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Undergraduates struggle to find employment in Fort Collins

McKenna Van Voris, Staff Reporter
September 24, 2024



It wasn't until after Oliver White applied to nearly 100 local jobs that she finally heard back from one.

Ping!

Ad

A first-year zoology major at Colorado State University, White stopped typing to check her phone. Working at her first job back home as an office assistant, White felt this might be the only employment she would see for a while.

An email notification from CSU's Lory Student Center lit up the screen, sparking White's curiosity, as it was unusual for her university to notify her while she was on winter break. Clicking on the email, the bolded word "Congratulations" immediately illuminated the screen. Excitement and relief rushed through her as she turned to her coworkers and said, "I got a job! I got a job!" Her voice rang throughout the office, and her coworkers smiled in unison.

Being the only job White interviewed for after months of applying to job after job with no response, this felt like her only chance of securing a job on campus. Not only is this a problem White has been facing, but the struggle of finding a job is felt throughout Fort Collins.

"Maximize your chances of getting a job by doing something extra during your college education. Your employers look less into GPA than they look at things that you've done." -Stephan Weiler, economics professor

Experts speak on Fort Collins employment

Lucas Pier, the operations manager at Blue Agave Grill, a Southwestern restaurant in Fort Collins, said a restaurant not responding to applicants could be due to a lack of organization within the business.

"I shouldn't say it's against the law, but I mean, there's a law behind discrimination and hiring," Pier said. "Either another restaurant's just not holding that standard, or they're passing on that equal opportunity situation."

Pier also said popular restaurants like Blue Agave experience high levels of interest in employment, something that factors into delayed or neglected responses.

"I would say (Blue Agave) gets a little less than 100 applicants probably per week, per email, online and then face to face," Pier said. "That being said, we don't hire a whole lot because we don't lose very many people."

From a CSU campus perspective, ((Emma Green))), a career education coordinator at the CSU Career Center, said she assumes employers may not be responding to applicants because students send in generic applications.

"Many students don't realize that they should be editing or tailoring each resume and/or cover letter for every single individual posting," Green said.

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This being said, Green said she does not believe unresponsive places of work are the biggest issue. Rather, the trouble she sees students facing is finding the right jobs to apply to.

"When I'm meeting with students and they're talking about wanting on-campus jobs, a lot of times, they are unaware of how to find them," Green said.

As touched on by Pier, another potential factor of employment issues is the sheer number of applicants.

Jason Scott, the project and programs manager for Housing & Dining Services, said the largest employer at CSU is Residential Dining Services, and this year, they have over 700 student employees.

"This seems to be the largest applicant pool that we've had since 2019," Scott said. "We struggled to fill open positions in 2020, 2021 and 2022, so this year's large applicant pool is a change."

While the number of applicants competing for a job at CSU has increased in recent years, the overall student population has, too.

"All three Colorado State University System campuses hit enrollment milestones this fall, with CSU in Fort Collins welcoming its largest entering class in history," a CSU SOURCE article reads.

The undergraduate student population at CSU was 26,168 during the 2023-24 school year, whereas the 2021-22 school year saw 25,362 students.

The number of jobs CSU has to offer has increased as well. For instance, according to data Green gathered from Handshake.com, the total number of on-campus jobs posted on Handshake with listings indicating "job" or "on-campus student employment," designated for first-years, sophomores, juniors and seniors, was 8,604 in 2023, a significant increase from the 2,993 jobs in 2020.

Undergraduate employment is crucial in Fort Collins

Reed Lifka, a 21-year-old forest and fire science student at CSU who has been applying to positions since July 2023, had a similar experience to White. Out of the dozens of off-campus bars, liquor stores and restaurants, Lifka has received little response.

"I dropped resumes at a whole bunch of bars and a couple of liquor stores because that's what I did back home before I moved out here," Lifka said. "I only heard back from one place."

After interviewing with the only business he received a response from, Mulberry MAX Liquor Store, Lifka was hopeful he might finally get a job. He got along with the owner great and felt the interview went well, but despite this confidence, Lifka was not offered the job.

"I would have gotten the job if I didn't need a couple of Saturdays off," Lifka said. "It was kind of upsetting to know that I'm not getting this job just because of the next three or four weeks."

White talked about the importance of working as a college student trying to pay for all of the expenses that come with being a young adult.

"A girl's got to save up money for her apartment — like, we're struggling," White said. "I want to save up enough money so that I can do rent and utilities and groceries and all this other stuff."

