes, or an introduction, project description and outcomes) is up to the student and mentor.

As the mentor of a student completing their APEX in the track is expected to:
- Develop goals and potential research questions for the placement
- Develop a timeline of the internship and APEX work
- Meet regularly with the student to monitor progress
- Communicate with the internship supervisor about any issues

4. The APEX Process

The completion of the APEX can be daunting for some students. Therefore, the process is broken down here into several parts to guide students and help keep them on track. Many of these parts involve filling out an online form, all of which can be found on the Honors College APEX website. There is also a table with the relevant due dates in section 4.6 of this guide. Mentors should familiarize themselves with these forms and due dates.

4.1 APEX Proposal (Due dates vary, see Table 4.1)

The proposal provides a brief description of the proposed project, and the course(s) and semester(s) in which the work will be completed. The mentor must approve and electronically sign the proposal before submitting it to the Honors College. The APEX mentor should ensure that the proposal includes the required components and that it is methodologically sound. The proposal should include the following:

1. **A narrative containing**
   - Background information with citations and a bibliography
   - Research question(s)/thesis statement/problem statement
   - Objectives of the proposed project

- Description of the proposed work/methods AND if you believe it will take one or two semesters. If two semesters are required, indicate which part(s) of the work plan will occur in the first and second semesters
- Explanation of how the project represents a culmination of the skills the student has obtained

The proposal is similar to the Office of Undergraduate Research grant application, which makes it easier for the student to apply for funding if needed.

2. **A work timeline.** The online proposal form includes a template for a timeline, which should be modified to fit the project. The APEX mentor should work with the student to determine realistic goals and timeline. The tasks on this timeline will provide the information on which grades for the semester will be based. Mentors should ensure that students complete any required training (e.g., CITI training for human subjects research, etc.). See the Additional Information section below for more details and Appendix B for timeline samples by College. Completing the timeline with the student will inform if the project will require one or two semesters to complete.

3. **A student/mentor responsibility agreement.** The online proposal form also contains a sample template for the responsibilities of the student and mentor. It is meant to be revised by each mentor/student team to fit the demands of the student's APEX project.

Table 4.1. APEX Proposal Due Dates.

TRACK	Proposal Due Date
Faculty commitment secured (Research or Exposition/Creative)	By the end of finals of the semester PRIOR to taking APEX credits
Capstone	By the end of the second week of the semester in which the capstone course is being taken
Internship	By the end of the second week of the internship
HON 301 (Research or Exposition/Creative)	By the end of the 13th week of the semester

4.2 APEX Progress Report (Due on the Friday of the 7th week of the semester by 5pm)

The progress report is a way for the Honors College to help students stay on track. The progress report should include the following information (if relevant):
- Changes to the methods or planned final product
- Major changes to the timeline
- IRB submission/approval status (if relevant)
- Progress on data collection efforts

4.4 APEX Final Approval Form (Due no later than the last day of final exams)

After the APEX has been written, presented, and approved by the APEX mentor and/or committee, the student must submit the final approval form. The student needs to report the

date and place of the public presentation (e.g., Honors Convocation Poster Session), the APEX credits used to complete the project and when they were taken (e.g., HON490 in Spring 20xx), the signatures of the mentor and applicable committee members, and a copy of the final paper that includes all of the required components. The final approval form needs to be submitted to the Honors College by the last day of finals of the semester in which the student completes the project.

4.5 APEX Revision Form (only if needed)

The APEX Revision Form only needs to be completed if there is a major change in the APEX. Submission is not required for relatively minor changes (e.g., modifying measures, slight changes in wording of research questions, etc.). To complete the revision form, a revised proposal and timeline needs to be submitted. If there is any question whether a revision form is needed, please reach out to the Honors College for assistance.

4.6 Summary of Required Forms and Due Dates

TRACK	Due Dates		
	Proposal	Progress Report	Final Approval
Faculty commitment secured (Research or Exposition/Creative)	By the end of finals of the semester PRIOR to taking APEX credits	7th week of the semester in which APEX credits are being taken	Last day of final exams
Capstone	By the end of the second week of the semester in which the capstone course is being taken	7th week of the semester in which APEX credits are being taken	Last day of final exams
Internship	By the end of the second week of the internship	7th week of the semester in which APEX credits are being taken	Last day of final exams
HON 301 (Research or Exposition/Creative)	By the end of the 13th week of the semester	7th week of the semester in which APEX credits are being taken	Last day of final exams

5. Additional Information

5.1 Institutional Review and Ethics Training Requirements

State and Federal law require that all human research using humans or animals undergo formal review by the institution's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and undergo University ethics

training. To determine whether your APEX project requires IRB review, please consider the following guidance adapted from the DHHS (Department of Health and Human Services).

A *human or animal subject* means a human or living vertebrate animal about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research:
  (I)   Obtains information or biospecimens through intervention or interaction with the individual, and uses, studies, or analyzes the information or biospecimens; or
  (II) Obtains, uses, studies, analyzes, or generates identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens.

Research means a systematic investigation, including research development, testing, and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge.

For a study to be exempt from IRB review and approval, it would have to be deemed either not human or vertebrate animal subjects or not research per DHHS. If it is considered human subjects research per the above definitions, the proposal requires IRB approval before the implementation of data collection and all personnel must complete required CITI trainings.

5.2 Collaborative Projects
It is possible to collaborate with another student on an APEX project. This is encouraged if the projects are related in a fundamental way. For example, an engineering student who develops a new technology may partner with a business student, who might develop a funding pitch and business model to monetize the invention. Each student is still required to produce an independent APEX paper and presentation in such a case.

