

# Commonwealth Honors Academy 2026

CHA is a three-week academic, personal, and social development program for outstanding high school students in the summer after their junior year.

**Academy Dates:** June 6-27, 2026

**Application Deadline:** March 1, 2026

**Decisions will be announced by April 1.**

**Students must accept or decline by May 1.**

## Contact information:

Email: [msu.cha@murraystate.edu](mailto:msu.cha@murraystate.edu)

*Laura Sullivan-Beckers, Academic Dean*

*Melanie McCallon Seib, Student Life Dean*

*Lori Rogers, Administrative Assistant*

Murray State University Honors College

304 Lowry Center

Murray, KY 42071-3385

270-809-3166

## GENERAL INFORMATION

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### What are the components of the CHA program?

1. Courses: Students choose 2 courses (out of the 10 offered, see last page of document for 2026 course descriptions)
2. Personal Development Seminar: Through small group discussions, you'll explore topics such as interpersonal communication, family and peer relationships, choosing a university, and civic responsibility.
3. Activities There are a ton of different activities throughout the program. Movies, games, talent shows, tie-dye, guest speakers, karaoke... You never know what you'll get to see and do at CHA!

### What are the benefits of the Commonwealth Honors Academy (CHA)?

- Three weeks of academic and enrichment experience at MSU
- Three hours of transferable university credit
- Guaranteed four-year in-state tuition scholarship to Murray State University
- Collaboration with other honor students and outstanding university and secondary faculty in a campus living-learning environment

**What if the student does not plan to attend Murray State University? Can the student still apply?**

Absolutely! Students who attend CHA are under no obligation to attend Murray State University. They still will get to participate in every aspect of the Academy, and they can transfer the received college-level credit to the school of their choice.

### **What qualifications are expected of Commonwealth Honors Academy applicants?**

All students applying for the Commonwealth Honors Academy should have

- 3.5 GPA (on a 4-point scale)
- a 25 Composite ACT score (or the equivalent PSAT, SAT score). Test scores submitted should be single test cumulative scores, not superscores. **A standardized test score MUST be submitted by the application deadline in order to be considered for admission.**
- be at least 16 years old, prior to the beginning of the Academy.
- be a rising high school senior at the time of the Academy

Note: CHA is open to students throughout the country.

### **What is the PSAT or SAT equivalent of a 25 ACT score?**

Equivalencies vary, but generally a 25 ACT score is between the 82nd and 85th percentile of all scores. Therefore, students scoring in the 80th percentile or above of a PSAT or SAT test are encouraged to apply.

### **What are the differences between the Commonwealth Honors Academy (CHA) and the Kentucky Governor's Scholars Program (GSP)?**

The two programs share many characteristics; indeed, CHA was founded by former GSP administrators and faculty.

- Both programs are for outstanding high school juniors.
- Both programs seek to develop a living-learning community.

Key differences: CHA is a smaller program (~100 students), is only 3 weeks in length, hosted only by Murray State, is open to students outside of Kentucky, awards course credits and a guaranteed 4-year scholarship. Additionally, CHA hosts a fall family reunion and CHA students who become Murray State students become part of an on-campus community of former CHA scholars.

### **How will the academy prepare my student for college?**

Students will live in a college residence hall with a roommate, use dining services, and learn how to navigate a campus. They will also be introduced to college-level material and honors courses with the expectation that they complete homework, teaching time management skills.

### **How much does the program cost?**

The academy is offered to students at no cost (including the application). For students who are accepted, there is a \$250 tuition processing fee. This fee is waived for those who are **eligible** to receive free or reduced lunch or have an ACT waiver.

## **APPLICATION**

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### **What is the application like?**

The application is an online Google form. In addition to gathering demographic information, students will be asked to share their GPAs and test scores, academic honors and awards, academic interests, extracurricular activities, and will write one essay. Separately, students need to ensure that a high school counselor and two teachers complete their online forms to complete the application.

### **What are the essay instructions?**

In an essay of approximately 500 words, please address **one** of the following prompts.

1. Think of a book that you've read recently (it can be for school or pleasure). How did this book, *in particular*, help or allow you to grow into yourself (or to imagine growing into yourself) as you think about the future?
2. Think about your extra-curricular activities and experiences (like after-school jobs or sports or clubs). How are these experiences shaping the person that you're becoming - or another way to put it - how are they helping you grow into yourself?
3. Tell us why you would like to attend CHA and what you hope to get out of the experience (besides the scholarship and course credits).

### **How are students chosen for CHA?**

A team of CHA leadership reviews all student applications and teacher recommendations and a determination is made holistically. In addition to GPA and test scores, student activities, leadership, attitude, essay quality, and drive are considered.

Note: We will limit the number of students accepted from a particular school. If 15 people from one high school apply and all are qualified, we will only take the 5 of them.

### **Recommendation Letters**

Students need to secure recommendations from two teachers and have their high school counselor submit a form on their behalf.

