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Liberal arts tweaked for careers

By Justin Pope

Longtime Middlebury College economics professor Michael Claudon should have been ecstatic. More and more students at the quintessential Vermont liberal arts school — nearly 1 in 6 — had picked his department as a major.

But Claudon could tell many students weren't taking his classes because they loved economics. They just thought it would help them get a job.

When he asked students once what they would do if there were some other way to get the kinds of experiences they thought employers wanted, one piped up: "I sure as hell wouldn't be here."

That comment was the genesis of a new class Claudon developed with alumni in business, designed to give students intense experiences that mimic real-world problem-solving.

Liberal arts colleges make a passionate case that the skills they offer — analysis, writing, argument — are the best preparation for a career in the ever-changing business world.

But at a time of surging college costs and rising career anxieties, they're feeling some heat from parents and students to do more to give students a well-rounded resume.

... Claudon says his program has been supported on campus. But faculty and alumni are fiercely devoted to the liberal arts, and he understands and even shares a reluctance to go further. Any step toward preprofessional training is a slippery slope, he said.

That's the reason schools like Connecticut College have emphatically resisted anything close to preprofessional coursework.

"It is very much a conscious decision on our part, I think because of our deep-seeded belief that the liberal arts is the best preparation for life and career," said president Leo Higdon, who spent two decades on Wall

Street, where he says liberal arts graduates often fared best.

Still, Connecticut College has started supporting about 80% of its rising seniors with a \$3,000 stipend for a summer internship, among other programs to round out students' experiences.

Even St. John's College — perhaps the purest liberal arts college in the country, where students on its campuses in Maryland and New Mexico follow a strictly "Great Books" curriculum — is beefing up its career services and internship placement programs.

"It's not so much students," said Michael Dink, the dean at St. John's. Some alumni "feel that we didn't do a good enough job for them in the past and they would like to see us do a better job for present students. Increasingly, I think parents are asking the question as well." ...

This is an excerpt from the article.

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