Choosing a career track isn’t easy. Jan Pagoria sees that almost every day as Elon University’s director of internships, helping students create career goals and collaborating with other staff members at Elon’s Student Professional Development Center. More than 500 students visited her office last year. “Students have many more dimensions to them than the title of their major. Sometimes we’re good at things we’re not interested in, and sometimes we’re interested in things we’re not good at. We have a conversation that looks at a balance in how we include our values, like a Venn diagram: what interests me, what I’m good at and what I value.”

Pagoria encourages freshmen and sophomores to attend local employers’ information sessions and job fairs and consider what they read about and what catches their eye. “Your major is a collection of classes. You’re going to become skilled and competent at many more things beyond that. In your compilation of experiences, what have you become? And what do you want to continue to be?”

People want work to be more than only work, says Albert Segars, distinguished professor of strategy and entrepreneurship at UNC Chapel Hill and faculty director of Kenan-Flagler Business School’s Center for Sustainable Enterprise. “It’s like trying to find a purpose for yourself in the marketplace. Schools are having a tough time figuring out how to shape that. There’s a lot
of chaos in the marketplace, so a typical university strategy would be to try to be all things to all people. Fields like analytics, technology management, these skill sets are just now forming. So it’s people seeking an identity, and universities trying to provide a pathway. Even companies can’t identify what these skill sets are, but that’s OK. It will all untangle.”

While most students are searching, that’s where their similarities stop. “There is no longer a typical MBA student,” says Bill Brown, associate dean and MBA program director at UNC Greensboro’s Bryan School of Business and Economics. “So there is increasing need for flexibility to meet students where they are at in terms of career and personal life. We are making admissions more flexible with [Graduate Management Admission Test] waivers for professionals with significant work experience and course waivers for those with certain undergraduate credits.”

UNC Greensboro’s tack is one that colleges and universities across North Carolina are following. But students, including those already in the workplace adding or updating their skills, need more than content. They want to choose where and when they study.

More working professionals in their late 20s or early 30s are knocking on UNC Greensboro’s door, wanting to earn an MBA while continuing to work full time. Brown expects that to increase evening enrollment. They want the degree personalized in other ways. “More students are looking to use their electives to personalize their MBA program. For example, they may take courses in business analytics without pursuing the whole concentration. They may also choose to take electives that fit their interests and needs outside the business school.”

Mark Bryant, assistant dean of graduate business programs at Wingate University’s Porter Byrum School of Business and head of the MBA program at its Ballantyne campus in Charlotte, says students also respect the big picture. “There are a lot of reasons for students to come into our program. The most common is they want to go to the next level in their careers, and an MBA is a very good mechanism to do that. Our big-picture goal in an MBA program is to develop
an individual who can eventually become the CEO of a company. What we try to do is develop a manager into a leader.”

Bryant says personal advancement equals success. “We try to develop a student with a strategic business perspective, to put the pieces together and think long-term for a strategic business maturity. A step below that would be to develop functional skills such as finance, marketing and economics.

Another thing we encourage is to develop a professional network that will stay after they graduate. Employers tell us that it’s important to have the ability to work in groups and build consensus, the ability to make decisions with imperfect information and be adaptable. That translates into leadership ability, which goes back to turning a manager into a leader.”

Boone-based Appalachian State University received 906 applications for this fall’s graduate level distance education courses, the most popular being in nursing and education. “I would say the major-
ity of our students are adult learners either coming back for a certification that they didn’t get as a graduate student, or they’re going through a career change,” says Matt Tate, the university’s distance education program manager. “We don’t have as many fresh-out-of-college students in our online graduate programs.”

Workers must have current skills, says Evan Duff, Rocky Mount-based North Carolina Wesleyan College’s interim provost and senior vice president of academic affairs and adult and professional studies. “It’s important for adults to keep their résumés fresh and their interview skills on point. Working adults should always be looking for ways to enhance their skills and increase their marketability.”

Buies Creek-based Campbell University is launching a revamped MBA curriculum this fall. Its core courses and electives have been tweaked. “In the nature of business today, there’s a lot of new material that needs to be covered, so we wanted to be relevant in terms of the needs of the employer,” says Kevin O’Mara, dean of Campbell’s Lundy-Fetterson School of Business. “We’ve added digital marketing and analytics and a new first class — a preamble, intro kind of class — based around innovation and personal development. We have another class at the end to work with real companies and the Small Business Technology Development Center, where our students can work with some of their clients. They have a chance to wear all the hats and see all the aspects of these companies, so that’s the capstone of this program.”