1. Your school counselor must complete the Counselor Form by March 1, 2026.
2. TWO Teacher Recommendations must accompany your application. Each teacher should complete the Teacher Recommendation form by March 1, 2026.

**HOMESCHOOL STUDENTS:** Recommendations are accepted from coaches and community leaders under whom you work or volunteer. Parents should not submit recommendation letters on behalf of homeschooled students.

## **CHA SCHOLARSHIP** \_\_\_\_\_

Full in-state tuition scholarship (4 years) - Students with a minimum 3.5 cumulative high school GPA & minimum 25 ACT Composite score or 1200 SAT total score.

### Scholarship RENEWAL REQUIREMENTS

- 2.75 cumulative GPA
- Full-time enrollment (at least 12 credit hours per each fall and spring semester)
- Completion of at least 24 credit hours combined from the fall and spring semester

## **STUDENT HEALTH & SAFETY** \_\_\_\_\_

### **Who is supervising the students in the dorms?**

CHA has 5 residential counselors (Murray State students) that live in the dorms with the scholars. Each RC is managing about 20 students. The RCs are a great support to the students and a bridge to the rest of the CHA staff. We have a licensed mental health counselor, Jonathan Durr, who lives in the dorm and is available to meet with students one-on-one or in groups. The student life dean, Melanie McCallon Seib, and the academic dean, Laura Sullivan Beckers both live near campus and spend much of their time in the dorm with the students and can be available to students as needed.

*All faculty and the deans keep regular office hours in the residential hall.*

### **May students bring their vehicle to campus and use it during free time?**

No student vehicles (bikes, cars, scooters, roller blades) are allowed on campus. Everywhere within what CHA calls “the bubble” is reachable by foot. In the case of extenuating circumstances, please contact Student Life Dean, Melanie McCallon Seib at [mmcallonseib@murraystate.edu](mailto:mmcallonseib@murraystate.edu).

### **What is “the bubble”?**

To ensure student safety, students are required to stay within “the bubble.” This area (which runs from Chestnut St - Main St and 12th - 16th, as well as Clark Residential College, the intramural fields, and the campus Health & Wellness Center) includes the main part of Murray State’s campus, a handful of restaurants (McDonald’s, CookOut,

Arby's, Future Grounds Coffee Shop, etc) and other stores (Dollar Tree). It also provides a convenient 2 mile loop for students who are interested in running or walking.

During free time, students are required to stay within this perimeter, and they are asked to go with friends. The first night of the Academy, students will walk the perimeter with their floor so that they know the boundaries. Any student who leaves the bubble without a CHA faculty or staff member will be sent home.

## **THE CHA SCHEDULE**

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### **What does a normal day look like?**

During the week (M-F) students will attend class between 9am and 4p with an hour and a half for lunch. They will have a variety of evening activities that include speakers, movies, personal development seminars, and other group activities for the CHA community.

### **What will my student do during non-class times?**

Students will have a variety of options during non-class times. Some non-class times are scheduled with co-curricular activities for students: speakers, a movie series, personal development seminars, and forums. All members of the community participate in these activities.

At other times, your student will have what we call "gray space." Gray space is truly the student's time. They may use it for homework, going to the wellness center with friends, or doing an activity that our resident counselors have devised.

### **Can my student go to church on Sunday?**

Yes. The CHA Activities Coordinator, will provide church sign ups each week. Students may choose to attend church on Sunday mornings. We work with churches to provide transportation to and from campus.

## **MISCELLANEOUS**

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### **Are students permitted to have their phones during the day?**

Generally, no. Students are required to leave their phones in the residential hall. They are permitted use of their phones while in their rooms, but when they are with the CHA community (classes, seminars, activities, etc), their phones must remain in their rooms. Exceptions can be made for class use or for navigating around the bubble.

**Where (and what) will students eat?**

All student meals, except the first night's cookout, will be provided by Dining Services on campus. These meals are paid for by CHA.

Many times, students also take the opportunity to walk to CookOut or order from a local restaurant. We now have a robust food delivery service in town.

**Do students need to bring a laptop with them?**

Yes, students can bring their own computers. If they do not have one, we will work with them to borrow a device from their high school.

**Can you clarify the term "dress clothes?"**

For speakers who visit us from outside the community, we ask that students dress business casual or in "church clothes." We ask that students not wear jeans for these speakers (but they are welcome to at any other time). For instance, khakis and a polo or button down shirt or dress slacks and a blouse are perfectly acceptable. We will have a banquet the final evening where students also dress more formally.

**Can we bring snacks?**

Absolutely. Students are welcome to have snacks in their rooms.

**Are CHA students automatically qualified for the Honors College at Murray State?**

Many CHA students are competitive to join Murray State's Honors College. They must apply separately for the Honors program at Murray State.

