

GRAD Guide to Nonprofit Careers

OVERVIEW

This guide focuses on careers in nonprofit organizations, non-governmental organizations, and social enterprises, all of which offer employment opportunities for UChicago graduate students and postdocs. Broadly defined, these organizations focus on the public good. Their employees are often motivated by their support of a particular social cause, and they think deeply about the best ways to further that cause.

According to the Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies 2020 Nonprofit Employment Report, nonprofit employment has continued to grow, expanding by 2 percent between 2016 and 2017. Nonprofit careers encompass a variety of fields, including health, social assistance, education, arts, and recreation.

Nonprofit Organizations are perhaps the most prominent organizations working for the social good. Nonprofits do not focus on making a profit or on financial gain. Their income is derived mostly from individual and/or corporate donations, foundation grants, government contracts, and fees for services. Although some nonprofit organizations may sell goods and services, all income goes toward the cost of providing other services to a community or segment of the public.

Institutions as varied as arts organizations, churches, community organizations, professional and trade organizations, and universities are considered nonprofits. Examples include the MacArthur Foundation, the Art Institute of Chicago, Ashoka, the Shirley Ryan AbilityLab, Feeding America, and the University of Chicago.

In light of this variety, other UChicagoGRAD career guides may be of interest, in particular:

- Guide to Higher Education Administration Careers
- Guide to Museum Careers

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are a specific type of nonprofit organization. NGOs are voluntary citizens' groups that can be active locally, nationally, and/or internationally. This designation was formally created by the United Nations to differentiate between inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations. Typically, NGOs focus on global issues in areas such as human rights, international peace and security, the environment, and a range of development-related issues, such as housing, employment, education, and health. NGOs tend to have connections to international issues and policies, and often cooperate with international organizations. Example of NGOs include Amnesty International, Oxfam, Greenpeace, Doctors Without Borders, and Human Rights Watch.

Social Enterprises, like nonprofit organizations and NGOs, operate with the primary purpose of serving the public good. What distinguishes social enterprises is their use of business models, principles, and methods to drive profits and gains to further a social cause.

Examples of social enterprises include the Chicago Community Loan Fund, which makes available loans to nonprofit organizations in Chicago, or the Social Enterprise Alliance Chicago, whose goal is to advance the practice of social enterprise through six midwestern states. An example of an influential international nonprofit that directly supports social entrepreneurs is Ashoka. The organization has more than 3000 members in 70 countries, and it can be a starting point to better understand the social enterprise landscape.



STEPS YOU CAN TAKE NOW TO PREPARE FOR THIS CAREER

- Volunteer with an organization. Nonprofit organizations, NGOs, and social enterprises recognize and appreciate demonstrated commitment to a cause. Hires often happen from within an organization, including from the volunteer pool. The University of Chicago Civic Engagement [Student Civic Engagement Pathfinder](#) lists volunteering options on and off campus.
- Consider an internship with a nonprofit organization, NGO, or social enterprise. UChicagoGRAD's [GRAD Global Impact "Pitch" Program](#) gives you the opportunity to create an internship with an organization that jives with your academic and professional interests.
- Take advantage of on-campus opportunities to learn more about careers in the field, including the annual [GRADUCon](#) career exploration conference.
- If you are interested in social enterprises, consider the [Polisky Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation](#). Programs and courses such as the Social Enterprise Lab, New Social Ventures, and the Polisky Accelerator may provide opportunities for you to get involved.
- Schedule informational interviews with professionals working in the field.
- Read about the field and learn more about goals and approaches (see resources at the end of this guide).



GRADUCon coffee chat (left) and 2019 panel on careers in NGOs (right)

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH PROFESSIONALS

The nonprofit field is relationship driven. Since organizations in this field work toward the public good, communication and relationship-building skills are valued highly. It is important that you, as a budding professional, build relationships with those already in the field. Informational interviews are key here; they give you a chance to meet professionals, hear about their work, and learn what they are looking for in future colleagues. Informational interviews are also a chance to develop a mentoring relationship that can help you build your career. If your goal is to work in a specific city or town, informational interviews can be a first step in getting to know and plug into the local community.

Use the UChicago [alumni directory](#), [Wisr](#), and [LinkedIn](#) to find alumni who work for organizations that are of interest to you. This [UChicagoGRAD presentation](#) on informational interviews explains how to reach out to alumni, and it provides sample outreach messages.



