

Harsh education about job scarcity

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Since entering college, Ellen Morstein has had it drilled into her head that as an aspiring teacher, her skills would be in high demand upon graduation.

Fast forward four years and one recession later, and Morstein, a senior education major at Rider University, is less confident a job will be waiting for her in May.

"I am very apprehensive about graduating in two months and finding that I have nowhere to work," she said. "I was always told that in the field of education, I really wouldn't need to worry."

Morstein joins legions of other college seniors who face bleak employment prospects as companies and employers continue to slash jobs and lay off established employees, leaving precious few jobs for the thousands of local college students expected to flood the job market in May.

Even industries previously considered immune to downsizing, such as teaching and nursing, have been hit hard by layoffs and hiring freezes, leaving students in specialized fields with limited options.

"I have found that friends who graduated one to two years ago are still in the process of looking for jobs, so that is very discouraging," Morstein said.

"I feel that I will be very highly qualified to be a teacher upon graduation, but I feel like I am going to spend the next year to two years substituting in different classrooms and living at home with my parents because I can't afford to move out," she continued.

Like teaching, nursing has long been considered a field where job security is all but assured for recent graduates. But a recent survey conducted by the New Jersey Hospital Association (NJHA) found that many hospitals are still not hiring.

According to the study, 48 percent of hospitals reported eliminating unfilled positions of various kinds in 2008 and 13 percent have set hiring freezes for 2009, which could be problematic for budding health professionals.

Nevertheless, Kerry McKean Kelly, vice president of communications and member services at NJHA, said even if hospitals aren't hiring now, they probably will be soon as large segments of the population grow older.

"The long-term outlook for the health-care field is very positive," she said.

Though nursing students may be able to wait out the rocky job market, for those with hefty student loan payments looming on the horizon, failing to find a job could lead to serious financial struggles, no matter what their major.

"I am terrified," said fellow Rider education major Julieann Picardo. "With the economy the way it is, it seriously causes me a lot of anxiety and stress."

Picardo said there are still some jobs out there for teachers, but the number of applicants is fast outpacing the number of job openings. Even those lucky enough to find jobs still face struggles, as first-year teachers are hardly known for their impressive salaries.

"Prices keep going up but salaries are not, so it makes budgeting extremely difficult considering I have to start paying off student loans as soon as I graduate," Picardo said.

"Even if I wasn't to get a teaching job right out of college, many companies are laying people off, which makes finding even a minimum wage job to support yourself difficult," she continued.

Like many seniors, Brandon Lee, an interactive multimedia major from The College of New Jersey (TCNJ), has sent out his fair share of resumes so far. Though he boasts an impressive resume detailing his numerous internships and freelance assignments, he has heard back from only one of the approximately 20 companies he has contacted regarding potential employment.

"I'm pretty damn scared," Lee said. "It seems like all the companies I've been looking at are looking for people who have two to five years of experience."

Lee said he'll continue working as a freelancer designing Web sites if he can't find a job, but hopes to secure a full-time job by this summer.

One lament echoed by Lee and other seniors is the lack of jobs specifically in the New Jersey area. Jobs, according to Lee, are "mostly in the city. There's not much around here."

Matt Hiznay, a marketing major at TCNJ, is less worried than most about finding a job, saying he's already had several offers based on his performance at a sales competition in Georgia.

However, he acknowledges how difficult it is for most business majors to find jobs in the wake of Wall Street meltdowns and bank takeovers.

"I know finance people are completely, completely worried," he said.

Like Lee, Hiznay believes that to find a job, he'll most likely have to move to New York City, or face a long commute from his parents' house.

"The first thing they ask you is if you'll relocate," he said. "People are going to place you where they need you, not where you want to go."

Luckily for him, the key to finding postgraduate employment may be flexibility, according to Princeton University Career Services director Beverly Hamilton-Chandler.

"Students should explore their career interests in a variety of geographic areas," she advised. "In addition to researching large well-known organizations, they should research the industries/organizations that are showing signs of growth."

Hamilton-Chandler also said students should not rely on the notion that employers will hire them simply as a cheap source of labor to plug up holes created by layoffs and downsizing.

"We have not seen any data that supports that practice," she said.

According to her, the university continues to see job openings in fields like communications, consulting, environment, and, of some consolation to Picardo and Morstein, education.

Still, with less than two months to go until graduation, seniors like Morstein can't help but feel discouraged and directionless.

"It's hard because we have no idea how long it's going to be before we find work, and we've done so much work up to this point to become highly qualified, but we won't have anything to show for it really," she said.