Arts majors jump ahead of tech grads in landing jobs

Lauren Kirkwood, USA TODAY   *3:32 p.m. EDT July 30, 2013*

Recent graduates with tech degrees face higher unemployment rates after the Great Recession.

(Photo: Victor Melo)

Here's a surprise for college students: Recent graduates with technology degrees are having a tougher time finding a job than their peers in the arts.

The unemployment rate for recent grads with a degree in information systems is more than double that of drama and theater majors, at 14.7% vs. 6.4%, according to a recent Georgetown University study. Even for computer science majors, the jobless rate for recent grads nears 9%.

Anthony Carnevale, director of Georgetown's Center on Education and the Workforce, said the statistics reflect the recession that officially ended in 2009. Certain job markets, like IT, are inherently cyclical, and are more affected by dips in the economy, Carnevale explained.

"During the recessions, those people lose their jobs," he said. "They're not computer scientists or programmers or people who understand the innards of computers; they're people who use computer information at their job," such as workers at a bank's customer service desk.

Drama and theater jobs, on the other hand, are not heavily affected by the recession, and tend to have lower unemployment rates because there are fewer graduates in these fields, Carnevale added.

Carnevale's study pooled employment dated gathered in 2010 and 2011 from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, and considered "recent" college graduates to be 22- to 26-year-olds with a bachelor's degree, most of whom graduated between 2005 and 2010. The study pegs the overall unemployment rate among these workers at 7.9%.

Victor Melo of Fort Lauderdale went back to school and earned a degree in management information systems in 2010, but it took him more than a year to land a job as a network engineer at a property management company. Melo, 46, said most companies are only interested in job candidates with practical experience in the field.

Anthony Carnevale, director of Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, said the high unemployment rate for recent IT graduates is likely a result of the Great Recession.*(Photo: Phil Humnicky, Georgetown University)*

Sheri Stoltenberg, founder and CEO of a health care consulting firm, said undergrad programs in IT ... ter programming often don't teach students all the skills needed to succeed in the health care IT world, and many employers are unwilling to take a chance on an inexperienced job candidate.

"Most consulting firms don't want to invest the time and money to do this," she said.

In 2011, Stoltenberg launched a "Junior Consultant Program," which trains recent college graduates in software and other programs used in the health care IT industry. IT grads who succeed in the program are those with strong communication and teamwork skills, strengths that some undergraduate programs don't emphasize, she added.

"If you just go to straight IT people, many of them want to kind of hide behind the (computer) terminal," Stoltenberg said.

The Georgetown study also details median earnings for recent college grads, which fall along more predictable lines. Most fields pay $30,000 to around $40,000 a year, with higher salaries in fields such as engineering, nursing and computer science. The average starting salary for an information systems major is $40,000, compared with $25,000 for a drama major and $34,000 for an education major.

For those fields, "You've got very low wages, but unemployment rates are very low," Carnevale said. "Majoring in education is a sure way to get a job, and it's a sure way to have lower earnings."

Longer term, jobs in IT will be on the rise again, Carnevale predicted. "That market is cyclical, but it will come back. … When it rains hard enough and long enough, everybody gets a little wet, college degree or not."

The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that 758,800 jobs will be added to the computer and information technology sector from 2010 through 2020.

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