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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 with 11,000 members, said that in an era in which people change careers frequently, philosophy makes sense. "It's a major that helps them become quick learners and gives them strong skills in writing, analysis and critical thinking," he said.

Mr. Schrader, an adjunct professor at the [University of Delaware](#), said that the demand for philosophy courses had outpaced the resources at some colleges, where students are often turned away. Some are enrolling in online courses instead, he said, describing it as "really very strange."

"The discipline as we see it from the time of Socrates starts with people face to face, putting their positions on the table," he said.

The Rutgers philosophy department is relatively large, with 27 professors, 60 graduate students, and more than 30 undergraduate offerings each semester. For those who cannot get enough of their Descartes in class, there is the Wednesday night philosophy club, where, last week, 11 students debated the metaphysics behind the movie "The Matrix" for more than an hour.

An undergraduate philosophy journal started this semester has drawn 36 submissions — about half from Rutgers students — on musings like "Is the extinction of a species always a bad thing?"

Barry Loewer, the department chairman, said that Rutgers started building its philosophy program in the late 1980s, when the field was branching into new research areas like cognitive science and becoming more interdisciplinary. He said that many students have double-majored in philosophy and, say, psychology or economics, in recent years, and go on to become doctors, lawyers, writers, investment bankers and even commodities traders.

As the approach has changed, philosophy has attracted students with little interest in contemplating the classical texts, or what is known as armchair philosophy. Some, like Ms. Onejeme, the pre-med-student-turned-philosopher, who is double majoring in political science, see it as a pre-law track because it emphasizes the verbal and logic skills prized by law schools — something the Rutgers department encourages by pointing out that their majors score high on the LSAT.

Other students said that studying philosophy, with its emphasis on the big questions and alternative points of view, provided good training for looking at larger societal questions, like globalization and technology.

"All of these things make the world a smaller place and force us to look beyond the bubble we

grow up in," said Christine Bullman, 20, a junior, who said art majors and others routinely took philosophy classes. "I think philosophy is a good base to look at a lot of issues."

Frances Egan, a Rutgers philosophy professor who advises undergraduates, said that as it has become harder for students to predict what specialties might be in demand in an uncertain economy, some may be more apt to choose their major based simply on what they find interesting. "Philosophy is a lot of fun," said Professor Egan, who graduated with a philosophy degree in the tough economic times of the 1970s. "A lot of students are in it because they find it intellectually rewarding."

Max Bialek, 22, was majoring in math until his senior year, when he discovered philosophy. He decided to 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."