

Q&A

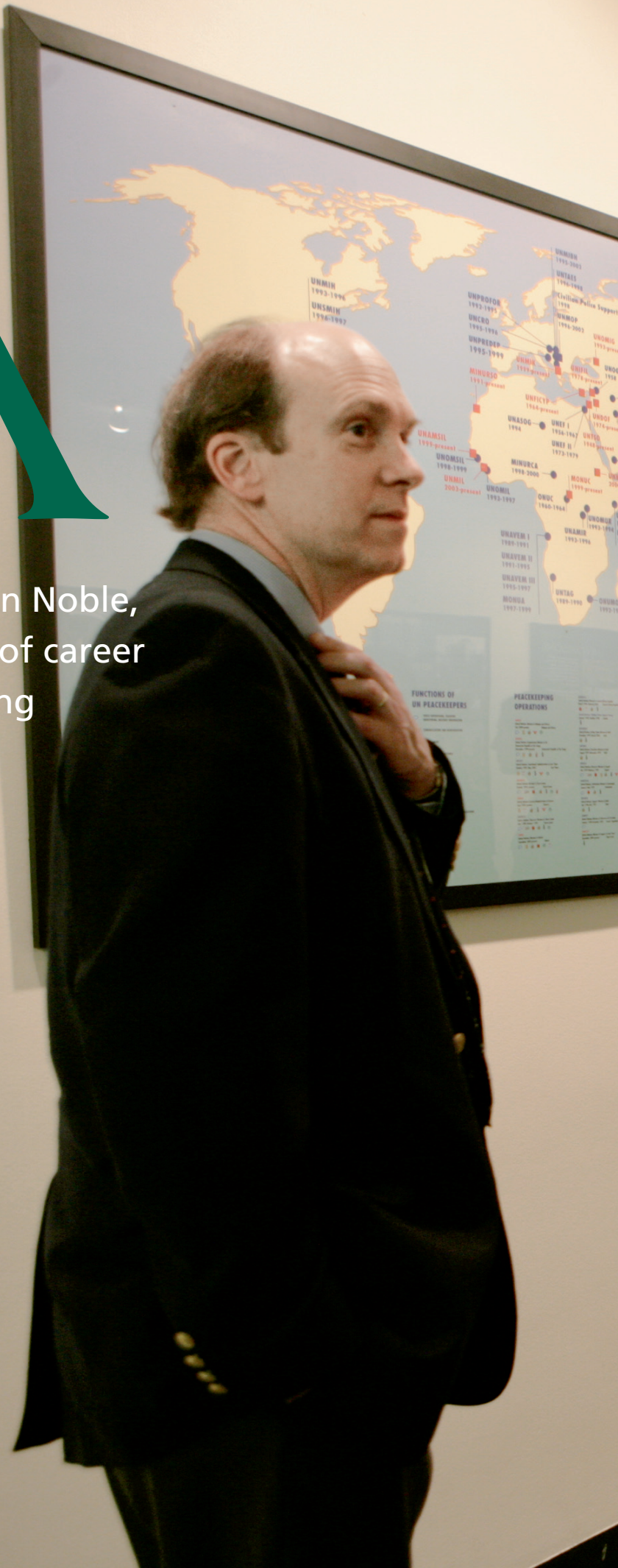
The Office of Career Counseling (OCC) long has provided Williams students with one-stop shopping for profession preparation. Since the arrival of John Noble as its director in summer 2005, the College has added even more dimensions to the OCC's comprehensive guidance and support.

Noble comes to Williams from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, where he was director of career services. Prior to that he headed the career development center at Duke University. Noble sat down with the *Alumni Review* last spring to discuss changes at the OCC, how alumni stand to benefit and whether it's better to be lucky or good.

BY JIM MULVIHILL

Photos by Elizabeth Lippman

with John Noble,
director of career
counseling





Alumni Review: There is a perception that Williams students are groomed to be i-bankers, lawyers and teachers. Is that an accurate perception, and is it one you'd like to change?

John Noble: I think there is a perception that this is the case, due primarily to the fact that these are the employers that recruit on campus. Yet we have very little to do with which recruiters appear on campus and which do not; the economy is the determining factor. It is an expensive proposition to send recruiters to campus, and so only those employers who can afford it will make the visit. Consequently, consulting firms and investment banks are most prevalent. I'd prefer to have students perceive that they have a wide range of career

options by coming to Williams and that they have the resources here to explore all of them.

