

Semester school programs Offer the enrichment opportunity of a lifetime

By **Mark Meyer-Braun**
Head of School,
The Outdoor Academy

For many readers the term “semester school” may be unfamiliar, but for thousands of ambitious high school graduates, their semester school experience was the defining feature of their pre-college education. In fact, for many of these students the semester school encounter was the most distinguishing characteristic of their college application portfolio. So what is this somewhat enigmatic, though undeniably fruitful, semester school experience all about?

Since the early 1970s, semester-long and year-long travel abroad programs have been available to American students seeking to broaden their horizons and strengthen foreign language skills. In the 1980s, following in the footsteps of the study-abroad movement, a number of educational organizations in the United States began to offer domestic, semester-long enrichment programs that invite students to travel away from home, but not overseas. These institutions recognized that there are unique opportunities for educational enhance-

ment in the cultural, ecological, geographic and historic heritage of our own country.

Today, there are nine semester school programs in the United States that provide a half-year educational boarding experience to students from across this country and abroad. High school sophomores and juniors can take a semester away from home hiking and studying ecology in the Appalachian Mountains, investigating the complexities of urban planning in New York City, or exchanging creative ideas with renowned artists in Napa Valley. While each program varies in its location and educational focus, all semester school programs expose students to uncommon educational opportunities.

Semester school programs tend to be relatively small, hosting 45 or fewer students per semester on a residential campus. Students learn independence, accountability, and self-determination through the short-term boarding school experience. Each school offers a rigorous college-preparatory curriculum, integrated with

unusual classroom and extra-curricular learning opportunities. The curriculum is thematic, interdisciplinary, and experiential, with emphasis on building skills that can be “packed-

The dramatic experience of studying away from home has little value if it does not enhance the participants’ academic performance and attitude toward learning upon return.

up” and taken home at the end of the semester. After all, the dramatic experience of studying away from home has little value if it does not enhance the participants’ academic performance and attitude toward learning upon return. Semester school programs are designed to complement the academic content of the home school; each program works closely with the home school to determine course placement in math, foreign language, science, the arts, and humanities.

tion at Eagle’s Nest Foundation, this school away from school provides a college preparatory curriculum along with special offerings in environmental education, outdoor leadership, and the arts. Each semester, up to 35 students embrace the Southern Appalachians as a unique ecological, historical, and cultural American region. In this setting we live as a close-knit community

of students and teachers, where lessons of cooperation and responsibility abound. Courses in English, mathematics, science, history, foreign language, visual arts, and music emphasize hands-on and cooperative learning. Classes often meet outside on our expansive wooded campus or in nearby national wilderness areas, where the natural world is used to enhance our intellectual pursuits.

Other Semester programs:

- Cityterm: www.themastersschool.org
- Coastal Studies for Girls: www.coastalstudiesforgirls.org
- The Island School: www.islandschool.org
- The Maine Coast Semester: www.cbewonki.org
- Rocky Mountain Semester: www.bminet.org
- The Oxbow School: www.oxbowschool.org
- Woolman Semester: www.woolman.org
- The Mountain School: www.mountainschool.org

Consider the profile of our school, The Outdoor Academy of the Southern Appalachians, as one model for semester school education that has thrived in the Southeast:

The Outdoor Academy offers 10th and select 11th grade students from across the country a semester away in the Southern Appalachians of North Carolina. Arising from a long tradition of experiential educa-

On weekends and extended trips, our outdoor leadership program teaches hiking, backpacking, caving, canoeing, and rock climbing skills. The Outdoor Academy is open to students from both public and private secondary schools.

The Outdoor Academy
828-877-4349
www.enf.org

