Staten Island collegians put their employment prospects on fast forward (video)

By Kiawana Rich/Staten Island Advance
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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- It's scary to be a college student in 21st-century America. The rotten economy, the dearth of good jobs, cascading student debt -- what's to like?

But students at St. John's University's Grymes Hill campus experienced a counter to that bleak scenario Tuesday afternoon in the form of a Speed Networking event.

Sponsored by the University Career Services and put on by The Executive Women's Council of the Staten Island Economic Development Corporation, the two-hour program gave young folks the opportunity to converse with more than 14 successful female Island business owners, entrepreneurs and executives in an effort to gain insight into what employers will be looking for in the professional world.

Valora Blackson, the brand-new director of St. John's Career Services, is keen to give students about to enter the workforce any possible edge.

"Whether it's students looking for an internship or interviewing for a job or trying to figure out 'what do I need to do now to develop the skills to be more competitive,' these professionals can give advice based on their expertise and also based on the fact that they are from the community. ... They have their pulse on what's going on on the Island," Ms. Blackson said.

A la "speed-dating," the participating 35 students got to spend 10 minutes with the executives asking questions and getting advice. The women would then rotate to another table.

The executives came from marketing, banking, TV journalism and other fields. Many shared their success stories as well as advice.

Linda Baran, president of the Staten Island Chamber of Commerce, related a 26-year rise through the Chamber, where she began as a bookkeeper. She acknowledged that today's college
graduates have it hard. The keys, she said, are doing internships and building relationships within an industry so as to have those connections come graduation time.

"Make yourself stand out and sell yourself during interviews," she advised students.

Terry Tarangelo, an associate group director/vice president with Signature Bank, shared her successful decades-rise though the banking industry, first with SI Bank & Trust and now with Signature Bank.

Ms. Tarangelo told students to keep an open mind, because the jobs they are looking for might not be out there right away.

She added that they should "enjoy what they are going to do, because they will be spending the rest of their lives doing it."

Anything to give the edge to young people is important. According to a recent study by the Pew Research Center, the labor force participation rate -- the percentage of the population that is looking for work or already employed -- for those younger than 25 was 54.5 percent in March, the lowest level in four decades.

And of the newer jobs being added to the economy, the majority pay significantly lower wages.

That kind of news makes Janet Brago, 19, nervous. The freshman said she's scared about finding a job when she graduates, but what she found heartening is that so many of the women started out in one career and ended up elsewhere.

"You can start out with one major and end up in a whole different type of career. That builds my confidence for the future," she said.

Joyce Bongo, 17, of the Bronx, also a freshman, said the lesson she took away is that getting outside experience really counts.

"I should do as many internships as I can and also be very open-minded and have fun in whatever I do. That's the most important thing, because I will be doing it for a long time."