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Finished College. Now What?

Wake Forest aids the aimless graduate with a road map for meaningful work

By KATHRYN MASTERSON

WHAT DO you plan to do after graduation? For thousands of college students accepting diplomas this spring, it's a question loaded with expectations and pressure to make good use of a costly degree.

Wake Forest University wants students to think differently about how they answer, focusing on what kind of work is meaningful to them rather than what pays the most or what others want. To do that, the Winston-Salem, N.C., university is reimagining its career-development program to help its 4,600 undergraduates figure out who they are and what they want out of life long before they get to commencement. From their first days on campus, students will explore their personal interests and how those might translate into a job.

This pairing of students' values and their professional paths is a departure from the traditional career-services office, which typically helps students with the mechanics of a job search and introduces them to recruiters. (Some institutions have taken a broader approach to career development in recent years, though not to the extent of Wake Forest.) The plan is part of the university's broader strategic priority to focus on vocational and character development, and the university will put about \$5-million behind it.

Too often, students' career choices are based on uninformed ideas about certain jobs, on chance encounters with people in different fields, or on what others have told them they should do, says Andy Chan, the university's vice president for career development, who designed the new program. He wants to expose more students to career paths that align with their personal beliefs and interests, so they don't spend their 20s drifting.

"That's too random for the money you pay to go to college," Mr. Chan says. "If I'm a parent paying for college or a student paying for part of it, I want to make sure this is a really good investment."

That message is already resonating with parents, who have contributed some \$1.2-million



KEN BENNETT, WAKE FOREST U.

Andy Chan, vice president for career development at Wake Forest U., talks with seniors. Mr. Chan envisions an advising program that can help students find their true paths early in their college years.

for the program since Mr. Chan started raising money in February. The goal is to bring in \$5-million in private money within the next five years.

If the project is successful, it will be equally beneficial for the university. Offering a structured framework to help students find their passions and related jobs could help differentiate Wake Forest from other colleges, as well as support the value of a \$50,000-per-year liberal-arts education.

"I think this program will give the school a competitive edge," says James D. Awad, a major donor whose child just finished his first year at Wake Forest. "I think it will give students a competitive edge, including my son."

FOUR-YEAR PLAN

Wake Forest's president, Nathan O. Hatch, was thinking about a redesigned career-services program when one of his deans told him about Mr. Chan, who at the time was running

the MBA Career Management Center at Stanford University's Graduate School of Business. The dean, whose son attended Stanford, knew Mr. Chan had developed a course on career and life vision. Wake Forest administrators hired Mr. Chan as a consultant, then liked his vision so much that they offered him a new cabinet-level job to make it happen.

At Stanford, Mr. Chan worked with students on similar questions—What is important to you? What kind of work do you find meaningful?—and recognized that the options were not as broad for those already in graduate school, who had made the decision and investment to study business. He wanted to get to people earlier.

Mr. Awad likes that Mr. Chan's program will reach students at the beginning of their college studies, so they have time to change their minds about career paths.

Mr. Awad and his wife attended a three-day meeting on the campus last winter, where Mr.

Chan spoke to a group of parents about his plans. The concept appealed to Mr. Awad, who did not see the same level of attention to students' interests and career choices at the private institutions his two older children attended.

He liked that the university was making this a strategic priority and that students' career development would be integrated into their educational experiences.

"The kid ends up really thinking about what he or she wants to do and is prepared to do it," says Mr. Awad, who directs an investment-management company in New York and founded his own money-management firm. "I didn't need this, but I think my kids do."

A COURSE OF SELF-DISCOVERY

Starting at orientation this fall, Wake Forest's first-year students will begin identifying their passions, interests, and strengths, which they will use to develop a career action plan. Throughout their undergraduate experience, Mr. Chan's office will help connect students with faculty members, mentors outside the university, and internships to introduce them to possible academic and career paths. Mr. Chan envisions developing classes with the university's counseling center that emphasize self-discovery, how to conduct a job search, and professional and life skills such as budgeting, financial planning, and working well with different people. He has already reached out to parents and alumni to look for internship opportunities, and his office gave 50 students \$3,000 entrepreneurship grants for the summer. (Mr. Chan's plans include starting a Center for Innovation, Creativity, and Entrepreneurship to encourage more students to be their own bosses, an expansion of the university's existing entrepreneurship program.)

The ultimate goal isn't to get students the perfect first job—it's to teach them how to build satisfying careers and lives.

That's a lofty goal and not an inexpensive one. Mr. Chan envisions an office of about 25 people, which the university estimates will take around \$10-million to build. Wake Forest will commit about \$5-million over five years, and Mr. Chan will raise the rest. Between a quarter and half of Mr. Chan's time is spent raising money, and he has traveled to New York, Washington, Florida, and Georgia to solicit donations from parents, some of whom are Wake Forest alumni.

Mr. Chan can point to his own career path to show what is possible. In college, he considered going to law school, until a lawyer told him to go only if he was excited about practicing law. He found a better fit in business and went into consulting, then ran several start-up companies before going to Stanford. All along, he worked with an executive coach who helped him figure out what motivated him and how to be a

better manager, father, and community member. Last year his coach helped him decide to leave Palo Alto for Winston-Salem.

Part of what swayed him was the university's president, Mr. Hatch, who has led Wake Forest since 2005. Mr. Hatch speaks about educating the whole student and giving students a moral framework to help them find "good work for a meaningful life," balancing individual success with the common good. He has written about the drawbacks of a society so heavily focused on achievement (Wake Forest, a selective college, is test-optional for admissions).

In an interview, Mr. Hatch says he is concerned that young people today think more about achievement and financial gain than what is worth dedicating their lives to.

"To the extent that we can help them find their way and redefine success so it configures to what their passion is, that's a very compelling thing," Mr. Hatch says. "Relating belief and work is so critical."

PARENTS AS PARTNERS

One key part of Mr. Chan's plan is parents. He writes a blog called Heart of the Matter (<http://andychan.blogs.wfu.edu/>), which offers advice for them as well as for students. He wants to teach parents to be better mentors and advisers to their children, who are choosing their careers in a different era. (One strategy he recommends: Instead of asking what students plan to do with their major, ask them what they liked best about a classroom or job experience.)

Donald M. Fellows, a fund-raising consultant, says colleges often overlook parents as prospective donors because they're already paying tuition. But parents, especially of freshmen, can be a strong source of support because they see what the college is giving to their child.

Wake Forest has a history of parent involvement with its Parents' Council, a longstanding volunteer advisory board. The university's fund raisers introduced Mr. Chan to those parents first to pitch his program.

Jack MacDonough and his wife were head of the Parents' Council when their son, Steve, attended Wake Forest. Even though Steve graduated in 2007, the MacDonoughs were among the first couples to give major gifts to Mr. Chan's program. Mr. MacDonough, a former chief executive for Miller Brewing Company, hopes the mentor program will become a model for other colleges.

"I wish I'd had his advice at the start" of Steve's college experience, says Mr. MacDonough, who himself now has a second career as a photographer. "I wish I'd had Andy's advice when I'd started college."



"Relating belief and work is so critical."