

This Associated Press story about Colorado College and the Block Plan ran in October 2007 in approximately 191 news outlets, including the Washington Post, the Boston Globe, the Houston Chronicle, Forbes, Newsday, NYTimes.com, AOL News, Yahoo! News' U.S. and Asia feeds, at least three locations in Canada, and in London's The Guardian. At that time, many high school seniors were making their final decisions on where to apply to college.

College Teaches One Class at a Time

By JUSTIN POPE

LAKE GEORGE, Colo. (AP) - It's a silly old expression, but Professor Eric Leonard says it's true: The best geologist is the one who's seen the most rocks.

Which is why, on a crisp fall morning, Leonard was driving a van full of sleeping bags and sleepy-eyed Colorado College freshmen into the mountains around Pikes Peak, where the history of the earth is writ large in giant slabs of igneous rock jutting up from the ground. The overnight trip, and another lasting four nights a week later in Rocky Mountain National Park, offer the kind of intense, hands-on learning that the typical college lecture course rarely has.

But at Colorado College it is common because of a 35-year-old, unusual system of teaching.

Typically, full-time college students take four or five courses simultaneously, over two or three terms per year. Colorado College is one of just a handful of places where students take one course at a time, giving it their full attention for three-and-a-half weeks. They'll spend most of the day in class, or on extended field trips like this one. Then, after a long weekend, they move on to the next course.

On the Colorado Springs campus of about 2,000 undergraduates, you won't see the typical college scene of students walking across the quad between classes. There's no "between."

The challenge, the private college readily admits, is to make sure students get the broad introductory knowledge they need, particularly in subjects like math and science. But the payoff is an intense learning experience that the school insists is well worth it.

"Most kids are taking courses and it's all theoretical. They don't see how it's actually occurring in the environment," said Brendan Boepple, from Wilton, Conn., perched on a sharp rock face above the South Platte River, about an hour west of campus. "We get to go out and see how it's affecting different ecosystems." He also likes having the long "block weekend" between courses when he can indulge his passion for fly-fishing.

The idea of the Block Plan dates to the late 1960s, when Colorado College was preparing for its centennial celebration with a general re-examination of academic and campus life. Nothing radical was on the table. But a small group of professors got to talking at Murphy's Bar near campus, and one asked, "Why can't the college give me 15

students and let me work just with them?"

Across higher education, there was lots of talk at that time about shaking up how colleges operated, and some made big changes. But the basic rhythm of academic life remained largely untouched. Lee Shulman, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, says the reason is college faculty are inherently conservative when it comes to control over their time.



Geology student giving presentation on the outcrop at Malpais National Monument, New Mexico

"There are some utterly irrational ways in which particular ways of configuring time are considered sacred," he said. "It's almost liturgical."

At Colorado College, the proposal prompted much debate but won faculty approval. What happened next is somewhat surprising in hindsight. The idea — new in American higher education — neither failed nor caught on more broadly. Rather, Colorado College nurtured and tweaked it, and it has survived as a nearly unique experiment.

"Modular learning" — as experts call block courses — is increasingly common in high schools, and some colleges have experimented with more intensive, full-time block courses for at least part of the year, usually between terms. A few schools have created intensive courses, like St. Lawrence University in New York, which takes some students into the Adirondack Mountains for a full-semester comprehensive course covering everything from ecology to philosophy.

But only a handful besides Colorado College —

including Cornell College in Iowa, the University of Montana-Western, and Quest University, a new college in Canada — have gone to a full block system.

“Why don’t more people do it? It’s expensive,” said Colorado College President Richard Celeste, a former governor of Ohio who also served as U.S. ambassador to India. The average class size is 16 (the larger courses are required to have two instructors).

“We have to run 122 classes at the same time, so I need 122 classrooms,” Celeste said.

But he says a growing number of students discover in high school that modular learning works better for them, and are looking for a similar college experience. Colorado College attracted a record 4,854 applicants last year. The acceptance rate has fallen below one-third, and the percentage of admitted students who decide to enroll is at its highest in more than 15 years. The schedule attracts lots of competitive skiers because they can take blocks off in the winter and make them up during summer term.

Both the rewards and challenges are obvious in Leonard’s class of first-year geology students. They are on the road by 8 a.m. — the crack of dawn for college students — and lobby Leonard for a stop at a popular doughnut shop en route. By midmorning they have pulled off a dirt road in the Pike National Forest, where they begin

making drawings of an exposed cliff side. Leonard prods them to look at the formations through the eyes of a geologist. It’s only the third day of class, but after two full days of study they already know the basic terminology.

“Even when we’re inside it allows us to do other things,” says Leonard. Students cover fewer topics than their counterparts elsewhere, he admits, but they study them more deeply and, he believes, ultimately become better geologists. “It takes away the constraint of the 50-minute lecture or the three-hour lab. You can continue on things until you’re finished.”

The college says it can’t really say for sure if students learn better this way. There’s no parallel college with the same curriculum and students against which to compare it. But Leonard says his students do fine applying to graduate programs. Celeste says he measures the success in the feedback from students, and from parents, who report they are pleased with how engaged students are in their subjects.

For students in this geology class, at least, one of the benefits is an affirmative answer to a question students are always peppering their teachers with: “Can we have class outside today?”

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Geology students hike in to survey the Spruce Creek Rock Glacier in the Ten Mile Range, Colorado