

The Commonwealth Honors Academy (CHA) is a prestigious 3-week academic program for outstanding rising high school seniors that occurs each June on Murray State's campus. CHA students take 2 courses earning 6 hours of (transferable) college credits and are awarded a 4-year in-state tuition scholarship to MSU (provided they continue to meet academic requirements). Students live in our residential halls and dine at Winslow to get a feel for what it is like to be a college student at MSU. Students also attend social/professional development seminars, attend presentations, and engage in lots of fun extracurricular activities. See our [Instagram page](#) for more examples.

The Commonwealth Honors Academy (CHA) was restructured for the 2024 Academy, which successfully increased the diversity in course offerings. For 2025 we will continue with this new model of having reduced faculty responsibilities and increased faculty compensation (details below).

Questions about faculty roles and responsibilities? Please contact Dr. Laura Sullivan-Beckers at LBECKERS@murraystate.edu

Faculty Qualifications:

To satisfy SACS requirements, Commonwealth Honors Academy teachers must have a minimum of a bachelor's degree and 18 graduate hours in their teaching area.

2025 CHA Leadership Team

Laura Sullivan-Beckers, Academic Dean
Melanie McCallon Seib, Student Life Dean
Jonathan Durr, Counseling Director

2025 Dates

Faculty Applications Due: October 1, 2024
Interview Dates: starting week of Oct 14th, 2024
Planning Weekend: April 11-12, 2025
Academy Dates: June 7 - June 28, 2025 (Faculty arrive June 4th)

Faculty Responsibilities

I. Coursework:

A. Overview: Faculty are tasked with developing an engaging and challenging 3-week course for talented high school seniors. The courses offered at CHA vary

each year, depending on the faculty hired for that academy. Faculty should design courses that will count as one of Murray State's 100-level courses in the Honors College. **The selection committee hopes to select courses that will excite and interest a diverse suite of students.**

Examples of courses previously offered at CHA:

- Your Story Matters (Creative Writing)
- Secular Saints and Faithful Heretics (Literature)
- Writing Women, Playing Women: Gender in the Renaissance (Literature)
- Truthfully Lying (Creative Writing)
- Magic in the Making (Visual Arts)
- Use Your Words: Podcasting for a Peaceful Resolution
- Take your Places: Argument and Debate in our Everyday Lives
- Manufacturing Balance
- Intercultural Communication
- US Government
- Design Thinking in Action – What is it? Why do we care?
- Chemistry of Murder
- Economics

Descriptions of 2024 Academy courses can be found [here](#).

B. Class Scheduling:

Classes meet at a regular time for 3 hours Monday-Friday, but that 3-hour block may be structured at the discretion of the instructor. Field trips and other learning experiences outside of the classroom are welcome and encouraged. Office hours will be required on a regular basis. (See sample weekly schedule below.)

C. Teaching Philosophy

Faculty members expand the intellectual horizons of Academy students, providing leadership by integrating subject matter from the humanities, sciences, and arts. They must be willing to use non-traditional and participatory methods, with little traditional lecturing. Faculty must relate well and communicate effectively with bright high school students. They should be enthusiastic and flexible enough to keep pace with this challenging, dynamic program.

Problem-Based Learning

CHA emphasizes a conceptual (rather than a skills/memorization) approach to learning, and an interdisciplinary approach to teaching. As such, all faculty will integrate project-based or problem-based learning (PBL) into their classes. Students should produce projects that demonstrate key factors of PBL such as sustained inquiry, student choice, reflection, and producing some sort of product appropriate for the public. On the final day of the academy, we

host a **learning fair**, which gives students the ideal space to share the results of their projects. Learn more about problem-based learning below.

II. Professional Development Seminars: In small groups, students engage in a 60-90 group seminar aimed at social and professional development. The seminars are led by CHA's residential counselors (MSU students who live with students in the dorms). Each seminar group also has a faculty member or two who attend sessions to assist the group and offer any insight and experiences. Seminars are held 3 evenings each week and CHA faculty are required to attend.

III. Community Meetings: On MWF, before morning classes begin, the entire CHA community (students, faculty, residential counselors, and the leadership) meet for 30-60 minutes to reflect on learning, discuss upcoming events, announce activities, and address any other issues necessary. Faculty will be present and engaged in these meetings.

IV. Other activities: CHA will schedule a number of speakers, movies, and other events. Faculty are welcomed and encouraged to attend as many of these as possible, but they will not all be required. Many events are family-friendly and faculty are welcome to bring spouses and children.

V. Meals and Community: Faculty are encouraged to dine with students for at least one meal during Monday-Friday. We want faculty to be accessible to students to create a sense of community. Meals are fully paid by CHA.

VI. Fall Reunion: A CHA family reunion will be organized in November following the Academy. Faculty are encouraged, but not required, to attend.

