

# Graduates put to test in job hunt

By **HOWARD BUCK**  
Columbian staff writer

**N**athan Gisby saw it coming. Midway through a career-changing, two-year sprint to complete Clark College's fledgling radiography program, the Vancouver man watched his job market turn on its head.

He was destined to be one of Clark's inaugural group of 14 medical imaging graduates, come June 2009. Across

## Local Class of 2009 scrambles to find work in tough economy

town, Portland Community College had pumped up slots in its red-hot program from 35 to 50 students each quarter.

But the region's economy had plunged into free-fall. Hospitals either shed staff or ordered a hiring freeze. Workers clung tight to their jobs and movement ceased, leaving lean pickings for newcomers.

"There was an extreme need about five years ago," said Gisby, 36, a father of two. "Hospitals had sign-on bonuses, signed people from out of state."

Then came the glut of local candidates. "It just kind of flooded the market. The problem is, there's just so many people looking that have experience," he said.

It's a familiar refrain for 2009 graduates of Clark College and Washington State University Vancouver. They ran smack into the worst job downturn in half a century, in one of nation's highest unemployment zones. And found themselves scrapping with competitors with plenty of work history.

Take a look at the chart at right: Can you think of a worse year in which to graduate?

One year later, several hundred local graduates have scrambled to stay afloat. The fortunate ones found a desired job in their chosen field. Many have strung together part-time shifts, biding their time for permanent work. Others plug along in make-do gigs, digging and praying for that one promising call-back.

Edie Blakley, career counseling director at Clark College, said it's easily

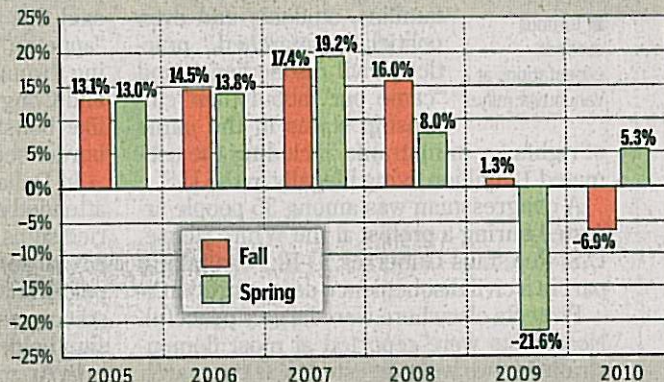


ZACHARY KAUFMAN/The Columbian

**Nathan Gisby, left, a 2009 Clark College graduate, positions a patient for a chest X-ray at Southwest Washington Medical Center. He's eager to advance to full-time work.**

### Job outlook projections: 2005-2010

Employers surveyed each academic year (in July-August, again in March-April) on plans to increase/decrease hiring of new college graduates nationwide.



SOURCE: National Association of Colleges and Employers

The Columbian

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**Edie Blakley**  
Clark College career counseling director, on the current job market



# Graduates:

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the worst hiring environment she's seen.

"The deepest dip, for sure. The longest lasting," Blakley said. "Honestly, there's still a lot of people living in mom and dad's basement, to put a point on it."

## 'Survivor' jobs

Graduates are piecing together two half-time jobs or continuing in four-year colleges "rather than face this," she said. Those jobs often are wholly unrelated to grads' field of study. And, a slight uptick in hiring nationally has yet to surface here.

"We are advising them to at least take 'survivor' jobs that give them transferable skills, whether it's writing or leadership," Blakley said. She urges them to "build your résumé, however you can: Ten hours of volunteer work, find an internship, networking.

"That's really hard to do, when you're not in school or in the field," she said. Many graduates tell advisers they've got no way to make a living, despite time and money invested in a new degree. "And it's heartbreaking, to say you need to go back into waiting tables or yardwork, until it turns. "And it will turn... but it won't be how it was," she said.

Neither Clark College nor WSU's branch campus at Salmon Creek keeps close tabs on how graduates have fared away from campus. But a recent, informal e-mail survey of WSUV grads found it's been tough for many. Clark staff also hear plenty about fruitless job searches.

"It's like, one out of 500 applicants gets a position," said Kelle Price, who completed Clark's well-regarded nursing program and quickly passed exams to earn her registered nurse license.

Price, 45, a Woodland mother of four, did finally find work, just last month. But rather than walk hospital floors, she drives rural roads to provide respite care for homebound patients, covering night shifts for weary parents of sick children or adults caring for frail parents.

"I'm glad to be making at least one small step," Price said. As someone who "loves adrenaline," she said her heart is set on trauma care, however. "I'm just kind of impatient. I want to get going with what I really want to do," she said.

It seems like another world, the several nurses she encountered during her Clark hospital training practicum: "A lot of them came straight from retail sales... right into emergency nursing," she said.

