



Orange County Associates Virtual Exchange (OCTAVE)

is a vehicle for collaboration of the **Tourism Cohort**
of the **Jobs First Initiative**,
administered by the **Orange County Business Council**.

Volume 1, Issue 7: Educational Challenges (Part 2)

May 26, 2026

JOBS FIRST TOURISM STEERING COMMITTEE

Patrick Brien
Jesse Ben-Ron
Jon Benson
Shant Boodanian
Anthony Brenneman
James Canfield
Brian Chuan
Nancy Cook
Danny Fierro
Eric Freed
Wendy Haase-Roberts
Matt Hicks
Ellen Kim
Marco Lucero
Tom Morton
Sergio M. Ramirez
Kyle Simpson
Shaheen Sadeghi
Zoot Velasco

Dear Reader:

In our fourth **OCTAVE** newsletter, published on April 14, we focused on educational challenges. However, that was part one of a four-part series on educational issues in Orange County and around the world. That issue focused on the underserved workforce and the need for soft-skills training for digital natives. Today, we will show you the pipeline for how someone moves from a fry cook or hotel desk clerk to running a restaurant or hotel. What does that pipeline look like? What makes a good internship? How is technology changing the needs for tourism education? And a part two on soft skills education, continuing the conversation from our April 14th article. We hope that once you finish reading, you might help us bring the conversation to life by joining a forum on internships, soft skills, and tourism training. More on that...

- Zoot Velasco, Consultant for Jobs First/ OCBC in Tourism

OCTAVE is a newsletter of the Orange County Business Council. Send us your questions, tourism success stories, needs, challenges, best practices, skills gaps, and emerging trends, and we will try to include the most relevant ones in OCTAVE!

CONTACT: Info@OCBC.com



Coming in two weeks: See how Corporate Social Responsibility impacts the OC Tourism community.

[I would like to subscribe!](#)

THE CAREER LADDER

By Zoot Velasco

How does a fry cook at KFC go on to manage or own a restaurant? How does a desk clerk at a Marriott end up as a hotel General Manager? What is the pipeline or ladder? In a post-COVID world, is it equitable and meeting today's standards? Are the rungs broken or missing?

1. Entrance Level Jobs

Restaurants have long been a common entry point into the broader hospitality and tourism industry, and one that is open to all regardless of background, education, race, or socio-economic status. Anyone in America can start their career in a fast-food restaurant, and most do. According to industry reports (ACTE Online), 80% of owners and 90% of managers reported that their first job in the industry was an entry-level position (e.g., server, dishwasher, cook). The restaurant workforce (eating and drinking places) accounts for approximately 10% of total U.S. employment—a substantial share for any single industry subsector within hospitality and tourism. The internet or AI cannot replace food service in any significant way.

With millions of young people entering their first paid work in food service, recognizing how these jobs serve as a pipeline or ladder into long-term careers (both within the industry and beyond) is vital to understanding workforce development in the Tourism industry. National career framework models (such as the Hospitality & Tourism Career Cluster) explicitly link **restaurants and food/beverage services** to a broader set of pathways in hospitality and tourism, showing how early work in restaurants aligns with future roles in lodging, event planning, and travel operations. In our newsletter Issue #4 (April 14), we showed how restaurant work is an important training ground for soft skills and interpersonal skills.

