

What are nonprofit jobs and how do I find them?

Understanding the Nonprofit Sector

As opposed to government (public sector) and business (private sector), the nonprofit sector (also referred to as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), independent sector, philanthropic sector, or third sector) is often defined by what it is **not**. The nonprofit sector **is** comprised of organizations that are trying to create a better world, as defined by each of these organizations' missions. These organizations have varying levels of government oversight depending on the country in which they are located. Within the nonprofit sector, there are organizations whose missions directly oppose one another, and many more whose work is guided by similar values, goals and visions.

Third sector organizations address issues such as poverty, the environment, youth development, community service, health care, workers' rights, public policy, violence prevention, the arts, economic development, and many more. People often think of "nonprofits" as youth centers and soup kitchens, but they also include religious institutions, universities, hospitals, trade associations and unions, and museums.

Who works in the Nonprofit Sector?

According to Independent Sector, in the US alone, 10.9 million individuals (about 7% of the workforce) work with nonprofit organizations. Some have the same titles as professionals working in the corporate or government sector: receptionists, CEOs/Executive Directors and presidents, accountants, managers, researchers, event planners, teachers, sales people and programmers. There are also many titles unique to the nonprofit sector: community organizers, advocates, program managers and volunteer coordinators.

This only serves to show that many of the same skills and opportunities available with businesses and the government are available in the nonprofit sector. The uniqueness of the nonprofit sector should not be overlooked, but any of your skills and talents could be put to use within a nonprofit organization.

What kinds of jobs are available to recent college graduates in the nonprofit sector?

Working for a nonprofit at the beginning of your career will likely offer more responsibility, leadership, and immediate growth opportunities than you ever would experience at the entry level in business or the government. Depending on what you want to do, here are some job titles that should be within your reach: research assistant/associate, project/program coordinator or assistant, executive assistant, organizer, volunteer coordinator, administrative assistant, event planner, etc. Having extensive volunteer experience in a given area, information technology skills, or being bilingual and/or bicultural can make you an even more attractive candidate.

Although many jobs will say that one- to two-years' experience in the given field are required, you should be confident in applying for just about any job asking for this range of experience that does not require a master's degree. If you have volunteer experience in the given field or know someone at the organization, you should feel even more comfortable in applying.

"Year of Service Programs," both secular and faith-based, are great opportunities for recent college graduates to get started in the nonprofit sector. Most of these programs will help you find a job, place you in a community of people doing similar work and provide opportunities for training, professional and personal development.

Can I pay my rent, loans, and eat with a nonprofit job?

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to young people seeking out work in the nonprofit sector, the salaries are indeed lower. But there is more to this issue when you take a closer look.

Disregarding the “feel-good” benefits of nonprofit work, living well on a nonprofit salary as a recent college graduate is very doable. Young adults around the world prove this every day. Starting salaries in the nonprofit sector are often very similar to starting salaries in other industries (excluding investment banking and consulting). Nonprofits often have excellent benefits packages, and many “Year of Service Programs” (mentioned above) enable college graduates to defer student loans for the duration of the program.

How do I find the jobs? – the bad news first

On most college campuses, jobs in the nonprofit sector are a virtually invisible part of the many employment opportunities presented. Your friends, parents, and professors may provide little to no understanding and/or support of your desire to do something outside the norm.

Nonprofit organizations themselves, most of which would love to hire young, energetic, talented staff, do not have the resources to recruit on campus in any comprehensive, strategic or competitive way. With some exceptions on campuses across the US, there will likely be no more than one or two nonprofits, if any, which actually recruit on your campus. There will likely be few nonprofits at any career fairs on your campus.

Students with an interest in nonprofit jobs are forced to go beyond the average time, energy and strategies that most students will put into the job searching process. They will also have to smile politely (or not) at the multitude of people who will ask when they plan to get a “real job.”

It becomes not that surprising why working for nonprofits after college is so much more the exception than the norm on most campuses across the country. And this does not even mention having to contend with your student loans on a nonprofit salary.

A few reasons not to give up - the good news

1. The Opportunities Exist

Many opportunities for recent college graduates exist within nonprofit organizations all over the world. The challenge is making connections between the organizations with these opportunities and the young people who want them stronger, more visible and easier to access.

2. The people you know

Presumably you are interested in working with a nonprofit in part because of people you have met through volunteering, classes, internships, or jobs you have held in the past. These people can be your best resource for finding the right opportunity for you. The nonprofit sector is often a relatively small and well-connected community within different issues (environment, arts, labor, homelessness, etc.) and in most cities or towns. Meet with or contact all of the people in your network as you begin your job search and *always* ask them who else they know that you should contact.

3. You are not alone

Searching for nonprofit work as a college senior can be a frighteningly lonely and frustrating experience. But take some comfort in knowing that there are thousands of people on campuses across the country in exactly the same position. And the high turnover rates in nonprofit organizations means that there are plenty of opportunities for all of you. Idealist.org will soon have a bulletin board for all of you to connect, but you should also rely on like-minded friends and peers on campus who can share in this exciting and daunting search.

Where can I learn more?

The Nonprofit Career Center at Idealist.org: <http://www.idealism.org/career.html>

The Career Center includes a wealth of information to guide you through the nonprofit job search.