

UNCW enters academic big leagues

BY SAM SCOTT

Staff Writer

Decades in the making, Erin Meagher's registration for classes at UNCW this week hit a small snag.

The call-in registration system did not know what to do with a Ph.D. student, she said – the university has never had one before.

It will take a much bigger snafu to take the gloss off the school's entry to the academic big leagues.

In May, the University of North Carolina at Wilmington got long-sought approval from the state to start a Ph.D. program in marine biology, the school's first doctorate program.

The approval came despite early opposition from the state's big guns: N.C. State University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The Office of the President, the

university system's top executives, also challenged the plan, requiring substantial changes, and approval was in doubt until the last minute.

After 30 years of polishing the marine biology program as the jewel in its crown, UNCW is finally getting recognition as a world-class program, said Scott Quackenbush, chairman of the Biological Science Department.

As one-third of the pioneer class, and the only one studying on campus this semester, Ms. Meagher stands to experience a range of firsts more positive than tangling with the registration system.

"It's exciting," she said.

Of the other two, one will start in January and another is doing research away from the campus, Dr. Quackenbush said.

Wearing shorts and a sleeveless T-shirt, she could easily blend into a crowd of undergraduates, though her

fluency in triple-barrel scientific terms might not.

"I've known since I was in the sixth grade that I wanted to do marine biology," she said.

She is studying how dolphins get rid of heat.

For a delighted department, the doctorate course promises to boost a program that is already renowned on an undergraduate level.

The new students' expertise will rub off on master's and undergraduate students, said Ann Pabst, an associate professor who works closely with Ms. Meagher.

And having doctoral students around for six years or so will also help professors' research, said Joe Pawlik, a specialist in marine invertebrates. Masters students typically leave after two years, just as they've gotten the hang of research.

The few open spots in the Ph.D.

program will also serve as a motivator for master's students, elevating their work, he said.

With the OK from the state coming so late in the academic year, the school was unable to recruit students for this year's program, Dr. Quackenbush said. Those that did come pursued the university.

In the future, there will be as many as 35 top-notch scientists pursuing their doctorates, Dr. Quackenbush.

"We haven't even advertised," he said. "This is three students before we've even started."

After getting her master's at the school, Ms. Meagher continued working in Dr. Pabst's lab as an employee for a year, her fingers crossed that the doctorate program would be approved, she said.

The school is one of the few sites in the county where she could do her research, she said.