'Jan Term's' adventures in education: At Saint Mary's, rigorous classes between semesters test, enthral students

By Lou Fancher Correspondent Contra Costa Times

MORAGA -- Like most people at the start of a new year, students and faculty at Saint Mary's College celebrate with a bang.

But it's not the pop of a champagne bottle opening or a balloon bursting. It's Jan Term, a four-week social justice jubilee embedded in an explosion of academic ambition.

Required by the college of all students, the program is so unique it landed the private Catholic college on 2013's list of "Colleges That Change Lives: 40 Schools That Will Change the Way You Think About Colleges."

Ironically, the college educational guide, originally written by former New York Times education editor Loren Pope and now updated by education journalist Hilary Masell Oswald, praised SMC for being deceptive.

"It looks like a place of privilege, but it's actually a down-to-earth college where 2,600 undergrads and 1,300 graduate students make the connection between learning and life," Oswald wrote.

And while the guide credits SMC's four-semester Collegiate Seminar series for stretching students by asking big questions like "What is death?" and "Does evil have to exist?," Jan Term is undeniably highlighted. Oswald attributes the program with not only blowing the lid off academic expectations, but with attracting--and retaining--top faculty.

Jan Term Director Sue Fallis agrees the effect on faculty is enormous.

"I can tell you so many stories," she said. "One young faculty member, Michelle Shulman, first proposed a course in forensics. She had a crime scene on campus. The next year, she taught a 'Chemistry in Art' course and took students to England to see restorations."

Today, Shulman is a tenured chemistry professor. Fallis says the "smashing success" of Shulman's courses allowed her to publish research that "paved her path to tenure and enlightened her about teaching."

Jan Term courses are deliberately, insistently, not aimed toward completing a course of study. They do not count toward a student's major and the curriculum changes each year. Fallis says other colleges and universities have "inter-sessions" between the main semesters, but her efforts to find comparable programs where four Jan terms are required have come up empty.

Each year, an elected committee of faculty members evaluates proposed courses, sets the curriculum and reviews successes and failures. If a proposal is not sufficiently rigorous or if students' work cannot be readily evaluated, the committee insists on changes. Courses that fall outside the comfort zone are top dog, leading to classes like "Bay Area Wild" and "The End of the
"World" and the mysteriously titled "Barbarians!!"

Students say Jan Term is not an opportunity for an "easy A." Limited to only one course, they insist pace, amount of independent study and teacher expectations are high.

Women's Studies and History Professor Myrna Santiago is leading her Jan Term students to Cuba. She knows they enter the course with general, even mistaken, impressions of the country ... a place where time has stood still; a ruler who everyone fears; a population antagonistic to Americans.

"They will learn that (Fidel) Castro is not the devil incarnate," Santiago writes in an email. "They will learn there are a lot of terribly interesting and creative developments around environmental issues and the arts."

Preparation before travel is crucial, Santiago insists, but walking the streets and having their senses engaged is impossible to achieve with theoretical lectures and textbooks alone. Boots on the ground is vital to learning.

"Cuba will be Cuba after we leave, but our students will be different young people for having had that experience," Santiago says.

Jan Term is not all travel-related, although Fallis says the college is working toward having enough scholarships so that all students may have one global experience.

Communications Professor Shawny Anderson leads her students to DIRT: courses inspiring them to Dismantle, Immerse, Reflect, and Transform. Thrusting the students into situations of extreme poverty and ruin, (like Haiti in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake), teaches them to address impossible problems, cooperate in teams, and loose any presumption of the poor as powerless or ill-informed.

"They get over their belief that situations of extreme need are too overwhelming for us to make any difference," Anderson says. "(We) produce rapid change at our worksites and in our own psyches. It fills me and my students and our hosts with awe and wonder every time."

Jan Term also includes a series of free, open-to-the-public speaker series following the "Inspired" theme and addressing creativity, religious achievement, Black Catholic gospel traditions, indie culture, modern-day slavery and social activism.

Jan Term
For information about Saint Mary's College Jan Term course offerings and public events, contact the Jan Term office at 925-631-4771 or janterm@stmarys-ca.edu.