AR: If only large firms and corporations can afford to send recruiters to campus, what steps are necessary to connect students to options at small businesses or with nonprofits?

JN: This is what our new Route 2 Program is all about and what we'll be implementing as soon as possible. The program involves several key components, but at the heart of each is alumni participation and assistance. Basically, the idea is to create formal pathways to a variety of careers by creating "alumni career groups" in each field. These groups will become a gateway for students to explore and then enter the career

fields of their choice. It involves relying on our alumni in new and more significant ways.

AR: How do you enlist and foster the necessary help from alumni?

JN: It is clear to me, in my short time at Williams, that the alumni here are exceptionally dedicated to the College. It is also evident that the alumni office is very experienced at tapping into the talents of this enthusiastic group. I intend to partner with the alumni office to help launch the Route 2 Program and, together with the OCC, make it a success. I see involvement in this program as a significant and new way for alums to give back to the institution.

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John Noble (back row, fifth from left) and students learned about career opportunities at the United Nations in March.

AR: Say a Class of '90 alum is looking to make a career change. Are the services you offer to students available to alumni as well?

JN: Alumni are key to the success of our office, so it is only logical that we should be ready to assist them in any way we can. Because our services are, at present, geared to undergraduates, many resources may not be appropriate or useful to the 1990 alum. However, two things occur to me: one, that the alumni database is available and an incredible resource for everyone as a networking tool (<https://alumni.ephnet.org/awc>); and two, the alumni career groups that are a part of our new program may become a professional resource for alumni making transitions later in their careers.

AR: How has career counseling changed over the nearly 25 years you've been following and shaping it?

JN: In the early '80s when I first entered this field, the word "placement" was

still quite prevalent and accepted. The idea of "placing" students into positions seemed more accepted and in line with the paradigm students were used to—academic achievement equals good job. This paradigm grew out of the early post-World War II era, when there was a supply-and-demand gap for highly educated college grads, i.e., more demand than supply. Corporations were lining up at the doors of the top schools vying for their graduates, and, for the most part, college seniors could pick and choose.

That picture changed dramatically in the late '60s, '70s and '80s as the economy changed. Supply and demand evened out or reversed. The baby boom generation hit the job market, and we had a whole new scene. Of course, a sociologist would have a field day with this simplistic analysis, but in essence the viability of placing students into jobs has become unrealistic and the emphasis has turned to teaching students job-hunting strategies.

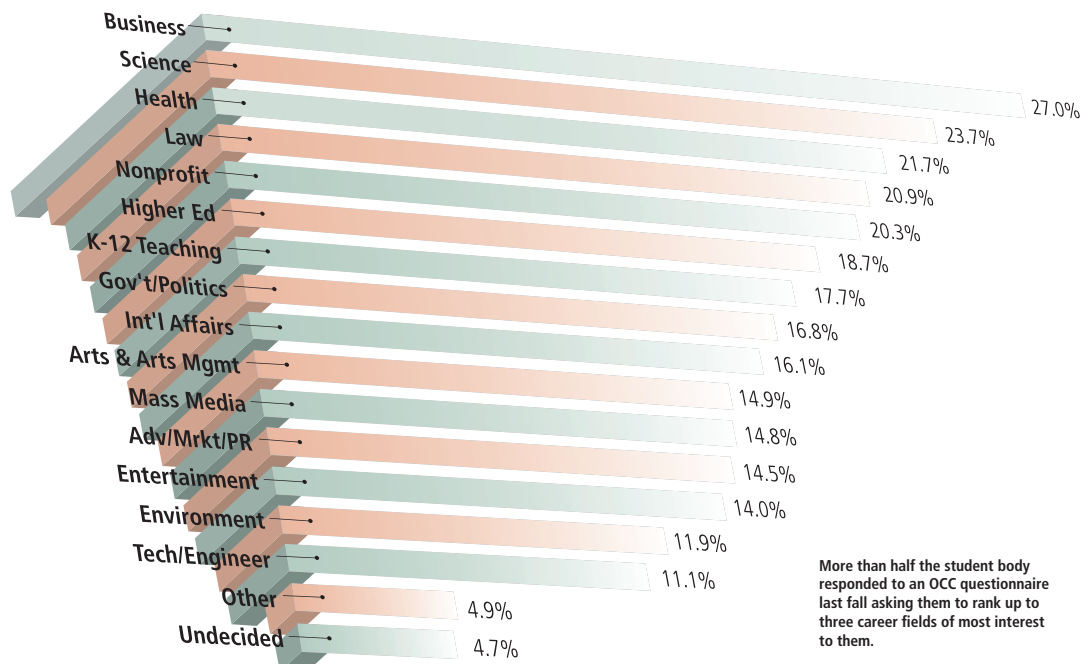
Most students do not get their first jobs as a result of on-campus recruiting

