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Change in Course

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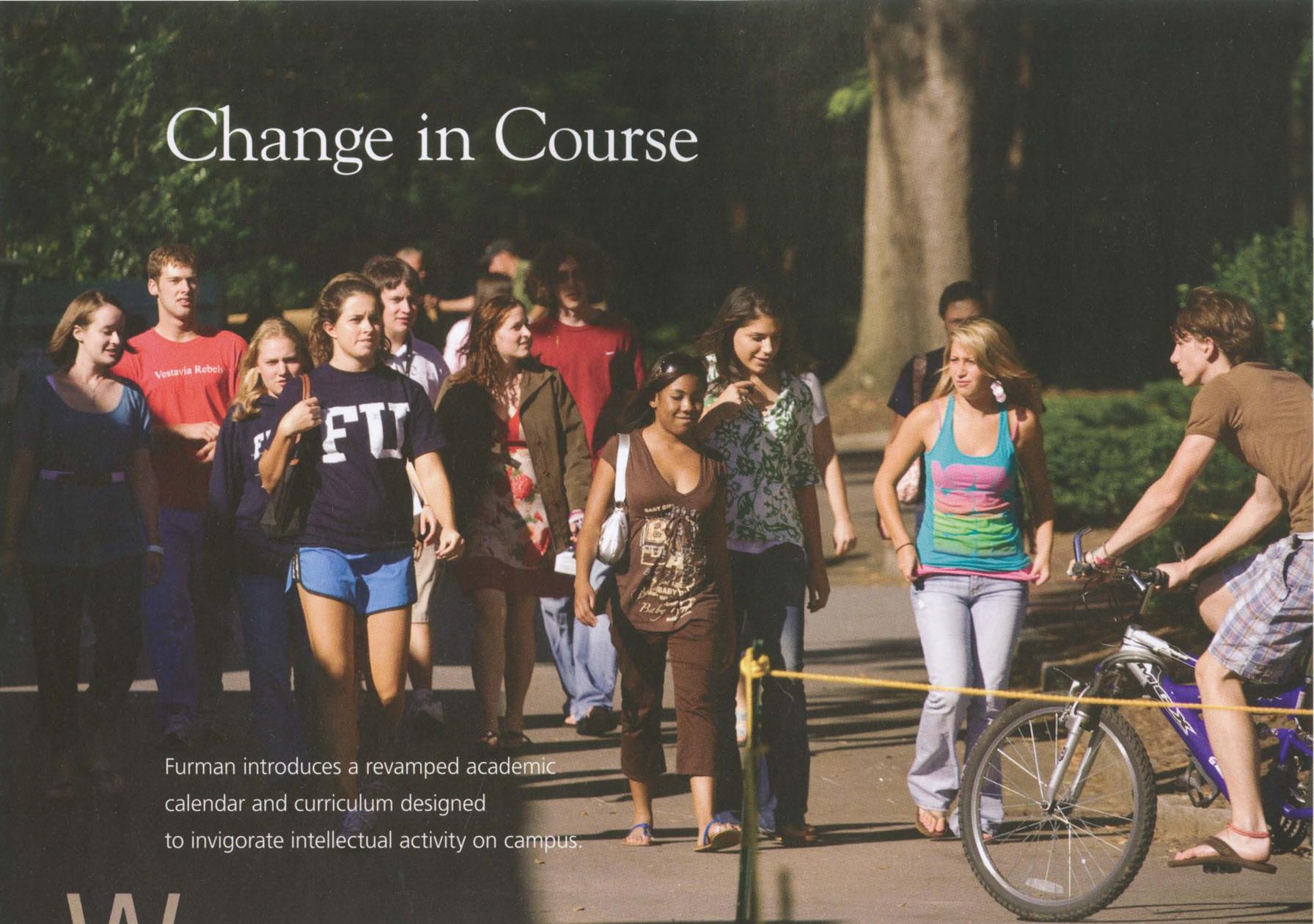
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Change in Course



Furman introduces a revamped academic calendar and curriculum designed to invigorate intellectual activity on campus.

When students arrived on campus in late August for the start of the 2008-09 school year, they entered a new world.

For the first time since 1969, the academic order at Furman did not include such staples as daily class meetings, the 3-2-3 (12-weeks-8 weeks-12 weeks) trimester system, winter term or even Beach Weekend.

Actually, Beach Weekend was never technically part of the calendar. It was an unofficial activity that evolved into an annual tradition — and students assumed it to be a part of the academic year.

Now, however, they can enjoy their spring beach trip without having to worry about returning for two more weeks of class — and final exams. Because, to quote legendary academican Alice Cooper, “School’s out for summer” by early May.

In a sweeping change designed to invigorate intellectual activity on campus, expand interdisciplinary offerings and bring the academic calendar more in line with those of the university’s peer institutions, the Furman faculty voted in late 2005 to adopt a “Semester Plus” calendar. It features two 14-week semesters and an optional “May Experience,” a three-week program following the spring Commencement in which students may focus on a single topic.

After two years of renaming, renumbering and revamping courses, rewriting the university catalog, and ensuring that returning students would be able to make the transition to the new system without excessive stress, the new calendar and curriculum went into effect this year — marking the end of the 3-2-3 system that had been used, with minor changes and tweaks, for 40 years.

