

Community college system considers semester calendar

HALEIGH (AP) — Community college officials are considering a shift to a semester calendar. But they worry the change could shut out some low-income students.

"I'm sure some students probably would be affected," said Parker Chesson, chief operating officer of the community college system and former president of the College of the Albemarle. "It would be tough to keep everyone."

But shifting demands from vocational and technical training to college transfer courses have prompted a majority of the school presidents to ask for the change.

The state's 58 community colleges have been on an 11-week quarter system since the early 1960s — an approach that dovetails well with the system's long-held goal of providing job skills.

The approach gives students a chance to retrain themselves quickly and holds down costs for businesses that underwrite the cost of worker training through the local campuses.

But more students are now using the community colleges to accumulate academic credits before transferring to four-year colleges or universities.

Virtually all of the state's other colleges — including those in the UNC system — are on a semester

academic calendar.

"Going to a semester system is going to make it much easier for those students," system President Robert Scott told board members Thursday. "It also will improve the profile of the community colleges as truly academic institutions."

A semester schedule would require most of the system's 750,000 students to attend two 16-week sessions a year rather than three 11-week quarters. That means tuition

for a semester, which is paid in advance, would cost students about one-third more than tuition for a quarter.

It would take only two semesters to complete a school year, however, compared to three quarters.

But some school presidents say a bigger problem involves the longer time commitment. For many of the system's part-time students, carving out enough time around work schedules is a bigger problem than

money.

It also will be expensive for each school. Depending on how much money legislators might provide for the switch, it will cost the 58 colleges a combined total of \$4 million to \$8 million to retool courses and weed out offerings that don't fit a semester format.

Despite those costs, 42 school presidents voted in favor of the switch earlier this year. Board members did not vote on the issue Thursday,

but a majority of them also seemed to favor the plan.

Scott expects to make a recommendation in October after talking with legislative leaders. If the system decides to change, the switch would probably occur in the fall of 1995.

But the semester schedule must first survive a political fight with those who feel the community colleges are straying from their mission.

Presidents from three of the system's biggest schools, for example, have all voted against the change — including Wake Tech and Durham Tech.

"When you start talking about going to the semester system, you have to ask is the tail starting to wag the dog?" said Bruce Howell, president of Wake Tech. "Only 15 percent of our students are college transfer, and a quarter schedule makes more sense for everyone else."