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More colleges offer alumni career-counseling services

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Dozens of colleges and universities have begun offering career-counseling services not just to recent graduates but to thousands of alumni, including some former students who completed their degrees a decade ago or longer.

That includes schools in Kentucky and Indiana. (See chart accompanying this story on Page D3.)

At schools like Willamette University in Oregon, the expanded career services are also part of a broader effort to keep alumni engaged in the college community -- something that makes them more likely financial supporters down the road.

"When we call them for their annual fund gift, they're not only going to say Willamette is a place where I spent four great years and that gave me a fabulous foundation liberal arts education, but it continues to provide value and service," said David Audley, the school's director of alumni and parents relations.

When the technology sector collapsed in the early 2000s, many alumni sought job-hunting help from colleges, and schools began to think about new ways to help them. In the last year or two, the trend of hiring full-time counselors for alumni has taken off. A listserv for people who hold such jobs started two years ago with eight members and now has 125.

Among the institutions offering alumni services is the University of Texas at San Antonio, where Angelina Roman graduated a decade ago. At the time, the school helped her land a job with business technology company EDS.

After taking time off to care for her ailing father, Roman recently returned seeking another job and advice on a potential career change. She got help from the same counselor, Shirley Rowe, whose assignment is now offering career advice to former students.

"It was great walking into their office and being able to talk to Shirley, who I knew from back then," Roman said.

Services already offered

The idea of helping alumni is not entirely new. Many schools offer at least some career services to grads, such as listservs and job banks, and a few have longestablished programs offering comprehensive services like one-on-one counseling and assessment tests.

For example, the University of Houston started an alumni career services program during the oil bust of the 1980s, when many graduates were looking for work.

Nizar Ali, who has two degrees from the university, including an MBA in 1998, said he took advantage of the counseling service after feeling like his career in retail management was stagnating. Counselors suggested a shift to health-care management, and he's looking into some options.

"The number-one 1 reason I went back to the same university I graduated from is they know what's out there," Ali said. "They keep in touch with the job market. I knew that they would know what's going on, what kind of fields are hot."

The University of Illinois has one of the larger programs, which is 20 years old and has three full-time staff members.

But it's only in recent years that a significant number of schools have begun devoting staff just to alumni. One reason is increasing job turnover in many professions has more former students looking for personalized advice.

"There was a time when if you got a job with a major corporation, you pretty much stuck with them and got your gold

watch," said Jack Rayman, director of career services at Penn State. Now, he says, graduates can expect to hold seven to 10 different jobs.

When the University of Texas at Austin surveyed members of its "Texas Exes" alumni association recently, career services was the No. 1 item graduates said the school could help with.

"Most of my clients are getting jobs by networking, and how better to network than go back to your alma mater?" said Jennifer Duncan, the association's director of career services, citing research that more than half of job hires come from internal referrals. "You have an automatic rapport with someone. It's a way of getting your foot in the door, and maybe the back door."

Maintaining relationships

On campus, colleges are also increasingly interested in nurturing lifelong relationships with alumni. Graduates with good jobs will have more money to donate, and they will be more likely to do so if they have an ongoing relationship with the school.

Career services are just one way schools are building those relationships, in addition to offering travel programs, credit cards, life insurance and alumni courses taught by professors.

Still, the number of schools with full-time staff for alumni remains fairly small. One reason is colleges are supposed to serve students first, and that's prompted some debate about how such programs should be funded. Many colleges are still experimenting with how to support them.

Houston offers some free services but charges \$35 for services, including on-campus interviews, and \$75 for more extensive help.