

NEWS

A weak job market has college graduates going...

Back to school

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Terese Gregg said she didn't consider graduate school until her last semester of undergraduate work, when she was looking for a job.

"It just didn't seem like there was much out there," said the 22-year-old Gregg, who got her bachelor's degree in environmental engineering at the University of Florida in fall 2002. "I wasn't too encouraged to keep looking."

Instead of entering the work force, she decided to stay at UF to pursue a master's degree in the same field.

Gregg isn't the only one avoiding the job market.

Last year, graduate schools around the nation grew at an unusually high rate. Most experts say it's because of the economy and the growing need for advanced degrees in a competitive job market.

At UF, that increase was up about six times more than the national trend, mostly because the growing interest in graduate school comes at a time when UF is trying to increase its graduate school enrollment.

For the 2001-02 school year, a 4 percent to 5 percent increase in national graduate school enrollment was expected, compared with 2 percent and 3 percent increases in previous years, said Peter Syverson, vice president for research at the Council of Graduate Schools, based in Washington.

"That's a very large increase in graduate enrollment," Syverson said.

As far as trends go, Syverson said the council has observed during the years that as the economy softens, graduate enrollment rises.

He said the last time he saw this kind of enrollment increase was in the early 1990s recession, after the Gulf War.

He said another reason for the increase could be that many more professions require or strongly recommend advanced degrees.

"Even if the economy wasn't soft, we'd still see an increase, just not as rapid," Syverson said.

Increases all around

At UF, graduate school enrollment has increased 27 percent, from 7,504 in fall 1998 to 9,554 in fall 2002, according to UF's Office of Institutional Research.

William Kolb, director of admissions at UF, said in an e-mail that UF has seen an increase in both applications and enrollment for graduate school.

At Florida State University in Tallahassee, graduate school enrollment increased 16 percent during the same time period and the University of Central Florida in Orlando increased 38 percent, according to FSU and UCF's Office of Institutional Research.

Kenneth Gerhardt, the associate dean of the graduate school, said it is part of UF's goal to increase graduate enrollment to 11,000 students; it's about 9,200 now.

He said because UF's peer research universities have a higher percentage of graduate students to undergraduate students, the administration felt UF should bring up its percentage.

"We expect that growth will primarily occur at the master's level," Gerhardt said.

He said another effort to increase graduate enrollment is the combined bachelor's and master's degree program, which allows students to take graduate classes in their junior and senior undergraduate years that count toward both degrees. Most colleges offer this program.

UF colleges see rise

Many UF colleges have felt the increase in graduate school interest.

The colleges of health professions, business administration, engineering and liberal arts and sciences have experienced the most growth in enrollment.

In the College of Engineering, there has been a 33 percent increase in enrollment since 1998, according to UF's Office of Institutional Research.

Jonathan Earle, the associate dean for student affairs for the engineering college, said a graduate degree is "extremely useful" to have when looking for a job in today's competitive job market.

He said he used to hear graduating engineering seniors getting two, three or four job offers, and now they are getting maybe one.

Ronald Akers, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences' associate dean for faculty affairs, said applications are "up some" in the largest college at UF.

Graduate enrollment at the college has increased 27 percent, from 1,521 in fall 1998 to 1,932 in fall 2002.

This graduate enrollment growth isn't as dramatic in the professional programs at UF - law, medicine, veterinary medicine, dentistry and pharmacy - because of the typically high costs, Gerhardt said.

He added that UF plans to grow only slightly in professional programs.

Money matters

Gregg said there were some drawbacks to graduate school, naming the "money issue" as one of them.

For Florida residents it costs about \$2,150 in tuition, and for non-Florida residents it costs about \$8,000 per 12-credit hour semester, but there is help with tuition available for graduate students who hold assistantships and certain fellowships.

"Even making \$35,000, at least I would've been making money," said Gregg about what she might have earned in the job market.

Regardless, she considers graduate school an investment that eventually will pay off in the future.