**2026 COURSES** 

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***From Colonies to Coachella: Puerto Rico's Colonial Roots and Bad Bunny's Media Revolution (Cultural Studies)***

The course will provide an overview of the history of the Spanish language, originating in Spain and traveling across the Pacific Ocean with colonialism. I will briefly address Caribbean slavery and its influence on Puerto Rico. I will also cover the evolution of the language and culture on the Island, beginning with the Taino people and ending with Bad Bunny, where we will do a deep dive on his musical evolution from Soundcloud recording artist to his latest album DeBÍ TIRAR MÁS FOTOs. Within this study, students will analyze his influence on the music scene in the US.

***Win With Wit, Not Volume: The Quiet Power of Strong Arguments (Organizational Communication)***

This course will teach students the fundamentals of debate, advocacy, & persuasion. By the end of the course students will be equipped to confidently tackle formal debates over history, pop culture, politics, and current events. They will also have cultivated the necessary skills to discuss any topic in an informed and respectful way.

### ***Immortality: The Literature and Philosophy of Eternal Life (Literature)***

"Who wouldn't want to live forever? From visions of eternity across many religious traditions, to the hope that our contributions to the world will outlive us, to techno-utopian fantasies of cheating death by digitizing consciousness, immortality persists as one of the most durable themes of literature, popular culture, and philosophy. But not everyone is convinced. Writers as far back as the ancient Roman philosopher Lucretius have criticized the desire for immortality as fundamentally incoherent, for we only truly care about that which we might lose. "'Death,'" as the Modernist American poet Wallace Stevens wrote in his poem "'Sunday Morning,'" "'is the mother of beauty.'" This course won't teach you how to live forever, but it will immerse you in an array of literary, philosophical, religious, and cultural texts--from classical philosophy to contemporary film--which champion, challenge, and reimagine this age-old theme."

### ***The Revolution Remix: Representation and Reality in Hamilton (American History)***

This course explores how history is reimagined on stage through the award-winning musical Hamilton. Students will examine primary and secondary sources to test the accuracy of the play's events and debates, while also analyzing the impact of its diverse casting choices on how we view America's past. Through project-based learning that includes research, debate, performance, and creative presentations, students will uncover the balance between fact and artistic license and discover how popular culture shapes our understanding of history.

### ***Designing with Intelligence – Generative AI, Media, and Visual Literacy (Graphic Communications)***

This course blends graphic communication and media literacy in the age of artificial intelligence. Students will explore how AI generates images and designs, while gaining the skills to create responsibly and critique critically. Through hands-on projects in visual storytelling, poster design, and digital campaigns, they will learn to spot AI-generated media, question authenticity, and apply ethical guidelines. The course culminates in a student-designed visual exhibit at the CHA Learning Fair.

### ***89 Seconds to Midnight: The End is Nigh and the Writers Know It (Creative Writing)***

It's the end of the world as we know it - but join me anyway for this gamified class about apocalyptic literature. Learn why writers across the world are fascinated by the apocalypse: specifically, let's discuss how they illustrate the social problems they care about by writing about it. After analyzing a series of short stories and TV episodes,

students will create their own collaborative apocalyptic society and then independently create a short story based on their world. Throughout, you'll enjoy a creative adventure game based in an apocalyptic scenario.

***Digital Shadows: Exploring Privacy, Ethics, and Security in an AI Connected World (Cybersecurity)***

This course explores how your data is collected, shared, and protected in today's digital landscape. Through hands-on activities, real-world case studies, and interactive discussions, Students will uncover the ethical dilemmas and legal challenges of modern technology—from smart devices and social media to AI and hacking. This course empowers students to think critically, act responsibly, and become more informed digital citizens.

***Make Your Mark! A Crash Course in Creating and Analyzing Artwork (Visual Art)***

Make Your Mark! Prepare to get your hands dirty and your mind buzzing! This crash course in art will introduce you to a range of making techniques, art historical works, and critical thinking. This course will cover a little bit of everything, from observational drawing and punk rock zines, to recyclable sculpture and wearable art. You don't need any experience to start this artistic journey - just come ready to try! Let's get creative!

***Global Soundscapes: A World-Wide Musical Experience (Music)***

Students will explore world cultures through playing music, participating in folk dancing, and critical listening. They will compare and contrast aspects of their own cultures and the content cultures in order to broaden their own perspectives. Students will explore music and dance in North America (including Caribbean and Latin America), South America, Africa, Asia, and Europe.

***The Age of Homo sapiens superior (Biology)***

The power of genetic engineering holds more than just promise and potential - it has already been harnessed to change the world and how we interact with it. Genetically modifying our food supply has made it more productive and fruitful, and genetically manipulating the genomes of organisms has provided us with novel life-saving medicines. Clearly, what was once the purview of science fiction is now science fact. What does the future hold? In this class, students will cross this horizon to explore how genetic technology can, is, and should be applied to manipulating human potential.