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Colleges Get Career-Minded; More Liberal-Arts Schools Stress Skills Development, Ruffling Academic Feathers

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Abstract: Andy Chan, who runs career services at Wake Forest, in Winston-Salem, N.C., and his team have met with more than 150 faculty members, and he has a staffer dedicated to initiatives such as encouraging history professors to bring students to the career-services office for webinars with successful alumni.

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Full Text: At Wake Forest University, students can hedge their bets, majoring in history and balancing out Napoleon or the Prussians with a minor in Innovation, Creativity and Entrepreneurship.

The five-year-old program, the school's most popular minor, requires students to learn the practical aspects of starting a business. It is a sign of change in liberal-arts colleges, which are grappling with the responsibility of preparing students for a tight and rapidly shifting job market while still providing the staples of academic inquiry. Some schools are beginning to make career development a mission-critical aspect of the college experience, with everything from ramped-up career services to academic programs emphasizing real-world applications and efforts to engage faculty in practical mentoring.

"We're seeing the emergence of a new model of education that blends liberal and applied learning," said Debra Humphreys, head of public affairs at the American Association of Colleges and Universities.

The changes are sparking a debate on college campuses over the extent to which job preparation and training should be part of a liberal-arts education.

For decades, liberal-arts schools largely have been insulated from such questions, even as for-profit and community colleges have faced scrutiny over low graduation rates, high rates of loan defaults and whether they truly prepare students for employment in their chosen fields. And the benefits of a liberal-arts education, such as critical thinking and communication skills, are still highly valued.

But with tuition increases far outpacing inflation and graduates entering a bad job market with record debt, students and parents are demanding a clearer--and quicker--return on their investment.

Some schools are warming to the idea of working directly with employers in the classroom, something more common on the community-college campus. Indian IT firm HCL Technologies is developing a six-month elective course in technology and business innovation to be offered at about 12 schools around the country, including at least a few four-year universities.

The University of Chicago promises each student a substantive internship. Wesleyan University, in Middletown, Conn., has launched College of the Environment, an interdisciplinary program that combines science, policy and the humanities. Fifteen students this year will graduate as majors in the program, and 35 members of the class of 2013 have declared it as a major.

"A lot of the environmental jobs of the future haven't even been created yet, but those jobs will appear, and they'll be interdisciplinary," said Julia Michaels, who majored in the program and will graduate Sunday. "You'll have to be at the cutting edge of science and policy and ethics and technology in order to really be able to face the important issues."

Other students cobble together their own combinations. Lesley Gustafson graduated Monday from Wake Forest with a double major in political science and computer science. The former gives her the opportunity to enjoy the

liberal-arts focus on "debating and reading and practicing critical thinking," said the 21-year-old, while the latter gives her coveted skills to take into the job market this year.

Such initiatives can encounter resistance.

"There is a tension to this," said Paula David, head of communications at Clark University in Worcester, Mass.

"We just had a series of difficult discussions with faculty called 'Educating for What?' Professors do not want us to suddenly become a vocational school."

So administrators must convince professors. Andy Chan, who runs career services at Wake Forest, in Winston-Salem, N.C., and his team have met with more than 150 faculty members, and he has a staffer dedicated to initiatives such as encouraging history professors to bring students to the career-services office for webinars with successful alumni. Reception from faculty has been mixed.

Mr. Chan said calls he received from more than 30 schools asking about Wake Forest's programs prompted him to organize a conference last month titled "Rethinking Success: From the Liberal Arts to Careers in the 21st Century." It was attended by administrators from more than 70 schools, including Yale, Emory, Brigham Young and Stanford. "Many career directors at schools are feeling this pressure but are trying to figure out: How do we get our whole institution to get behind this?" Mr. Chan said.

Some point to a risk in developing courses based on business trends or software languages.

"When we see a deep structural shift, that means our students need experiences they didn't need before," said Carol Quillen, president of Davidson College in North Carolina, which offers an extracurricular program in entrepreneurship. "But we won't change our curriculum based on what we would perceive as a transitory need for a particular skill."

Write to Lauren Weber at

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