Compensation and Conditions

Time for faculty to work together to develop curriculum is crucial to the success of the Commonwealth Honors Academy. Therefore, faculty members are required to participate in one weekend planning session (April 11-12) and to arrive on campus on June 4th to finalize plans for CHA. An additional Zoom meeting may be required prior to the start of the academy.

Faculty availability in and out of the classroom is key to the development of the living-learning community at CHA. Therefore, faculty are encouraged to eat lunch and/or dinner with students, be available during office hours, attend seminars, and some of the seminars and extra-curricular activities. Faculty are not expected to live in the dorms. Local faculty are expected to live at their own homes.

Compensation is \$6,500.00 with daily lunches and dinners provided during the Academy. Housing is available for faculty who do not live in or near Murray.

Sample Faculty Weekly Schedule (for faculty teaching in the morning block)

Sunday: Optional activities (tie-dye, karaoke, cookout, ping pong tournament, etc)

Monday: Community meeting (8-9am); Class (9a-12pm); optional lunch with students (12-1pm), free time (1-4pm), Office hour (4-5 pm); Professional Development Seminar (5-6pm); optional dinner (6-7pm)

Tuesday: Class (9am-12pm), optional lunch with students (12-1pm)

Wednesday: Community meeting (8-9am); Class (9a-12pm); optional lunch with students (12-1pm), free time (1-4pm), Office hour (4-5 pm); Professional Development Seminar (5-6pm); optional dinner (6-7pm)

Thursday: Class (9am-12pm); optional lunch with students (12pm-1pm); Free time (1-6pm); Speaker or movie (6-7pm)

Friday: Community meeting (8-9am); Class (9a-12pm); optional lunch with students (12-1pm), free time (1-4pm), Office hour (4-5 pm); Professional Development Seminar (5-6pm); optional dinner (6-7pm)

Saturday: Optional activities (tie-dye, karaoke, cookout, ping pong tournament, etc)

Note: The first and last days of the academy are full of events and faculty will be required to attend for most of those days.

More on Problem-Based Learning

Though there is a difference between problem-based and project-based learning, they draw from similar ideologies. In many ways, problem-based learning can be considered a subset of project-based learning, where students are charged with solving a problem. In project-based learning, students are asked to complete a project. Within this project they should face "unclear and uncertain challenges," and the project should illustrate "realism, opportunities for students to synthesize material, uncertainty, and risk" (Nilson). In a project-based learning class, students "solve real-world problems by designing their own inquiries, planning their learning, organizing their research, and implementing a multitude of strategies" (Bell). In addition to these characteristics, projects should allow students to have "voice and choice," to reflect on the work they have completed, to participate in "critique and revision," and to produce some sort of "public product" (Larmer and Mergendoller).

The ultimate deliverable, or the public product, should clearly show how the students in the class meet the learning objectives for the course. These assignments might include white papers or reports, budgets with analysis, a plan of action or policy recommendation, or oral presentations.

In short, project-based learning fits with the CHA mission of developing future leaders within our region. If students learn to solve problems through inquiry, experience frustration, and learn that not all problems are well-defined, they will grow both as students and as leaders.

Additionally, project-based learning is good pedagogy for all students, but especially for the gifted students who attend CHA. A 2003 study of gifted high school students found that students who experienced "control, choice, challenge, complexity, and caring teachers" were more likely to be engaged in their learning experiences. These are all fundamental characteristics of the PBL classroom.

Finally, it fits into the classroom structure of CHA already. Many of the faculty who teach in CHA are already using and integrating PBL into their classrooms. The service-learning projects from past years' courses such as completing oral histories for the senior citizen's center, working through the design thinking process with the Humane Society of Calloway County, or producing a benefit concert all fit within the parameters of project-based learning. In our Interdisciplinary Humanities and Fine Arts (IDHFA) courses, students have written missing scenes, filmed interpretations of plays, and adapted works for different media. Public projects are presented during the learning fair. For faculty already integrating these ideas into the classroom, we hope to see students reflecting on these experiences and looking to connect their learning experiences.

References

Bell, Stephanie. "Project-Based Learning for the 21st Century: Skills for the Future." *The Clearing House*, vol. 83, 2010, pp 39-43. DOI: 10.1080/00098650903505415

Larmer, John, and John Mergendoller. "Gold Standard PBL: Essential Project Design Elements." Buck Institute for Education. 21 April 2015. <https://www.pblworks.org/blog/gold-standard-pbl-essential-project-design-elements>

Larmer, John, John Mergendoller, and Suzie Boss. *Setting the Standard for Project Based Learning*. ASCD, 2015.

Nilson, Linda. *Teaching at its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors*. 3rd ed. Jossey-Bass, 2010. <https://www.spu.ac.th/tlc/files/2016/02/Teaching-at-its-best.pdf> (see especially chapter 20).