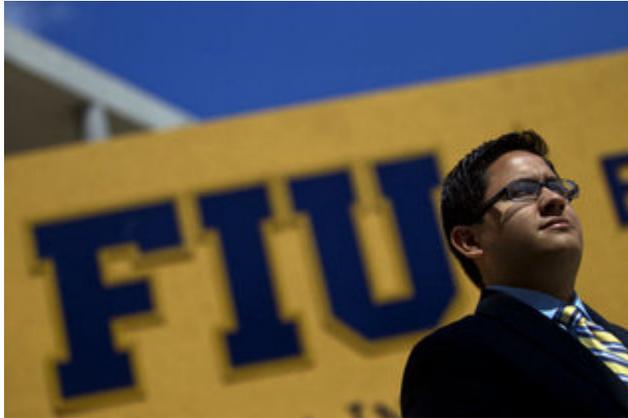


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Finding degrees of improvement

By Alina Matas
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PATRICK FARRELL / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Bruno Cevallos, 21, is graduating from FIU this spring and has accepted a job offer with JP Morgan in New York. He says his job search started in his junior year, and while he was a sophomore he made sure to add courses that would make him appeal to potential employers, rather than just take the courses that interested him.

Bruno Cevallos was a sophomore at Florida International University in 2009, when news about the economic recession kept going from bad to worse: more companies folding, more jobs disappearing, unemployment climbing and the banking industry tanking. On campus, company recruiters were becoming fewer and farther between.

Cevallos realized it wouldn't be long until he would be tapping this bruised economy for a job. So right then he began to beef up his appeal to prospective employers. He pursued internships. He enrolled in courses that added technical savvy to the conceptual foundation in his business major, and made sure to add an international component as well. In his time off, he took courses to

become proficient in number-crunching programs such as Excel and database services such as Bloomberg.

"I realized it wasn't good enough to have a degree, but to have the right degree," said Cevallos, who's graduating in May with a dual bachelor degree, one in business administration, with a concentration in finance and international business, and one in economics. "I took a step back and started taking courses that would satisfy what companies would look for in me, rather than what I was interested in learning."

Cevallos, who has landed a financial analyst position with JPMorgan Chase in New York, will be among thousands of South Florida college students trying to enter the labor force this summer, their training and job-getting skills put to the test. But at least one thing will be better this year compared to the past two: Companies are increasing their recruitment of college graduates.

"There's definitely an increase of employers coming to recruit, a lot of industries are starting to open up, especially in the banking industry," said Diane Klein, assistant director of internships at Nova Southeastern University.

It's a sentiment echoed by career placement professionals in other schools throughout South Florida. At the University of Miami's career expo fair in February, 93 companies showed up, compared with 85 companies last year, and online job postings are up by 200 percent. At FIU, recruiters from retail companies are coming back in force. At Miami Dade College, government agencies have been noticeably active this year, recruiting graduates of the college's criminal justice program.

The activity reverses a dip in college recruitment that was most noticeable three years ago, for the class of 2009. That year, companies' projected number of college hires dropped nearly 22 percent from the year before, according to the annual job outlook survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers. The association's 2012 survey, by contrast, shows companies plan to hire 9.5 percent more graduates from the 2012 class than they did from class of 2011. And this year's increase follows a 19 percent increase in hires from the class of 2011, compared to the year before.

"We're definitely seeing an upswing, going back toward where it was before the recession," said Christian Garcia, executive director of the Toppel Career Center at University of Miami. "We're not there yet, but we've seen an increase in all career fairs in terms of attendance."

What's in demand

Majors in finance, accounting and computer science are in highest demand, college placement officials said. Companies across all industries always have a need for those skills, and more so when their businesses start to grow, as many of them are this year. Some 115 companies responding to the NACE survey said they plan to hire graduates with these majors, which top the list in terms of number of companies who will be looking for them.

But with a broader range of companies coming to campus, other specialties are getting attention as well.