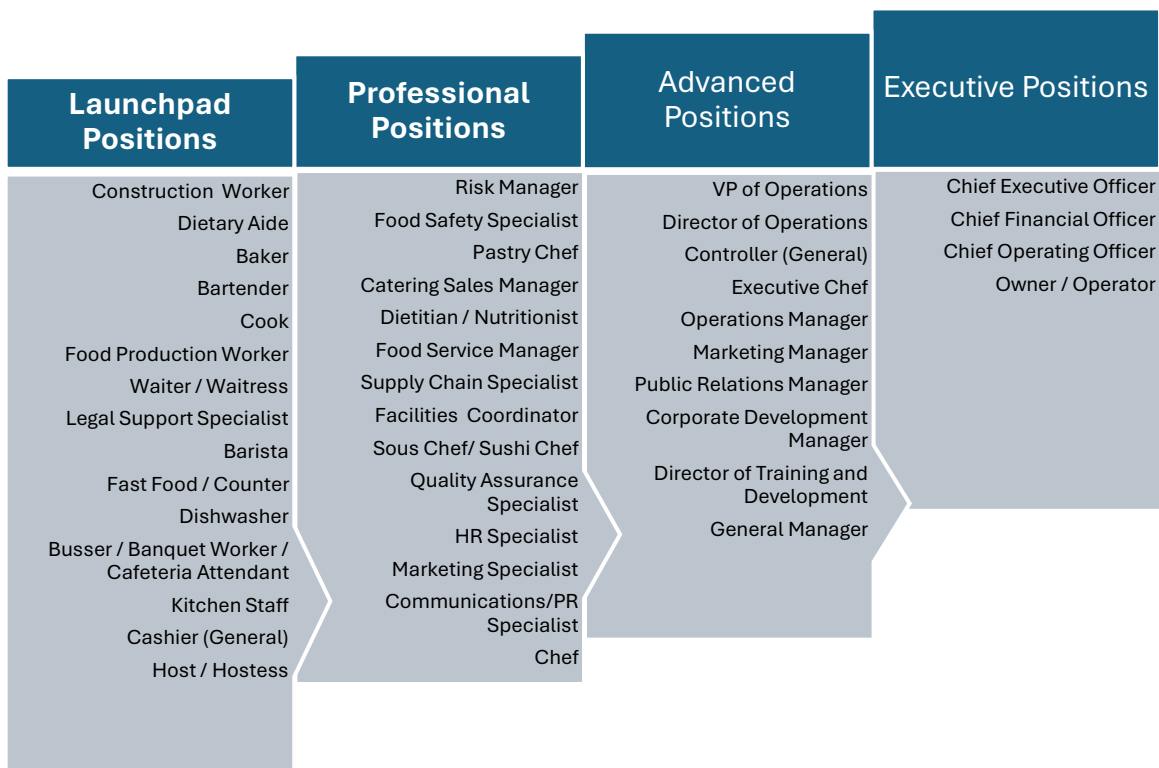
2. Education

Once an employee has worked in food service, they may, based on their experience or conversations with others, decide to pursue a career in hospitality, tourism, or events management. Some employers offer their own management training programs. A great model of this is In-N-Out Burger. Their management training is a promote-from-within system starting with hourly associates, progressing through detailed skill levels (Levels 1-7+) focusing on Quality, Service, Speed, Cleanliness (QSSC), culminating in In-N-Out University courses for higher management (4th, 3rd, 2nd, Store Managers), emphasizing operational excellence, leadership, and upholding company values to ensure consistency across all locations.



Other employers have programs that pay for model employees to attend college courses. *Disney Aspire* is a model of this type of program, founded just a few years ago. The Walt Disney Company's education investment program for eligible hourly employees offers 100% upfront tuition payment for a wide range of online programs (from high school to master's degrees) and career development, along with support from success coaches via *Guild*, to help employees gain skills and advance their careers. The program covers tuition, books, and fees, removes cost barriers, and provides support for career mobility. The program partners with various online and on-ground schools, including Purdue Global, the University of Arizona, Fullerton College, and Cal State Fullerton, among many others.

Many workers don't have access to an employee training program or may not want to stay with the same company. For them, California's public college system is among the best in the world, with free college through the Promise program for first-generation students; ESL, GED, and other programs that prepare students for college; Rising Scholars and other programs for system-impacted adults; and online, evening, and asynchronous class options for working people.



3. Internships

Broad research from the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) finds that participation in internships and experiential learning correlates with higher early-career salaries (\$59,000 vs. \$44,000 nationally, and higher in California), faster-than-expected career progression, and greater job satisfaction. Although this data is not tourism-specific, the patterns strongly suggest that experiential learning yields superior career outcomes relative to traditional work placements. Tourism-specific studies indicate that tourism internships clarify career expectations and develop practical competencies that better align with industry needs. Internships increase *work readiness, role clarity, and ability*, key precursors to career progression, primarily when structured and contextualized as learning rather than labor. Internship experiences — frequently in restaurant, hotel, or tourism settings — can influence students’ career intentions and self-efficacy, affecting whether they choose to enter and remain in hospitality careers.

