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Standing Out in the Crowd

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Standing Out in the Crowd

Faced with a tough job market, students are bringing their A game.

**Story by NICOLE TRAVIS '11
Photos by MARC FEATHERLY**

Just as Illinois Wesleyan students reach the finish line of graduation, many find themselves in another race: to find a decent job.

Despite the current economic downturn, the nationwide unemployment rate for people who hold a bachelor's degree is 4.7 percent — less than half the rate for those with only high school diplomas. Still, there's no denying that job prospects are tough for new college graduates. Only one out of four college seniors this year had a job waiting for them upon graduation, according to a survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers. That's up from one in five last year, but still not encouraging news.

A survey of 323 graduates of the Class of 2009 by Illinois Wesleyan's Hart Career Center shows that, within six months of graduating, 44 percent had found full-time employment, 32 percent were in graduate school, 7 percent worked part-time and 15 percent were still formulating their plans or seeking employment.

“This is about what we expected,” said Career Center Director Warren Kistner '83. “Most of our graduates who sought employment found jobs. Our contacts with potential employers show that our students have what they're looking for in new workers, and the prospects for our 2010 graduates look even brighter.”

Still, Kistner concedes, IWU students shouldn't walk into the employment market after graduation expecting to automatically find a job. “We advise our students to start early, even in their first and second years of college, to obtain the necessary skills and background that will make them stand out to employers.”

The following tips are not just for new job seekers, but for anyone competing in a tight job market.

Networking is key

When it comes to career planning, there's truth in that old cliché, “It's not what you know; it's who you know.”

That's why Hart Career Center staff encourages students to make as many face-to-face contacts as possible via career center programs or job and internship fairs.

For English major Melinda McNeil, attending a job fair last year eventually led to a job at Liberty Mutual that she began after graduating in May.

“I was trying to find a company and I couldn’t find their booth,” she recalls. That was when she made eye contact with a Liberty Mutual representative. “It was kind of that awkward eye contact where it was long enough that I thought I should probably say hi.” After approaching the representative and introducing herself, McNeil was asked back for an interview with the company that day and later accepted a job offer from them.



At the annual Fall Internship Fair held in the University’s Memorial Center, students meet with employers in a variety of fields.

“That face-to-face interaction — there’s nothing like that,” says McNeil. “It gives you an opportunity to be more than just a piece of paper.”

IWU alumni are another vital networking resource. Alumni who volunteer through the Career Center’s mentoring network talk with students about their career goals or invite them to visit their workplaces. At events like the alumni coffeehouse series, graduates speak about their own career progression and the variety of options that may be available in their fields.

Alumni also frequently assist students in finding jobs at their workplaces. “Working through alums is a great tool for us to get our foot in the door for some organizations that might not necessarily recruit at a smaller school like IWU,” explains Kistner. “We’re not going to have the drawing power of a University of Illinois or a Michigan in terms of numbers, but we know we have the quality. Sometimes we have to find our way in the back door by finding an alum in a company who already values a Wesleyan education and who will shepherd a resume through the ranks and make sure it gets into the proper person’s hands.”

Kyle Borkowski, an accounting major who graduated in May, was able to secure interviews with two different companies via alumni networking. “It is an enormous benefit to have someone inside the organization pushing for you come interview time,” he says.

Laurie Diekhoff, assistant Career Center director, urges students to use “whatever networks they might have” to make valuable alumni career connections, whether they be Greek affiliations, athletics, on-campus organizations or academic departments.

Of course, networking has taken on a whole new dimension in the Internet age, and job experts encourage students to build connections through business-oriented social networking sites such as LinkedIn, which has over 65 million registered users. But while professional networking and

web recruiting have taken off in the past decade, recruiters still depend on more traditional placement and interview processes to make their final decisions.

According to Renee Haning, college relations and employment coordinator at COUNTRY Financial in Bloomington, “Job and internship fairs are still one of the best ways for us to recruit, especially at the college level. It allows us to have a conversation with the individual, and to learn more, to ask questions. That interpersonal communication is really critical for us, and it’s a great way to recruit.”

