

# living the life you dream

## **Career Advice from Dave Rosenfeld, Student PIRG**

### **I. Why consider public interest careers?**

The world needs you. Global warming, the health care crisis, and poverty are not going to be solved without dedicated organizers and advocates shining the spotlight on the problems, lobbying decision makers to implement solutions, and educating and mobilizing public outcry for change. The world desperately needs more full time organizers and advocates, in every part of the country.

### **II. Options:**

- A. *Organizing*: As distinct from simply campaigning, organizing is entering a community (be it a neighborhood, workplace or college campus), identifying the problems that community perceives to care about, and connecting that community's hungering to solve the problem with a concrete program that is impactful, develops leaders and a taste for the power they could have by taking on bigger and more ambitious problems. Groups like SEIU, Student PIRG student, and Acorn all hire college graduates to organize.
- B. *Grassroots Campaigning*: Campaigning is taking an issue and going out and directly building public support for that issue, going door to door, standing on street corners, going into churches and other meeting places.  
The Fund for Public Interest Research hires over 100 college graduate for careers each year, along with thousands of college students for summer campaign jobs.
- C. *Issue Advocacy*: Advocacy is taking an issue, developing specific policies and working with decision makers (such as the Legislature, or corporations) to implement those policies, using research, media, coalition building and lobbying to get the job done. Pretty much every issue group under the sun does this, the PIRGs Fellowship program is probably the most extensive entry level career program for this line of work.
- D. *Service*: Service is what it sounds like - providing direct services to communities. Planned Parenthood provides abortion services, soup kitchens provide food services, etc.
- E. *Consciousness Raising*: As opposed to advocating directly to decision makers on an issue, consciousness raising is working to move public opinion over to your issue - your target is the public and your tool is education.  
Greenpeace is engaging in consciousness raising when their boats block whale hunters; National Organization for Women is engaging in consciousness raising when they organize marches on Washington; Operation Rescue is doing consciousness raising when they protest abortion clinics.

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- F. Think Tanks: Think tanks hone in on issues, churn out research on new problems, new ideas and new ways to communicate those ideas to decision makers and the public. Brookings Institute, Center for American Progress, Cato Institute are examples on different ends of the political spectrum that are think tanks.
- G. Partisan: This is working to directly elect a candidate or party to office. You can work for a party, like the Republican National Committee, the Democratic National Committee; you can work for groups that candidates and groups hire to help elect people to office, such as Grassroots Campaigns Inc or MoveOn.org.

Obviously lots of groups overlap with all of this; so don't take these categories too seriously, just get out there and make some change.

## **III. Qualifications I look for in social change candidates**

- A. Do a few things really well. I prefer candidates who picked a few things in college/life experience and really got into it, took on lots of responsibility and demonstrated some loyalty to their project/team/group and helped build it into something bigger than when they started.
- B. Discrete projects where you took leadership and accomplished a concrete goal. I look for people who can name actual projects they took on with a real goal, dig in and really had to work hard to make it happen, overcome obstacles, etc. I look for projects that involved having to get other people to do something - an event, a sports team, an organization, a campaign. Although studying abroad or doing a thesis are important life experiences, I do not believe they are not impressive enough challenges to stand alone without something else as part of it.
- C. Put yourself out there - gumption. I look for people who have demonstrated some gumption, a willingness to go outside their comfort zone, try new things, take on hard projects, push themselves to the limit and came out of it realizing that they were capable of more than when they started.  
Again, I recognize that study abroad is that kind of experience for many, but it is limited because it is an individualistic experience and what I'm looking for is demonstration of some gumption that involves trying to get other people to do something.

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## **IV. Other tips for people who want to get into social change**

- A. Be willing to live like the people you represent, at least for a few years. Most people in this world live on an annual income far below most entry level social change salaries are. Not that this is a good thing, but people who are serious about social change should be willing to experience life as working and poor people live it in their first few years out of college. That means sharing a room with other people, shopping at discount stores for food, using mass transit to get around, going without luxuries.  
This doesn't mean you have to live this way forever, but living this way for a few years will give you a perspective that will give you unique insights into how the world works.
- B. Be willing to learn the difference between "need" and "want". American consumer culture has grossly distorted the lines between "need" and "want". Learning to live close to that line is an important life skill that will make you smarter and tougher and more understanding of what is really important in life.
- C. Be willing to work hard. Real hard. Dive in. Take on a lot of responsibility. Embrace 60-80 hours a week and the lifestyle it brings.  
Think about how you can do that project as perfectly as possible.
- D. Be willing to work anywhere. If you're from the Midwest, go to New Jersey. If you're from New York, go to Nebraska. If you're from California, go to Alabama. Experience this country in all of its glory and learn how to make social change happen out of your element. Avoid working in a liberal, groovy city. Go somewhere where there is a real need for social change practitioners - go to places where there AREN'T lots of people who think like you - and recruit and train more people to be like you so there is more social change when you leave than when you started.
- E. Commit to one thing for a few years, not just one year. The skills of social change work - organizing and advocacy - take a few years to master, so take a few years to master them. Your first year will kick your butt, you'll start to get a handle in your second year, and by your third year, you'll be a master and ready to really move up the ranks. Doing a job for just a year and then going back to law school is a missed opportunity to really develop your skills.
- F. It's not about you. No doubt, you will bring a lot of great talent to whatever job you have. But also remember that initially, you will likely be getting more from whoever you are working for than you will be putting in.  
I encourage you to respect that.