Education Special Report

Degree-seeking students jump-start careers before graduation

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Keiser University's Neal Isaac works with student Duroy Burnett.

When Duroy Burnett left the Navy after eight years aboard the U.S.S. John F. Kennedy and working security at Jacksonville Naval Air Station, he wondered what career to pursue. Burnett wanted the job stability of a growing industry. He was versed in security, and his family wanted him to pursue health care. Burnett also felt a passion for legal studies.

"My father gave me the spiel: 'You'll make a lot of money if you become a male nurse,'" said Burnett, 30, who tapped his Chapter 33 Montgomery G.I. Bill benefits to get tuition and three years of living expenses while he pursues his degree at [http://www.bizjournals.com/profiles/company/us/fl/fort_lauderdale/keiser_university/3244570/](http://www.bizjournals.com/profiles/company/us/fl/fort_lauderdale/keiser_university/3244570/) in Fort Lauderdale. "But something was missing. I knew that if you're not happy in what you're doing, eventually you'll have a nonchalant attitude and you'll lose your job."

Apparently, Burnett couldn't have gone wrong with any of his choices. Paralegal, health care and security are three in-demand careers for people returning to the classroom for degrees. Accounting, finance, human resources, technology, computer design and cyber security are also hot.

And employers are interested. College hiring is up 19 percent, year-over-year, in 2011, according to a survey of 840 employers conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers. In Florida, some academic advisers claim hiring is the best it has been since 2007.
Three-quarters of students at Keiser University are “career changers” who are pursuing everything from certificates to master’s degrees to bolster their job options, said Neal Isaac, the school’s associate vice chancellor of student services. Online job postings are up 14 percent statewide, he said. Schools with in-class, online and hybrid programs are drawing nontraditional students who are looking to augment their current careers and widen their options.

“Business program graduates are finding jobs in HR and accounting,” said Joshua Padron, South Florida Metro president with http://www.bizjournals.com/profiles/company/us/fl/jacksonville/devry_university/3296859/. “It’s a strong market for graduates with the right credentials.”

Science, technology, engineering and math are in-demand career pursuits, said Shari Saperstein, director of career development with http://www.bizjournals.com/profiles/company/us/fl/fort_lauderdale/nova_southeastern_university/3244560/. At the Davie school, medical degrees – physician and medical assistants, and students earning their Bachelor of Science in nursing – are finding jobs. On the business side, students who have a breadth of knowledge across disciplines are gaining attention. For example, a Bachelor of Business Administration graduate who learned accounting, human resources and finance can be seen as more of “a generalist,” Saperstein said.

“Employers are really looking to get the most bang for the buck,” she said. “Not just an accountant, but someone who can do a little bit of everything.” That includes entry-level applicants who can be groomed into specialized employees, said Sandra Jakubow, director of the Career Development Center at http://www.bizjournals.com/profiles/company/us/fl/boca_raton/florida_atlantic_university/929960/. Job postings were up, especially for engineering, IT and accounting – but people who could be massaged into managers. A recent job fair had 24 percent more recruiters than in years past, she said.

“They’re coming back to college campuses for entry-level positions for management training,” she said.

Keiser has seen a 55 percent increase in the number of paralegal graduates in the past year, with many finding jobs or internships before graduation. In fact, Keiser’s online career center has seen a 31 percent increase in paralegal and legal jobs posted by legal employers in the past year.

Earlier this year, Burnett landed a paid internship – “actually, it’s a well-paid internship,” he corrected – as a clerk with the IRS’ Department of Chief Counsel in Plantation. He hopes it will become a full-time position once he has his bachelor’s degree in legal studies in 2013.

Burnett also brings the intangibles many employers seek – leadership, communication skills, an ability to work in a team environment. Many older, nontraditional students have already learned many of these attributes in previous positions. Younger students should invest the time to hone them, Saperstein said. Internships also draw a positive nod; the National Association of Colleges and Employers also reported that students who had internships were offered a job 42 percent of the time, versus slightly more than 30 percent for those without.
While in the Navy, Burnett would help fellow sailors – single parents like him – who needed assistance with paperwork to see their kids. In February, he was elected president of Phi Theta Kappa honor society. He recently accompanied Keiser officials on a trip to Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C.

Once he decided on legal studies, “everything made sense for me,” said Burnett, who has an eye for politics. “With the field I’ve chosen, I have a true passion. I do know that I love my field and am looking forward to getting that bachelor’s degree.”