

# The Times

## Assessing the probability of landing a job

Sunday, May 23, 2010

Anita Shaffer

SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Most newly minted college graduates are about to be slammed by the realities of hunting for a job in an economy still climbing out of the worst recession in a half-century.

Inevitably, the question will arise: Was it worth it to go to college in the first place?

No matter how many studies report the long-term benefits of postsecondary degrees, frustrated jobseekers--particularly those struggling with debt--may find it difficult to understand why this supposedly sure-fire path to success isn't working for them.

For an answer, see William W. Keep.

Keep is just finishing up his first year at his new job. He's dean of the School of Business at The College of New Jersey.

He recently received a letter from a high school senior that he found striking:

"How can you assure me that the hundred-thousand dollar investment which I will make in my education at TCNJ will give me the knowledge, confidence and readiness to head out into the real world and make a living?" asked the student, who sent the letter after hearing Keep speak about the program. "Majoring in business management during a recession-struck era, I need to be assured that investing in an education here at TCNJ will pay off."

Keep, who has a Ph.D in marketing, did not try to peddle the notion that a degree from TCNJ, which ranked No. 65 on the 2010 BusinessWeek Survey of Best Undergraduate Business Schools, would pay off in the way the student envisioned.

Instead, he noted that the value of a college degree lies in the possibilities.

"The difficulty, of course, is trying to help students understand that everything in life has a probability attached to it," Keep said in an interview. "Our answer to the student is that we can help increase your probability of being hired. We cannot guarantee you will get hired. Students have to choose to do things that can help."

Although statistics confirm the earning power of a college education, not every person with a degree will hit the average income figure or attain a higher salary than a skilled tradesman, Keep noted in a letter he wrote back to the student.

Even with the same major, graduates can find salaries and opportunities vary widely depending on the economy.

There are a few signs of hope this year in an otherwise dispiriting outlook for new college graduates.

In April, the National Association of Colleges and Employers reported employers are planning to hire 5.3 percent more college graduates than they did last year, based on a survey of 177 employers nationwide. It was the first positive sign in nearly two years.

The leading sectors where employers are extending offers to new college graduates are accounting services, engineering services and retail/wholesale trade companies, the NACE said.

But with New Jersey's unemployment rate at 9.8 percent, the market remains tight.

"There's no question about it that it's a tough market," said Keep. "Some of our students are competing against people who have lost their jobs. We have some firms that in the past would have been out interviewing on college campuses that are not authorized to be out interviewing at all."

Young people "have to realize it's a competitive environment," Keep said. "Sometimes it's hard to get the message across to them that pretty much they're going to be competing for the rest of their careers. You have to be good at your job and you have to be good at getting a job."

Contact Anita Shaffer at [ashaffer@njtimes.com](mailto:ashaffer@njtimes.com).