Some students are so desperate for some sort of income that they have resorted to donating bodily fluids in a desperate search for some sort of financial relief.

"My previous roommate who moved out at the end of last semester — they had a lot of struggles finding a job as well," White said. "They ended up getting to the point where they were so short on money that they started having to donate their plasma."

Not only is working as an undergraduate student important financially, but as someone who has been working two jobs for the last few years, Lifka has become reliant on work as an emotional outlet.

"It's just a way for me to calm myself down instead of sitting on the couch or just sitting in bed not doing anything," Lifka said.

This appears to be an issue unique to Fort Collins. Coming from opposite ends of the country, such as New York and Hawaii, neither Lifka nor White have experienced such trouble finding jobs before.

"I worked construction and a bartending job back in my old city, and both of them were always hiring," Lifka said. "I could go around and ask any bar or any work if they were hiring, (and) they'd say yes, but out here, you walk around, and I feel like a lot of spots are already taken up."

Reflecting Lifka's experience with unresponsive local businesses, various businesses were contacted 20 different times each in the process of writing this story with little success. It was only after three different calls to its number that Blue Agave responded.

Some advice from the experts

When asked what factors a manager looks for in applicants who are applying for a job, Pier stressed the importance of professionalism and consistency in past jobs.

"Somebody who has, especially at age 25 or 26, who's had one job per year or something like that — I'm not a big fan of it," Pier said. "Even if the job sucks and they hate it, I like to see someone at least put a couple years into it to at least try to learn the job."

CSU economics Professor Stephan Weiler said that while finding a job during undergrad may be challenging, to avoid similar difficulty when looking for a career after graduation, one should utilize their undergraduate years to do things that make one stand apart from other applicants.

"Maximize your chances of getting a job by doing something extra during your college education," Weiler said. "Your employers look less into GPA than they look at things that you've done."

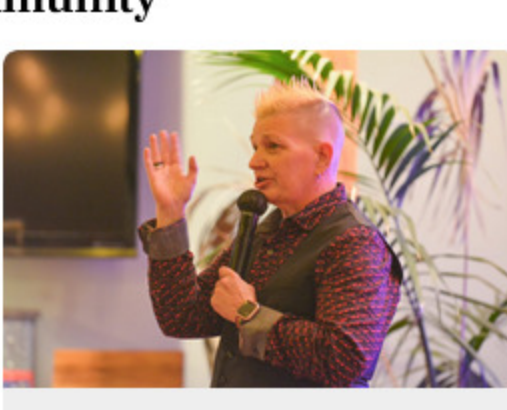
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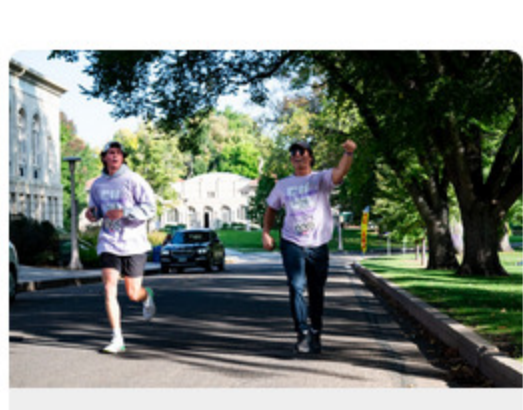
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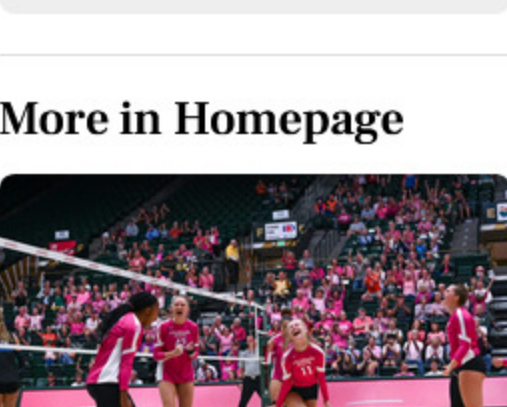


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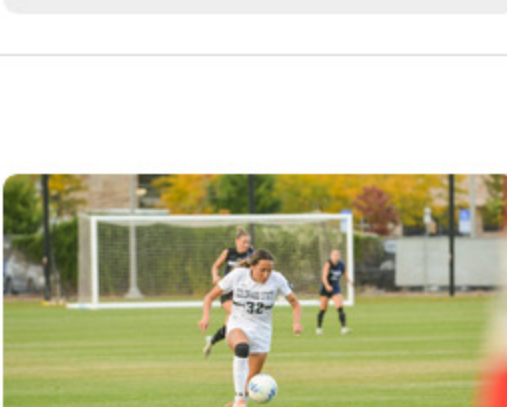


