

MAJOR CONCERNS

L.I. COLLEGE GRADUATES FACE UNCERTAIN ECONOMY—AND FUTURE

Michael Cunha did it all by the book.

BY
KEVIN
RYAN

He achieved an SAT score in the top 3 percentile nationally. He earned a full scholarship to Hofstra University, maintained a 3.7 grade point average and graduated with honors. He secured a job and less than two years later was paying his own bills and living on his own—age 24 and financially independent.

The job he worked so hard to achieve that set him on a path to his own version of the American Dream? Waiting tables at Olive Garden.

Cunha, like so many other perfectly qualified college grads across Long Island, has had to resort to a way to earn a living that just a few years ago would have seemed both unimaginable and undesirable. Since late 2008, when the ongoing recession became an accepted fact for most Americans, college students have graduated with the fairly depressing knowledge that a crippled economy awaited them. For the class of 2009 and beyond, the idea of nailing down a steady job immediately after commencement has been an unrealistic one; the notion of leaping straight into career-oriented employment, a pipe dream. With the academic year approaching its conclusion, more than 20,000 college graduates from Long Island—many of whom will earn their degrees from the Island's own 19 colleges and universities—will soon find themselves in a job market still struggling to extricate itself from the Great Recession.

According to a study by the Heldrich Center for Workforce



MICHAEL CUNHA, 24, EARNED A FULL SCHOLARSHIP TO HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY AND GRADUATED WITH HONORS. NEARLY TWO YEARS LATER, HE'S WORKING TWO JOBS, WAITING TABLES AT HURRICANE GRILL & WINGS IN HAUPPAUGE AND OLIVE GARDEN IN RONKONKOMA (BELOW), TO PAY HIS BILLS.

Photos by Jon Sasala/Long Island Press



Development at Rutgers University, only 52 percent of employed recent graduates have jobs that require college degrees. And among the classes of 2009 and 2010, just 22 percent describe their first jobs as being a step towards their intended careers.

"I can't even imagine what you would have to do to get the job you wanted in this economy," says Cunha, of Ronkonkoma. He graduated in 2009 with a psychology degree and pursued the field for a few months, landing several interviews but no offers. In an impulsive moment en route to one interview, he stopped into the Olive Garden a few blocks from his home, spoke to the manager, and was offered a position within a half hour.

It was tough to turn down. There were pressing needs, like paying his car insurance and phone bills—and hopefully having enough left over to cover a gym membership. He's been waiting tables and collecting tips and paychecks ever since, and

he's even picked up another waiting gig, at Hurricane Grill & Wings in Hauppauge.

"I'm kind of rolling with it," he tells the *Press* recently, relaxing at home after an all-day shift of Italian dinners and countless breadstick baskets. "Depending on how things go, I would like to go back to school someday, but it's kind of hard to imagine doing that soon with the economy the way it is."

Cunha's predicament is far from unique—20-somethings across Long Island share his uneasy sentiments. When the National Bureau of Economic Research officially declared that the U.S. was in a recession back in December 2008, it meant that college students would have to gear themselves up for a period of uncertainty that would last for an undefined amount of time. The real world that loomed was merely an in-between, a purgatory for those stuck between college and a career. Only 12 percent of the class of 2009 graduated with

jobs already lined up, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers—an especially staggering statistic considering that the same figure was at 33 percent two years earlier. For the rest, the choices were generally unappealing: Take the first thing available or risk staying unemployed for a long, long time.

Some, like Evan Goldfarb, 23, have already dealt with both. The Massapequa resident graduated from the University of Florida in December 2009 with a degree in finance. Within three months, he was fortunate enough to find work, albeit at a lower salary than he would have hoped, and in an only slightly related field—at a collection agency. Such were the necessary drawbacks of having a steady paycheck, or so he thought.

When his company restructured last March, he was let go. More than a year later, he is still unemployed. He has used a variety of network-



JILLIAN COX, 24, GRADUATED FROM SUNY BUFFALO WITH A DEGREE IN EXERCISE SCIENCE, BUT AFTER HAVING TROUBLE FINDING WORK, SHE ENROLLED AT MOLLOY COLLEGE TO OBTAIN A DEGREE IN NURSING.



many cases, parents and counselors are more invested than students when it comes to declaring a major and finding a career.

"There are people out there who are really concerned, but I don't think our kids are there yet mentally," says Semder, who has almost two decades of counseling experience. "They're not really looking four years down the road. They don't even know what they're going to be studying in four years."

Rather than focusing on a particular field and choosing a school that specializes in it, many students decide to attend the school with the best overall reputation. This choice can offer the most freedom both in college and beyond, but, since the best names tend to carry the heftiest price tags, it can also pile on the loans.

