In 2009, a group of Duke faculty[1] developed the idea of a multidisciplinary, integrated curricular program that would allow students to explore a single issue or problem through the combined lens of four completely integrated courses during a semester. They called this idea “DukeImmerse.” In this model, students enroll in four courses as in a typical semester, but these courses are delivered in a completely integrated fashion, without the constraints imposed by separate meeting times and places. Because students all enroll in the same four courses, they use all their academic time to immerse themselves in one multidisciplinary program for an entire semester. DukeImmerse programs are intended to more closely connect student learning with faculty academic interests, and so are expected to focus on issues that faculty are actively engaging in their own research. Faculty-student interaction is expected to be frequent, informal and collaborative, as one might see in a progressive laboratory or a start-up company. Professors and students have the freedom to dynamically schedule teaching and learning activities, taking advantage of more opportunities to connect classroom learning with the real world, and, if necessary, to leave campus for extended periods to enhance the curriculum.

The DukeImmerse concept bears some resemblance to the first-year Focus program at Duke, although it takes a big step further by having students share all four course registrations, not just a subset. Programs may be targeted for sophomores or older students, depending on the need for prerequisites. DukeImmerse also might be seen as an academic counterpart to the co-curricular DukeEngage program. The faculty committee that developed the idea envisioned DukeImmerse as shifting the discourse of education from knowledge acquisition to knowledge construction. This latter focus requires a move from a teacher-centered view of education to a “learner as intellectual worker” approach.

In the spring 2012 semester, two pilot DukeImmerse program were launched. Although both of these pilots included an extended international trip, DukeImmerse is not inherently an “abroad” program. Travel away from Duke is enabled by the DukeImmerse structure, but only included if it substantively supports the learning objectives of the program.

There is as yet no formal application process for proposing a new DukeImmerse program. Ideas should be forwarded to Steve Nowicki in the Office of Undergraduate Education, who will work closely with the academic deans and appropriate faculty governance committees to help faculty bring those ideas to fruition. Key to developing a successful proposal will be for faculty to map the learning objectives of four courses onto their DukeImmerse program, including how those objectives are expected to be achieved by students and how they will be assessed. Courses involved in a DukeImmerse program could include existing courses that are reconfigured to be part of the program or newly-created courses.