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Abstract: The article discusses the job hunting services provided by alumni associations and administrations at colleges and universities, focusing on ways in which their efforts are being challenged by alternative professional networks. The article highlights the professional networking company Summit Series, noting its efforts to gather young professionals to network with potential employers. Other topics include self-motivation in job hunting, the online social network LinkedIn, and employee recruitment.

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Alternative Networks Challenge Colleges' Role in Alumni's Job Searches

NEWS

TECHNOLOGY

FOR MICHAEL STATON, a thirty-something entrepreneur in Silicon Valley, his college alumni network hasn't opened many doors. His alma mater, Clark University, regularly asks him for money but has done little to help him professionally, he says.

What has had cachet in his business dealings? Invitation-only networking events held by companies that have emerged to help young professionals find one another. When he tells people that he has attended those, they take notice.

The most colorful example involves a group that took Mr. Staton and hundreds of other young leaders aboard a chartered cruise ship to a private island. At a party there, thrown by a company called Summit Series, Mr. Staton shook hands with Richard Branson, chatted with the president of the College Board, and met recent graduates of Harvard University and other selective institutions working on projects similar to his own.

Mr. Staton is founder and "chief evangelist" of Ingral, which helps colleges use Facebook to connect with graduates and prospective students.

If colleges don't step up their own professional-networking services for graduates, he argues, then higher education's role as a key job-searching hub could decline. As he put it in a recent white paper published by the American Enterprise Institute, people are now able to show their value to employers through "alternative signaling methods"--many involving social media--that have nothing to do with any college, including their own.

"The conventional wisdom has typically been that higher education and access to opportunities are one and the same," he writes. "However, tying graduates' future job prospects to institutions that see job preparation as an ancillary purpose seems ill-fitting and inefficient."

In other words, he and other young professionals are finding new entities perfectly willing to introduce talented participants to potential employers. That could make the idea of skipping college and heading straight for the job market--maybe taking a few free online courses along the way--seem less of a gamble and more a pragmatic option.

At first, Mr. Staton was reluctant to attend one of the Summit Series parties. The invitation arrived with plenty of hyperbole and ego-stroking--he was on the list, it said, only because others had identified him as an important, up-and-coming figure.

"I felt very flattered," he says. "Like, wow, you think I'm awesome." Then it mentioned the price tag: \$3,000. "I was like, That's ridiculous! Why would anyone pay \$3,000 for a party? I thought they were just suckering all these people into this."

He skipped that event but came to regret the decision after friends who went regaled him with stories afterward. Bill Clinton was there. So was Sean Parker, who founded the influential music-sharing service Napster. Mr. Staton started saving his money for the next party, in 2011, and now feels a connection to anyone invited to the company's events, even those he doesn't attend.

"I found that I treat it like an affiliate network," he says. "It's actually more powerful than my alma mater. The meaning I assign to being within the network is the equivalent of someone saying they went to Harvard."

This might all seem easy to dismiss were it not for the rise of free online courses offered by Harvard and other elite institutions. The conventional wisdom is that no matter how good those free classes get, people will always prefer to go to a brick-and-mortar campus because, well, that's where the parties are. But what if other groups start throwing better parties?

Elite gatherings are nothing new, of course. One prominent example is Renaissance Weekend, which is more than 30 years old. But Mr. Staton says companies like Summit Series work harder to encourage a spirit of belonging after each event.

"Colleges say they have an alumni network, but I don't think they instill as much thought and effort as these kinds of new groups," he argues.

It's not hard to imagine a future when exclusive fraternities, with branches around the country, cater to teenagers taking online courses free from their parents' basement.

In a way, that's what Summit Series is already starting to do.

HELPING STUDENTS LINK IN

Andy Chan, Wake Forest University's vice president for personal and career development, isn't worried about his office's being displaced by those private cruises.

Such parties may work for a small subset of self-motivated people, he argues, but plenty of young people will still prefer the traditional college experience. "The reality is that entrepreneurs, they're just more inclined to do that kind of stuff," he says. "They know they need to find ways to generate money."

And folks like Richard Branson show up on campuses as well.

Mr. Chan sees such efforts as supplements rather than replacements for traditional higher education: "They'll just be nice, interesting add-ons that very resourceful entrepreneurs will take advantage of."

But he does feel that colleges should offer new kinds of services to help graduates navigate today's job market. In addition to offering one-on-one help with résumés, for instance, Wake Forest now invites students to come in for a "LinkedIn profile review," where they are coached on improving their social-media calling cards.

"First impressions are important, and your LinkedIn profile is often the first link that occurs when Googling your name," explains a tutorial on the university's career-services Web site. "Make sure your online presence matches the quality of your résumé."

Wake Forest is also one of several institutions around the country using LinkedIn to connect students with alumni who might help in job searches. It created a private group on the service for such online mixing; so far 3,300 alumni and 200 professors and parents have agreed to participate, and about 1,800 students have signed up. That's more than a third of all undergraduates at Wake Forest.

Campus leaders there have found that while students are good at using social networks to find friends and parties, they need help transferring that energy to a job search. Mr. Chan's office even set up a Web site called "Learn to Network."

"Most college students are not thinking, 'I need to network. I need to make contacts,'" Mr. Chan says. But he has found that alumni are often eager to help: "Employers and young alums are interested in engaging with students because they remember how hard it is just out of school."

HACKING BUSINESS

Still, colleges are facing new kinds of competitors for connecting young people to potential business partners and employers.

Take hackathons. Those informally organized events, usually held over a weekend, bring together computer programmers or other types of online designers to build projects together. While some are held on campuses, most have no college affiliation.

"Those I think are already replacing the idea that you have to go to Harvard Business School to meet your companions for life," says Sebastian Thrun, the Stanford University professor who has become a major force in the MOOC revolution by starting Udacity, which offers massive open online courses taught by well-known professors.

Hackathons are an example of how the Internet can serve a function that once fell mainly to colleges, he argues. College degrees have traditionally been a "proxy" for great work, but social networks and the Web allow people to organize to create projects and show the fruits of their work directly to employers.

Plenty of other groups also allow what Mr. Staton calls the alternative signaling of merit. There are TED talks and presentations at other "ideas" festivals, many of which are now posted online and can give speakers a major career boost.

And providers of MOOCs have begun offering headhunter-like services to connect high-achieving students in free courses with employers looking for workers with specific skills.

Of course, people have always relied on a range of organizations outside colleges for professional networking, whether Rotary Clubs or bowling leagues. The question is whether something fundamentally different could develop in an era of LinkedIn and party cruises, something that could change how college fits into the career paths of millions of students each year.

I wanted to ask the leaders of Summit Series for their thoughts, but an official for the company wrote that they didn't have time to talk to The Chronicle. They were too busy fielding media calls about their latest high-profile move: They bought a mountain in Utah to host future networking parties.

Invitation-only networking events like this cruise, held by the Summit Series company, are promoted as alternatives to traditional methods of job hunting.

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