Student debt at all-time high
Recent grads also deal with record unemployment for their age group
By Stefano Esposito
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Like any soon-to-be college graduate, Rachel Christensen isn't quite sure what her future holds, although the Loyola University Chicago student can be sure of this: It will involve paying off $35,000 in college debts.

"If I were going to guess, it would take at least 15 years -- unless I score some fantastic job," said Christensen, 23, who expects to graduate in May with a double bachelor's degree in music and journalism.

When she graduates, she'll join the ranks of four-year college grads facing an increasingly large mountain of student loan debt -- as well as a double whammy of an increasing unemployment rate for grads.

According to numbers released Thursday by the Project on Student Debt, four-year college grads in the United States, on average, graduated in 2009 with $24,000 in student loan debt, a record high.

At the same time, they moved into a work world with an 8.7 percent national unemployment rate for college graduates ages 20 to 24 -- the highest annual rate on record, according to the student loan project, put together by the California-based nonprofit Institute for College Access & Success.

In Illinois, the average debt for college seniors graduating in 2009 was about $22,000, according to institute's study, which looked at students who graduate from public and private nonprofit four-year colleges with loans.

"These are challenging times for parents and students trying to figure out how to pay for college," said Lauren Asher, the institute's president. "Our study shows that from state to state and from college to college, the amount of debt you can end up with varies tremendously."

Students in Washington, D.C., and New Hampshire graduated with the highest average debt levels: $30,000 and $29,400, respectively. Students in Utah had the lowest average debt: about $13,000.

The report points out that the $24,000 average student loan debt is about 6 percent higher than in 2008, following a similar trend during the last four years.

Asher said college remains a great investment, but parents and students need to do their homework to find out which college offers the best deal. Asher said students should opt for federal loans over the private variety because federal money typically comes with a wider range of repayment plans, as well as other consumer-protection options.

Despite the huge amount of debt she faces, Christensen has no regrets about her choice of college.

"I really enjoyed my career at Loyola," said Christensen, who one day hopes to be a music journalist. "I couldn't be happier with my education."
Still, she knows she won't be living the good life any time soon.

"It's definitely frustrating," she said. "I'm from Minnesota. Most of my family is from there. My niece was just born. I would love to get back there more often [to visit] my family. ... But I'm dead broke."