

The New York Times

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March 24, 2009

At Auto Engineers' School, a Course in Layoffs 101

By [MICHELINE MAYNARD](#)

FLINT, Mich. — For much of the last 90 years, Kettering University honed its reputation as the [West Point](#) of the automobile industry, offering valuable work experience for its students at car companies and parts suppliers, and then virtually assuring them lucrative jobs upon graduation.

Now the 2,300 students at Kettering are finding this fast track to a career shut down because of the crisis in Detroit. Some have even been laid off from their student jobs at places like [General Motors](#), which founded Kettering in 1919 to help train future [G.M.](#) leaders.

Others are quickly switching their minors to fields like medicine, the environment and aerospace. Even those who are clinging to their dream of an automotive career find the atmosphere to be grim at employers, where they alternate six months of work with six months of studies.

"Everybody right now is afraid for their jobs, and it shows," said Keely Albers, 22, who has a student job in G.M.'s hybrid car program.

While G.M. has offered her a position after she graduates, Ms. Albers said she is considering whether to decline and instead pursue a master's degree because of the continuing uncertainty in the industry.

G.M. recently eliminated jobs for 103 students — those bound for graduation, like Ms. Albers, were allowed to stay on — and has suspended its participation in Kettering's cooperative education program, at least for the time being, according to the school.

Elizabeth Santos, a 19-year-old industrial engineering student who worked at a G.M. engine plant here in Flint, was one of the students who had been shut out. She said she now hopes to be placed in a student job at Lockheed Martin or at the [National Aeronautics and Space Administration](#).

Tyler Finnegan, 22, a business management student at Kettering, was told he should expect to be laid off for two weeks each semester from his job at the [Delphi Corporation](#), a parts supplier that has been operating under bankruptcy protection since 2005.

"I still want to go into automotive," Mr. Finnegan said. "I'm willing to throw caution to the winds."

Others are simply turning more cautious. Lakithia Williams, 21, heeded the advice of relatives in the auto industry who warned her to "get out while you can," and added a concentration in bioengineering to her major in mechanical engineering. Rather than develop automobiles, Ms. Williams said she now hopes to work on advanced medical devices.

Like its students, Kettering is broadening its focus to reduce its reliance on Detroit.

The school, known until 1998 as the General Motors Institute, was set up to teach students about G.M.'s way of doing business before starting their careers.

Its alumni include Gary L. Cowger, G.M.'s group vice president for global manufacturing and labor relations, and [Stanley O'Neal](#), the former chief executive of [Merrill Lynch](#) whose résumé includes a stint as G.M.'s treasurer.

Until G.M. cut formal ties with the university in 1982, the auto company employed every one of its students, who had often been admitted to the school based on the recommendation of a G.M. dealer or a company manager.

Since 1982, the number of students employed in co-op positions with G.M. has gradually diminished; only 6 percent of this year's class got G.M. positions, and the company will sponsor about 3.5 percent of the students next year.

If hired by G.M. after graduation — as most were — the students' college work experience counted toward their G.M. seniority, giving them a leg up over other new hires.

Chris Nielsen, a 1987 graduate, joined [Toyota](#) after graduation as a purchasing agent, and is now in charge of vehicle parts procurement for all of Toyota's North American plants.

Mr. Nielsen, who worked at G.M. when he was a student, said his experience "allowed me to hit the ground running, and to be really, really focused."

Because of that student job, Toyota "viewed me as somebody with practically a couple of years experience," he added.

Now, Kettering, renamed in 1998 after Charles F. Kettering, the inventor of the electric ignition and the longtime head of research at General Motors, tries to work with a broader range of employers, both inside and outside the industry. It places students at companies like [United Parcel Service](#), local museums and even the [Central Intelligence Agency](#) (where students are told to say merely that they work for "the government").

Indeed, the guarantee of a job while in school is an important draw for students at Kettering, who pay \$28,000 a year in tuition. They can expect to earn \$45,000 to \$65,000 in student positions while they are earning degrees, said Frank J. Hribar, the school's vice president of enrollment services.

Applications for 2009 are up 48 percent, and the curriculum, traditionally focused on engineering, has recently expanded to include a pre-law major and more management classes.

But Kettering's G.M. roots still permeate the school, from the big blue and white G.M. logo that dwarfs other corporate symbols in the lobby of the student center, to the collection of G.M. memorabilia in its archives just off the center's lobby, including the office chair used by G.M.'s founder, William C. Durant.

Inside one case is a yellow button proclaiming, "I'm proud I went to G.M.I."

Trent Sutherland, 20, said he shares that sentiment. Nonetheless, he recently switched from his original plan to follow his uncle, a 28-year auto industry veteran, into a conventional job in mechanical engineering.

Instead, Mr. Sutherland added a minor in the development of alternative vehicle propulsion systems. "That's where I see the industry heading," he said.

Asked how his uncle reacted to his decision, Mr. Sutherland said, "He's happy I've gone into fuel cells."

Mary M. Chapman contributed reporting.

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