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STUDENTS

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Professional-School Enrollments Boom as Many Parts of the Economy Tank

Law, business, nursing, engineering, and pharmacy all see increases in applications

BY KATHERINE S. MANGAN

AFTER 18 YEARS in the telecommunications business, Kelli K. Leask took an unusual detour on the road to job security. She quit her job managing software development last year and entered nursing school.

"My colleagues and friends were shocked. I had a great job, but with the stock-market decline, I was very concerned about what the next five years would mean for the telecommunications industry," says the 37-year-old mother of three, who is attending classes at Grand Valley State University, in Allendale, Mich. "I felt like it might be a good time to reach out into a new field."

Across the country, students like Ms. Leask are heading to professional schools to make themselves more marketable in a sputtering economy. Many graduate programs that struggled to attract students just a few years ago are doing a booming business today.

Among the fields that are on the upswing after years of stagnating or declining applications are law, business, nursing, pharmacy, and engineering. Conspicuously absent from that list is medicine, which has lost some of its luster in the age of managed care.

Some schools are just now seeing an increase in applications, while others caught the early wave of dot-com refugees, who entered professional programs in the fall.

Although the economy didn't slump into recession until March—after the application deadline for many professional schools—it was already slowing down by late 2000 and early 2001. Layoffs in the technology sector were forcing many students and employees to rethink their career goals.

At the time, Ms. Leask was supervising 15 employees and overseeing telecommunications and software development at 35 work sites for Herman Miller Inc., a \$2-billion-a-year furniture maker based in Zeeland, Mich. The company, which is known for its innovative use of technology and Internet marketing, has suffered from declining sales in recent years.

LOOKING FOR STABILITY

Nursing was the field she'd studied in college, before the lure of big money and plentiful jobs persuaded her to switch to computers. But while her new field was losing some of its appeal, a nursing shortage meant that nurses were being courted like the geeks of the 1990s, with signing bonuses and multiple job offers.

Even if it meant being off a payroll for several years, nursing school promised a fulfilling career that would weather turbulent times.

The stampede to professional schools is
Continued on Following Page



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Anthony S. Wojcik of Michigan State: "More students are thinking about graduate school because the employment market is a little tighter."

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DH2002 5074 E2

STUDENTS

Continued From Preceding Page
reminiscent of a similar rush in the early '90s, when the last recession hit. Following are overviews of the trends in some professional fields:

LAW: Applications to law schools are up about 21 percent compared with this time last year, according to the Law School Admission Council. This fall's entering class had about 4 percent more applicants than the year before.

That's good news for a field in decline for most of the past decade. Law-school applications fell by nearly 30 percent between 1990 and 1997 before leveling off at the end of the decade—about the same time the economy went into a tailspin.

At Drake University Law School, four admissions officers have been buried under applications that are up 84 percent over this time last year. "In the five and a half years I've been here, I've never seen anything like this," says J. Kara Blanchard, director of admissions and financial aid.

For those just out of college, law school seems like a safer bet than trying to land a job. Scott Erwin, a junior who is majoring in accounting at the University of Richmond, had planned to graduate a year early and pursue a job with a major accounting firm. Now he's leaning toward waiting a year and applying to law school. "Having a law degree would open so many doors," he says.

Andrea S. Hershatter, director of the undergraduate business program at Emory University's Goizueta Business School, has had at least 30 undergraduate business students come to her this year requesting recommendations for law school. Usually, she has around 10. "There are people right now applying to law school because it's the only credible thing they can see doing," she says. "Their parents aren't going to support them to live at home or backpack through Europe."

And, since most top M.B.A. programs require several years of work experience, "students are treating law school as the default option."

When students can't offer a good reason for going to law school, Ms. Hershatter urges them to consider other options, like working for a nonprofit group. "I'm very concerned we're going to have a country worth of very unhappy newly minted lawyers."

BUSINESS: At the height of dot-com fever, many business schools saw their M.B.A.-applicant pools dwindle; the extra years of schooling seemed a waste of time when an undergraduate degree and a little technology experience seemed like a ticket to instant riches. Today, getting rich quick no longer seems like a realistic goal.

A growing number of students are deciding that a master's degree in business administration will give them an edge and buy them some time until the economy improves.

