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How to Get a Job With a Philosophy Degree

By SUSAN DOMINUS

On a Friday in late August, parents of freshmen starting at Wake Forest University, a small, prestigious liberal-arts school in Winston-Salem, N.C., attended orientation sessions that coached them on how to separate, discouraged them from contacting their children's professors and assured them about student safety. Finally, as their portion of orientation drew to a close, the parents joined their students in learning the school song and then were instructed to form a huge ring around the collective freshman class, in a show of support.

When it was time for the parents to leave, their children kissed them goodbye — fully independent for the first time and on the brink of academic adventure — and headed, en masse, to their next session, one that catapulted them directly from orientation to the job market: "From College to Career."

Rock music played as the students entered the school's chapel, and then Andy Chan, vice president in charge of the Office of Personal and Career Development — the O.P.C.D., it is called — introduced his team with a video spoof of the television show "The Office." The students played a game in which they could guess, by text, which majors had been chosen by various gainfully employed alumni of the school. (Human-capital analyst at Deloitte? And the answer is . . . German!) And a panel of students shared their own glamorous work experiences: a fellowship in Paris, an internship at a start-up.

Staff members from the O.P.C.D. had handed out forms asking the students what fields they'd like to work in and where they'd like to live. At the end of the session, Chan directed the students to fold them into paper airplanes. Then, as a group, they let them fly, a symbol of "them launching their careers," as he had put it. Some planes soared, others took nose-dives. A young man flinched when someone else's plane clocked him on the side of his head. Celebratory in midair, planes quickly littered the floor. The career-office staff, who would input the information on the forms into databases, walked around with boxes, picking them up. A few students helped, but many watched, as if curious, but not that curious, to see what would happen next to their professional dreams.

For years, most liberal-arts schools seemed to put career-services offices "somewhere just below parking" as a matter of administrative priority, in the words of Wake Forest's president, Nathan Hatch. But increasingly, even elite, decidedly non-career-oriented schools are starting to promote their career services during the freshman year, in response to fears about the economy, an ongoing discussion about college accountability and, in no small part, the

concerns of parents, many of whom want to ensure a return on their exorbitant investment.

The University of Chicago has extensive pre-professional programming and a career center that engaged with roughly 80 percent of its freshmen last year. Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn., has a new career center prominently located on campus; its Web site urges freshmen to stop by and start their four-year plan. Michael S. Roth, the school's president, says he wants the career program "to work with our students from the first year to think about how what they're learning can be translated into other spheres." Like Chan, Roth believes that the process can make for more thoughtful, meaningful careers choices; but he also told me that the demand from parents for better career services has pushed resources in that direction (for those schools that can afford it; many schools have been forced to cut back their career-center budgets). "My parents didn't expect me to have an easy time when I graduated," said Roth, who recalled finishing college in the challenging economy of the late '70s. "I think families at these, dare I say, fantasy schools — they're used to kids getting what they want, and they expect that to happen at graduation."

No other school has marketed its career center quite as successfully as Wake Forest (which, at No. 27, falls between the University of Virginia and Tufts on the U.S. News & World Report rankings but has struggled with name recognition nationally). In 2009, the university hired Chan, who was running Stanford Business School's career center and had led a Silicon Valley start-up. Chan has made a name for himself as an oft-quoted expert on getting young people employed. He has given a TEDx talk on the subject of reinventing career services and hosted, at Wake Forest, a symposium that was attended by representatives from some 75 schools. His theme: If universities want to preserve the liberal arts, they have a responsibility to help those humanities majors know how to translate their studies into the work world.

Chan, who can earn up to $350,000 a year, raised more than $10 million, mostly from parents, for a sunny, glass career center with video displays and healthful snacks for students ("It looks like Google," Chan told me). He likes to say he has "supersized" the career-services office, creating an elaborate Web site and hiring enough staff members — close to 30 — to offer conciergelike services to students.

At orientation, Chan gave a rousing talk to parents, encouraging them to let their children follow their interests, knowing that his office was looking after their employability: 95 percent of Wake Forest's graduates, he told them, were either fully employed or in graduate school within six months of graduating. (Eighty percent of the class of 2012 responded to the survey.) The room suddenly felt festive with affirmation. "Wow," one parent said, loudly enough to be heard across the room. The parent might have been even more surprised to learn that for schools in the high end of the U.S. News & World Report

rankings, that statistic is not unusual. The University of Chicago's comparable number is 96 percent, and N.Y.U.'s class of 2012 was 93 percent. Dickinson College, a less competitive school in Carlisle, Pa., said that 92 percent of its graduates were either employed or had been in graduate school a year after graduation. Wake Forest didn't keep those statistics before Chan arrived, so it's hard to know whether employment has increased during his time there. The survey doesn't reflect students' satisfaction with their jobs, but tracking down the number was a high priority for Chan. And with good reason: citing it clearly reassures parents.