Be flexible

“One thing that I would encourage potential job seekers to do is broaden their perspective a little bit — look at things they wouldn’t have looked at before,” says Kistner, who suggests that students look into the non-profit sector as well as postbaccalaureate internships and fellowships for work experience.



Warren Kistner (seated) meets with Kyle Borkowski and Melinda McNeil, who both used the Career Center to find jobs after graduating this spring.

McNeil says she made her way to both an internship and job offer by keeping an open mind while researching her prospects. She had never heard of the Normal-based CornBelts until just days before the new professional baseball team contacted her for an internship interview. “When they asked me why it interested me, I said, ‘Because right now I’m open to trying new things.’ And I think that’s what people need to be when they’re looking. Don’t judge a book by its cover — definitely go in thinking, ‘Yeah, maybe I could do this.’”

Haning has noticed that students are more flexible in planning career goals than they have been in the past — a change she considers positive. She encourages students to “be open to opportunities that you weren’t originally thinking about that might be good for your career development or help you ultimately get to a dream job in the future.”

“I think there has to be some adaptability,” Kistner concurs. “It’s going to be absolutely key. Students are going to have to recognize that things aren’t necessarily going to fit into nice, neat boxes.”

For that reason, Kistner says, the broadness of a liberal arts education should give an edge for job-seeking Wesleyan students. Scott Searles ’95, a business analysis team leader for Kimberly-

Clark, agrees. “The IWU experience provides a particular advantage, because the liberal arts curriculum requires students to stretch themselves into areas where they may not be as comfortable.” Such an education shows that a student is capable of “applying critical-thinking skills, presenting their ideas well, thinking fast on their feet and [possessing] substantial bandwidth to take on assignments” — all assets that are eagerly sought by today’s employers.

Do your homework

“The main message that we try to get out to students is that career planning is not something that you do two weeks before you graduate,” Kistner says. “It really is something that a student should begin thinking about when they first walk through our doors.”

A 2009 survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that “students who used career center services extensively were significantly more successful in the job search” than those who had used the career center minimally or not at all. With these statistics in mind, the Hart Career Center has taken action to make its services more accessible, such as developing a Facebook page and blog that take advantage of students’ growing interest in social media. According to Kistner, the center received over 2,000 appointments this year, with 80 percent of students accessing its services at least once prior to graduation.

Unfortunately, Kistner says, many students delay accessing the Career Center until late in college, thus failing to take advantage of the career guidance and planning, internship and job-search assistance it offers.

In McNeil’s experience, getting an early start at the Career Center helped prepare her for the remainder of her job-search process. “I went in and started working with Warren, and he completely tore my resume apart, and that’s wonderful. That’s what you need,” she says.

“I also did several mock job interviews, and I feel like that really helped my communication skills. They actually record you, and you get to watch. It’s a very humbling experience; but it’s a great thing to know that I play with my hands a lot when I talk and I need to tone that down a little bit or make sure that I smile a lot to show that I have that confidence.”

“Balancing school and a job search as well as an internship turned out to be a huge challenge,” says Borkowski. “I would guess I spent an average of



Renee Haning from COUNTRY Financial (left) interviews Amy Chang '12 for an internship with the company as part of the Career Center's on-campus recruitment program.

eight to 10 hours a week on my job search, whether it be cold-e-mailing companies, talking with alumni, researching companies, preparing for interviews or just educating myself on the industry.”

McNeil recommends that students get a head start on their job search by starting the summer before their senior year. “If you get a ton done before then, all you have to do is print your resume out and go to the interview.”

That proactive attitude was crucial through all stages of Borkowski’s job search process — and it all came down to making sure he did his homework.

“I knew Baird was a company I really wanted to apply to, but they did not recruit at IWU,” he explains. “So I e-mailed about 10 or so of the higher-up, managing directors, letting them know I was interested in their company and that my resume was attached for their consideration. One of them passed my resume to a recruiter who eventually contacted me to schedule an interview. After three phone interviews and two days of interviewing at the Chicago office, I finally received an offer.”

But this kind of preparation is even more beneficial for recruiters, who prefer to hire candidates who are already familiar with their industry and company.

