

Pathways to Public Policy Careers

by Paula Nailon

Are you, like most Americans, interested in health care reform? Have you been confused by the conflicting viewpoints of politicians, analysts, lobbyists, health care professionals, and others? This debate provides the perfect context to discuss public policy careers.

What exactly is public policy?

Public policy is made when a governing body attempts to address an issue of widespread public concern, such as health care. The process often runs in cycles and can take years.¹

- During *Agenda Setting*, a wide range of actors (including individuals, nonprofits, corporations, special interest groups, lobbyists, federal agencies, and the Executive Branch) compete to frame the issues, educate stakeholders, and build support for their agendas.
- The Legislature joins the mix in the *Policy Formulation* stage.
- After new laws are created, *Policy Implementation* occurs, often involving federal agencies, state and local governments, bureaucratic entities, and NGOs. Courts get involved as laws and policies are challenged on a variety of fronts.
- *Analysis and Evaluation* occurs throughout the cycle and involves many players. Policies may be changed — *and the cycle begins again.*

Where do lawyers fit into public policy?

Everywhere! If it concerns advocating for, drafting, implementing, or analyzing laws or policies, lawyers will be involved. They interact with legislative and government representatives. In the health care debate, lawyers worked behind the scenes for pharmaceutical, biotech, and insurance companies; health care providers; corporate employers; and others. They work as registered lobbyists² and specialized impact litigators, filing amicus briefs and taking precedent-setting cases to court. Lawyers work as research fellows; legislative staffers; budget, policy, program, and regulatory analysts; government relations specialists; and program managers, as well as in nonlegal positions involving communications and fundraising. They rely not only on their legal training, but on skills and experiences from previous employment, and undergraduate and graduate degree programs.

What is the best advice for someone pursuing a career in public policy?

Students often find their way to public policy careers because of an interest in a particular substantive area. Public policy work can be found in virtually any subject area; for example, Idealist.org allows job seekers to search in 57 focus areas, ranging from “Art and Architecture” to “Women’s Issues.” Public policy positions also attract the students who say, “I like law but don’t want to be an attorney.”

A word for career counselors about the public policy job search:

- Your ears should perk up when you hear the words “Center for,” “Institute,”

“Association,” and “Foundation” because they represent potential employers.

- Provide curricular advice. In addition to traditional law school courses (such as administrative law, constitutional law, and legislative drafting), students may benefit from cross-listed courses with MPA and MBA programs (such as statistical analysis and public finance). If you offer JD/MPA, JD/MPP, or other relevant joint degrees, provide the information early in students’ law school careers.
- Résumé builders include clinics, community volunteer work, specialized moot court competitions, legislative internships, and conferences.
- Most public policy positions are considered “public interest.” Become familiar with the broad range of resources available to public interest job seekers (PSLawNet’s Public Service Career Library, for example: <http://76.12.222.174/publicservicelibrary>). Join NALP’s Public Service Section (<http://www.nalp.org/publicservicesection>).
- Public policy internships and fellowships do not always provide a path to permanent employment. However, they do help students gain substantive experience and form mentoring and networking relationships, which can be the key to finding full-time work after graduation.
- Students may be competing with other graduate students, and possibly even undergraduates, for their jobs. They must be able to explain how a law degree provides added value.
- Although public interest positions are available throughout the country, many of the best ones are in Washington, DC. Develop resources and alumni contacts to make it easier for students to relocate for the summer and make the move permanent after graduation.

Selected resources for public policy employment

- Almanac of Policy Issues (www.policyalmanac.org) — Background information, documents, and links on major public policy issues, plus a list of websites with public policy jobs.
- Foreign Policy Association (http://www.fpa.org/jobs_contact2423/jobs_contact.htm) — General resources and jobs in foreign policy.
- Hill Zoo (www.hillzoo.com) — Resource, activities, and listings for jobs on and off the Hill.
- Idealist.org (www.idealists.org) — A recent search found 5,482 jobs; 18,135 volunteer opportunities; 2,695 internships (many were policy-related).
- PSLawNet (www.pslawnet.org) — Approximately 11,000 profiles for public interest employers, plus job search resources and job postings.
- Public Affairs Council (<http://pac.org/jobs>) — International association for public affairs professionals, with tools, resources, and job postings.
- Public Policy Handbook (www.law.arizona.edu/career/PublicPolicy10-11/LoginForm.cfm) — Subscriber resource with ±150 internship and fellowship postings, published by creators of the Government Honors & Internship Handbook.
- Roll Call (www.rcjobs.com) — Job postings are searchable by category, including: Government Relations, Legislative, Policy, Political, and Research.
- The Hill (<http://thehill.com>) — News from the Hill plus job postings.
- USA Jobs (www.usajobs.gov) — Federal government’s official job posting site.

Endnotes

1. The New York Times.com's Health Care Timeline runs from 1912 (when former President Teddy Roosevelt campaigned for national health care) to March 23, 2010 (when President Obama signed HR3590, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act).
http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2009/07/19/us/politics/20090717_HEALTH_TIMELINE.html
2. A Center for Public Integrity analysis of Senate lobbying showed that ± 4,525 lobbyists were hired to influence health reform bills in 2009, representing ± 1,750 companies and trade, advocacy, and professional organizations.
<http://www.publicintegrity.org/articles/entry/1953/>

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