

Tips for college graduates on finding jobs as a better economy beckons

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Future of Work

Many colleges turned to online platforms such as Handshake or Simplicity to conduct virtual job fairs. Here are some tips.



Hofstra graduate Katie Schaeffer in front of her home [Read more](#) Katie Schaeffer

by Christine Johnson-Hall, For The Inquirer

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Katie Schaeffer never opened her graduation gown. A film and writing major, Schaeffer left the Hofstra University campus for spring break last year, only to close her college career in the Zoom-filled void of COVID-19 shutdowns.

"We never got to say goodbye to our friends, had to scrounge for books [to finish the school year], there was no finale," recalled Schaeffer, of Lumberton, N.J., noting that Nassau County, where Hofstra is based, had the second-highest case rate in New York state. "It was terrifying. I really felt like the world was ending."

Finishing finals and seeking a full-time job as a copywriter/editor from home, Schaeffer, 22, and other seniors [faced a job market billowing with economic uncertainty](#) as COVID-19 infections surged, fell, and surged again. Among companies that were hiring, some sought more experienced workers. Many businesses closed or adapted to virtual and hybrid models. Entry-level job postings fell off a cliff, according to data from Burning Glass Technologies, a Boston-based labor market analytics firm.

The Class of 2020 "graduated into the maelstrom of a calamitous job market," said Matt Sigelman, Burning Glass CEO, working virtually from his home in Bryn Mawr.

However, the picture is starting to brighten. While January and February saw double-digit declines in entry-level job hiring, that trend reversed in March when hiring those job seekers rose 13% while experienced-level hires jumped 23%, according to [Burning Glass](#) data. Sectors hiring bachelor of arts degree holders and people with three-plus years of experience for the most jobs right now include: manufacturing, information, and retail trade.

"Yes, there's a light at the end of the tunnel," Sigelman said, noting that he expects demand to remain high for jobs in the remote economy, the green economy, and the automated economy.

In this unique and challenging year, how have area colleges prepared the Class of 2021 to land jobs in their fields?

Pandemic closures have put everyone's tech skills and mastery under the spotlight. Zoom interviews and virtual onboarding are now the norm. For college career guidance leaders, the hard pivot to virtual brought challenges and rewards.

College faculty taught and coached students in lockdown via computer screens. Many colleges turned to online platforms such as [Handshake](#) or [Simplicity](#) to conduct virtual job fairs — a necessary shift since traditional in-person job fairs were unsafe. Some colleges joined forces for a job fair showcase — welcoming national and international employers that previously would not have traveled to on-site events. Students now had free rein to serve internships on the West Coast or anywhere else in the world.

"Technology has leveled the playing fields. It's helped us reach nationwide jobs. That's a win-win-win for us," said Nick Schaefer, director of career development at Gwynedd Mercy University.

For students and staff, ties and blazers went out the window as most everyone relaxed into their own comfy, casual, work-from-home wardrobe.

"We've all been sitting home in yoga pants," laughed Barbara Hewitt, University of Pennsylvania's executive director of career services. But she reminds students to dress professionally from head to toe for interviews, saying one employer "had a job candidate stand up" for an interview.

Speaking of attire, Rowan University students can get donated business attire from [Career Wardrobe](#), founded by president Ali Houshmand for what they need, said director of the Office of Career Advancement Robert Bullard.

"One of our students had his [Houshmand] tie on" for an interview, Bullard said. "For a student, the clothes can make all the difference."

Bullard said 2021 brought students and faculty together on a mission as never before to foster career prep skills and build alumni connections through virtual panels, showcasing careers and job fields.

"We really doubled down on alumni mentorship, creating a lifelong connection with students and alums," Bullard said.

Penn boosted one-on-one student appointments, beefed up its robust virtual career panels, and added more alumni/student networking events. To confront Zoom burnout, Gwynedd Mercy created a digital employer packet that students and employers can browse on their own time to see opportunities.

In a year like no other, students followed the news from their dorms or homes and rode the wave of uncertainty. Rowan University senior Fiona Hughes, of Deptford, saw a dramatic shift in perspective from junior year to now.

"When the pandemic hit, I was really scared. Markets were going crazy, and I was nervous that the job market wouldn't recover for years," said Hughes, a double accounting/finance major.

However, many of her senior friends did find full-time jobs after graduating virtually, she said, adding that her double major and Rowan's Rohrer College of Business positioned her well for the job search. Hughes, 21, has four job offers from the financial sector in her pocket.

Sierra Mills, a Doylestown native and a Penn Class of 2020 grad, used LinkedIn, connected with alumni, and leveraged all of Penn's built-in recruiting training to land a job as a data engineering analyst in New York City after graduation. However, realizing it wasn't the best fit, Mills accepted a post this year as a software engineer at another NYC firm.

"I was so lucky," Mills reflected, saying many of her classmates turned to graduate school during an uncertain year.

For Arcadia University psychology major Robert Gervasi, 22, of Conshohocken, serving an internship and taking a course on professional development brought real-world experience as well as a crisp resume, cover letter, and mock interview practice. "I feel very prepared," said Gervasi.

Gervasi, who worked with the local nonprofit [Don't Stall Just Call](#) (educating people about the signs of alcohol poisoning), is planning to get his behavior technician certificate and take a gap year before starting grad school to be a school psychologist.

For the Class of 2020, getting to walk across the stage for graduation was either virtual, canceled, or postponed. This year many colleges are planning limited outdoor in-person ceremonies. Like so many other seniors at this moment, Hughes and Gervasi are finishing finals and thesis papers with their eyes on graduation dates they weren't sure were going to happen.

On May 25, Katie Schaeffer, now working as a freelance copy editor, will finally don her graduation gown to collect her 2020 degree, magna cum laude, at Hofstra. Due to COVID-19, parents are not allowed to attend in person.

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