According to Ellen Kim, a steering committee member and the Past Director of the Center for Hospitality at Cal State Fullerton, interest in internships has been declining. This local report echoes other national reports. According to a WYSE Travel Confederation/ GoAbroad analysis of internship search behavior, interest in internships in the United States declined by about 50% from 2024 to 2025. A long-standing critique in tourism and hospitality education, which has only become more pronounced since COVID, is that internships often amount to low-paid or unpaid routine labor rather than developmental, career-orienting experiences. According to a study published in the *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education*, poor planning, the absence of integrated learning objectives, and insufficient industry involvement have diminished the effectiveness of internships and student satisfaction.

To combat this trend, employers and educators need to rethink internships for Generation Alpha. In tourism and hospitality curricula, a proper internship is part of a broader “Work-Integrated Learning” (WIL) strategy, which includes co-ops, field placements, and service learning. Tourism education programs should be embedding internships within academic frameworks that include:

1. **Academic oversight and learning objectives.** Internships are increasingly tied to course requirements, reflective assignments, and formal mentorship rather than being side jobs.
2. **Interdisciplinary experiential projects** combining tourism with other fields (e.g., event production or marketing), enhancing real-world preparation.
3. **Expanded experiential activities** beyond internships (such as instructional tours, service learning, and place-based projects) designed to deepen engagement.



Rather than routine tasks, programs could offer **Immersion internships** in which students engage in teamwork, destination planning, or strategic projects that mirror leadership roles. Case studies on tourism immersion models show potential for “multi-stakeholder learning experiences” beyond basic service tasks. These bring diverse groups (educators, industry, community, policymakers) together to solve complex problems, share knowledge, and co-create solutions through iterative, collaborative processes that build collective understanding and capacity beyond what any single group could achieve alone, often using methods such as **Learning Alliances** or experience-based design for innovation.

Research integrating transformational leadership frameworks indicates that internships should include mentoring, reflection, and alignment with students' goals. These shape career development more than purely transactional experiences. Studies show that internships coupled with reflective assignments, faculty assessment, and industry feedback yield higher satisfaction and greater career decision self-efficacy—students report feeling more capable of navigating career choices after the experience.

The shift toward experiential learning in tourism builds on **Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory (ELT)**—where meaningful learning occurs through “experience plus reflection,” rather than rote tasks: Kolb’s classic model emphasizes concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation as a learning cycle that informs competence and professional development.

The Four Stages of the Learning Cycle

- **Concrete Experience (CE):** Having a new experience or reinterpreting an existing one (e.g., a hands-on workshop).
- **Reflective Observation (RO):** Watching and reflecting on the experience from multiple perspectives (e.g., reviewing notes or discussing with peers).
- **Abstract Conceptualization (AC):** Forming new ideas, theories, or logical understandings from reflections (e.g., reading a textbook chapter on the topic).
- **Active Experimentation (AE):** Using the new concepts to make decisions and solve problems in new situations (e.g., applying the theory in a real project).

Borrowing from The Restaurant Model: In an article from our April 14 newsletter (#4), evidence shows that restaurants are a worthy model for internships with:

- Experiential learning from the start
- The development of soft skills through customer service
- Relationship management training
- Teambuilding through regular meetings, meals, and assessments
- A focus on quality experiences
- And constant mentorship



Other sectors of our industry should consider incorporating these elements into their internship programs.

Internships must be structured to be competitive with other students' jobs to be successful. The path to management often requires sacrifices that low-income students cannot afford. Unpaid internships disproportionately benefit those with financial support, thereby limiting inclusion. In California, unpaid internships are only legal if they “primarily benefit the intern's education, mirror training in an academic setting, don't displace paid workers, and meet strict ‘Primary Beneficiary’ tests, requiring clear understanding of no pay, limited duration tied to academics, and specific documentation, like a written program description submitted to the CA DLSE (Division of Labor Standards Enforcement).” We would do well to eliminate “no pay internships” and make paid internships with a floor of the minimum wage for the industry, with clear incentives and pathways to management for model employees.