And in cases like Jillian Cox, students might be confident they know what they'd like to pursue, only to realize the job market in that particular field has run dry. This is why, Semder stresses, it is essential they investigate the potential of a particular area before diving headlong into it.

"Do some research," she advises. "See what the projections are for the career you might be thinking about in terms of: Are there jobs? What is the pay in those jobs?"

To start students thinking about this sooner rather than later, many guidance departments meet with them to discuss their future plans or to conduct career interest inventories—written surveys that measure students' inclinations towards certain types of work. One-on-one meetings with students gauge what kinds of paths they envision themselves taking. When students are completely uncertain, guidance counselors like Semder will encourage students to think on the

macro level and consider the type of environment in which they envision themselves: in an office or on street level; behind a desk or solo; helping others or in a competitive atmosphere.

But all this effort and preparation offers few guarantees, as students tend to be fickle: More than 50 percent of undergraduates change their majors at least once.

"A lot of times they think they like the idea of something, like medicine, and then they get there and they're struggling in their physics or chemistry course," she says. "A lot of students think they know what they want to do but don't know what it takes to achieve that goal."

While picking a major is a fluid decision, the choice can still have plenty of long-term impact because all majors are definitely not created equally. The success rates in some disciplines are vastly different from others, as revealed by labor economist Andrew Sum in a recent analysis published in *The New York Times*. Using data collected in the American Community Survey, Sum determined the percentage of college graduates under age 25 who held jobs requiring college degrees (he found the number to be 55.6 percent) and broke the stat down by major. The most successful discipline, nationally, was education: Among recent graduates who were education majors, 71.1 percent currently hold degree-requiring jobs. The same statistic stands at 69.4 percent for engineering, 68.5 for math/computer science, and 64.9 percent for health majors. ➔

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➔ On the other end of the spectrum sit an array of liberal arts majors: communication (51 percent), humanities (45.4 percent) and area studies (such as Latin American studies, 44.7 percent) ranked as the bottom three types of majors.

The stats hold water, considering the natures of the disciplines at the extreme ends of the spectrum. Majors like engineering, accounting and education are disciplines that entail very specific training, points out Fred Burke, executive director of the Career Center at Hofstra University. They require particular skill sets that are honed in college classrooms. It follows that students in such disciplines tend to land jobs more easily, Burke says, because their undergraduate studies train them for the exact type of work they will be doing once in the workforce.

Other disciplines, particularly liberal arts and humanities majors, put less of an emphasis on developing skills and more on personal enrichment. Quite often, they are the most appealing to students, but they do little to guide them toward a career. Majors like philosophy, English and history enrich the person as a whole but often fail to place them in jobs. In many of the best cases, they serve as stepping stones to graduate school, a path that gives more of an upper hand to students entering the workforce but also often means more debt.

Burke points out, however, that Hofstra's career center avoids coercing students to take on particular majors.

"We are objective," he says. "No advisor is going to encourage a student to study XYZ." Doing so, he adds, could steer students towards disciplines they hold little interest in. "Students often ask, 'What should I study?' and we say, 'Well, what are you interested in?' You have to put it back on the student," he says. "We don't push people toward majors and careers. We have to keep a level playing field—we have 140 undergraduate programs and 150 graduate programs."

That being said, Burke notes that the correlation between students' undergraduate majors and the fields in which they go on to work is low. Today's economy has put these choices under a microscope, he says, but in reality, much more powerful factors are at play in determining who gets jobs and who doesn't—such as the initiative they take in the job search.

"I think people are trying to quantify an investment in education," he says. "What you put in is what you get out. College is designed to prepare

you, and if you put forth the effort, you will be successful."

Such effort comes in the form of internships, campus involvement and taking advantage of alumni connections.

"Get to know your faculty," he advises. "Engage the process. Use the career center. Especially in this economic climate, why would you not be close to the office that's going to help you identify jobs and your interests?"

Burke points out that, while there is no surefire trick to success in finding a job, those who are successful tend to take advantage of the connections in their networks and to understand their own skills, values and interests. In the cases of many of the exceptions who were able to find jobs in their chosen fields, success was the result of myriad factors: picking a practical major, forging connections and starting the process early. For Michael Wiederecht, 21, a Massapequa resident and a senior at Notre Dame, this process began with choosing majors that were both engaging and practical.

"I ruled out in my head anything in Arts and Letters," he says, referring to Notre Dame's liberal arts school, "both because they weren't interesting to me, and because I knew it would be much harder to get a job in those fields."

Wiederecht chose a finance and math double major, and he kept a high GPA in both. He interned at PNC Bank during the summer after his junior year and, by the first semester of his senior year, was offered a job with the company when he graduates this May. He points to his strategic choice of majors as a factor in his ability to succeed where many others have not.