or from postings they see in the OCC jobs database. They return home or venture to a new place with a group of friends and begin their job search on the ground, pounding the pavement. So, necessarily, the OCC's role for the past many years—even decades—has been to help students decide which career paths to follow and then to teach them the skills needed to follow that path successfully.

AR: In the past, it seemed that giving a student a contact was enough to get them started down a path. Nowadays they want career counselors to help them foster more meaningful relationships with prospective employers.

JN: Recent generations of college students expect something I refer to as "high tech and high touch." In other words, they want access to information that is specific to their needs, but they also want someone to care about what they're doing and to connect on a personal level.

Where Do Students Want to Work?



It isn't enough to send students to the database. They will go, they will mine the names, but few of them will make the leap to connecting by e-mail, phone or in person.

The Route 2 Program establishes a link via the counselors in our office who can then make a personal referral. Rather than say to the student, "Look in the database for alums in the field of your interest and give them a call," we can say, instead, "Please call 'Joe Jones '89' and 'Mary Worth '95' from the Ephs in Entertainment Group, who are eager to help you." I think that personal touch makes all the difference.

AR: How has the structure of the OCC changed since your arrival?

JN: In the past the OCC had a counselor that dealt primarily with undergraduates and a couple that dealt with juniors and seniors. We have now adopted an experience-based approach and split our four counselors by career fields, each counseling students from all classes. The counselors get to develop expertise in a field and have more of a depth of understanding. That's the model I experienced when I first started. Harvard was set up that way, and we set it up that way at Duke. It makes sense.

Ron [Gallagher, the OCC assistant director specializing in nonprofits, arts and sciences] is a great example. He's had experience in the nonprofit world, he's on the boards of several community groups, and he's very involved in public service. He can talk from his own experience about how it works, as opposed to the stereotypical career counselor who hasn't done anything but counseling. There's a personal connection there to tie in.

AR: How do you balance the College's liberal arts mission with specific career aspirations?

JN: I am a firm believer in the liberal arts approach of learning a discipline, a way of thinking and an approach to solving problems. Done seriously, a student can apply this discipline to any field of endeavor. That's one side of the equation. On the other is a firm belief in experiential learning. You have to test out your discipline in different environments, and that's where the OCC, the Center for Experiential Education and other innovative experience-based learning opportunities such as the Williams in New York and Williams-Mystic programs are absolutely necessary.

Our program and the others attempt to challenge students to try out the lessons learned in the classroom on the outside, to test their approaches to solving problems. Extracurricular activities also provide an opportunity for students to gain this necessary experience. Leadership activities and/or membership and involvement in peer-organized groups are great places to put theory into practice. The staff of the OCC coaches students in their efforts to find opportunities that will lead to specific career paths. Students who do not take this extra step beyond the classroom are putting themselves at a great disadvantage when it comes time to leave the Purple Valley.

AR: I saw the Woody Allen movie *Match Point*, and one of its recurring themes is whether it's better to be lucky or good. When it comes to a career search, would you rather be lucky or good?

JN: Ah, yes, I love this polemic. It reminds me of a question often asked of admission officers at top schools—"Is it better to get 800's on my boards or straight A's on my report card?" Most of the time the answer is simply, "Yes." In other words, it's better to get 800's and straight A's.

The same is true in life—with one caveat. I will argue that those who are good are the ones who get lucky; that if you pursue life according to your passions, with energy and enthusiasm, then luck will find you. I say this because every time we hear an alum speak about his or her success, they most often begin their talk with, "Well, I just got lucky and was in the right place at the right time." I contend that unless they were good at what they were doing, they would have been far from the right place and probably in a different time zone. ■

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