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Career U.

## Making College ‘Relevant’

By KATE ZERNIKE

THOMAS COLLEGE, a liberal arts school in Maine, advertises itself as Home of the Guaranteed Job! Students who can’t find work in their fields within six months of graduation can come back to take classes free, or have the college pay their student loans for a year.

The University of Louisiana, Lafayette, is eliminating its philosophy major, while Michigan State University is doing away with American studies and classics, after years of declining enrollments in those majors.

And in a class called “The English Major in the Workplace,” at the University of Texas, Austin, students read “Death of a Salesman” but also learn to network, write a résumé and come off well in an interview.

Even before they arrive on campus, students — and their parents — are increasingly focused on what comes after college. What’s the return on investment, especially as the cost of that investment keeps rising? How will that major translate into a job?

The pressure on institutions to answer those questions is prompting changes from the admissions office to the career center. But even as they rush to prove their relevance, colleges and universities worry that students are specializing too early, that they are so focused on picking the perfect major that they don’t allow time for self-discovery, much less late blooming.

“The phrase drives me crazy — ‘What are you going to do with your degree?’ — but I see increasing concerns about that,” says Katharine Brooks, director of the liberal arts career center at the University of Texas, Austin, and author of “You Majored in What? Mapping Your Path From Chaos to Career.” “Particularly as money gets tighter, people are going to demand more accountability from majors and departments.”

Consider the change captured in the annual survey by the University of California, Los Angeles, of more than 400,000 incoming freshmen. In 1971, 37 percent responded that it was essential or very important to be “very well-off financially,” while 73 percent said the same about “developing a meaningful philosophy of life.” In 2009, the values were nearly reversed: 78 percent identified wealth as a goal, while 48 percent were after a meaningful philosophy.

The shift in attitudes is reflected in a shifting curriculum. Nationally, business has been the most popular major for the last 15 years. Campuses also report a boom in public health fields, and

many institutions are building up environmental science and just about anything prefixed with “bio.” Reflecting the new economic and global realities, they are adding or expanding majors in Chinese and Arabic. The University of Michigan has seen a 38 percent increase in students enrolling in Asian language courses since 2002, while French has dropped by 5 percent.

Of course, universities have always adjusted curriculum to reflect the changing world; Kim Wilcox, the provost and vice president for academic affairs at Michigan State, notes that universities, his included, used to offer majors in elocution and animal husbandry. In a major re-examination of its curriculum, Michigan State has added a dozen or so new programs, including degrees in global studies and, in response to a growing industry in the state, film studies. At the same time, it is abandoning underperformers like classical studies: in the last four years, only 13 students have declared it their major.

Dropping a classics or philosophy major might have been unthinkable a generation ago, when knowledge of the great thinkers was a cornerstone of a solid education. But with budgets tight, such programs have come to seem like a luxury— or maybe an expensive antique — in some quarters.

When Louisiana’s regents voted to eliminate the philosophy major last spring, they agreed with faculty members that the subject is “a traditional core program of a broad-based liberal arts and science institution.” But they noted that, on average, 3.4 students had graduated as philosophy majors in the previous five years; in 2008, there were none. “One cannot help but recognize that philosophy as an essential undergraduate program has lost some credence among students,” the board concluded.

In one recent survey, two-thirds of public institutions said they were responding to budget cuts with extensive reviews of their programs. But Dr. Wilcox says curriculum changes at Michigan State have just as much to do with what students, and the economy, are demanding. “We could have simply reduced the campus operating budget by X percent,” he says, “but we wouldn’t have positioned ourselves any differently for the future.”

In Michigan, where the recession hit early and hard, universities are particularly focused on being relevant to the job market. “There’s been this drumbeat that Michigan has got to diversify its economy,” says Mary Sue Coleman, the president of the University of Michigan.

Dr. Coleman says she had an “aha” moment five years ago, when the director of admissions was describing the incoming class and noted that 10 percent — some 600 students — had started a business in high school. The university has responded with about 100 entrepreneurship courses across the curriculum, including “Financing Research Commercialization” and “Engineering Social Venture Creation,” for students interested in creating businesses that not only do well financially but also do society good. Next year, the university will begin offering a master’s to students who commit to starting a high-tech company.

