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In a New Generation of College Students, Many Opt for the Life Examined

By WINNIE HU

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. — When a fellow student at Rutgers University urged Didi Onejeme to try Philosophy 101 two years ago, Ms. Onejeme, who was a pre-med sophomore, dismissed it as “frou-frou.”

“People sitting under trees and talking about stupid stuff — I mean, who cares?” Ms. Onejeme recalled thinking at the time.

But Ms. Onejeme, now a senior applying to law school, ended up changing her major to philosophy, which she thinks has armed her with the skills to be successful. “My mother was like, what are you going to do with that?” said Ms. Onejeme, 22. “She wanted me to be a pharmacy major, but I persuaded her with my argumentative skills.”

Once scoffed at as a luxury major, philosophy is being embraced at Rutgers and other universities by a new generation of college students who are drawing modern-day lessons from the age-old discipline as they try to make sense of their world, from the morality of the war in Iraq to the latest political scandal. The economic downturn has done little, if anything, to dampen this enthusiasm among students, who say that what they learn in class can translate into practical skills and careers. On many campuses, debate over modern issues like war and technology is emphasized over the study of classic ancient texts.

Rutgers, which has long had a top-ranked philosophy department, is one of a number of universities where the number of undergraduate philosophy majors is ballooning; there are 100 in this year’s graduating class, up from 50 in 2002, even as overall enrollment on the main campus has declined by 4 percent.

At the City University of New York, where enrollment is up 18 percent over the past six years, there are 322 philosophy majors, a 51 percent increase since 2002.

“If I were to start again as an undergraduate, I would major in philosophy,” said Matthew Goldstein, the CUNY chancellor, who majored in mathematics and statistics. “I think that subject is really at the core of just about everything we do. If you study humanities or political systems or sciences in general, philosophy is really the mother ship from which all of these disciplines grow.”

Nationwide, there are more colleges offering undergraduate philosophy programs today than a decade ago (817, up from 765), according to the College Board. Some schools with established programs like Texas A&M, Notre Dame, the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, now have twice as many philosophy majors as they did in the 1990s.

David E. Schrader, executive director of the American Philosophical Association, a professional organization

stay an extra year to complete the major (his parents needed reassurance, he said, but were supportive).

“I thought: Why weren’t all my other classes like that one?” he said, explaining that philosophy had taught him a way of studying that could be applied to any subject and enriched his life in unexpected ways. “You can talk about almost anything as long as you do it well.”

Jenna Schaal-O’Connor, a 20-year-old sophomore who is majoring in cognitive science and linguistics, said philosophy had other perks. She said she found many male philosophy majors interesting and sensitive.

“That whole deep existential torment,” she said. “It’s good for getting girlfriends.”

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