

# Job market improving for new graduates

By Marilyn Geewax and Andrew Schneider, NPR

For the last five years, graduation day has been as much a time for apprehension as for celebration.

Even now, with the Great Recession over, many recent graduates are still struggling to turn their high school and college diplomas into tickets for a better life. The unemployment rate for Americans under age 25 remains more than double the overall rate of 7.5 percent.

But experts are predicting this year's graduates – whether from high school, community college or a four-year college – should have better career launches than at any time since 2008. Companies expect to hire about 2.1 percent more college graduates from the Class of 2013, and will offer a higher overall starting salary of \$44,928 – up 5.3 percent over last year, according to the spring survey by the National Association of Colleges and Universities.

Many college officials are cheering as the job offers come in for their graduates. “At both the graduate and the undergraduate level, we’re seeing higher salaries, we’re seeing earlier offers, and we’re seeing better acceptance rates than we’ve seen in quite some time,” said Jamie Belinne, assistant dean for career services at the University of Houston’s Bauer College of Business.

On Friday, the U.S. Department of Labor will release data about May hiring. The new numbers likely will confirm a trend that already is well entrenched: Job growth is improving in general, but the higher your skill level, the better your chances of landing one of those jobs.

In April, the unemployment rate for people with at least a college bachelor's degree was 3.9 percent. For those with less than a high school diploma, the rate was 11.6 percent. Not only do college graduates have more job offers, they also command salaries that average nearly twice as much as high school graduates.

But even for the roughly 1.7 million Americans who will earn college degrees this year, the job market will remain very uneven, with hot spots and cold. NACE, the nonprofit organization that assesses graduates' employment prospects, says the biggest pay gains this year are going to people entering health-sciences careers. They are being offered 9.4 percent more than last year's recruits.

But graduates in the humanities and social sciences are still facing tough times. Their job offers pay just 1.9 percent more than last year, the survey showed.

For people who have high school diplomas or two-year-degrees, the prospects are improving too, but mostly for those in growing economic sectors, such as health care and energy.

"It helps to have a hard skill that is immediately useful for a company," said John Challenger, who heads the global outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas.

That's exactly what Adan Alanis discovered when he decided to go into automotive repair work. He graduated from high school three years ago when the job market was far weaker. Still, he managed to land a good job at a Ford dealership in Pasadena, Texas, because he was at the top of his class.

"The manager here and a few other managers from different dealerships came by and they interviewed all of us, and they only hired me and one other guy because we were always on top of our studies, and we always had the highest grades in class," Alanis said.

But he could see the repair tasks were getting more complicated all the time as automakers continued increasing the technological sophistication of their vehicles. "Everything's getting more electronic, and I've been into electronics, too," he said. So he went back to school and has just earned his associate's degree from nearby San Jacinto College.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics' shows the best opportunities are turning up for people like Alanis – those willing to keep layering on skills involving electronics, software and computer systems.

And in health care, jobs abound for high-skilled professionals such as physical and occupational therapists, optometrists, dental hygienists and audiologists, the handbook says.

But not all skilled workers are flourishing. Many people who have challenging jobs – such as flight attendants, mail carriers and newspaper reporters – are in industries that need to reduce employee ranks.

J.C. Gage, an Iraq War veteran and new graduate of the University of Houston, is learning how tough the job market remains for those with degrees outside of technology or a hard science. With his degree in public relations, he has started an internship with a public-relations firm. He also is working for the *Houston Chronicle's* sports section while continuing his search for a full-time job.

"I'm working 9 to 4, Monday through Thursday [at the PR firm], and then I'm working four nights a week at the *Chronicle*, from 6 to midnight," he said. "It is exhausting."