At COUNTRY, that research is not necessarily limited to reading online newsletters and press release information. Haning suggests “talking to people who have previously interned or are currently working at COUNTRY to hear about their experiences and learn what they like about the organization — how they feel about our culture.”

The right amount of research into a company can also “help you better articulate what you can bring to the organization,” Haning says.

Build on experience

According to Haning, the most important aspect of a candidate that recruiters consider when filling an open position is the relevant experience he or she has already developed. To have a good shot at fitting the bill, students need to get started early on building the skills and knowledge that will be applicable to their future careers.

“Students should begin getting practical experience as early as they can,” Diekhoff says. But, she warns, many of the more competitive internships require students to be at least juniors or seniors just to apply.



Carrie (Harmon) Nance '99 explains internship opportunities at State Farm.

To get a head start while still underclassmen, students should look into a variety of practical-experience venues, including volunteer and research positions. For recruiters like Haning, leadership experience in student organizations does not go unnoticed. “As you get more involved in different organizations in the academic environment, you certainly are developing leadership skills that can be translated back into the work environment.”

Diekhoff adds that studying abroad also develops skills “that are very valuable in the workplace: comfort interacting with diverse groups of people; better understanding of cultural differences; and the heightened abilities to adapt to change, work independently, take risks and solve problems.”

The best experience of all, most experts agree, is an internship. According to a 2009 survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, college graduates who had participated in internships “fared far better in the job market” than those who had not.

“An internship isn’t the only way to get practical experience,” Diekhoff says. “Relevant leadership and volunteer experiences are critical for your success and your future. But I would still say that an internship is probably the single most effective way to demonstrate to potential employers that you are ready for the job.”

Looking into the future, Haning says, student interns will be a valuable resource for organizations to consider when replacing the 76 million baby boomers who are due to retire in the coming decades.

“There will come a point when all organizations are going to lose some of their leadership and need people who can fill in those gaps,” she says. “It’s great to bring in people who have leadership skills now so we can continue to develop them as leaders for the future of our organization.”

Don’t get discouraged

Despite all of the professional and anecdotal advice available to them, Illinois Wesleyan students may still face disappointment and rejection in their job searches. But students should know that in a tough economic environment, getting turned down is just part of the process and should not be seen as a signal for surrender.

McNeil was frustrated at the beginning of her job search. None of her campus jobs were relevant to the professional career she wished to pursue. In the full year it took her to land an internship, she focused on building up more relevant experience by getting a job as a church secretary the

summer before her senior year. By the end of that year, she had the luxury of making a choice between three different job offers.

Finding a job during an economic downturn is “going to take a longer period of time,” says Kistner. “If things were rolling along like they were some years back and somebody had a gap between school and work or between two jobs, there might be a question about motivation. But right now there’s more recognition that this student could have done everything right, but the number of opportunities out there are just not what they were at one point.”

Diekhoff’s advice for students does not change in light of these challenges. She continues to advocate proactive, innovative job-search techniques: Keep trying, get creative, aim outside the box, volunteer, follow up, be assertive, show your interest, use your network. Kistner adds that students should read publications that are relevant to their job search in order to become more informed about their desired industry. These publications may also specify emerging job markets or opportunities, as well as those that are fading.

“You have to try to determine if you would be getting into a dead-end field, or something where there’s likely to be some growth taking place. Have ways to stay current yourself, and update your skill sets. Tap into those things you do well that may have increased value in this new economy,” Kistner says. For example, “there’s going to be a bigger push for green jobs, and we’re going to see new opportunities with social media. I think what students are going to have to do, to a certain extent, is ride the wave.”

As new graduates navigate the difficult economy, Haning suggests that they “remain patient and persistent as they go through their career search. It is undoubtedly a tough job market right now; but these are cycles that we’ve seen throughout history, and we hopefully will see a change soon. In the meantime, what I’m recommending to students is to get out their A game, if you will — to utilize all the resources they have available to them, so they are as ready as they can be when the opportunity comes their way.”

Garrett Rapp '10 contributed reporting to this story.