UW-Madison to help liberal arts majors compete in a techie job market

Call it the cranky parent appeasement program, designed to arm UW-Madison students majoring in art history or Polish or zoology with answers to a common question: How will you get a job in that?

John Karl Scholz, dean of the College of Letters & Science, is launching a large new program to improve career planning and job outcomes for students in his college, by far the largest at the university with more than 16,000 undergraduates in 39 departments.

The effort comes amid some questions nationally about the value of a college degree, especially in liberal arts majors that don’t lend themselves directly to a career path but cost the same — and result in the same debt loads — as more job-ready majors such as accounting or nursing.

Scholz pointed to evidence that majoring in what makes the heart sing does lead to jobs that make the wallet smile.

“Trying to spark their imagination about what they can do with different majors strikes me as really important,” said Scholz, in his second year as dean.

Chancellor Rebecca Blank applauded the effort in an address about economic development Thursday to the University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents. She pointed to data from recent decades showing the greatest economic gains went to people with a four-year degree, and even bigger gains went to those with a graduate degree.

She lauded one specific part of the program, a ramped-up survey effort by L&S that, in the near future, will yield economic and job outcome information for graduates a year out of school and a decade out of school.

The program, funded entirely by donations from alumni, has been in the works for a year and will get its most public rollout next spring with a new career-planning course open to 420 sophomores. The one-credit course will be taught by Greg Downey, a journalism professor, who will guide it for three years.

It will include regular visits from career advisers and alumni, who will help students identify career paths and nuts-and-bolts tools needed to get there: resumes, social media branding, internships, networking, interviews.
The department plans to expand the course in coming years, making it available potentially to thousands of students. Blank said the university will heavily market the course not just to students but also to parents, who tend to be a bit more practical about their children’s education when writing tuition checks.

Scholz said students in all liberal arts majors come away with skills employers find valuable — communication, critical thinking, teamwork, logic — but often aren’t able to see the value in those skills and explain how they transfer to the world of work.

A report in January by two national higher education groups found that 93 percent of employers valued communication and other skills as more important in potential employees than a specific major. It also found that liberal arts majors earn as much or more long-term than peers in pre-professional and science and math majors. They do tend to lag in earnings directly out of college, though.

Another piece of the new effort will be adding career advisers, which Scholz would like to triple if funding allows. Scholz said he also wants to increase involvement by the 190,000 L&S living alumni, especially those in the early and middle stages of their careers, who may not be able to donate money but are eager to share advice and contacts.

“We don’t take advantage of that great and incredibly loyal group as fully as we should,” he said.

More information online

For more details visit ls.wisc.edu/careerinitiative.html.