One industry that is noticeably back after retrenching the past two years is retail, said Lauren Shalom, employer relations coordinator at FIU's College of Business. Burger King, for one, has already hired six FIU prospective graduates, Shalom said. And the number of recruiters from companies like Macy's, Kohl's and Target are up by 50 percent this year, compared to last, Shalom said.

TJX, parent company of the TJ Maxx and Marshalls retail chains, added FIU to its recruitment circuit in the 2011-2012 academic year, TJX spokeswoman Doreen Thompson said. FIU presented the curricula and diversity the company is looking for when it selects graduates, as the publicly-traded national retail chain continues to grow into a global company.

"To attract young talent, TJX has been recruiting on college campuses across the country for many years, and to keep pace with our company growth, at this time, we are hiring slightly more associates than in previous years," Thompson said.

“We added Florida International University to our recruitment pool this past year and believe that their students, majoring in a wide range of academic disciplines and from very diverse backgrounds, may be excellent candidates for positions in our world-class corporate merchandise training program, or our store operations and distribution training programs,” Thompson said.

Also stomping for talent on campus this year are government agencies, said Paola Documet, Miami-Dade College’s lead director for career and advisement services. The Federal Bureau of Investigations and the Central Intelligence Agency, for example, visited campus this year to talk to students in the college’s criminal justice program; the U.S. Army and U.S. Air Force talked to students completing health sciences degrees to discuss joining the military as medical personnel; and the Department of Agriculture talked to students majoring in science.

“In past years we have called government agencies and they wouldn’t necessarily come,” Documet said. “Now we see their participation increasing.”

But that’s not to say it is all smooth sailing for college grads. Architecture, for example, still isn’t back on campus in a noticeable way, said UM’s García. And for nursing graduates, while there are plenty of entry level jobs, those jobs aren’t in hospitals anymore, but rather in nursing homes, assisted living facilities and other community-based care facilities, MDC’s Document said.

“There was a time three years ago when hospitals were hiring many nursing graduates without experience, and they would train them, but right now many hospitals are going for higher level accreditation, which requires higher level of staff experience,” Documet said.

Stiff competition

Even as more companies are increasing hiring, there still are more people looking for work than jobs available, so it is critical for prospective graduates to prepare well before meeting a company recruiter on campus. That means doing research to learn about the company and its competitors, having a well-crafted resume on paper and for the Web, and going through mock interviews to answer interview questions competently.

“It’s really subjective what is considered the best of the best,” said John Nykolaiszyn, associate director for employer development at FIU. “Obviously, the most objective measure is high GPA (grade point average), but employers will also gauge ‘Will this student fit in our culture?’”

Also, many of the desirable job opportunities will be located out of town. At FIU, for example, the ratio of job offers in town vs. out of town is about 50-50, said FIU’s Nykolaiszyn, while UM’s Garcia sees more of a 70-30 ratio, the larger number being out of town. That’s because many industries have a heavier presence in other parts of the country. Investment banking, for example, is more concentrated in New York, while engineering and technology is more concentrated on the west coast.

Placement experts advise students to be as flexible as they can, especially for that entry-level job that will give them experience.

“South Florida is a little bit of a tough job market, and I think will always remain a tough market,” said Nova’s Klein. “Most students today are less rigid, they have to be. Sometimes you have to leave in order to come back.”

Students getting hired this year should see better salary offers, overall, than in the past two years. Slightly more than half of companies recruiting on campus plan to increase starting salaries by an average of 3.3 percent, according to the NACE survey. Last year’s average starting salary across all industries was \$44,318, which would make this year’s average starting salary \$45,648.

Liberal Arts majors?

And what does the market hold for liberal arts majors — the students who read and wrote ad nauseam about literature, philosophy, political science, sociology, psychology and the like?

Many students with those majors go on to graduate school, placement experts said, but many looking for work right after college will also fit in many companies, particularly if they’ve had an internship before graduation and show determination to bring something to an employer’s table.

“More and more companies want to recruit students from all majors, so it really depends what the student wants to do,” said UM’s Garcia.

Said Nova’s Klein: “I have a lot of psychology students who go into management training programs. They didn’t want to study business, but they want to be in business now.”