Campbell focuses on financial services and health care management. “We’re in a mecca of health care here in the Triangle, and we’re going to tap into the government sector,” O’Mara says. “Two areas we think are very important are digital marketing and how companies globally are communicating, with the supply chain being digital-based. And innovation is one of the top drivers. How to work on a team is crucial, and not only in our own country. So we need to infuse globalization.”

In Segars’ UNC Chapel Hill classrooms, lectures are replaced with exercises, giving students a chance to format responses to real issues, some of which they can implement in their workplaces. “There is a need in the marketplace for people to identify themselves in a unique way. They want to be an expert in product management or software or something that is uniquely them. The basic thing is people trying to gain an identity for themselves beyond degrees, and in today’s marketplace, you have to be very entrepreneurial, so that’s opened up a landscape of certificates that are more skilled. You have to build a brand around yourself and find something you’re interested in. One of the things I became cognizant of through my own teaching is that we need tools and techniques more than theory. Theory is like hearing a story with no context. We
need tools that say, ‘Hey, I can use this. This belongs to me.’"

Queens University’s McColl School of Business Executive Leadership Institute in Charlotte customizes courses for employees that businesses want to move up the corporate ladder. “They are selected by the leadership of their organization to come through as a group, and we do that in industry sectors such as manufacturing, professional services, education and health care,” says Paul Joyce, the institute’s executive director.

“There is a demand for leadership in the market in general, and that is being born of the talent crisis as baby boomers exit the workforce and companies realize they have not developed strength in those areas. The emphasis is coming from a company that has an employee and is saying, ‘I want him to go through this program so we can invest in him.’”

Joyce says curriculums last three to 18 months, depending on their scope. “We co-create the program design, so it’s tailored to their organization, then we develop the materials and run the program. We may have a strategy professor teach on fundamentals of business strategy then bring in the CEO or chief strategy officer to show what it would look like within their organization.”

One continuing education program is geared toward educators. “We work with the teachers who teach the Advanced Placement classes in high schools, where students get college credit that’s accepted when they enroll as freshmen,” says Nancy Williams, UNC Asheville’s professional education programs coordinator. She says about 250 teachers participate each summer. “We draw from the whole South, and even two or three foreign countries, and do it in four days rather than five, so they have that extra day for sightseeing.”

Many community colleges offer study options in a variety of fields. Fayetteville Technical Community College’s business programs include accounting, business and office administration, culinary arts and global logistics. Its corporate and continuing education department has noncredit courses in 22 disciplines. Winterville-based Pitt Community College provides free assistance to small-business owners and entrepreneurs. It offers training in health care, emergency medical services, law enforcement and real estate. Raleigh-based Wake Technical Community College trains for industry-issued certifications, such as exam preparation for electrical contractors and pharmacy technicians.

Executive education includes graduate level, noncredit courses for business leaders and managers. At N.C. State University in Raleigh, it often falls into categories of innovation, leadership, manufacturing and operations, product management, risk management, supply-chain management and sustainability. And much of it can be customized.

When San Jose, Calif.-based Cisco Systems Inc. needed its business and
technology managers to be better leaders of data-science projects, the information-technology company asked N.C. State to develop a program. Daniel McGurrin directs the university’s executive education department and works in its Poole College of Management. He syphoned information from faculty in data science, computer science, innovation management and statistics to develop a seven-week course. “Our objective in developing this program with Cisco was to improve how managers work with data-science teams, thereby improving decision-making in an environment where the volume and complexity of data — and how to use it effectively — continues to grow exponentially. So far, about 1,000 people have gone through the data sciences series in the last two years. Interestingly, the demand is split between technical skills — machine learning, statistics, applications — and business skills such as problem definition, analytic techniques and decision making.”

Cullowhee-based Western Carolina University offers the country’s first baccalaureate paramedic program, and it’s one of 20 U.S. schools offering a bachelor of science degree in emergency medical care. Its graduate programs can be pursued online or at its Asheville or Cullowhee campuses. And for many students, how and where they study are as important as the subject.