At the same time, Dr. Coleman is wary of training students for just one thing — “creating them to do some little widget,” as she says. Michigan has begun a speaker series featuring alumni or

other successful entrepreneurs who come in to talk about how their careers benefited from what Dr. Coleman calls “core knowledge.”

“We believe that we do our best for students when we give them tools to be analytical, to be able to gather information and to determine the validity of that information themselves, particularly in this world where people don’t filter for you anymore,” Dr. Coleman says. “We want to teach them how to make an argument, how to defend an argument, to make a choice.” These are the skills that liberal arts colleges in particular have prided themselves on teaching. But these colleges also say they have the hardest time explaining the link between what they teach and the kind of job and salary a student can expect on the other end.

“There’s no immediate impact, that’s the problem,” says John J. Neuhauser, the president of St. Michael’s College, a liberal arts school in Vermont. “The humanities tend to educate people much farther out. They’re looking for an impact that lasts over decades, not just when you’re 22.”

When prospective students and their parents visit, he says, they ask about placement rates, internships and alumni involvement in job placement. These are questions, he says, that he never heard 10 years ago.

St. Michael’s, like other colleges, has adapted its curriculum to reflect demand. The college had to create new sections of chemistry labs and calculus on the spot during summer registration, and it raised the cap on the number of students in a biology lab. “I’d say, given the vagaries of the business cycle, people are looking for things that they know will always be needed — accountants, scientists, mathematicians,” says Jeffrey A. Trumbower, dean of the college. “Those also happen to be some of the most challenging majors academically, so we’ll see how these trends hold up.”

Still, Dr. Neuhauser finds the careerism troubling. “I think people change a great deal between 18 and 22,” he says. “The intimate environment small liberal arts colleges provide is a great place to grow up. But there’s no question that smacks of some measure of elitism now.”

There’s evidence, though, that employers also don’t want students specializing too soon. The Association of American Colleges and Universities recently asked employers who hire at least 25 percent of their workforce from two- or four-year colleges what they want institutions to teach. The answers did not suggest a narrow focus. Instead, 89 percent said they wanted more emphasis on “the ability to effectively communicate orally and in writing,” 81 percent asked for better “critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills” and 70 percent were looking for “the ability to innovate and be creative.”

“It’s not about what you should major in, but that no matter what you major in, you need good writing skills and good speaking skills,” says Debra Humphreys, a vice president at the association.

The organization has conducted focus groups with employers before and heard the same thing. With the recession, she says, they weren’t sure the findings would hold. “But it’s even more

intense. Companies are demanding more of employees. They really want them to have a broad set of skills.” She adds that getting employer feedback is the association service that “college leaders find the most valuable, because they can answer the question when parents ask, ‘Is this going to help in getting a job?’ ”

Career advisers say that colleges and universities need to do a better job helping students understand the connection between a degree and a job. At some institutions, this means career officers are heading into the classroom.

Last fall at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, the career office began integrating workplace lessons into capstone research seminars for humanities majors. In one of three classes taught by Anne Scholl-Fiedler, the director, she asks students to develop a 30-second commercial on their “personal brand.” “When somebody asks, ‘How are you going to use that English degree?’ you need to be able to clearly articulate what you are able to do,” she says. “If you don’t know, employers probably won’t either.”

At the University of Texas, Ms. Brooks says, many parents drop their children off freshman year asking, “How can my child transfer to the business school?” She tries to establish the value of the liberal arts with a series of courses called “The Major in the Workplace.” Students draw what she calls a “major map,” an inventory of things they have learned to do around their major. Using literature — “The Great Gatsby,” perhaps, or “Death of a Salesman” — she gets students to think about how the themes might apply to a workplace, then has them read Harvard Business Review case studies. The goal, she says, is to get students to think about how an English major (or a psychology or history major) might view the world differently, and why an employer might value that.

“There’s this linear notion that what you major in equals your career,” Ms. Brooks says. “I’m sure it works for some majors. If you want to be an electrical engineer, that major looks pretty darn good.

“The truth is,” she says, “students think too much about majors. But the major isn’t nearly as important as the toolbox of skills you come out with and the experiences you have.”

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