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Making College ‘Relevant’

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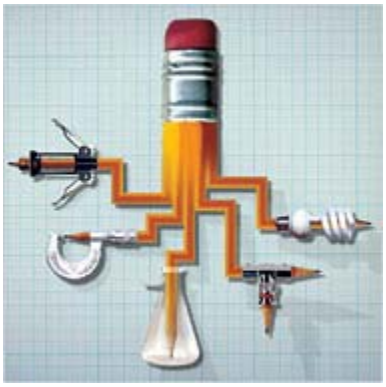
THOMAS COLLEGE, a liberal arts school in Maine, advertises itself as Home of the Guaranteed Job! Students who can’t find work in their fields within six months of graduation can come back to take classes free, or have the college pay their student loans for a year.



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.