A well-designed internship can address the problems associated with the loss of star employees. Hospitality workers often leave the industry in search of better conditions and stability, thereby disrupting business. For less-than-stellar performers, this is “survival of the fittest” and helps keep a company healthy. However, if star performers are leaving, it indicates a lack of team development, no emphasis on mission or quality, or no path to management.

4. Other Credentials

Some curricula are layering **micro-credentials** (certifications in specific hospitality or technology functions) on top of internships to signal skill attainment and support career mobility. These micro-credentials may include areas such as Beverage Specialist (covering coffee & tea, wine, spirits, and non-alcoholic drinks), Hospitality Sustainability (teaching environmental, social, and ecological responsibilities), ServSafe Certification (essential food safety and sanitation guidelines), and technical skills such as social media marketing, hybrid meeting production, or website management.

5. The Network



In each stage along this pipeline, workers form a network of colleagues, employers, trainers, mentors, and fellow students. The best studies from sources like *LinkedIn* and *HubSpot* consistently show networking is crucial for jobs and promotions, indicating 85% of jobs come from networks, leveraging the "hidden job market" where 70% of roles aren't public.

Key findings from a large-scale study reported in [Harvard Business Review](#) indicate that weak ties (acquaintances, not close friends) are often most effective, as they bridge different social circles and provide new information. Long-term research also links networking to greater promotion and career success, demonstrating its vital role beyond job-finding. Therefore, the more of these stops people take along this pipeline, the more likely they are to find good jobs and be promoted. Also, low-income workers are more likely to catch up to better-

connected workers from privileged families with broader networks. Both in-person and digital networking sharpen soft skills and build interpersonal relationships that build careers.

Career pipelines or ladders exist in tourism today; however, they are not as strong in the post-Pandemic landscape. To be most effective for workers, employers, and trainers, companies must design their pipelines to resonate with younger workers and build incentives for growth, while still addressing the skills employers require. This can't happen in a vacuum; it needs to be discussed in a forum and designed to be optimal, drawing on the many great models already in our community and across the country at large.

REFERENCES

- Croft, C., & Wang, W. (2023). *Hospitality and tourism experiential learning combined with interdisciplinary learning*. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education* (qualitative insights into experiential benefits). [ResearchGate](#)
- NACE (2025). *Impacts of experiential learning on the Gen Z early career experience*. National Association of Colleges and Employers. [Default](#)
- Ruhanen, L., & Alpert, F. (2013). *A tourism immersion internship: Student expectations, experiences and satisfaction*. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education*. [ScienceDirect](#)
- Solnet, D., Kralj, A., & Kandampully, J. (2021). *A systematic review of literature on hospitality internships*. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education*. [ScienceDirect](#)
- Wickey, J. L. (2023). *Students' perceptions of hospitality and tourism internships on career pathways: Transformational versus transactional internships* (doctoral dissertation). [STARS](#)
- Zopiatis, A., Papadopoulos, C., & Theofanous, Y. (2021). *A systematic review of hospitality internship literature*. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education*.
- Robinson, R. N. S., et al. (n.d.). *Tourism and hospitality internships: A prologue to career intentions?* *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education*. [ScienceDirect](#)
- Stangl, B., et al. (2024). *Transferable skills in tourism and hospitality*. *Annals of Tourism Research*. [EurekAlert!](#)
- Ramaprasad, B. S., Rao, S., & Prabhu, D. (2021). *Linking hospitality and tourism students' internship satisfaction to career decision self-efficacy: A moderated-mediation analysis*. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education*. [ResearchGate](#)
- Boundary crossing, internships, and the hospitality & tourism talent pipeline. (2023). *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education*. [ScienceDirect](#)
- Hospitality and tourism jobs data: soft skills demand in hospitality & tourism labor market. (n.d.). Ohio Hospitality Career Field Data Report. [education.ohio.gov](#)
- Hospitality and tourism skill overlap and career mobility research. (n.d.). *Hospitality labor pipeline and cross-sector skill mobility study*. [NSF Public Access Repository](#)
- Career pathways in hospitality, events, & tourism. (n.d.). CareerTech Hospitality–Events–Tourism Cluster report. [Advance CTE](#)
- National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation, *RestaurantsWork* career pathways. (n.d.). [chooserestaurants.org](#)
- Insights in talent development in the hospitality industry (systematic review). (n.d.). *Crafting excellence insights in talent development*.