Sixty-five percent of the M.B.A. programs surveyed in April by the Graduate Management Admission Council said applications for full-time programs were up for this ac-

ademic year—the highest proportion of programs in four years. The council administers the Graduate Management Admission Test, which was taken by 12 percent more applicants in 2001 than in 2000.

"Whenever the economy starts to go into a recession, the early wave of people being laid off look to graduate school," says Susan Motz, director of admissions services for the council. "If you haven't been laid off, you worry that you will be. There's also the view that you might as well be in school and out of the job market during a recession. When you return, you'll be in the right place at the right time."

Among the schools enjoying the rebound: the Columbia Business School, where applications are up more than 50 percent above the total at this time last year. That's a remarkable turnaround from last year, when applications dropped 16 percent.

NURSING: After six years of falling enrollments, nursing schools finally had good news this year. Enrollment in baccalaureate programs was up 4 percent at the schools surveyed by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing. The group doesn't track application figures, but they appear to be up as well.

The increase may not be enough, however, to prevent a nursing shortage as aging baby boomers contribute to a growing demand for nursing services. A study released in November by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics concluded that by the year 2010, the nation will need one million new nurses. Nurses are grayer, too; a large proportion of the current work force will be retiring soon.

Buoyed by an increase in nursing-school applications, Grand Valley State expanded enrollment in its bachelor's-degree nursing program by 33 percent and began offering year-round classes. Job security is one of the top attractions for new students, says Phyllis E. Ciendler, dean of nursing. "Nursing graduates can throw a dart on a map and get a job anywhere."

PHARMACY: An 8-percent increase in applications for this academic year was just the prescription pharmacy deans needed after six years of declining numbers. The upswing may cure some of the stress that pharmacists have suffered as their workload has increased to burnout levels.

At the University of Maryland, the School of Pharmacy's Pharm.D. program saw a 12-percent increase in applications for the current academic year, and the trend appears to be continuing into next year, with applications up about 5 percent so far. "I started out in business but switched to pharmacy because there were so many opportunities," says Elizabeth Stier, a first-year pharmacy student at Maryland. She plans to double up by adding an M.B.A. degree: "I'm not going to have to worry about job security."

Pharm.D. applications are up 19 percent for next year at the Uni-

versity of the Pacific. Phillip R. Oppenheimer, the pharmacy-school dean, isn't convinced that the slowing economy is the major reason for the nationwide increase, however.

It's also a product of aggressive marketing by pharmacy schools and drugstore chains like Rite Aid, which posts ads on its prescription bags urging people to consider careers in the field. "I think students are finally getting the word that there's a dearth of pharmacists, and that the field offers some great opportunities," Mr. Oppenheimer says.

ENGINEERING: At Michigan State University, applications for graduate engineering programs are up more than 20 percent for next year. At the California Institute of Technology, they're running about 31 percent higher.

"More students are thinking about graduate school because the employment market is a little tighter," says Anthony S. Wojcik,

associate dean of engineering at Michigan State.

Many of the engineering jobs that are available "aren't the ones students want, so they'll defer for a few years and go to school," says Dr. Philip D. Gardner, director of Michigan State's Collegiate Employment Research Institute. "If there are specific skills they're trying to develop, it makes sense, but if they're just going there to wait out the economy, that's costly and doesn't necessarily strengthen their position."

MEDICINE: Interest in medical education has continued its downward slide. Applications to the nation's medical schools dropped 6 percent this year—the fifth straight year of declines.

Among the possible explanations, according to Jordan J. Cohen, president of the Association of American Medical Colleges, the average debt burden of medical-school graduates upon graduation is nearly \$100,000. What's more,

many would-be doctors fear that managed care has put a crimp in physicians' salaries and at the same time created new regulatory headaches.

"We've had these swings before, and I'm anticipating we may be bottoming out," Mr. Cohen says.

That raises a question about professional schools in general. What happens when the economy picks up, and job prospects aren't looking so bleak?

"It's part of the cyclical nature of our job," says Ms. Blanchard, of Drake's law school. "We're planning ahead as though we won't have this kind of increase next year, and if we do, we'll just have to do some backpedaling and make some adjustments."

Meanwhile, as the surge in applications keeps admissions officers hopping, those in career services are working overtime to help nervous soon-to-be graduates find jobs.

For them, it's back to the real world.