

# UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS

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## **OBTAINING APPROVAL FOR A NEW ACADEMIC DEGREE PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS**

### **A GUIDE TO THE PROCESS**

All new academic degree programs at the University of Massachusetts require multiple levels of authorization prior to being established. These levels originate at the campus (faculty governance, Provost, and Chancellor). They also include the President and Board of Trustees of the University and the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education (DHE). Each level of review and approval focuses on overlapping concerns, but with different emphases. This guide is intended to help faculty and administrators understand the primary concerns of the University President and Board of Trustees as well as the Department of Higher Education, and to clarify the process and timetables for new program approvals.

#### **Relevant Policy Documents**

The University's policy on new academic programs is Doc. T92-012, "Procedures for University Approval of New Academic Degree Programs, Program Changes, and Program Termination." The relevant Board of Higher Education (BHE) policies are entitled "Procedures for New Academic Program Proposals and Program Changes, Public Institutions of Higher Education" (EA-92-13, adopted June 1992) and "Expedited Procedure for New Program Consideration in the Public Sector" (an addition to EA-92-13 adopted in April 2000).

#### **What is a new degree program?**

For the purposes of this process, an academic degree program is defined as an undergraduate or graduate certificate of 30 semester credit hours or more, an associate or bachelor's degree, or a graduate program at the master's, CAGS, or doctoral level. New concentrations, tracks, or options within existing degree

programs, or changes in the content, delivery, or graduation requirements of existing programs, are not included in this process.

## **THE PROGRAM APPROVAL PROCESS**

**The Preliminary Application.** The approval process at the President's Office level begins with the development and submission of the Preliminary Application. The Preliminary Application is a five-page (single-spaced) document that provides the rationale for a new program. The purpose of the Preliminary Application is to allow campus and system officials to make an informed judgment about whether a proposal has sufficient merit to warrant the significant expenditure of time and human resources necessary to prepare a Final Application. While the Preliminary Application is not lengthy, to be persuasive, it must be based on serious evidence and argument.

The major issues a Preliminary Application should address are:

1. **Purpose and description of the program.** Without going into great detail, the Preliminary Application should describe the purpose of the program, the broad outlines of the curriculum, and the anticipated number of students who would enroll.
2. **Relationship to mission.** This section should concisely address how the proposed program serves to advance the stated mission and goals of the campus and the University.
3. **Need for the proposed program.** The demonstration of need should be based on careful, documented research that addresses whether there is a true societal and/or economic need for the program *that is not currently being met by other programs* and documents the existence of a pool of potential students as well as employers or graduate schools who would hire or admit graduates of the program. This section must include an explanation of why existing programs at the same campus, on other University campuses, or at other public or private institutions within Massachusetts or the region cannot meet the need (including through distance technologies).
4. **Major resource implications.** Without going into great detail, the Preliminary Application should address whether the resources to mount the program currently exist, need to be reallocated from other programs, or will be generated from some other source. Specific attention should be paid to faculty, equipment, and library resources.

The Preliminary Application should be submitted to the President by the Chancellor. However, it is often helpful for faculty or administrators involved in the preparation of the document to send a draft to the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs, Student Affairs and International Relations (AASAIR) or his/her designee for comment prior to finalizing the document, or to meet with AASAIR staff in the preparation of the document to discuss the program. This helps to

ensure that the primary concerns of the President's Office and the DHE will be adequately addressed.

Once the Preliminary Application is submitted, AASAIR circulates it to the Commissioner of the Department of Higher Education and the Academic Advisory Council (AAC – the UMass Provosts) – for comment. The comment period is typically one month. After this period is over, in consultation with the President, the Senior Vice President will decide whether or not to authorize continued development of the proposal.

How long the Preliminary Application process takes depends on the quality and completeness of the first draft submitted to the President's Office, whether any serious questions or concerns are raised about the program, and whether the process itself leads to significant changes in the proposed program. With respect to recent proposals, the Preliminary Application process has taken anywhere from four weeks to a year.

**The Final Application.** The Final Application serves as the basis for a detailed review by campus governance, staff of the President's Office, an external review team, and staff of the DHE. The Final Application (minus appendices) is included in materials forwarded to the Committee on Academic and Student Affairs of the Board of Trustees and summarized in an accompanying template if the proposal is recommended for approval.

The Final Application builds on the Preliminary Application by adding detailed information concerning program curriculum and requirements, faculty expertise and credentials, program administration and operation, admissions, and resources. In some cases, an expanded articulation of issues of need and demand are warranted, as well.

The required contents of the Final Application are outlined in Trustee Doc. T92-012 as well as the DHE's "Expedited Procedures." Because the Final Application must satisfy the requirements of the Board of Higher Education as well as the University, and these requirements overlap to a considerable extent, drafters are advised to organize the Final Application in the format of the DHE requirements, while taking care to ensure that all the information required by the University is supplied. Additionally, the DHE requires that the curriculum outline and budget forms be completed for submission with the Final Application.

As with the Preliminary Application, it is often useful to submit a draft of the Final Application to AASAIR prior to formally submitting the document to governance and subsequent levels of review. The development and governance review of the Final Application, up to the point of submission to the President's Office, typically takes several months to complete.

Upon submission to the President's Office, the Final Application is circulated to the Academic Advisory Council for review and comment, typically for a period of month. The campus will be asked to respond to any issues or concerns raised in this process.