That was then.

## New 'ball game'

In downtown Portland, Amy Huseby is glad for a decent fall-back. For a decade, she's handled office duty for a small legal team. But her bid to earn a doctorate in English and teach literature to college students is a dream deferred.

Despite perfect grades at WSUV and a sharp curriculum vitae of published stories and poetry, the 2009 lead editor of the school's literary "Salmon Creek Journal" has struck out in her applications to top-flight graduate schools. The poor economy means fewer funded slots, raising competition to intense heights, she said.

"I've had many advisers ask, 'What's your Plan B?'" said Huseby, 37, an east Clark County resident and mother of three. "I say, 'I've been living it for 10 years.'"

Make no mistake: She calls herself lucky, compared with many fellow graduates.

"It's definitely a different ball game for youngsters coming out of college now," Huseby said. "These last generations have been raised, 'You'll be given everything, everyone gets a trophy.' But you won't. You can be 4.0 and not get a job offer."

She's heard much worse from younger grads. Such as the fellow on a nursing track who got no offers, chose to flip his U.S. National Guard reserve experience into active duty — and then got deployed to action in the Middle East, she said.

"I have all these young kids who come to me from Washington State and tell these stories, and it breaks my heart," Huseby said.

## Tough local market

Clark County college graduates notably differ from those elsewhere, presenting a new set of challenges.

Neither WSUV nor Clark is what Christine Lundeen, WSUV career adviser, calls a "destination campus." Those are land-grant institutions for teens straight out of high school who plan to parlay their four-year run to a bachelor's degree and a first career job: schools such as the University of Washington, Washington State's main Pullman campus and Western Washington University.

Clark and WSUV students skew older, into their 30s, 40s or 50s, even beyond. They include military veterans, displaced homemakers, middle-aged career switchers and others finally taking the college plunge.

As a result, local graduates are more placebound than most untethered 21- or 22-year-olds. They aren't ready to look outside the metro area for work.

"The majority of students that I ask say, 'No,'" Lundeen said. "I hear, 'I wish I could be more flexible, but I can't be: I'm taking care of my parent. I'm not taking my kids out of school.'"

"Even some of the younger students around here, the reason they went to WSU is because they wanted to stay in this area. They have extended family here, and friends. They want to build their life here, too," she said.

Indeed, Vancouver-Portland's vaunted livability — and sagging home prices that makes selling difficult — has kept many of the newly jobless from fleeing. And yet, the metro area continues to attract 20- and 30-somethings, the much-hyped "creative class," from other states.

The result is a deep pool of college-edu-



STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

Clark College nursing graduate Kelle Price, with her son, Caleb, 12, gets ready to leave for work, providing home health care to a Kelso client. She would rather work in a hospital emergency room but has found few openings.



ZACHARY KAUFMAN/The Columbian

Dental hygienist Kramer Blake, a 2009 Clark graduate, readies an oral X-ray of patient Sunny Schiffmann. Blake spent months on temporary assignments before landing at Lewis Family Dentistry in Vancouver.

cated adults fighting for precious openings, where job recovery has yet to be seen.

## Flexibility pays off

Three success stories for '09 grads point directly to willingness to branch out.

Niel Hayes, 28, graduated from high school in Littleton, Colo., near Denver. He came to Vancouver to study advanced thermal fluids science (refrigeration) under former professor Amir Jokar, and earned his master's degree in mechanical engineering.

He sought to return home and was happy to land work at Brownhill Engineering, a Littleton-based firm that designs municipal water system controls.

"I would definitely like to get into refrigeration and air conditioning (related to global warming) someday," Hayes said. Counting his bachelor's degree from Brigham Young University, he recalls one class in six-and-a-half years directly related to his new work, he said.

"But right now, I'm learning lots. As far as job security, it's there. Whatever the economy, people need water. I've got a job, so I guess I can't complain," he said.

Brent Cooper graduated from Oregon's Clatskanie High School in 2004.

He gladly accepted a surgical unit nursing job at St. John Medical Center, Longview's busy hospital, straight out of Clark's nursing program, even as classmates came up empty.

"It's just weird how our area is," said Cooper, 24, who has continued in bachelor's degree studies in WSUV's nursing program. "There are so many nursing schools in this area, it's hard to find a hospital job." Besides the Clark and PCC programs, the University of Portland, Linfield University and Concordia University also are churning out RN competition, he said.

Most local openings are in long-term care, "not necessarily where the high-paying jobs are," Cooper said.

"The biggest thing I had over my class is that I was flexible. A lot of people couldn't leave Vancouver because of their house. A few people from my class went up to Tacoma; others tried finding jobs in Portland," he said.