COMMON REQUIRED NONPROFIT SKILLS

- Written and oral communication skills as well as an ability to communicate to expert/non-expert and internal/external audiences
- Collaboration experience, especially with diverse and underrepresented groups
- Grant writing skills (grant management skills are also desirable)
- Research skills
- Online marketing and social media experience
- Language skills and cultural awareness

UNDERSTANDING AND COMMUNICATING MOTIVATION

Your skills are crucial to landing a role with a nonprofit organization, NGO, or social enterprise. Having said that, in many cases, hiring managers look for normative fit, too. They want to see that applicants genuinely care about the organization and the organization’s mission. Many nonprofit organizations, NGOs, and social enterprises believe that their work and strategies are unique. They look for someone who understands and appreciates their uniqueness and wants to be part of that very endeavor. As such, it is important that you understand your motivation. This will allow you to identify which organizations are a good fit for you, and it will allow you to succinctly communicate that fit to a hiring manager.

How do you communicate your motivation clearly and authentically? Steer clear of what may be perceived as platitudes, such as, “I am passionate about children” or “The environment is what motivates me every day.” While these statements may be true, they are not distinct to you or a particular organization. Spend some time reflecting on what motivates you. For example, if you are passionate about children, do you care about child literacy, child protection, or child labor? If you believe in environmental protection, do you want to work in grassroots action, national advocacy, or global collaboration? Which of these motivates you, and what is the intersection between your motivation and the organization (or program) to which you are applying?

APPLYING FOR POSITIONS IN NONPROFITS, NGOS, AND SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

An application for most positions in this field requires a resume and cover letter. Typically, both documents are limited to one page in length. Analyze the job ad to understand which skills and experiences you should convey. Your resume and cover letter should clearly communicate that you have the experiences and skills specified in the job ad (refer to UChicagoGRAD’s resume and cover letter guides for tips on how to tailor your documents).

In your cover letter, also *briefly* explain why you are interested in this job and why you want to work for this particular organization, keeping in mind the tips for communicating your motivation discussed above. The guiding principle for discussing your motivation is **“show, don’t tell.”** Consider the experiences you have and what claims you can credibly make based on those experiences. Volunteer work, research on related issues, internships, involvement in student organizations and/or government, teaching of related topics, and active participation in religious and/or civic groups can all serve as evidence that you are motivated to work toward a cause.

For example, you may be able to frame your interest in sustainable development by discussing research you conducted. Or, you may show your drive to support education in Chicago by pointing to your volunteer experience with a local grassroots organization.



APPLYING FOR POSITIONS, CONT.

Be mindful of the culture of the organization to which you are applying. Nonprofit, NGO, and social enterprise professionals often underline their mission and empathy toward others. As such, presenting yourself and your educational credentials as *just the thing* that the organization has been waiting for may be off-putting. Finally, if the work would take you to another country, demonstrate knowledge and respect for the country and, ideally, relevant international experience.

POSSIBLE JOB TITLES

Nonprofit Organizations

- Development Coordinator
- Program Specialist
- Research Manager
- Program Evaluation Manager

NGOs

- Engagement Manager
- Assistant Director, Outreach
- Project Officer
- Research Associate

Social Enterprises

- Partner Relations Manager
- Impact Reporting Associate
- Manager, Government Relations
- Business Development Specialist

FINDING JOB POSTINGS

- [Job Board](#) at Idealist.org
- [Job Board](#) at Devex.com
- [Job Board](#) at GlobalJobs.org
- [Nonprofit Job Board](#) at Bridgespan
- [Job Board](#) at NPO.net
- [Jobs and Internship Board](#) at Net Impact
- Using the “possible job titles” on this page as keywords, search common industry job sites, such as [Glassdoor](#), [Indeed](#), [Monster](#), and [LinkedIn](#)

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Personal Narratives and Profiles

- Versatile Ph.D. provides narratives and job documents from academics who pursued careers in nonprofit organizations. Log into [GRAD Gargoyle](#) and click “Versatile Ph.D.” in the quick links. Then click the “Nonprofits” tab within the Ph.D. Career Finder.
- [Imagine Ph.D.](#) offers resources for exploring careers in Advocacy, including profiles of graduate students who have built careers in this nonprofit career path. Please note that the information provided is valuable for M.A. and Ph.D. students as well as postdocs.

Application Tips

- Kate Rodriguez, “What Top Nonprofits Look for in Job Applicants”, *Idealist*, June 9, 2016
- Anna Richardson, “How to Land a Job at an NGO”, *Idealist*, October 20, 2014

Campus Connections

- Office of Civic Engagement (<https://civicengagement.uchicago.edu>)
- Polsky Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation (<https://polsky.uchicago.edu>)
- Institute of Politics (<https://politics.uchicago.edu>)