North Carolina Wesleyan College has offered evening accelerated degree programs for working adults since 1976, and it has 10 locations across central and eastern North Carolina. Duff says its Ed4Online program takes convenience one step further. “The beauty of Ed4Online is that all of the courses are 100% online and are either self-paced or are concentrated for four weeks of study. The courses range from 30-minute refresher classes to programs that offer over 900 hours of training and help [information-technology] professionals prepare for certification.”

Wesleyan’s Corporate Advantage Program takes classes to companies. Columbus, Ind.-based Cummins Inc’s
engine plant in Rocky Mount and N.C. Department of Public Safety in Apex have used it. “We have offered courses in their training rooms for their employees,” Duff says. “We give them a slight discount, and this allows Cummins and the NCDPS to educate their workforce in three common areas — management, organizational behavior and human resources. If employees want to continue with their education, they can through our seated and online courses. There has been an upward trend of working adults going back to school to complete their degrees for the last 15 years. Based on my research, that trend will continue to increase. Some courses are for personal development that individuals may take for fun while others will certainly help to update your skill set and make you more marketable.”

Wingate University’s MBA program moved to Charlotte’s Ballantyne area from Matthews in 2013 to cater to students living and working in Mecklenburg County. Bryant says about 120 students enroll each semester. Classes are once a week from 6 to 8:45 p.m. “It’s very flexible, and it’s completely face-to-face. How fast they go is up to them. You can take two classes a semester or skip a semester. A full-time MBA is pretty well set. You jump on the train, and you can’t jump off. It’s two years, and that’s it. This is for full-time professionals who have busy lives and [need to] go at their own pace.”

Campbell offers classes at its law school, main campus and online. Students can opt for a dual-degree program — pairing an MBA with a professional degree — or earn undergraduate and graduate degrees in five years. “In downtown Raleigh, at the law school, we have the opportunity to overlap with some of their classes,” O’Mara says. “The main aspect of the program is to develop a culture that has the feel of a full-time program but in a part-time setting and build a network they can feed on.”

Methodist University in Fayetteville has master’s degree programs in medical science in physician assistant studies; education; business administration; and justice administration. Each 16-month program blends online work with weekend on-campus sessions. Also in the east, East Carolina University in Greenville bills itself as a state leader in distance education. Its online program covers more than 90 degrees and certificate options. ASU’s Tate says online studies provide a longer reach. “People want that Appalachian experience without coming to the mountains. Whereas a school in the Triad will draw from Winston-Salem, High Point or Burlington, there’s a bit of remoteness here. Our goal is to make people feel a part of the community, and welcome, even though they aren’t here. Our hotbed areas are Charlotte, the Triad, Hickory, Lenoir, and to a lesser extent, on the coast. They mostly come from west of Raleigh.”

Kenan-Flagler’s executive MBA program offers two options. The first is a
mix of evening and weekend classes. The second is Global OneMBA, which gives students the chance to study at top business schools in Brazil, China, Mexico and the Netherlands. Participants travel to two of them and work with host students, who also are business professionals. “When we go to each different country, the host of that particular residency is responsible for putting together a full week of guest speakers and studies with people from that school,” says Global OneMBA Director Maria Gill. “And the students plan a lot of social activities as well. The students end up with a very in-depth view of that particular region. They hear from companies that school has connections with. They work with these schools the entire program. It’s globally coordinated, with course designs and faculties across all five schools.”

The 100 or so students in the 21-month program become a close, international network of executives in their fields. “They form that international network and help each other with daily programs and running their own companies,” Gill says. “One of the most important aspects is how deep the friendships are in the program. It’s like boot camp. You’re thrown into this with 20 or 30 different nationalities, because each school recruits from around the world, and they already have busy, demanding jobs and families, and they support each other.”

With so many choices, UNC’s Segars says students should formulate a plan and see it through on a personal level. “It’s a changing marketplace, a chaotic marketplace, but when the dust settles, I think universities will be able to provide great experiences. Where we’re headed is better than where we’ve been, and that’s where we’re at right now. A lot of good ideas are just ugly ducklings, and sometimes students and managements shy away from the ugly ducks. But when you’re trying to build a career, you take those ugly ducks and turn them into swans.”

— Kathy Blake is a freelance writer who lives in eastern North Carolina.

Fayetteville Technical Community College's Corporate and Continuing Education Department has noncredit courses in 22 disciplines, some of which are offered online.

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