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More employers, more jobseekers attend collegiate career fair

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The 400 people who crowded into the first hour of the Springfield Collegiate Career Fair Thursday were a sign of how many people still are trying to find work, organizers of the event said.

The significant difference this year was the mix of employers at the Springfield Collegiate Career Fair — fewer from the public sector, more from the private — and the fact that the nearly 90 organizations were looking to hire.

“There’s just more energy this year,” said Rachel Hasenyager, employer relations coordinator at UIS.

Hasenyager said more retail and financial-services companies signed up this year, while there were fewer government agencies. UIS, Lincoln Land Community College, Robert Morris University and Benedictine University sponsor the event, which is in its 13th year.

While exchanging information at tables spread through much of the first floor of the Public Affairs Center, both employers and would-be employees described a still difficult and highly competitive job market.

But employers said they are, indeed, hiring again, and applicants said it seems worth getting out there.

“I’ve been here 11 years, and I’ve never seen it like this,” said Tammy Craig, director of the UIS Career Development Center.

Craig said the job market never really recovered after 2001, when the economy was hit by the terrorism attacks on Sept. 11. The last two to three years have been even harder because of the recession, she added.

“We started seeing more alumni come back who were laid off,” said Craig. “They are trying to figure out if they needed to go back to school to learn new skills, or if they were going to do career changes completely, because the work they were doing has been eliminated.

“They understand it’s so competitive out there that they really need to be on top of what to do with their job search.”

A different attitude

Director Mary Beth Ray of LLCC Career Development Services said that, in addition to health care, retail and finance, hiring appears to have picked up in the hospitality and restaurant industries.

While manufacturing is not a big part of the immediate Springfield market, Ray said inquiries from that industry have increased, too.

“What we were seeing even a year ago was still so many of those manufacturing folks being laid off, with nothing out there to offer them except some retraining,” said Ray. “Now, there are some jobs.”

Ray said she was surprised by Thursday’s turnout, especially compared to the 2010 career fair, when the number of job-seekers was considerably lower. Ray said she takes that as a sign people feel optimistic enough now to try again.

“I’m wondering if people were discouraged last year because they knew there weren’t any jobs out there, whereas this year, there’s a different attitude,” said Ray.

What employers want

Corporation Service Company, which provides data and processing services for financial service companies, the real-estate industry and the legal profession, added 25 employees last year, said Russell Lutkehus, a team leader for the company.

He said the company probably will add about that many again this year. CSC, headquartered at Sixth Street and Stevenson Drive, now has 175 employees. Lutkehus said he considers the expansion a sign banking and finance will continue to recover.

“When people are getting ready to lend money, they need our services,” Lutkehus said.

Ameren Corp. recruiter Angie Turner, who oversees the company’s Illinois territory, said the utility has openings ranging from engineers to line workers.

Turner, who worked her way up from an entry-level job in Peoria 18 years ago, also had advice for those new to the job market.

“Apply for jobs that you have a passion for. Just don’t apply for anything,” said Turner. “Right now, what I’m experiencing is a lot of people just apply to get their foot in the door, and I understand that.

“If you go after jobs that you really have a passion for, that makes all the difference in the world. Then you’re not job hopping.”

Turner said internships, paid or not, and volunteer work are good ways for people to find work that suits them and build resumes.

Job-seekers talk

Still tough out there. A sample of job-seekers at the 2011 Springfield Collegiate Career Fair.

"I have been looking for a couple of months now. I'm open to new ideas. There's few openings with a lot of applicants. They want several years experience under your belt and, being fresh out of college, that's kind of difficult to have."

-- Jacob Price, Jacksonville; graduated in December from Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville in sociology and employment relations.

"It's supposedly growing. Evidently the numbers are going up for employment in my area. Even with the recession, there's job opportunities in my field."

-- Clay Yates, Jacksonville; working on a master's degree in management information systems.

"It's hard. They are looking for full-time people and for people with experience. I'm just looking to make a little money."

-- Daniel Sanjoy, Decatur; first-year student at LLCC who plans to major in communications.

"I'm looking for part time, to have some supplemental income and to get myself out of the house a little. I decided just to try it and see what's going on."

-- Ronda Morrison, Springfield, mother of a 5- and a 2-year old.

Unemployment fell in 2010

After starting out at the highest level in decades, Springfield-area unemployment fell along with the rates in the state and nation in 2010. Here are Springfield's percentage rates month-by-month:

- * January, 10
- * February, 10.1
- * March, 9.3
- * April: 8.4
- * May: 7.1
- * June: 8.2
- * July: 8.5
- * August: 7.9
- * September: 7.5
- * October: 7.6
- * November: 7.6
- * December: 7.1

Source: Illinois Department of Employment Security (Note: January 2011 figures will be released in March)

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