HAWAII NEWS

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University of Hawaii students face uncertain job market

By Jaylynn Sasano jsasano@staradvertiser.com

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Many students, whether in their first or final year of college, feel challenged by economic and competitive factors when looking toward their future after graduating. Students are seen at Campus Center at University of Hawaii at Manoa on Tuesday in Honolulu.

With University of Hawaii graduations continuing through Saturday, students preparing for life after college are weighing a job market shaped by competition, cost of living, artificial intelligence and the growing expectation that a degree alone may not be enough.

Across majors — from nursing and engineering to biology and business — students described the same pressure in different ways: build the resume early, find internships, make connections, and figure out whether they can afford to stay in Hawaii.

“It’s terrifying,” said Faith Harriman, a 19-year-old biology major from Maui, who hopes to become a surgeon.

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For Harriman, the uncertainty comes from knowing that the path toward medical school and a future job depends on more than earning a degree.

“I feel like there’s jobs open now, but people are so specific on what they want that it’s harder for students to even think about getting a job,” Harriman said.

At UH's Shidler College of Business, career placement numbers tell a more optimistic story.

Rick Varley, Shidler's director of internships and career development, said 39% of the college's 303 graduating bachelor's degree students have already accepted full-time job offers. The number of students going on to master's degree programs is 34, and 20 are taking the summer off to travel.

However, the pressure to gain experience is already reaching students who are not close to graduation.

Aaron Egan — a 19-year-old, incoming sophomore majoring in mechanical engineering — said he has put "a pretty decent amount of thought" into his future job search because he does not want to reach graduation and realize he missed important steps.

"I think that it's something where the learning curve has definitely gotten up," Egan said. "It's not impossible to get a job, but it depends very heavily on your major and also your connections."

For some students, the message from professors, classmates and advisers has been simple.

"Internships, internships, internships," Egan said.

That advice has also reached Colbey Pena, a 19-year-old sophomore majoring in mechanical engineering, who said he has been attending career fairs, joining clubs and applying for internships.

"I know the job market is not the greatest right now," Pena said. "So it makes me feel kind of worried and scared, but I think as long as I work hard, I'll be able to find something."

In nursing, Cassidy Domingo, a 21-year-old junior from Mililani, said staying in Hawaii may be difficult even in a field often

associated with shortages.

“Since nursing is really competitive here, I was thinking that I would have to go away to the mainland for a little bit because Hawaii hospitals want experienced nurses,” Domingo said. “They don’t hire new grads necessarily.”

A plan to earn her certified nursing assistant license is one way Domingo said she hopes to gain hospital experience and make connections before graduation.

“I want to make myself as shiny as possible so that I can get picked,” Domingo said.

For Genshu Price — an 18-year-old freshman from Oahu’s Windward Side studying business with a focus on marketing and a minor in sociology — the goal is to stay in Hawaii or eventually return home.

“If it was up to me and if there were no living cost challenges, then I would definitely stay here,” Price said. “But Hawaii is one of the most expensive places to live.”

Varley said students are hearing negative news about the job market, especially as artificial intelligence changes hiring and some companies pull back from entry-level positions.

“Part of what we have to do here is say, ‘Look past the negative,’” Varley said. “There’s opportunities.”

The rising role of AI has added another layer of uncertainty for students preparing to enter the workforce.

Pena called AI a “double-edged sword,” saying it depends on how students use it.

“If you use it in all your classes and in your whole life, then you’re not learning anything,” Pena said. “But if you use it

beneficially then it'll help you learn and grow."

Varley said AI can help students practice interviews, but warned against relying on it to replace the personal work of applying for jobs.

"Don't expect AI to do everything for you," Varley said. "Because that's why you can't find jobs in the first place."

The strong candidates, according to Varley, are those who can communicate with people face to face.

"The more chance students have of interacting with humans … that's really important more than ever," Varley said.

From an employer's perspective, Walter Dods Jr., former chairman and CEO of First Hawaiian Bank, said this year's graduates are entering a workforce very different from the one he joined.

"My advice to them is to be adaptable, to stay curious, to learn by mistakes and to understand that everything does change," Dods said.

In Hawaii, he said, modesty can also make interviews harder for local students.

"We can't hire you if we don't know you," Dods said. "You need to express yourself. You need to make sure that we understand your talents and your values."

For seniors still looking for jobs in their field, Varley said the search itself should become the work.

"Make it your job to find a job," Varley said. "Don't discount a job that you feel is below you."

For Dods, the path after graduation comes down to work ethic, confidence and community.

“My recommendation is get a job and work like hell,” Dods said. “I call it the shortcut.”

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