

Students

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In Tight Employment Market, Career Services Gain Clout

By SARA LIPKA

The proverbial parents of a philosophy major fret that Junior will end up unemployed. The tension lies in that pesky question: Is college about getting an education or a job?

Now more than ever, students and their families say both.

Kevin F. Gaw, director of career development at the University of Nevada at Reno, sees that demand in his parent-orientation sessions. He had to move them to an auditorium this year, and the audience there grilled him. "They were asking questions like 'What is the university doing to generate good opportunities?'" he says. "'What's in place to help my student be successful?'"

Such concerns, long present, have become insistent.

A national survey by Eduventures, a consulting firm, found in late 2006 that entering students considered professional preparation the most important factor in assessing the value of their college degree. And last year, based on popular demand, the Princeton Review introduced a new ranking: best career services.

The stakes these days are especially high. Tuition and student-loan debt have risen to record levels, while the economy has slowed. In a competitive market, a college degree is no longer the golden ticket to a professional career.

Employers still plan to hire 8 percent more graduates this year than they did last, but that projection has dropped from an initial estimate of 16 percent, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers. Next year may bring a downturn in hiring, the group predicts.

Economic conditions, public expectations, and a heightened emphasis on student success have pushed many colleges to ramp up their career services. Some less-selective private colleges, under particular pressure to justify their tuition, are touting new programs that all but place students in a job. And a wide range of institutions now see career planning as a way not only to recruit students but also to retain them. The colleges are more aggressively marketing career services, redoubling their efforts to reach out to employers, and grappling with the best way to measure their success.

The field is reaping the rewards of increased interest by college leaders, says Lisa E. Severy, director of career services at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

"It's been in the category of, Oh yeah, they do fine," she says. "And it's coming around to, Wait a second, this is essential for us."

'In Their Face'

Still, colleges aren't guaranteeing students jobs. Among career counselors, "placement" is a dirty word.

"Career offices make no claims about placing students," says Julie Westlund, director of career services at the University of Minnesota at Duluth. "That's for an employment agency to do."

Many career offices used to include "placement" in their names, but in the 1970s and 80s, most struck it. Equal-opportunity legislation had taken hold, and the concept of matching students one by one with employers was not only distasteful, but potentially illegal.

At the same time, the seminal job-hunting book *What Color Is Your Parachute?* brought a self-help approach to the field. College career centers began to promote "exploration" and "opportunity." By that point, a first job wasn't what it used to be — Day 1 of a 30-year gig — and the offices focused on developing students' professional savvy.

"We teach them how to make effective and thoughtful and deliberate decisions," says Kathy L. Sims, director of the career center at the University of California at Los Angeles.

But students are not necessarily inclined to seek out such help. Just as people postpone writing a will, students put off planning a career. And so colleges have devised increasingly innovative marketing strategies.

Members of the Big East Conference, for example, tap their basketball audiences. For the fourth time this year, the conference held a career fair at Madison Square Garden during its men's basketball tournament there. The Big East already had the arena rented, and brought in more than 150 employers to meet students from its 16 institutions.

A blend of high-tech and "high touch" services produces the greatest results for students, according to a recent survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers. Career counselors at Colorado, for instance, chat online with students. Their counterparts at the University of Wisconsin at River Falls rely on a growing staff of "peer educators" to lure their friends and classmates into the center.

West Virginia University just began an all-out campaign to increase the visibility of career services to students. "We're going to be in their face," says David Durham, who directs the center there.

This year all West Virginia students started receiving periodic e-mail messages about jobs or internships for which they qualify. A computer program allows Mr. Durham to scan announcements, plug in parameters — such as journalism major and 3.0 grade-point average — and fire off links to lists of students.

In the fall, the university will unveil 10 job kiosks in high-traffic areas around the campus. Swiping a student ID will generate a tailored list of job postings from more than 5,000 entries in the university's "MountaineerTrak" database. Using a touch screen, students will be able to e-mail themselves good prospects. In addition, large new signs will direct students to a revamped career center.

"I want students to know that career services is here," says Mr. Durham, "and we're going to do everything we can to help."

Required Reading

At Nichols College, students don't have a choice. Career-preparation there is mandatory. For eight years the 1,100-student institution in Dudley, Mass., has been running a Professional Development Seminar that includes four semesters of résumé writing, portfolio building, and mock interviewing.

Not all professors were fans of the program at first, says Dawn C. Sherman, who created it. "There were people who said, 'You're going to give academic credit for what?'"

But Ms. Sherman, now assistant dean for special academic programs, stood her ground. She explained why she

thought students needed the one-credit course. "I don't care if they come out of here with a 4.0," she told the skeptics. "If they don't look the interviewer in the eye, they're not going to get a second interview."

Now dozens of faculty and staff members teach the weekly seminar, which students take one semester each of their four years.

"The students will complain it's a lot of work," Ms. Sherman says. "But by junior year they start to get it."

Ms. Sherman has developed a textbook for the course, and this summer Nichols will hold a conference on its model, which has become a selling point for the college.