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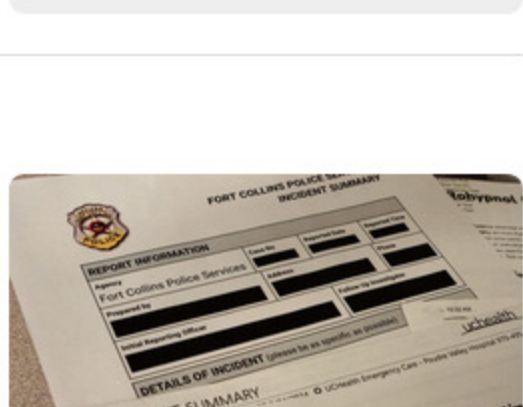
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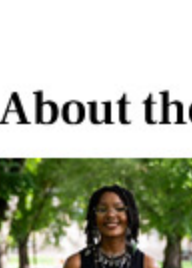


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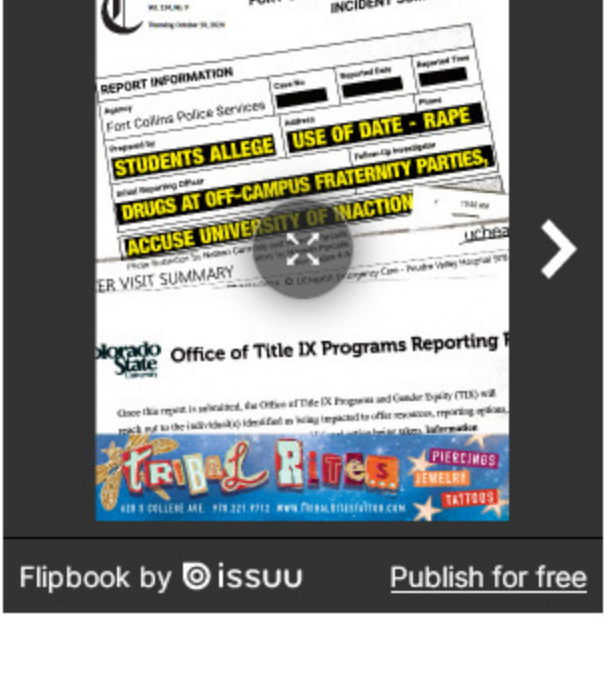
About the Contributor



Trin Bonner, Illustration Director

Trin Bonner is the illustration editor for The Collegian newspaper. This will be her fourth year in the position, and she loves being a part of the creative and amazing design team of The Collegian. As the illustration editor, Bonner provides creative insight and ideas that bring the newspaper the best graphics and illustrations possible. She loves working with artists to develop fun and unique weekly illustrations for readers. She enjoys helping the illustrators on her desk explore and expand their artistic abilities as well as challenge their skills with every edition. Bonner is a senior studying graphic design and electronic art and is also a community coordinator for Aggie Village Apartments on Colorado State University's campus. She finds immense joy in illustration and comic creation. She hopes to explore more in the realm of graphic design and video game design as she approaches the end of her undergraduate experience. Trin spends her free time crocheting, doing beadwork and playing guitar when she's not working on illustrations or acting as community coordinator, though she spends much of her free time sketching and brainstorming her next webcomic. Bonner finds that making people laugh and smile through her art is incredibly fulfilling and is excited to continue to bring her love for illustration and art to The Collegian.

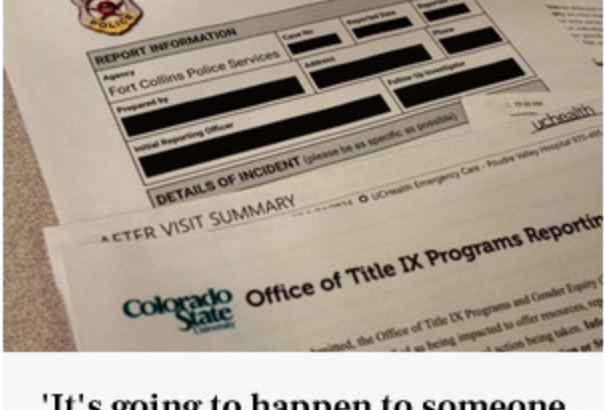
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