**The External Review.** An external review of proposed new academic programs is required by both University and DHE policy. Once the Final Application is submitted to the President's Office by the Chancellor, AASAIR will work with campus faculty and/or administrators as well as the BHE to arrange for an external review. *In some cases, to save time, the external review may be conducted concurrently with the review by campus governance.*

The purpose of the external review is to engage evaluators qualified to comment on issues of faculty quality and sufficiency, curriculum and pedagogy, and adequacy of resources. A team of three external evaluators is typically engaged: two academics from outside the state of Massachusetts, and one practitioner/professional in a relevant field (where appropriate).

In most cases, the review entails a site visit to the campus so that reviewers can meet with students, faculty, and administrators (including the Provost and Chancellor) and, where appropriate, tour labs and facilities. In a very limited number of cases, a "paper" review of the Final Application may be sufficient.

Once the external review team has submitted its report, the campus must respond in writing to any substantive issues raised, and revise its Final Application to reflect decisions made subsequent to the review. Our experience suggests that even the most positive external reviews result in constructive suggestions for improvement that are often enthusiastically adopted by program proponents.

Where a site visit is necessary, up to three months is often required to identify and recruit external evaluators, schedule and conduct the site visit (having sent the Final Application to the team in advance), allow the team time to write a report, and allow time for the campus to respond to issues or adopt changes.

Once the response to the review and final revisions have been received by AASAIR (including the response to any issues raised by AASAIR or the AAC), the Senior Vice President for AASAIR, in consultation with the President, determines whether the proposal should be forwarded to the Board of Trustees. If an affirmative decision is reached, the Final Application is placed on the agenda of the Committee on Academic and Student Affairs and subsequently the Board of Trustees.

**Submission to the DHE.** By agreement with the DHE, all University proposals may be considered under the DHE's Expedited Procedures. While formal submission of the Final Application to the BHE does not occur until after the Final

Application has been approved by the University's Board, in the case of particularly innovative or complicated proposals (such as multi-campus or interdisciplinary programs), or when an expedited timeline is warranted, a draft Final Application will be shared with DHE staff for review prior to formal submission.

Submission of a Final Application to the DHE begins with the Letter of Intent. Similar in most respects to the Preliminary Application, the Letter of Intent is a brief executive summary of the Final Application that is sent to the DHE by the President's Office. The Letter of Intent also includes an outline of the proposed curriculum with course titles and credits (see curriculum form.) The DHE circulates the Letter of Intent to all institutions of public higher education and the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Massachusetts (AICUM) for a one-month comment period. All responses are shared with the applicant campus for response.

Following DHE guidelines, the President's Office will submit the Final Application to the DHE one month after sending the Letter of Intent. Under the Expedited Procedures, once the DHE has determined that the application is complete, it will forward the proposal to the Board for action within 30 business days or at the next Board meeting following the 30-business day period. DHE staff will determine whether an application is complete within 15 days of receiving the Final Application.

**Timetables and Dates.** The University's Board of Trustees meets on a quarterly basis. The dates are set each September for the following academic year; specific information regarding the dates may be obtained from the Provost's office or the President's office. Typically, the meetings are in February, June, September and December. The Committee on Academic and Student Affairs (CASA) meets approximately two weeks prior to the Board, and considers all program proposals before they are forwarded to the full Board for approval. Materials are mailed to the CASA members two weeks prior to the meeting so it is important to know both the mailing and meeting dates so that all documents are received in the President's Office in a timely manner.

The Board of Higher Education meets six times a year, in February, April, June, October, November, and December (though this schedule is subject to change). However, the DHE only accepts new program applications between August 15 and April 15. Because of this, **campuses wishing to enroll the first cohort of students in a given fall semester must obtain University Board of Trustees approval for the program no later than the preceding February/March depending on the meeting schedule.** This requires that all changes, responses, and additions to the Final Application following the external review, staff review, and AAC circulation have been incorporated and approved by the beginning of February. **It is extremely difficult to meet these deadlines if the**

**Final Application is not completed by the beginning of the preceding November.**

The following timetable illustrates the major deadlines and milestones of the program approval process, working backward from a Fall Semester implementation. Consistent with this timetable, program planners should anticipate that completing the Final Application (including obtaining approval for the Preliminary Application) often takes at least one year, suggesting that a Preliminary Application should be submitted to the President's Office at least two full years prior to the anticipated date of implementation.

Admit first students	September
BHE Approval	April or June
BHE Submission	March/April
UMass Board of Trustees Approval	March
Final changes incorporated and submitted	February
External Review complete	November/December
Final App circulated to other campuses	November
Final App submitted to President's Office	November
Campus Governance approval obtained	September-November
Final App submitted to campus governance	March - June
Preliminary App approved by President's Office	September
Preliminary App circulated to AAC, BHE	August
Preliminary App submitted to President's Office	August

This timetable is illustrative and assumes a more linear progression of events than is often the case. It is possible to save time by working on the Final Application concurrently with the Preliminary, obtaining approvals from campus governance concurrently with the engaging the external review, and so on. However, this illustration also assumes that the process is never slowed down by serious questions or concerns that require re-thinking and additional work, that the preparation of the Final Application is completed in six months, and that the governance review is relatively expeditious (two months not including summer). These assumptions are not all realistic for every program.

AASAIR is committed to working constructively and expeditiously with campus personnel in all stages of the program approval process. We are actively seeking ways to further streamline the approval process while continuing to satisfy our fundamental concerns related to need and demand for new programs, effective use of University resources (within and among campuses), and program quality.