UNC planning ‘Maymester’ pilot
Idea: One focused class for three-week term after spring semester

UNC administrators devised the idea for a short session as part of the university's reaccreditation process. It is a concept that a growing number of universities are incorporating into their academic calendars.

At UNC, students would not be required to participate in the session, and courses would be small enough to allow for close interaction with professors. University officials want to do a pilot "Maymester," with about five courses in the spring of 2007, and expand the program to 10 to 20 courses in 2008, Owen said.

Stephanie Kurtz, a student on the committee that developed the "Maymester" concept, said many of her classmates would like the hands-on approach of the classes.

"It's something new and it's a different alternative to summer school," said Kurtz, a senior from Maryland. She added that, when choosing colleges, she was disappointed that the University of Maryland had a short session and UNC did not.

Required to draft a plan to improve educational quality as part of the reaccreditation process, administrators chose the theme "making critical connections," and, within that, picked three areas of focus: implementing new curriculum, internationalization and research.

"Maymester" falls most directly under the first area, but also would provide room for studying abroad and doing research with professors, said Sue Goodman, a math professor who chaired a committee on curricular innovation and who is interested in teaching a class on the connections between literature and math.

In April, UNC will submit its broad plan for improvement to the Southern Association of Colleges and
Schools.

Many administrators already have expressed approval for "Maymester," and the reaccreditation group likely will accept it as well, said Owen, who was in charge of writing UNC's improvement proposal. If that happens, administrators will move forward with the logistics of the new session, which likely would be run through UNC's summer school office.

The courses would mainly be for undergraduate students and could be worth three or four credits, Owen said. Some would be held abroad, and the abbreviated schedule could encourage people to sign up who might not be able to leave campus for a full semester.

A familiar model

The idea for short-term immersion courses is not new.

Some small liberal arts colleges, like Williams College in Massachusetts, have long hosted abbreviated terms in January. The University of Virginia started a January session last year, and students have gone to New Orleans to study the effects of Hurricane Katrina and to Chaco Culture National Historical Park in New Mexico to do anthropological research.

At Elon University, almost all undergraduates sign up for "winter term," which the North Carolina institution has offered since the 1960s. Students say they like just taking one class, and having the time to attend lectures and field trips related to their study area, said Mark Albertson, registrar and director of "winter term" at Elon.

"You don't have to balance five or six courses," Albertson said.

UNC officials considered doing a short-term program in January, but the May schedule worked better with the university's academic calendar.

By having the courses in May, students will still have time to work or do other activities for the rest of the summer.

Owen, though, hopes that one day, the university will offer short-term courses at multiple times during the year.

"I am hopeful that we'll be able to say it's May in Chapel Hill in August, December or January," she said.

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