

# Finally, jobs for new college grads — just maybe not the jobs they wanted



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BY RUTH SERVEN

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It may be the best time to graduate from college since the Great Recession. The rate of unemployment for recent graduates is under 5 percent and job prospects are finally brightening.

But they're still not great.

Since the recession, it has been hard for graduates to find jobs at their education level, and it still is.

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Although college historically has been an excellent investment and grads are finding work, 45 percent of recent college graduates have jobs that don't require their degrees, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. The marketing major may settle for a 20-hour-a-week gig as a barista.

And while there is more work, statistics show, grads still face stagnant wages and the highest student debt load ever.

Michaela Ousnamer graduated with an English degree from William Jewell College. She was able to find a job teaching preschoolers how to read, but it will only last 10 months. Ousnamer has decided to wait a year to make long-term career or educational plans.

"I only get to be 22 once," she said.

Unlike Ousnamer, Phil Pettit has been looking for work since he graduated from the recreation and sports program at William Jewell in May.

Pettit moved back to Oklahoma City to be near his family and got an apartment with a college friend while he applied for jobs. He thought about moving back in with his parents but decided to use his savings to pay his own rent.

Mentors warned him that it might take a while to find a job in his specific field — parks and recreation.

"I knew I wouldn't be able to get a job immediately," he said.

He is hoping to work at a new water sports park that opened in Oklahoma City, but he has begun thinking about taking positions as a bank teller or an insurance agent.

Some students have jobs, but they know they may need to return to school eventually.

Fallon O'Reilly finished her biology degree from the University of Missouri-Kansas City in May but decided to take a business job instead of pursuing research or medicine immediately.

O'Reilly plans on returning to school, perhaps to be a nurse practitioner or an anesthesiologist — but she wants to spend a few years in the business world first.

Like O'Reilly, Alex Mediavilla graduated with a science degree, hers in nursing. She is about to begin working as a nurse with the University of Kansas Hospital in Kansas City.

Nursing is one of the fastest-growing fields in the nation, according to the Department of Labor. The median wage for registered nurses of \$67,490 in 2015 is much higher than the average median wage of \$36,200.

“I feel very lucky to be in the program that I was,” Mediavilla said. “Eighty to 90 percent of my graduating class had job offers or positions when they graduated.”

But the market isn’t equal for all degrees. Health sciences degrees are rising in demand, but the outlook is different for those with a liberal arts degree.

Graduates with liberal arts, humanities, fine arts or political science degrees typically have lower starting salaries and higher unemployment, according to a report by the National Center for Education Statistics. Graduates with those types of degrees had an unemployment rate of 6 to 8 percent in 2012, compared with about 3 percent unemployment for engineering and health sciences degrees.

Students with liberal arts degrees also tend to be underemployed and cobble together multiple part-time jobs unconnected to their degrees.

Lindsay Lillig just finished a theater performance degree at UMKC. She and her husband are hoping to move to Los Angeles so they can both pursue acting, but right now they both work at Science City in Union Station.

“When I get up every day, theater is what I want to do,” she said. “I work during the day, but theater is what I care about.”

Ousnamer said she wasn’t thinking about career opportunities when she began her English degree.

“I thought a job would just sort itself out,” she said.

She and her peers also face an average student debt load that has doubled since 1989. Households with student debt owe an average amount of \$26,682, according to a recent report by the Economic Policy Institute. Ten percent of households owe more than \$61,895.

Ousnamer said she’s not stressed about her loans.

“I feel like I’ll be in debt forever, so it’s not something I’m worried about,” she said.

Even if students are able to graduate with a bachelor’s degree without school debt, they may feel that the best way to get ahead is to go back to school.

Mediavilla plans to eventually go back to school for a nurse practitioner degree. She’ll have to take out student loans, but the demand for advanced practice registered nurses is growing fast. She thinks it will be a good investment.

Like applying for nursing school and for jobs, Mediavilla views applying and paying for an advanced degree as a challenge to conquer: “That’s what I want to do, so I’m going to do it.”

While student debt is rising, the average starting salary for a college graduate, \$38,500, is nearly the same as it was in 2000. Although that salary is much higher than the wages for those with only a high school degree, it has failed to keep up with the rising cost of college.

Young workers are also disproportionately unlikely to receive pension coverage, overtime or employer-provided health insurance.

The outlook is worse for students of color, who are more likely to be unemployed whether the economy is good or bad, according to the Economic Policy Institute’s report. Having a college degree and the same starting record still doesn’t guarantee equal treatment in the job market.

“In fact, the highest young white college graduate unemployment rate reached in the recession (9 percent) is still lower than that of young black college graduates today (9.4 percent),” according to the report.

In the Kansas City area, unemployment has been decreasing. But according to the Mid-America Regional Council, the sectors that have seen the highest percentage of growth in the past five years are fast food, construction, manufacturing and retail — occupations that typically do not require a college degree.

The council doesn’t track unemployment numbers for recent graduates in the area, but area unemployment overall is lower than the national average of 4.7 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

It’s too soon to know how this year’s graduates will fare in the long run, but statistics show that, in time, graduates should be able to find jobs. As they become more established, their unemployment rate should drop toward the national average of all college graduates, 3 percent, according to the report by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

“I’m OK with anything,” Pettit said, “as long as it pays.”

**UNDEREMPLOYMENT OF RECENT COLLEGE GRADUATES, IN PERCENTAGES, FOR DECEMBER OF EACH YEAR**

December 1995: 44.1

1996: 43.1

1997: 41.5

1998: 40.6

1999: 39.1

2000: 38.3

2001: 37.9

2002: 38.4

2003: 41.6

2004: 44.6

2005: 43.1

2006: 43.1

2007: 41.8

2008: 42.8

2009: 44.2

2010: 45.4

2011: 43.8

2012: 45.3

2013: 46.3

2014: 44.5

2015: 44.9

**UNEMPLOYMENT OF RECENT GRADUATES, IN PERCENTAGES, FOR DECEMBER OF EACH YEAR**

December 1995: 3.9

1996: 3.8

1997: 2.7

1998: 2.8

1999: 3.2  
2000: 2.7  
2001: 4.0  
2002: 4.5  
2003: 4.4  
2004: 4.2  
2005: 3.9  
2006: 3.5  
2007: 3.5  
2008: 4.2  
2009: 6.7  
2010: 7.0  
2011: 6.6  
2012: 5.5  
2013: 5.9  
2014: 5.3  
2015: 4.6

Source: Federal Reserve Bank of New York, The Labor Market for Recent College Graduates  
[www.newyorkfed.org/research/college-labor-market/index.html](http://www.newyorkfed.org/research/college-labor-market/index.html)

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