"Enrollment has been growing steadily over the last eight years or so, and I think this program has a lot to do with it," says Alan J. Reinhardt, vice president for academic affairs. "Students are choosing Nichols over our competitors to a much greater extent."

Sarah H. Petruzzelli, a senior, says the career seminar influenced her decision to transfer to Nichols from Western Connecticut State University. "I had no idea how to make a real résumé or a cover letter," she says. "I probably would have been lost."

Friends at other colleges routinely call Ms. Petruzzelli for help with their job applications. The native of Danbury, Conn., just accepted a marketing position for a hockey team there.

Her mother, Pamela Petruzzelli, is busy recruiting more students to Nichols: "The first thing I say is, 'You've got to look into this program. It's phenomenal.'"

After her daughter transferred to Nichols, she says, two more students from the local high school went. From this year's graduating class, five will attend the college.

Westminster College, in Salt Lake City, is hoping for similar success with a new program, Career Passages, set to begin this fall. That program is voluntary, and students who enroll will follow a four-year calendar of interviews, internships and etiquette dinners.

Ten thousand brochures for the program recently arrived in the admissions office, says Beverly Christy, director of the career-resources center. "The marketing piece of it is pretty big," she says. "We are trying to guarantee that students have a certain kind of experience if they decide on Westminster."

Westminster is one of only two private institutions in the state — the other is Brigham Young University — and charges an annual tuition of \$24,000. Michael S. Bassis, Westminster's president, says Career Passages will help the college distinguish itself.

"We are the expensive program in town," Mr. Bassis says, "and so we really do have to make the value-added case."

Face Time

Preparing students for the job market is one aspect of career services; hunting new jobs is another. And Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute is on the prowl.

Thomas Tarantelli, who directs the career-development center there, now works closely with the vice president for institute advancement to identify new prospective employers, including some of the university's research partners. In particular, he hopes to find opportunities for students in emerging degree areas like electronic-media arts and communications.

Mr. Tarantelli brings glossy brochures to meetings with employers, but those are less effective, he says. "I very quickly turn it into a conversation about students, because they're the real salespeople."

In February, Mr. Tarantelli had a chance to boast about his students for two days straight. The Florida High Tech Corridor Council, a business-development coalition, played host to more than 70 colleges and 60 employers for its second annual career expo. To avoid long lines, the council's president, Randy Berridge, coordinated a series of "speed-dating sessions," ringing a bell every five minutes for participants to rotate.

The expo, he says, especially benefited small and midsize companies and lesser-known colleges, which often lack the budgets to travel or the brands to attract visits.

Big companies, Mr. Berridge says, always "meet with the Purdues and the Georgia Techs and the MITs."

Several public universities in other states attended the fair, though they are generally committed to keeping their graduates in their backyards. But Mr. Berridge made a diplomatic request: "Share those you know you're going to lose with us."

Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis, which did not attend the fair, is encouraging its students to participate in local internships and entrepreneurial projects, which may lead to jobs after graduation.

"We have to both graduate those who are here and retain those who we graduate," says Charles R. Bantz, the chancellor. "It is a constant challenge."

Gauging Success

Another challenge for colleges is figuring out if students get jobs. Verifying where graduates end up requires tracking them down when their contact information is in flux.

But legislators and accreditors routinely request that "placement rate," so colleges try to collect it. Response rates, however, tend to be fairly low.

Nichols says that last year 96 percent of its graduates found jobs within six months, but that proportion is based on replies from two-thirds of students. From the University of Nevada, 82 percent of students go on to work, officials there say. But those data come from about half of students.

"Unless that figure is based on a survey of more than 90 percent of the students who attend, it's suspect," says Peter Vogt, publisher of the national newsletter *Campus Career Counselor*. Otherwise, just the happy, employed graduates may respond.

Comparing figures across institutions can be tricky, too, as methods and times for polling students differ. Some colleges, for example, check in six months after graduation to see if anyone's job status has changed.

"It can be very labor- and resource-intensive if you really want to capture good information," says Marilyn F. Mackes, executive director of the National Association of Colleges and Employers.

Montana State University at Billings offers a gift card to graduating seniors who respond early to its questionnaire. The University of Miami surveys students when they pick up their caps and gowns.

At the University of Wisconsin at River Falls, career counselors approach students as they wait in line for their graduation ceremony. After that, the university mails students a survey with their diplomas. Then come three telephone calls, some by a temporary employee hired to work in the evening.

"We tend to get around 70 percent, and then we feel like we've done OK," says Carmen Croonquist, director of career services. "That's the minimum of what we strive for."

Still, many career-center directors say those figures don't necessarily measure their effectiveness. Taking credit for good numbers, they say, would mean being blamed when the economy turns sluggish. And so they favor the figures they can control, like students attending career fairs and employers recruiting on the campus.

"If I can get every student to have three or four or five interviews, I feel like we're being pretty productive," says Mr. Durham, of West Virginia University.

This year the career center drew almost 470 employers to the campus, double the amount from last year. It was satisfying to see that number rise, he says. "Then obviously we're doing something right."

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