Classes now begin in late August, as opposed to mid-September, and end in early May, instead of late in the month. Students meet classes two or three days a week. Monday, Wednesday and Friday classes meet for 50 minutes, as they did previously in the spring and fall. On Tuesday and Thursday they last 75 minutes, per the old winter term schedule. Most courses still offer four hours of credit; a full load each semester is four courses, or 16 hours. Two credit hours are awarded for a May Experience course.

The new curriculum is intended to offer students more courses to select from and to allow students and faculty to take advantage of the growing trend in higher education toward inter- and multi-disciplinary studies. The General Education requirements, which form the basis for a liberal arts education, have not been conceived along strictly departmental lines but have

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been restructured as an answer to a question: What kinds of academic experiences does a student need to become liberally educated in the contemporary world?

THE REVISED GENERAL EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS, which feature a mix of the old and the new, are designed to preserve the university's traditional strengths while laying the foundation for future generations of students and teachers.

The categories for the new GERs:

A. First-Year Seminars (two courses). The seminars are the boldest departure from the previous curriculum. Every first-year student will take two seminars, one of which will focus on the development of writing skills and information fluency. The animating idea behind the seminars is to match, as much as possible, the intellectual passions of faculty members with emerging student interests.

The seminars are intended to introduce students to the principles of engaged learning, to encourage student responsibility for learning from the start of their undergraduate years, and to emphasize critical thinking, intense discussion, and communication and analytical skills.

Enrollment in the seminars is capped at 15; for the seminars with a special emphasis on writing, the cap is 12. The limits ensure that first-year students are guaranteed two small classes at a time when many find themselves most in need of individual attention.

B. Core Requirements (11 to 13 courses). The interdisciplinary emphasis of the new curriculum is evident in the core requirements. Courses from different disciplines can satisfy a particular core requirement or the global awareness requirement (see below) as long as they fulfill the guidelines stipulated for that requirement. For example, a core course in textual analysis could be fulfilled by approved courses in English, history, political science, philosophy or religion. Some seminars may also satisfy the core and global awareness requirements, which cover the following areas:

> *Empirical Studies* (four courses): Two courses in the empirical study of the natural world (at least one with lab), and two courses in the empirical study of human behavior and social relations.

> *Human Cultures* (three courses): One course using historical analysis to study past human interactions; one course in the critical and analytical interpretation of texts; and one course (or four-hour equivalent) in the visual and/or performing arts.

> *Mathematical and Formal Reasoning* (one course).

> *Foreign Language* (one to three courses).

> *Ultimate Questions* (one course). Students engage metaphysical, religious and ethical questions through a course that examines ways in which individuals and societies have articulated what constitutes a good and meaningful life.

> *Body and Mind* (one course). This course supports Furman's commitment to developing the whole person — intellectually, physically, spiritually, socially and emotionally.

C. Global Awareness Requirements (two courses). One class emphasizes the interactive relationships between humans and the natural environment; the other helps students develop a heightened awareness of the cultures and traditions that have shaped and continue to shape the world. The Asian-African requirement from the 3-2-3 system served as the model for the Global Awareness category.

AS FOR THE CALENDAR ITSELF, the two 14-week semesters, followed by the optional three-week May term, offer a number of advantages.

The new schedule moves the calendar more in line with those at other institutions, giving students greater opportunities to compete for jobs and summer internships than they were able to under the previous calendar. It is also expected to promote greater collaboration with other schools and, especially through the May Experience, create more options for innovative academic experiences.

The longer semesters give students more time to digest and apply material that they are likely to be encountering for the first time. Although students will now spend fewer hours in class (from 56 to 42), they will work with faculty to develop strategies for independent learning — and thus take greater responsibility for their education.

In addition, Furman's study away programs have undergone significant revisions. Previously, most of these programs developed as a result of individual faculty initiative, entrepreneurial acumen and personal connections. Now, the university has established a central office and faculty committee that oversee all study away programs, from regional to international.

While many study away programs, especially study abroad, will still extend over an entire semester, the new system makes it possible to more easily divide some programs into on-campus and off-campus segments. A first segment might be taught on campus, preparing students to derive maximum benefit from the travel portion of the program. Students and faculty then return to campus for the final segment, in which they work on integrating their study and travel experiences with whatever culminating projects students may be required to complete.

The May Experience will likely help students and faculty who cannot afford the time commitment of a full semester to participate in a study away activity. The three-week term can also serve as either prelude or capstone to more in-depth academic experiences offered during the regular year.

In sum, Furman's Semester Plus calendar and revised curriculum represent the faculty's collective effort to match the abilities of professors with the current needs of students. While time will determine how successful the changes are, it appears that an invigorating new academic era has arrived at Furman — one that has the potential to create bold new opportunities for students and faculty alike. ¶

This article adapted by Jim Stewart from a talk by political science professor Ty Tessitore at this year's opening faculty meeting. Tessitore chaired the Curriculum Review Committee that constructed the framework for the new curriculum and calendar. For more on the process, visit www.furman.edu/itf.