Class of 2011 enjoying boost in college grad hiring
By Francine Knowles
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Job postings and recruitment activity are up at Chicago area college campuses this year, and employers nationally say they plan to boost hiring — more evidence of a slowly recovering but still highly competitive job market.

Employers will hire 19 percent more new college graduates nationally this year than they did in 2010, according to a survey released this month by the National Association of Colleges and Employers. This is the first time since 2007 the NACE survey has revealed a double-digit increase in spring hiring projections.

Some students are “getting multiple offers, they’re getting offers earlier in the year,” said Lonnie Dunlap, executive director of University Career Services at Northwestern University.

While the unemployment rate is hovering near 9 percent in Illinois and nationally, the job market is displaying “selective improvement,” she added. Indeed, the U.S. unemployment rate among 20- to 24-year-old college graduates with a bachelor’s degree remained high at 8.5 percent in March.

Kate Moberg, 22, who will graduate from DePaul University in June, started last summer looking for an internship, which she hoped would improve her prospects for landing a full-time job after college. She applied for roughly 50 positions, she said.

“I was looking everywhere for an internship,” she said. “I got interviews at maybe five of them.”

Her early efforts paid off. Moberg, who has a double major in economics and international studies, accepted a position a few weeks ago as a health care industry economic and financial consultant at Berkeley Research Group in Chicago, where she is completing an internship.

The University of Chicago reports the number of employers recruiting on campus this spring is up about 125 percent compared with last spring. That followed a 25 percent increase during the fall, said Marthe Druska of the U. of C. Career Advising and Planning Services.

“We’re seeing increased numbers, which is great,” she said. “But I wouldn’t say we’re back up to the level that we were five years ago when the economy was strong.”

Still, things are moving in the right direction, she noted.

DePaul University experienced a 48 percent rise in job postings in the first quarter compared with a year earlier, said Gillian Steele, director of the DePaul University Career Center. Job postings were the highest since January 2008.
“We’ve had about a 30 percent increase so far this year in the number of employers at our career fairs,” Steele said. “In on-campus interviewing, we’ve seen a 17 percent increase in the number of employers.”

At Northwestern, there has been a 48 percent jump in job postings year-to-date, and there was a 39 percent increase in employer attendance at a January job fair there compared with a year earlier, Dunlap said.

Graduating seniors “definitely have a more positive attitude,” said Darby Scism, director of the Career Development Center at Loyola University, where there has been a 10 percent increase in the number of employers recruiting on campus.

“I think the reason for that is [the economy] isn’t a shock to them anymore,” she said. “Students this year are more realistic about it.”

They recognize that they have to work harder in today’s economy to land a job, she said.

“It’s very different,” from the past couple of years, said Dunlap. “We don’t hear the same kinds of anxiety. Students are much more engaged in their job search. They’ve translated the last couple of years of recession into a more active, effective job search. They’re starting their searches earlier. They’re more serious about internships. Right now it’s more of what can I do to make myself marketable. In the past, it was why try.”

Jordan Dexter, an English literature major at the University of Chicago, said she accepted a position last October to work as a business analyst with retail giant Target after she graduates in June. The 21-year-old also completed an internship at another company last year.

Her fellow students are having mixed results in their job search and mixed feelings about their prospects.

“It really spans a pretty broad range,” Dexter said. “I know students who will be graduating with me, who still have absolutely no idea what they’ll be doing after graduation, and they’re starting to get a bit concerned,” she said. “On the other hand I know students who literally every job they apply for they’re getting second-round, third-round interviews.”

The U.S. Department of Education projects 1.7 million students will graduate with bachelor’s degrees in this 2010-2011 winter-spring graduation cycle.

Local universities report that majors that are finding more prospects are computer science, information technology, engineering, accounting and software engineering. Students with business development, account management, marketing and communication skills are also in demand, they said.

AT&T and JPMorgan Chase are among employers doing more recruiting on college campuses this year. Although AT&T doesn’t expect its overall head count to increase this year, it does plan to fill about 20,000 positions, including new graduates, said Jennifer Terry, AT&T staffing director.
“We will continue to hire recent graduates into our many student leadership, sales or technology hiring programs,” Terry said.

Asked what attributes AT&T looks for in job applicants, she said, “We look for candidates who are passionate about technology and innovation, with a keen eye on serving their communities and customers.”