

Graduating Into Uncertainty:

The Double Burden Facing Lee County's College Grads

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Graduating into a tough job market has always been part of the rite of passage for some, but recent college classes (2024-2026) are facing a confluence of forces that many did not expect. Macroeconomic headwinds, automation, and inflation all combine with new federal policies that have disrupted key pipelines for employment. If you're in Lee County, Florida, or anywhere similar, the pressure is undeniable.

National Policy Shifts That Matter

One of the most consequential moves came on January 20, 2025, when the Trump administration put in a federal hiring freeze for most executive branch agencies. No new civilian positions. Vacancies go unfilled. Even after the freeze ends, agencies are restricted in how many new staff they can hire relative to departures, often only one new hire for every four who leave.

For students and recent graduates, the impact has been personal. Internships supported by federal agencies or grants have been pulled back. Job offers rescinded. Applications might be accepted in theory, but it's unclear whether any of them will lead to an offer.

These policy shifts don't happen in a vacuum; they amplify the existing difficulties:

- **Pipelines are blocked:** Internships, federal job offers, and grant-funded roles are a major pathway for experience, networking, and transition from school to work. Freezing or removing those options breaks that path.
- **Delayed or retracted offers** mean candidates may have to scramble in the short term, sometimes accepting roles that don't match training, or postponing career moves (joining the job market later, accepting part time over full-time, etc.).
- **Shrinking public sector appeal:** For many grads, public service roles were attractive not just materially, but because of meaning, stability, benefits. When those roles are less available, more of the burden falls on the private and non-profit sectors, which may not always provide comparable terms.

- **Psychological & financial risk:** Graduates may invest years in preparation expecting federal or public-sector pathways; when those disappear, that investment feels diminished. Also, uncertainty makes planning (relocation, paying off debt, choosing majors or supplemental credentials) harder.

Lee County Students in the National Storm

Though Lee County does not host many major federal agencies in the way Washington, DC does, students and recent graduates here still feel the reverberations:

- **Fewer local internship opportunities tied to federal funding** means local universities and colleges (including FGCU and community colleges) may offer fewer “federal-grant linked” internship or research roles.
- **Schools’ budgets and hiring plans** are tighter. For instance, the Lee County School District froze hiring in its central office to redirect funds into classrooms. While that freeze is local, it’s happening in the environment of federal funding uncertainty and tightening.
- Graduates in non-health majors or those who had been considering public sector or federal agency work now feel pressure to shift into fields where demand is clearer (health care, business management, technical certifications), or to accept roles outside their desired field to gain experience.
- As federal hiring freeze reduces competition from government roles, more applicants turn to private sector or state/local government, raising competition in those markets. It is likely the case that some Lee County grads, especially those in majors with weaker local demand, are facing higher unemployment or underemployment.

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What Graduates & Local Stakeholders Can Do

Given how the policy landscape is shifting, here are some updated strategies for recent grads (especially in Lee County) to navigate this new environment:

- **Be proactive about alternative pathways:** Seek state, county, municipal internships or roles; non-profits; private sector jobs in roles that can build transferable skills. Don’t rely entirely on federal or grant-based positions.
- **Document your work even when titles are non-ideal:** If you end up in an underemployed role, make sure you’re building skills, taking on responsibilities that show growth; these can help bridge into better roles later.
- **Monitor policy developments closely:** Federal hiring freeze extensions, grant funding announcements, changes in policies like DEI or merit hiring are moving targets. Local universities’ career centers (FGCU, etc.) should communicate clearly with students about what is and isn’t available.
- **Network locally and regionally:** Even if federal roles are fewer, the private, health care, education, and construction sectors in Southwest Florida still have demand. Build relationships in those spaces early.

- **Consider supplemental credentials:** Certifications or short courses in high-demand fields (health tech, health services management, project management, digital tools) can help make a résumé stand out when competition intensifies.
- **Advocate for local supports:** Local governments, school boards, universities can push for stable funding, grant programs, internships that aren't vulnerable to federal policy swings; community foundations may help fill gaps.

Conclusion

So much of the labor-market pressure for recent grads stems from structural economic shifts. But current federal policies, particularly the hiring freeze, workforce reductions, rescinded internships, uncertainty around grants and DEI/hiring controls, are acting as accelerants. For graduates in Lee County, FL, these accelerants mean more uncertainty, fewer options, and stronger competition just to gain a foothold. Still, not everything is bleak. Fields with clear demand (health care, management, education) continue hiring. And local adaptability, being nimble, open to lower or adjacent roles, leaning on networks and supplementary credentials, can make a difference.