



Education doesn't always help graduates meet expectations

Updated: Tuesday, November 15th 2016, 11:21 am EST



A volatile job market and degree programs that don't always steer college students toward productive skills often set graduates up for rude awakenings in the working world.

(Source: Cparks/Pixabay)

(RNN) – Young professionals crippled by debt, inadequate training and rising costs in the standard of living are finding it harder to prepare for and afford life after college.

The burdensome price of higher education, a subject of intense scrutiny in recent years, is just part of the picture. Roadblocks to gainful employment pop up before the first student loan payments are due, sometimes before stepping on campus.

“Schools rarely communicate to potential students what the outcomes of any particular major are,” said Steven Rothberg, president and founder of College Recruiter, a job-finding service for students and recent graduates. “Some schools, if you graduate with an education major, you’re more likely to end up in hospitality or retail than in teaching because that school’s education program may not be well-respected by the schools in that geographic area.”

Additional Links

FAQ: Young graduates face growing student debt, less ways to pay bills

Eleven percent of [recent college graduates](#) were unemployed in 2015, twice the rate of the overall population.

The rate of underemployed – working part-time or not looking for work – is higher. Many who are working likely have jobs unrelated to their degree.

Katie Young, 31, commutes 2 1/2 hours each way from her one-bedroom apartment to her job as a manager for a New York City retail boutique. She can't afford a place in the city and hasn't found a job related to the business marketing degree she earned from a small, upstate New York college.

"I think schools have let students down," said Young, who graduated in 2007 during the housing market crash. "I wish my school had done a better job of being realistic in preparing me for real life. I wish they had said, 'It's going to be hard, but these are things you can do to get a job,' instead of being unrealistic and saying, 'You're great. You're going to be fine, and you have nothing to worry about.'"

Business is the most common field of study in schools of higher education. The number of jobs in that field [grew by 1.3 percent](#) between 2004 and 2014 – the second-highest rate among all job categories – but the rate of business degrees conferred [dropped 3 percent](#) in the same time period, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

More jobs and less candidates should mean college graduates have an easier time finding employment, but that has not been the case.

Part of the explanation is the [average age of workers](#) is getting higher. People are staying at jobs longer for a variety of reasons, including unaffordability of retirement or difficulty recruiting new workers.

The latter reason is directly related to the difference in expectations of candidates and employers.

People will not earn anything close to a position's average salary right out of college, something Rothberg said many graduates don't think about.

Employers are also placing more emphasis on practical skills to supplement classroom achievements.

"Too many students fail to understand that employers are hiring them to do the work, not to take tests," Rothberg said. "If you can demonstrate to the employer that you've done similar work before and done it well, that's going to mean a lot more than your GPA."

Students can prepare themselves for life after college in a number of ways – using on-campus career counselors; finding mentors who are teachers, alumni or older friends and family; signing up for job sites and networking services such as LinkedIn.

Rothberg recommends students market themselves for internships by presenting their services as a benefit – such as a replacement for a worker on leave – instead of asking for a favor from the business.

Employers in highly skilled trades may be more open to using college workers. When it's time to hire new talent, someone with previous experience reduces the time and money necessary for training.

Young wanted to break into the fashion industry and got a rude awakening about the practicality of her plans.

"My career adviser said, 'I can't help you. I don't have any experience in this,'" Young said. "I might have picked a different school, and I would have taken internships more seriously. I would have done more than one and definitely done a different one. It would have been in the city where I could market myself better."

Popular rankings of the country's most competitive colleges often focus on test scores of incoming freshmen. They don't include job placement rates and starting salaries for graduates.

Schools also tend to recruit prospective freshmen with things that appeal to their age group – state-of-the-art dormitories or successful sports teams – instead of services and programs to get them into the job market as quickly as possible.

About 70 percent of seniors who graduated in spring 2016 borrowed money to pay for school, and they will owe an average of \$37,000, according to a [Wall Street Journal](#) report.

That places more strain on young professionals forced to accept low-paying jobs or who aren't able to find work.

Jared Chmielnik, 28, doesn't owe money on student loans, but he had thousands of dollars in credit card debt after college. He shares a New Jersey apartment with two friends and has deferred home ownership and starting a family because it has been difficult to save money working his job in records and information management.

"There were three to four years where I absolutely questioned if maybe my degree was worth it, if I chose right major or if I could have focused my attention on something else," Chmielnik said.

He graduated in 2010 with a regional development degree and hoped to go into city planning, but the timing couldn't have been worse. Construction nationwide was still slow, so he took a job in content management on a project-to-project basis with no benefits and lower wages than full-time workers.

Schools are not totally at fault for graduates' shortcomings in the working world. They can't change their course offerings as quickly as the labor market demands, so it's important for graduates to have flexibility and make themselves available to as much working experience as possible.

Chmielnik still does not have a job related to his degree, but said he recently began to feel comfortable professionally.

"If you want to follow something you're interested in, that's fine, but it's important to be realistic and pay attention to opportunities. Don't get pigeonholed," Chmielnik said.

His is a common story. A survey of people ages 18 to 34 showed [more than two-thirds of them are "cost-burdened,"](#) meaning they spend 30 percent or more of their income on housing costs. NHP Foundation, a nonprofit that provides affordable housing, conducted the survey.

"That number is much higher than I thought it would be," NHP Foundation President Dick Burns said of the number of cost-burdened millennials. "It's interesting that more than 50 percent of people said they prefer renting to owning. That's a totally different aspect of the American dream than what we've traditionally seen."

Most cited ownership costs as their reason for renting, and nearly one-third preferred renting because they anticipated moving several times to find suitable work.

"It used to be if you interviewed somewhere and had three jobs already, you were a job hopper, but today that's become normal," Burns said. "People don't want to be saddled with a house if they want to up and go to Houston instead of going to Chicago. That wasn't the case before."

Copyright 2016 Raycom News Network. All rights reserved.