Chan explained to me that his chief strategy is "to create a kind of ecosystem where everyone has a vested interest in helping our students be prepared for life and for careers and for work" — a universitywide, collective assumption that the faculty was there not just to expand students' intellectual horizons but also to help however it could in creating job-ready students.

A lot of that vision entails executing practical ideas, like improving the quality of mentoring on campus or persuading the faculty to encourage students to use the O.P.C.D. But Chan seemed especially enthusiastic about more innovative collaborations between the faculty and the O.P.C.D., some of which would have been unthinkable 20 years ago. He more than once mentioned a history professor named Robert Hellyer, a 46-year-old with a Ph.D. from Stanford, who had voluntarily transformed his teaching style from a straight lecture to a teamwork approach.

When I spoke to Hellyer, he said he was sensitive to widespread attacks on the liberal arts and was happy to work with someone from Chan's team to focus, in class, on fostering in his students two of the skills the career office has identified as "core competencies": communication and collaboration. He decided to have students in his Japanese-history class work in groups of three and take turns leading class discussion. And he invited the O.P.C.D.'s assistant director, Amy Willard, into his classroom on three occasions. "In the very beginning of the semester," Willard told me, "I presented to the class, Here are the skills that employers are looking for, and I had them actually analyze their syllabus and say what the skills were that they hoped to gain from this class." The hope was that when those students then went on job interviews, they could speak confidently about how their experiences in class prepared them for the skills the employers most needed. On a separate occasion, Hellyer and Willard brought in an alumna of Wake Forest, a history major, who was working locally at Wells Fargo, to discuss how her academic experience had helped her professionally.

Many of the students later said that they loved Hellyer's innovative team-based approach to instruction and got more out of the material as a result; and some appreciated the professional component. But many complained frankly about the explicit career education. "I felt like I signed up to take a history course, and sessions on professional skills were not what I was looking for," one

student said on a teacher evaluation. Another said, “I just think that the team-building exercises were a waste of time that could be better spent on class topics.”

Hellyer sounded almost relieved by the responses. “In some ways, I was gratified that students were saying, ‘I really want to learn about Japanese history — why are you diluting what we’re doing?’ ” he said. Even so, now he is brainstorming with Willard about how to make the history of the young, revolutionary samurai in Japan an explicit opportunity to talk about leadership skills.

Colleges and universities have noted parents’ seemingly boundless concern for their children’s well-being and have shifted strategies in response. They have boosted parental involvement, or engagement, as it is known in the fund-raising industry. Schools have doubled the number of on-campus parent associations in roughly 10 years, according to the Council for Advancement and Support of Education, and parents, in turn, have given generously, even as college costs have hit new highs. Parent donations to higher education, from 2001 to 2010, increased by nearly 50 percent, according to a study published by the Council for Aid to Education.

Andy Chan is particularly gifted at cultivating the bond between parents and Wake Forest. He writes a blog for parents about career development to help them guide their children. And he interacts with parents and employers as much as he does students: even during the school year, he is actually on campus only every other week, because his family is still in Palo Alto and he spends a third of his time traveling to raise funds.

This summer, Chan had lunch in San Jose with Alan Naumann, whose son, Bradley, is a sophomore at Wake Forest. Naumann, the president and C.E.O. of 41st Parameter, an online-security company, has pledged a significant amount for entrepreneurial programming. He had also spoken to a group of Wake Forest students and been part of a team of business leaders who gave rapid feedback to student entrepreneurs who presented their business ideas.

Chan started by giving Naumann his professional assessment of Bradley, whom he met that summer. Bradley, an undeclared major who acts in a comedy troupe at Wake Forest, was working in a sports-marketing internship at Stanford (a position he learned of through his sister, who knew someone in the office). Chan told Naumann what a terrific kid he has. “The sense I have is that he’s learning so much,” Chan said. “I was telling him that at Wake Forest, there’s tons of internships in the athletic program. And I said, you know, ‘Obviously if you need any introductions, just let me know.’ ”

Naumann was most enthusiastic about the school’s entrepreneurial program. Chan has raised money for a popular minor in entrepreneurship and social enterprise, which is open to liberal-arts majors. As Chan took notes on his

iPad, Naumann talked about the qualities he thought were most essential for the school to cultivate in its students: fearlessness, communication, analytic skills and teamwork. Working well with others, he pointed out, was precisely the kind of skill that could not be learned online and one that brick-and-mortar liberal-arts schools could pride themselves on providing as they sought to stay relevant.

