

Grads welcome an uptick in hiring; But jobs picture for new talent not nearly as bright as go-go '90s

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WASHINGTON -- College seniors are experiencing the best job market in four years, but hiring for soon-to-be graduates is still nowhere near the dot-com boom of the late 1990s.

Employers plan to increase their hiring of college graduates by more than 13% this year, the second consecutive yearly rise and the biggest gain since 2001, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), a non-profit group linking college career officers with employers.

Salaries are also up for most college majors, according to NACE. But the days of large signing bonuses, stock options and major on-campus recruiting blitzes are still a distant memory. Some 182 employers went to Rutgers University's main job fair in January, up 14% from a year ago but still below the 257 companies that attended one year in the late 1990s.

"It's a better time to be coming out of school than at any time in the last few years," says Richard White, director of career services at Rutgers in New Brunswick, N.J. But "it's a much more realistic environment."

Says Adonica DeVault, director of career advising at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Ore.: "We're not back to where students had lots and lots of options. They have options."

University of Dayton senior Craig Stimmel had a job lined up in November. The 22-year-old accounting major interviewed with several private companies and government agencies before deciding to take an offer from NCR in Dayton. "I was really surprised at how many people were interested," the Dayton native says. "It was a pleasant surprise."

Students majoring in nursing, teaching and computer programming also are faring well. Those graduating with degrees in the arts and sciences, such as English, history and biology, are also finding jobs, says Andy Ferguson, director of the career development center at the University of Richmond in Virginia. They are being courted for a variety of careers, such as finance, that are not directly related to their majors.

On the money front, the average offer for starting salaries for marketing graduates was \$37,832, up 6% from a year ago, the largest percentage increase among a variety of majors, according to NACE. Economics and finance majors are seeing a 5.1% increase in salary to \$42,802, while chemical engineers are seeing a 4.3% increase in pay to \$54,256. Although data for liberal-arts majors are more limited, statistics show their average salaries are up 4.2% to \$30,337, NACE says.