2016 college job fair season sees lots of employers

By Maura Lerner

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Two weeks from now, thousands of college students will converge on the Minneapolis Convention Center in hopes of lining up a job or internship.

And this year, their prospects appear to be looking up, judging from the number of recruiters lining up to meet them.

Already, a record 325 employers have signed up for booths at the University of Minnesota's annual student job fair on Feb. 19. That's the largest number since the U began hosting the job fair in 2004, officials say, and close to double the number that showed up at the depths of the recession in 2010.

"We've been really excited at the employers coming back," said Paul Timmins, career services director at the College of Liberal Arts, who helps organize the event. In fact, there's even a waiting list for employers who want a booth.

The U fair is open only to University of Minnesota students and recent alums (those who graduated since 2013).

But the picture is similar at the Minnesota Private Colleges' student job fair, which runs Feb. 17-18, also at the convention center. This year, organizers — who represent 17 private colleges — expect about 300 potential employers at the fair, slightly more than last year and a healthy jump over previous years. "We actually had to reconfigure the setup at the convention center to accommodate the increase," said John Mountain, one of the organizers, who is acting director of career counseling at Macalester College in St. Paul.

Meanwhile, there's also a waiting list for employers hoping to attend a Feb. 26 job fair in Brooklyn Center sponsored by the seven Minnesota state universities. "So there is an increase in interest," said Deanna Goddard, a career counselor at Winona State University.

The surge in recruiters is obviously a good sign for students. But the trick is to make sure that both undergrads and graduate students are ready to take advantage of this networking moment, says Timmins. So the U is going the extra mile to help students prepare, with in-person and online workshops that offer coaching on the do's and don'ts of job fair etiquette.

"The biggest mistake that I think students make is just simply failure to prepare," said Timmins. "I want them to go into the event having given some thought to why they're here."

Among the top tips:

• Dress like a professional. "Under no circumstances is it acceptable to come to a career fair wearing jeans, sweatshirts or hats," says a U video for undergraduates. No ties with TV characters, either, or "trendy spaghetti-straped camisoles." Stick to suits, tailored dresses, or blazers with pants or skirt.

• Update your résumé, have someone else review it, and take copies to hand out at the fair.

• Create a "personal commercial" or elevator speech — a quick way to introduce yourself, including your major and year in school, what kind of position you're seeking and "highlights of relevant experiences." Practice it out loud before you go.

• When speaking with a recruiter, always ask for a business card. And always send a
It’s also important to remember, says Timmins, that the job fair is just a first step. “No one leaves an event like this with a job in hand,” he said. “You’re not going to have your internship lined up at the end of the day.” It’s a chance to “start a relationship. And you have to be ready to follow up.”