Chan asked Naumann for feedback on a board meeting Naumann had recently attended. “What I like to see is the big thinking,” Naumann told him. And Chan, he thought, could be thinking more boldly. What about proposing an entire new building, a lab for creative innovation? His enthusiasm for Chan’s mission was deep: it seemed that whatever Chan was asking for from parents, he could probably ask for more.

Some professors have welcomed Chan’s role in managing parents’ anxiety about the liberal arts precisely because it relieves them of the burden of doing it themselves. “The parents of one student asked me to have a meeting,” recalled Alessandra Von Burg, a professor in the department of communication at Wake Forest. “I was kind of flabbergasted. They wanted to know what a communication degree could do for their son.” (She agreed to meet with them and their son to discuss it.) Michael Sloan, a classics professor, fielded a similar call during which he found himself explaining to a mother how a background in classics could help prepare her daughter for a career as a lawyer. And if professors know to direct students to résumé workshops, Von Burg added, students won’t expect those services from the professors. “They can be like demanding customers,” she said.

Still, Susan Rupp, a professor of Russian history at Wake Forest, said she had misgivings about the push from the O.P.C.D. She said she would not be very likely to invite someone from that office into her classroom to explain the class’s professional value. “It reduces an education to the marketplace,” she said. Instead, she says, teaching history should be about helping young people to understand “the relationship of the individual to the larger society.”

Andrew Delbanco, a professor at Columbia, writes in his book, “College: What It Was, Is and Should Be,” that colleges should help students develop “a skeptical discontent with the present, informed by a sense of the past.” Can liberal-arts schools encourage students to question the status quo while simultaneously reminding them from their first days on campus to keep their employability in mind?

Michele Gillespie, another history professor at Wake Forest, has been receptive to the O.P.C.D. but has concerns about some of its innovations — among them, classes on career development for academic credit that teach students how to “brand themselves,” how to identify themselves through personality tests and form a customized, consistent description of the self. “These kids’ frontal temporal lobes are barely formed,” Gillespie says; as

teachers, she and her peers "are trying to open their minds, to see complexities and tensions." The emphasis on translating academics into skills also struck her as problematic. "They want to know what the calculus is: How will doing an honors thesis translate into my ability to persuade my manager to put me on the management track? How can I sell this? How can I market these things? I fear that the students see the learning as a means to an end and don't connect as much to the learning that's taking place."

Academics are expected to express reservations about the encroachment of career planning on intellectual development, but their doubts are not that different from those voiced by Brad Henderson, a 34-year-old partner at Boston Consulting Group, who is in charge of the firm's Midwestern recruiting. Henderson, an alumnus of the University of Chicago, does not object to career programming in principle but worries that at some colleges, "this race to get jobs becomes more important than the actual 'let's educate our students,' " Henderson said. "It's not uncommon to encounter a 20-year-old who has not benefited from the maturation you get from higher education, from true engagement in a classroom — it becomes more about taking classes as an extended way to build your résumé. You think you're talking to a 20-year-old who should have bright ideas and enthusiasm, and they can't get out of the mode of: 'What are the words I'm supposed to use in this conversation?' And you see that the risk has been taken out of résumés — that's the part that's most disheartening."

Some schools have expensive climbing walls; others have wellness centers worthy of five-star hotels. Wake Forest has Andy Chan. At orientation, he addressed the parents wearing a navy jacket and white shirt, roaming freely with a headset and using his hands for emphasis with the skill of a seasoned public speaker. "I believe, and many believe, that a liberal-arts education is the key to navigating the changes that come ahead," said Chan, a former political-science major, reassuring parents who may recall fondly their years studying 18th-century art history or the Romantic poets but who still want results for the high cost of tuition. He had a bit of advice for them: They should see themselves, he explained, as their children's executive coaches, there primarily to listen, to encourage their clients to use their best judgment. Your son wants to be a philosophy major? Chan paraphrased the response of many a parent: "How do you get a job in philosophy?" But hold your tongue, he urged them. Let them think big. Two months later, they might decide they love math anyway, he said. And even if they don't, he and his team will help them turn academic risks into résumé-ready experiences. They could take it from him, a Silicon Valley pro and Stanford veteran: Your child can be academically happy and still end up successful, like me, like you.

Sitting near the front of the auditorium were the parents of a freshman — an investment manager from Bronxville, N.Y., and his wife. The father went to Dartmouth, and when their son announced that he was applying for early decision at Wake Forest, his father asked, "Are you sure you couldn't do

better?” Under the spell of Chan’s reassuring message on finding a career, he turned to his wife and looked at her intently. “This,” he told her, “is the greatest school.”

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