

Keene Sentinel

College business programs gain

More students looking at MBAs, courses in green building, health

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After they've flung their caps into the air and joined the ultracompetitive job hunt, an increasing number of college graduates are discovering that plenty of other job-seekers have bachelor's degrees.

And some are discovering that the major of study they chose isn't as useful in the real world as they'd hoped. Many of these diploma-holders are returning to the classroom, hunkering down in graduate school in hopes of weathering at least part of the economic storm and emerging with more marketable skills.

"A bachelor's degree just isn't what it used to be," said Patricia Garrity, a spokeswoman for Franklin Pierce University in Rindge. "Students are demanding their masters because more and more of them are not finding the types of jobs they want. There's really not a lot out there."

Realizing they must adapt, undergraduate and graduate students are becoming savvier surveyors of the marketplace; they are identifying niches of employment opportunity and pursuing the related majors of study.

"We are seeing students think more critically about major choice as they consider basic issues such as loan repayment, employability, entry to graduate programs and 'portability' or mobility," Dawn Stevenson, director of institutional research and assessment at Franklin Pierce, wrote in an e-mail. Franklin Pierce students are becoming more interested in majors related to business, finance, healthcare, biotechnology, policy, legal studies and environmental sciences, according to Stevenson.

In June, the university began offering an accelerated MBA program — students graduate in a year instead of two — in response to student demand, Garrity said. The program has been successful, and the university plans to launch accelerated master's programs in education and information technology next year, she said. Last winter, the Marlboro College Graduate School in Brattleboro expanded its graduate program to include a MBA with an emphasis in sustainability — one of the few growing job sectors, said Lisa Christensen, the college's chief advancement officer.

"More companies are looking at their responsibilities to the environment and community," she said. "They're looking at the three P's: people, planet and profit."

Felicity B. Ratté, dean of faculty and education, said the MBA in sustainability has become “wildly popular” among the college’s students. The college’s health care administration program is growing too, she said.

Antioch University New England in Keene has also seen a spiking interest in the business sustainability program it founded in 2007, according to Leatrice Oram, co-director of admissions. The university, which offers only graduate study, now boasts two certificate programs focused on autism disorders. The programs were created “in response to burgeoning autism diagnoses” and a need for professionals who work with the autistic, Oram wrote in an e-mail.

The recession has also created a wave of nontraditional undergraduate students — those who have been out of school for years and typically have steady employment, said John Pappalardo, a professor of management in Keene State College’s business department. They are seeking degrees to bolster their resumes, to become more competitive, Pappalardo said. “Most of those nontraditional students who are working are concerned about their jobs and the future prospects of perhaps being laid off,” he said. “They’re taking a proactive approach.” Pappalardo also teaches a MBA program Plymouth State University offers on the Keene State campus. The recession has yet to have a discernible impact on enrollment in the highly-focused program, he said. “The numbers are holding pretty well here,” he said. “We have about 25 students this semester, which is about average.”

For the spring semester at Keene State, safety studies was the most highly declared undergraduate major, followed by education, health science, management, psychology, English, sociology, film, music and history, according to statistics posted on the college’s Web site.

The University of New Hampshire has not experienced any radical shifts in majors of study in the past few years, according to Robert McGann, director of admissions. The university’s programs are experiencing growth across the board, from business and hospitality management to nursing and occupational therapy to mechanical and civil engineering, he said.

Any growing interest in higher education is a good thing, and it may be one of the few upbeat trends of the dismal job market, said economist Annette Nielsen of New Hampshire’s Economic and Labor Market Information Bureau in Concord. “It’s a tough environment out there right now. There’s just not a whole lot of hiring going on,” she said. “But one silver lining about this recession is that it might get more people to go after some sort of degree.”

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