5.3 Potential Funding Opportunities
Some students might require funding for things such as special equipment or material, participant compensation, or access to certain resources. Two of the primary sources of funding are the Office of Undergraduate Research and the Honors APEX Support Fund. Please look at the APEX Funding Opportunities on the UMass Dartmouth Honors College website for more information.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Rubrics - Final Paper
A.1 Traditional Research Track

1. Literature, background, and justification

Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

- Thesis presented within an academic framework
- Comprehensive and relevant literature review included
- Justification and background (e.g., historical and contemporary contexts, assumptions/biases, and/or ethical considerations are clear and sound
- Clear articulation of the gap in current understanding/state of the field

Comments:

2. Research question or creative challenge

Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

- Unique research question/issue/creative challenge identified
- Goals/objectives/hypotheses are explicit
- Questions and hypotheses flow logically from literature review and background
- Predictions can be tested using described methods

Comments:

3. Methodology/approach

Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

- Methodology/approach is appropriate to disciplinary/interdisciplinary focus
- Topic is contextualized among sources and materials cited
- Demonstrates understanding of the content, tools, and structures in the field
- Methods appropriately test predictions/hypotheses
- Study design is appropriate to test predictions/hypotheses
- Appropriate analytical approaches used (e.g., proper statistics are used)

Comments:

4. Results

Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

- Results are displayed in appropriate manner in both text and graphic form
- Appropriate field-specific reporting guidelines are followed (e.g., APA style)
- Results follow logically from background and methods
- Analytical plan is clearly stated

Comments:

5. Conclusions, implications, and consequences

Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

- Conclusions, qualifications, and consequences, including value of thesis, are presented
- Significance of what was discovered, learned, or created is demonstrated
- Assertions are qualified and well-supported
- Demonstrates independent and critical thought
- Critical analysis of evidence/results
- Explain results and place them in the context of current understanding
- Report on if results support/do not support hypotheses

Comments:

6. Writing

Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

- Language clearly and effectively communicates ideas
- Any errors in grammar, spelling, mechanics, and/or punctuation are minimal
- Organization is clear and effective
- Sources and citations are used correctly
- Citations and references are in appropriate standard

Comments:

A.2 Creative/Exhibition Track

1. Literature, Background, and Justification

Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

- Project reflects familiarity with historical and contemporary texts and contexts, reflected in a thorough literature review
- Literature review provides an evidence-based and critical evaluation of the works cited, in language appropriate to the discipline

Comments:

2. Research Question or Creative Challenge

Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

- Clear statement about what questions the work explores
- Clear statement about why the questions matter, within the context of the work explored in the literature review

Comments:

3. Methodology/approach: Development

Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

- Methodology/approach is appropriate to thematic and disciplinary/interdisciplinary focus
- Topic is contextualized among sources and materials cited
- Multiple perspectives are considered
- Demonstrates understanding of the content, tools, and structures in the field

Comments:

4. Methodology/approach: Implementation

Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

- Symbolic and/or quantitative tools are utilized effectively
- Breadth and depth of the work are sufficient to address the research question
- Demonstrates understanding of professional standards

Comments:

5. Conclusions, Implications, and Consequences

Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

- Conclusions, qualifications, reflection on the creative process, and value of the thesis, are presented
- Significance of what was discovered, learned, or created is discussed
- Assertions are qualified and well supported
- Demonstrates independent and critical thought

Comments:

6. Writing

Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

- Language clearly and effectively communicates ideas
- Any errors in grammar, spelling, mechanics, and/or punctuation are minimal
- Organization is clear and effective
- Sources and citations are used correctly
- Citations and references are in appropriate standard

Comments:

A.3 Service/Internship Track

1. Literature, Background, and Justification

Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

- Thesis is framed within an academic framework
- Comprehensive and relevant scholarly review of sources and materials included
- Justification and background (e.g., historical and contemporary contexts, assumptions, biases, or ethical considerations) is clear and sound

Comments:

2. Scholarly Question or Challenge

Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

- Unique question or challenge identified
- Goals/objectives are explicit
- Questions or challenges are logically connected to the scholarly review and background

Comments:

3. Methodology/approach: Development

Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

- Methodology/approach is appropriate to disciplinary/interdisciplinary focus and organizational context
- Topic is contextualized among sources and materials cited
- Multiple perspectives are considered
- Demonstrates understanding of the content, tools, and structures in the field

Comments:

4. Outcomes

Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

- Formative or summative outcomes are identified
- Outcomes reflect methodology
- Consideration of barriers, context, and demands
- Connect scholarly review with actual experiences

Comments:

5. Conclusions, Implications, and Consequences

Poor		Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent
1		2	3	4	5

- Significance of what was discovered, learned, or created is demonstrated
- Assertions are qualified and well supported
- Demonstrates independent and critical thought
- Identifies key findings, potential collaborators, and stakeholders
- Future directions (e.g., what could the next student do to continue work, how could findings be implemented in a larger setting, etc.)
- Self-reflection
    - Identify successes and what you would change if you could do it again
    - Identify any possible biases (systemic or personal)
    - Identify any challenges in terms of processes, co-workers, or collaborators
    - Consider how experience is relevant to your future and career

Comments:

6. Writing

Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

- Language clearly and effectively communicates ideas
- Any errors in grammar, spelling, mechanics, and/or punctuation are minimal
- Organization is clear and effective
- Sources and citations are used correctly
- Citations and references are in appropriate standard

Comments:

APPENDIX B: Sample Proposals and Final Projects by Track

Click here for the Honors College's repository of past redacted APEX Proposals (containing timelines and responsibility charts), Final Approval submissions, and samples combined by track. This folder is available to UMassD accounts only. These examples encompass multiple majors, tracks, and presentation venues. Paper samples are available upon request.

If the included link cannot be used, please use the QR code below.