Photo Credits in Order: “The Tourism Ladder”- ChatGPT Image; The Tourism Pipeline Table by [Choosereastaurants.org](#); Internship and networking photos- Microsoft Stock Image

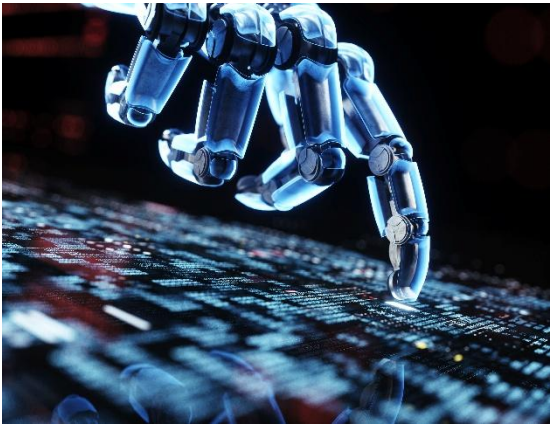
The Digital Landscape of Tourism Education

The tourism sector has become increasingly digital, relying on the internet and related technologies for marketing, operations, and customer interactions. Digital influence now plays a central role in tourists’ decision-making; travelers rely on online platforms, social media, and user-generated content during planning, booking, and travel experiences (Truong Thi Vien, 2025). The growth of “smart tourism,” which harnesses information and communication technologies (ICT), mobile devices, artificial intelligence (AI), and cloud computing, highlights the industry’s digital orientation. Smart tourism supports personalized visitor experiences, real-time services, and enhanced destination management. These industry trends demand new curricular approaches within tourism education that prepare students to navigate these technological ecosystems.

Several key technologies now form essential components of tourism curricula:

1. Internet and Online Platforms. The internet remains foundational to tourism education. Online learning platforms, virtual classrooms, instructional videos, and digital resource repositories enable flexible access to learning materials for students worldwide. These tools support blended learning, which combines remote online coursework with experiential components facilitated by local institutions. Online training mitigates geographic and economic barriers to education.

2. Artificial Intelligence. AI integrates with tourism systems to enhance customer interactions, automate service delivery, and analyze large datasets for predictive insights. AI-powered chatbots and virtual assistants help streamline bookings and customer service, while machine learning models personalize travel recommendations based on user behavior. In tourism education, students learn to apply AI tools for data analysis, marketing, automation, and customer relationship management.



3. Social Media and Digital Marketing. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube play an outsized role in tourism marketing, influencing destination choice and traveler engagement. Courses in digital marketing teach students how to design, implement, and analyze social media campaigns that drive tourism demand through authentic storytelling and influencer partnerships (Digital Technologies in Tourism, 2025).

4. Drones. Unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) have gained prominence in tourism for aerial photography, real-time destination monitoring, hybrid events, and the creation of immersive promotional media. AI-equipped drones can autonomously collect and analyze environmental and visual data, which supports both industry decision-making and experiential learning opportunities for students. Incorporating drone operation and data analytics into the curriculum gives students hands-on skills

relevant to modern tourism operations. (The first Drone Pilot Apprenticeship program in the US, offered by any college, began right here in Orange County at Fullerton College in 2023.)

5. Hybrid Events Production and High-Tech Facilitation. The rise of hybrid events that blend in-person and virtual participation exemplifies how technology enhances tourism-related gatherings. From destination weddings to international conferences, hybrid formats require competencies in event technology platforms, real-time streaming, audience analytics, and digital facilitation skills. Students must understand how to plan and manage these events to effectively engage both remote and on-site audiences. Serving both audiences well can be very challenging, even with great planning and technology.



6. Coding and Technical Skills. While tourism programs have traditionally focused on business skills, there is a growing recognition of the value of coding and technical competencies. Coding skills enable students to develop or customize technological solutions, such as websites, mobile applications, data analytics dashboards, and interactive user interfaces, that address industry challenges and support digital innovation. More often now, this is being done by AI, but it still requires coders to check the work.