ZACHARY KAUFMAN/The Columbian

Amy Huseby, a 2009 WSUV grad, hopes to trade a legal assistant job with Williams Kastner & Gibbs in downtown Portland for a college teaching career.

## College degree still helps job prospects

Despite the glum job picture, there's no ignoring the value of a college diploma or college-level training.

Latest data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics puts the unemployment rate for individuals who hold at least a bachelor's degree at half that for all workers with a high school diploma, but no further study.

The nationwide rates for March, seasonally adjusted:

**14.5 percent:** Individuals with less than a high school degree.

**10.8 percent:** Individuals who are high school graduates, with no college.

**8.2 percent:** Individuals with an associate degree, or some college.

**4.9 percent:** Individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher.

He has since talked a couple of classmates into joining him at St. John, he said.

## Inside track

Location was never a question for Rachel Barclley, raised in Tumwater, near Olympia.

While she earned a bachelor's degree in business administration from Washington State — two years in Pullman, two more in Salmon Creek — she spent summers in the state capital, doing intern work at the Department of Labor and Industries.

Upon graduating with minors in psychology and human resources, she returned to Labor and Industries and used an office assistant job as a springboard to bigger things.

"It's a lot easier to apply for (state) jobs internally," said Barclley, whose mother works elsewhere in the department. Sure enough, after six months and several attempts, she landed a human resources post

"These last generations have been raised, 'You'll be given everything, everyone gets a trophy.' But you won't. You can be 4.0 and not get a job offer."

## Amy Huseby

Graduated: WSUV.  
Field: English.  
Job: Legal assistant.  
Dream job: College literature teacher.

with the state Department of Transportation. What's more, her job offer came just before a department hiring freeze kicked in.

"I felt so lucky. It was just the right time, right place," Barclley said. "I know it could have been a very long struggle." But she'd laid her groundwork, earned good grades and scored her family's first college degree.

"I think I'm the only one of my friends who's in the position I'm in, a career field," she said. "I wasn't worried about not having a job; I was worried about not having a job I liked."

## No surrender

Gisby, the part-time radiology technician, doesn't need sympathy.

He's survived, working on-call shifts at Southwest Washington Medical Center and a Gresham, Ore., hospital, snaring 16-24 hours each week. He spends quality time with his kids, more important since his marriage crumbled in the past year.

"I've been fortunate and had work. My savings is running thin, but there's normally enough to pay the bills," Gisby said. He had driven routes and managed delivery of industrial gases before he enrolled at Clark.

It's a matter of time before the permanent job opportunity comes, he believes.

There are no doubts over his occupational choice.

"I knew it was going to be a little tough. I wasn't going to give up on it, either," Gisby said.

Kramer Blake, who graduated from Clark College's dental hygiene program in June, also hasn't been deterred.

It took nearly eight months of substitute duty and several temp assignments to build up to three-and-a-half days each week, currently at Vancouver's Lewis Family Dentistry. It's not yet what she expected when she jumped from business studies at UW to a career that paid well and offered flexible hours for a future family life.

"All my family's here, and I didn't want to go," said Blake, 24, a Skyview High School graduate. Talking to 2008 graduates, she knew it was fast getting tough out there.

"To find an almost full-time position in the field I graduated in, I would have to call myself fairly lucky," she said.

## 'One more shot'

Price, the Woodland mom who itches for frontline nursing while she gives home care, also fights to stay upbeat.

"When you finish school (at Clark), you've done critical care for probably six months," she said. "We were pushed to our limits 100 percent of the time. We were ready to hit the hospital floor right away. But, because of the economy, we're not." Those same hospitals now prefer experience in more mundane, long-term care, she said.

Price frets a bit that her critical care skills might grow stale. But she also finds satisfaction in home care as she pays her occupation's dues, she said.

"It does bring me a lot of joy, to just give people the care that they need. I am glad to be working and be getting income," she said. "In a year, I see myself in an emergency room. It's my niche, I love it. I kind of like being hyper, probably from having all these kids."

Blakley, the Clark career adviser, tells recent graduates that temp assignments offer a real chance at a breakthrough. Their work ethic, attitude and "soft skills" make a crucial impression, she said.

"Essentially, it's like an internship. When (employers) see you show up every day, eager to go and using creative solutions, that's the person they're going to hire," she said.

For her part, Huseby has boned up on the nation's top English departments, eager for one last push for "the brass ring," she said. She's got eighth-grade twins, and has pledged not to switch their high schools once they begin.

"I get one more shot at this," Huseby said. "This has been my goal. I've always wanted to teach in college."

"This is what I think I'm cut out for — I have to try," she said. If turned away, she may instead look into marketing, as some friends suggest. "I definitely have got that feeling that I've got to step over to what's next."

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