



# The University of North Carolina

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

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*Adopted 1/11/02*

## MEMORANDUM

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North Carolina  
at Pembroke

University of  
North Carolina  
at Wilmington

Western Carolina  
University

Winston-Salem  
State University

DATE: December 31, 2001

TO: Committee on Educational Planning, Policies, and Programs

FROM: Gretchen M. Bataille, Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs *JMB/MTJ*

RE: Academic Calendar

Over the past year, there have been many discussions about the academic calendar. Those discussions, prompted initially by faculty at UNC-CH, have expanded to include the Faculty Assembly and the Council of Student Body Presidents. Resolutions passed by the Faculty Council at UNC-CH, the Faculty Assembly, and the Council of Student Body Presidents all have two elements in common: the resolutions ask for more campus autonomy in setting the academic calendar and at the same time demonstrate a lack of understanding that the current policy allows the individual campuses to establish the calendar in any way they wish within a requirement of 150 days of instruction. Campuses already have the authority to set beginning and end dates for the semester, to establish holidays and breaks, and to set study days and final examinations periods.

### Current Policy 400.1.6

**“Academic calendars will be structured to provide a minimum of 75 class days per semester – excluding final examinations, Saturdays, Sunday, and holidays – for a minimum of 150 class days per academic year. The chancellors of the constituent institutions shall submit to the president by October 15 of each year copies of the calendars for the subsequent academic year.”**

This requirement assumes that three-credit classes meet three times a week for fifty minutes each. The requirement results in a fifteen-week semester followed by study days and a final examination period. The current requirement was established by the Board of Governors in 1996, and it took effect fall semester 1997. The requirement for 150 instructional days does not address the expectation that faculty with nine-month appointments would continue to have responsibilities for that period of employment irrespective of the semester length.

Over the past several months I have queried the vice chancellors for academic affairs, have discussed the issue with members of the Faculty Assembly, have done a survey of the semester length of the peers of both UNC-CH and NCSU, and have

reviewed a study on semester length done by the University of Hawaii. I asked campuses to respond to issues that have been raised such as the need for a common academic calendar to encourage and support joint programs within our system as well as with other campuses, and I asked for their views on a policy with differential semester lengths within the system. Many of the campuses do not recommend any changes, and those that would consider a change believe that each campus needs to assess its own mission and calendar within a stated policy. Some campuses suggested innovative ways to structure the academic year, recommending a winter intersession and others addressed their dissatisfaction with the campus's existing calendar.

The review of calendars of institutions outside of the UNC system reveals that the "standard" semester length for U.S. universities is 15 weeks or 75 days. The standard course generally is defined as a class that meets for 50 minutes three times a week for three credits. Variations include longer classes once or twice a week as well as four- and five-credit courses with additional meeting times. Additionally, there are variations in whether or not final week is included in the definition of the semester length. Many universities have 14-weeks of instruction (70 days) with a week of finals, requiring attendance during the final period. This final period is generally at least two hours and sometimes three hours. Campuses select different holidays. Some meet on Labor Day and Good Friday (Duke University, for example) and others do not have classes on Columbus Day. Some have weeklong breaks during Thanksgiving week; others do not. The variety reflects campus and regional culture as well as historical patterns. Policies in most states are a combination of system or state guidelines with campus flexibility within those guidelines. SACS has no requirement for semester length, and I did not identify any accrediting requirements that linked accreditations with semester length. Distance education and e-learning are changing the way class time or "seat" time is measured, and outcomes assessment is increasingly more important than in-class time.

In recognition of the changes in patterns of teaching and learning and in the evolution of e-learning, and in recognition of the needs of campuses to adjust the semester calendar to accommodate local partnerships with other universities and community colleges or to be responsive to local events or activities, the Office of the President recommends a change in the current academic year policy. In no way will this change affect the expectations that faculty will continue to fulfill either a nine-month or twelve-month appointment and be available during that time for student advising, meetings, or other academic responsibilities. Within the proposed policy, we will work with campuses to identify ways to accommodate e-learning courses to ensure that there are equivalencies between on-campus, distance learning, and e-learning courses.

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Based on a review of the issues, I recommend the following policy:

**All UNC campuses must ensure that every course offered for academic credit adheres to the standard of a minimum of 750 scheduled minutes of instructional time, or the equivalent, per credit hour. The time may include required examination periods, but may not include study days. In setting the academic calendar for each semester, campuses may set holiday periods, study days, and final examinations appropriate to accommodate the scheduled classes. In no case may a campus set a calendar that has optional final examinations if that time is considered a part of the required minimum class time.**

This recommendation amends the current policy to allow campuses to include a structured final examination period within the fifteen-week semester.