"During one of my interviews," he recalls, "a recruiter made the comment: 'He's math and finance? Let's give him an offer right now.'"

For others, a key to success has been the decision to enter fields that are growing while many others shrink. To Alex Mavroudis, 22, a senior at Stony Brook, that meant majoring in information systems, which gears students to jobs in information technology. Mavroudis, who also graduates this May, was recently offered a job at the IT consulting company Capgemini. As companies become more and more reliant on technology, he is confident his field will only continue to expand.

"Nowadays with the job market being so difficult," he says, "it's nice to go into a field that has more opportunities and is growing every year."

And success stories do exist in the teaching sector, even though Long

THROUGH PREPAREDNESS, HARD WORK AND A LITTLE BIT OF LUCK, **HEATHER TRIFILETTI**, 25, WAS ABLE TO FIND A JOB IN HER FIELD OF STUDY, AS A MATH TEACHER IN THE BAYPORT-BLUE POINT SCHOOL DISTRICT.



Island's budget issues make it a far less attractive major than in most of the country. Heather Trifiletti, 25, of Ronkonkoma, majored in mathematics and minored in education at Adelphi University. She completed her undergraduate in three years, then spent a fourth year attaining a master's in secondary education while she interned with the math department at a middle school. The gig didn't land her a full time job in that district, but when she finished her coursework in 2009, her principal passed her resume on to other schools on the Island. Eventually, she landed a job as a math teacher for 7th and 8th grade students at James Wilson Young Middle School in the Bayport-Blue Point School District, where she is now a full-time tenured teacher. She realizes her good fortune was the result of preparation, hard work and a few auspicious breaks.

"The internship that I did usually lines up everyone for a job the next year. I was the only person out of ten who had a full-time job for the next September," she says. "I felt so lucky to have gotten a job on Long Island—and I still do."

Burke points out that, in today's

economy, college graduates like Trifiletti need to put forth the extra effort to become part of the workforce.

"Employers are saying they can't find good talent. The media is saying there is a shortage of jobs. I think college grads need to be aware they're entering a competitive job market," he says, "but they have to think of ways to separate themselves."

For those graduates now several years removed from college, many of whom have spent years either unemployed or in positions they're over-qualified for, the recession has quelled their youthful hopefulness with an unwelcome dose of reality. But while those who graduated into the teeth of the recession—the classes of 2009 and 2010 especially—have certainly taken a beating, many of them are making the best of what they've been given.

Deneen Dismore, 24, of Freeport, graduated in 2009 with a marketing degree from Boston College, and for nearly two years, she bounced among odd jobs: retail at a jewelry store, receptionist at a hair salon and a six-month stint as a full-time babysitter.

"I even have a real estate license I don't use," she says. All



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IT TOOK **DENEEN DISMORE**, 24, NEARLY TWO YEARS TO FIND A JOB IN HER FIELD. "IT GAVE ME A REALITY CHECK," SHE SAYS. "I AM NOT ENTITLED TO ANYTHING."

→ the while, however, she stayed focused on her goals. "I always made sure I was networking, had my nose in the market," she adds. "I even carried my resume around with me. I was kind of a psychopath."

Last August, Dismore found a position as the marketing director for a dentist's office. While patients have their teeth drilled a few rooms away, she helps the practice expand its clientele—something a bit closer to her desired career path, even though it's not quite the situation she would have conjured up for herself a few years ago.

"I always saw myself in more of a trendy than corporate environment," she says, "but I'm happy where I am."

The importance of the experience hasn't been lost on her.

"The economy whooped me, spit me out, but you know what? I think it gave me a reality check. I am not entitled to anything."

And as for the overwhelming majority of those who are about to graduate and don't already have jobs in hand—are they giving up on their dreams altogether? Hardly. A study by the Pew Research Center found that, while only about a third of young people feel they make enough money,

89 percent of those who don't think they earn enough foresee that they will in the future. As the situation remains dire, optimism remains unchanged.

Michelle Esbin, 21, a Massapequa resident and a senior at Ithaca College, graduated this December, a semester early. The television-radio major hopes to embark on a career in the entertainment industry, either in Los Angeles, where she spent a semester interning with Will Ferrell's Funny or Die website, or in New York, where she interned with Nickelodeon last summer and recently signed a three-month contract to work for the company.

"I definitely won't be starting anywhere near the top, but I'm OK with that," she says. "Any job is better than no job."

Funding her undergrad experience has accrued mountains of debt, and she acknowledges that she'll be paying it off for years to come. But she's hopeful that it will be worth it.

"To think that all of it is for nothing—that would be terrible. I believe all that time and effort will find me something," she says.

"In the end, I'm optimistic. I have to be." **D**

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