

# Nonprofit Organizations



Like government careers, the nonprofit sector is an expanding field with excellent entry-level career fields for political science graduates. Nonprofits offer great opportunities for people who like to help others, or who believe strongly in certain issues or causes. Unlike government jobs, nonprofits in general offer more flexible employment options for students or recent graduates.

## *What are Nonprofits?*

- Nonprofit organizations promote causes or provide public services in numerous areas including the environment, economic development and science-based research.
- Nonprofits are different than private corporations or businesses that sell products or provide services to generate profits for their owners or shareholders. Instead, nonprofits are funded through grants from governments, private sector corporations, philanthropic foundations, wealthy individuals, membership dues and various other fundraising activities.
- Nonprofits that hold 501 (c) (3) designations from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) are limited in the government lobbying activities they can pursue, while those holding 501 (c) (4) designations can lobby extensively.

## *Careers in Nonprofit Organizations*

- There are many myths about the nonprofit career sector that may discourage students from seriously considering this field. One common misnomer is that nonprofit organizations only employ people who work for no pay. Another mistaken belief is that nonprofits provide their services for free. These beliefs distort the reputation of an honorable and potentially rewarding career field. While many nonprofits do welcome volunteers, most also employ professionals who earn competitive salaries.
- Currently there are over one million nonprofit organizations in the U.S. collectively employ over ten million people. There are also thousands of other nonprofits, called non-governmental organizations (NGOs), operating around the globe. Nongovernmental organizations respond to natural disasters such as floods or famine, provide basic services in war-torn areas, and promote rights such as free speech or self-determination, among many other things.
- Specific types of nonprofits include **foundations**, which are nonprofits that operate from their own funds and are managed by a board of trustees or directors. Foundations often provide grant support to educational, charitable, cultural and religious organizations. Major foundations include the Carnegie Corporation, Ford Foundation, Pew Charitable Trust and Kellogg Foundation.
- Another type of nonprofit, advocacy organizations, promote the interests of those they serve, such as children, the poor, the elderly or veterans. Other nonprofits advocate for a particular public issue, such as the environment or human rights. Examples include the Sierra Club or Amnesty International.
- Nonprofits vary widely in size and mission. Large organizations, such as the American Red Cross or YMCA, employ thousands of individuals while the smallest organizations may have one paid employee who oversees a staff of volunteers.
- Nonprofits offer career opportunities for people who live in smallest towns to the largest cities. Students interested in learning more about nonprofits should look at both large nonprofit organizations and smaller organizations that operate locally.

## *Think tanks*

Research institutes, also known as think tanks, conduct research, produce reports, and organize conferences on a host of public and private-sector topics including economic trends, environmental policy, management effectiveness, foreign affairs, and government reform. Think tanks are usually designated nonprofit organizations that receive grants and contracts from governments, corporations and foundations. Most consider themselves nonpartisan, although many promote liberal or conservative approaches to public problems. The Heritage Foundation, for example, is recognized as a conservative think tank, while the Progressive Policy Institute adopts a more liberal perspective. Other prominent think tanks include the Brookings Institution, the CATO Institute, the Hoover Institute, RAND, and the Woodrow Wilson Center. Most think tanks also employ undergraduate students as interns for a semester or two. Students who intern at think tanks gain valuable research experience as they generally support the work of one or a few scholars. Experience at a think tank may also help undergraduates decide if graduate school is a right choice for them.

## *Issues versus Skills in the Nonprofit Universe*

- The dizzying range of size and types of nonprofit organizations can seem overwhelming to college students who are seriously considering a career in nonprofits. Therefore, it's helpful to find ways to narrow down your search for opportunities in either paid positions or in internships or voluntary work.
- The basic distinction between issues and skills offers one way to organize your exploration of nonprofit careers:
  - The nonprofit sector includes many people who are driven by a particular issue they feel strongly about, and who are less concerned about which particular position they fill at a given time. If you are driven primarily by an interest in an issue such as the environment, women's rights, child health, or arts advocacy, you should learn as much as you can about organizations that promote specific variants of those issues.
  - Others find careers in nonprofit sector rewarding for developing skills that are transportable. In all nonprofit organizations, there are several essential positions including fundraisers, accountants, researchers, administrative assistants, and communication specialists. If you want to work on your interpersonal skills but prefer to work in a corporate setting later, a public relations position in a large nonprofit might be a good starting point.
  - Be sure to consider your options at different levels including international, national, state and locally based nonprofits. Many nonprofits, such as World Wildlife Federation and the American Cancer Society have headquarters that coordinate the work of regional and local chapters, and that engage in political advocacy and fundraising, as well as many regional or local chapters that provide hands-on work that cause-oriented individuals will find fulfilling.

## *Monetary and Other Rewards in the Nonprofit Sector*

- The traditional thinking is that people who thrive in the nonprofit sector are motivated more by their personal convictions than the profit motive. While it's true that you won't become a millionaire through a career working in nonprofits, the salary picture is better than the conventional wisdom assumes. In many cases nonprofit salaries are quite competitive with government and private sector salary scales, especially as you move up into mid-career positions that require higher-level skills and more responsibility, or if you work in larger nonprofits with more institutionalized hiring and promotion practices.
- Although larger organizations are valid choices for internships and entry level positions, be sure to explore the middle sized and smaller organizations as well. Because these organizations operate with less staff, they often rely on interns and new colleagues to stay running and meet their mission goals. The benefit of working in smaller organizations is the real sense you gain that your work is meaningful and rewarding and that if you're not doing it, it won't get done.