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## It's a good year to be a college graduate; Offers abound for accountants and engineers - and firms going extra mile to hire

**BYLINE:** L.M. SIXEL, Staff

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When John Merancy was researching career opportunities, he figured mechanical engineers would be in short supply, especially with oil prices so high.

The bet paid off. Today, Merancy will receive his bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Houston, and on May 21 he starts his new job at Williams Energy.

After weighing five offers, Merancy took a \$67,000-a-year job with the company's engineering development program, where he'll learn design and project management - and he got a \$2,000 sign-on bonus.

The economy may be cooling a little, but it's been a pretty good year for college graduates. Especially those getting degrees in some highly sought-after fields, such as engineering, accounting and finance.

"This year was definitely stronger than last year," said Heidi Glantzberg, assistant director of experiential education in the career services center at Rice University.

Local numbers weren't available, but according to a report from the National Association of Colleges and Employers, businesses it surveyed said they plan to hire nearly 20 percent more college graduates this year than last.

### More jobs posted online

Glantzberg recalls demand was so strong at one Rice career fair extra space had to be rented to accommodate the 92 companies wanting in, and she had to say no to the recruiters who didn't reserve fast enough.

"I can't tell you the last time we had a waiting list," she said, recalling previous years in which the career service staff had to cajole employers to come. "It was crazy."

Glantzberg also could tell by the questions company recruiters were asking that they were feeling pressure, too.

They'd ask if their competitors were making a presentation to students or just sending a representative to campus and whether they'd be interviewing at the career fair, she said.

"They want to be here first," she said.

UH has seen a big spike in recruiting this year, too, but it has come mostly through its online job service site. This year, employers posted 23,000 jobs online compared with about 16,000 last year, said David Small, UH's assistant vice president for student services.

Many of them came from small and mid-size companies that don't have a college recruiting office, he said, adding that he saw more of those smaller companies at the university's job fairs this year.

"It's a popular and lower-cost way to recruit," he said.

Small calls 2007 a better-than-average year and estimates salaries are up 3 to 4 percent compared to last year.

Though 2007 is good for graduates, it's still a year that has required students to be persistent and creative and, this is key: Start their search early.

Josh Hesterman heard that advice and worked hard during the fall semester to find a job.

"I was getting a little panicked," said Hesterman, who is receiving a bachelor's degree in English from Rice University today. He was even considering law school as a backup.

But Hesterman landed several second interviews and, in the end, received two offers.

Efforts can pay off

Hesterman's experience appears to echo that of students nationwide.

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers' 2007 Graduating Student Survey, on average each graduating student who applied for a job got 2.25 offers.

In December, he accepted a position as a consultant with technology consultancy Booz Allen Hamilton. His starting salary? It's in the \$60,000s. Plus he's getting a five-figure signing bonus.

Hesterman, who starts Sept. 1, said he was especially touched by the fact the top partner from Houston called to make the offer, not someone from human resources. And he also likes the firm's commitment to pro bono work.

Some of the busiest recruiters are those in auditing, tax and financial consulting.

Cathy Craven Miller, a regional recruiting leader with Deloitte & Touche in Houston, said the firm hired almost 200 new college graduates this year, about 10 percent more than last.

"It's a competitive market," she said, not only with the other big tax and auditing firms but industries such as energy that are hiring more accountants and other finance majors.

To persuade job candidates to join Deloitte & Touche, as well as sell them on Houston, the firm hosted trips to sporting events and Galveston and invited them to dinners to meet the folks they'd be working with, Miller said.

Eager recruiters

Recruiters say it's already looking good for next year's crop of graduates.

Typically, companies start calling in mid-summer to begin scheduling their fall recruiting visits, said Lindsey Guthman, associate director of career services at the University of St. Thomas. But she's already fielding calls from eager recruiters.

Glantzberg, who focuses on student internships, reports a higher-than-usual volume of questions from companies about what to pay their interns.

"If they're hiring more, that's telling me they are ramping up," she said.

Companies typically like to hire from the summer intern pool, then make fall offers.

J. Robert Jones, career resource specialist at Texas Southern University, is dealing with a late surge of students who just before graduation "realize they need a job."

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## GRADUATION COVERAGE

Coming Sunday: Report from the commencement ceremonies at Rice University, University of Houston, Texas Southern University and Houston Community College.

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## JOB SEARCH REMINDERS

Network, network, network.

Remember to say "thank you" in a follow-up note or e-mail after your interview.

Put a professional greeting on your cell phone.

Don't post anything embarrassing on the Web.

Source: **Anna Ivey**, author of The Ivey Guide to Law School Admissions.

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**NOTES:** lm.sixel@chron.com Send us your photos: Show off your graduate in an online photo gallery at chron.com/grads.

**GRAPHIC:** Photo: GOOD TO GO: Josh Hesterman is graduating from Rice University and has a job set at Booz Allen Hamilton. (p. 12)

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