

At New School, Students Eye Market Before Taking Plunge

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Joseph Heller has been watching for months as a grim picture unfolds in the financial data that flashes across the monitors of his Bloomberg terminal. Fortunately for him, he's nowhere near any panic-stricken trader's desk.

A graduate student at the New School for Social Research, he's watching Wall Street's periodic stock plunges from the safety of a classroom near Union Square. Dubbed the trading room, this classroom is the epicenter of the university's new Global Finance Program.

Launched last fall, the yearlong master's program offers a crash course in the latest financial accounting methods to students aiming to enhance their credentials before entering an increasingly bleak job market.

"In some respects, it's very exciting to be studying in the midst of a financial crisis, to see what traders and investors got wrong," Mr. Heller said. "On the other side of the coin, it makes your employment prospects that much dimmer."

The job market is shrinking, creating a challenging environment for those seeking employment. In the last three months of 2007, for example, New York's securities companies shed a total of 1,800 jobs, according to a report by Comptroller William Thompson Jr. In February alone, Morgan Stanley announced plans to slash 1,000 jobs, and Lehman Brothers is reportedly planning 200 job cuts.

Experts say the layoffs may lead to greater demand for business education, as has happened in the past: After a recession in the early 1990s, enrollment in graduate programs surged, a report by a research group, the American Council on Education, found.

Now, as the credit crisis extends further into the stock market, more young people may start turning to programs such as the New School's to boost their resumes.

Unlike most two-year MBA programs, the global finance curriculum foregoes training in marketing and management, instead focusing on the newest techniques in financial engineering, back-office procedures, risk management, and accounting of derivatives.

Taught by economics professors and working professionals, the courses offer intensive "real-time" instruction on how today's global markets are functioning, the program's chairman, Professor Salih Neftci, said.

Instead of reading yesterday's news about a rise in commodity prices, for instance, students can watch the surge live by poring over financial data at their Bloomberg terminals. Rather than discussing staid economic theories, the instructors focus on the latest trends in rising global markets.

The structure of the program, Mr. Neftci said, "let's you discuss what's happening right as it happens."

For the professors, the goal of the program is to give students the training they need to work at Wall Street's banks, money management firms, securities companies, and regulatory agencies.

Despite all their training, it may not be enough. As financial firms trim their payrolls and cut jobs, these laid-off employees, who will likely have more experience than recent business school graduates, will be fighting for these same entry-level jobs.

Still, while competition is likely to get increasingly fierce, a few students have managed to snatch up some of these sought-after jobs. One New School student, Jessica Waverka, said the intensive training program recently helped her land a position at a New York City firm that trains risk-management professionals.

"Money is the way the world goes around," she said. "Just having the vocabulary to have a dialogue with an employer is so valuable. That's really what's helping me keep up."