Online and Hybrid Educational Models

Much of the education for technology-related tourism skills occurs online. Digital classrooms provide theoretical foundations, while simulated environments and online practical projects allow students to apply new tools in safe, controlled settings. Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) simulations bring immersive learning experiences to students, helping them visualize customer interactions, navigate smart destination technologies, and manage crisis scenarios without physical risk. These online components are often complemented by institutional partnerships where local colleges and universities host experiential learning modules, such as drone training labs, hybrid event simulations, and field-based digital marketing campaigns.

Hybrid learning models have been shown to enhance flexibility and access while maintaining rigor; they provide opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous engagement, enabling institutions to balance technological skill development with in-person mentorship and networking. However, effective implementation requires not only technological infrastructure but also teacher training, curriculum realignment, and industry engagement to ensure relevance and applicability.

Many tech-related subjects can be learned online through free or low-cost programs outside universities. The quality of these programs can range widely. Students need to check qualifications, certifications, and reviews.

Challenges and the Future of Tourism Education

Despite the advantages, integrating technology into tourism education poses challenges:

- Digital divides, such as infrastructure limitations and unequal access to high-speed internet, can hinder student participation. As many as a third of students lack access to a reliable internet connection and a digital device on which to save work, other than a cell phone.
- Instructors must be well-trained in digital pedagogies, and institutional policies must support ongoing curriculum evolution. One of the issues that has arisen since the Pandemic is that tenured professors often resist online teaching training due to a lack of pedagogical preparation, technological apathy, and the belief that traditional in-person methods are superior, which causes significant disparities in student engagement and course quality. This creates low-quality online experiences, low student satisfaction, and poor retention rates, say experts.
- AI makes it easier for students to cheat and harder for professors to design learning experiences. Students can graduate without the knowledge needed to succeed, while professors find it harder to design classes that test knowledge.
- Furthermore, curricular alignment with industry expectations requires sustained collaboration between academia and tourism employers to ensure that graduates possess the practical skills needed in a rapidly evolving workplace.

Nevertheless, the trajectory is clear: tourism education must remain at the forefront of technological adoption to prepare future professionals for a digital-first industry. By embedding competencies in technical skills, educators can equip students with the tools needed to innovate and lead in tourism's dynamic landscape. On the flip side, employers can incentivize interns and employees to acquire technical skills beyond their degrees.

REFERENCES

- Ayuba, H. (2024). *Digital transformation in tourism education: Driving forces and challenges*. Journal of English Teaching and Linguistic Issues (JETLI). ejournal.iaingorontalo.ac.id
- Digital Technologies in Tourism. (2025). *Digital technologies in tourism: From online booking to virtual tours*. American Journal Of Applied Science And Technology. inlibrary.uz
- Elkhwesky, M., et al. (2024). *The use of artificial intelligence systems in tourism and hospitality: The tourists' perspective*. MDPI. [MDPI](https://www.mdpi.com/)
- Forestur. (n.d.). *Tourism specialist training*. Wikipedia. [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/)
- Journal of Practice Learning and Educational Development. (2025). *Digital transformation and tourism education*. digitalpress.gaes-edu.com
- Smart tourism. (2025). *Smart tourism*. Wikipedia. [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/)
- Truong, T. V. (2025). *The impact of digital influence on tourist decision-making behavior*. Research Inventy: International Journal of Engineering and Science. researchinventy.com
- International Journal of Artificial Intelligence. (2025). *Innovations in tourism education*.



UPCOMING JOB FAIRS 2026

✦ June 2026

- [Orange County Virtual Job Fair – Jun 25, 2026](#)

✦ July 2026

- **ORANGE COUNTY In Person Community Employment Day Career Fair**
 - 📍 Holiday Inn Santa Ana-Orange County Airport
 - 📅 **July 23, 2026, 11:00 am – 3:00 pm**
 - Large community hiring event with many local employers.*
- [Orange County Virtual Job Fair – Jul 30, 2026](#)

✦ August 2026

- **Orange County Job Fair & Career Fair**
 - 📍 Courtyard Marriott Santa Ana
 - 📅 **August 13, 2026** — regularly scheduled fair series.
- [Orange County Virtual Job Fair – Aug 18, 2026](#)

NOTE: Additional Job Fairs are available to registered students at all local Colleges and Universities. Check with your College Counselors.