

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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CAREER OPPORTUNITIES IN GOVERNMENT RELATIONS/ LOBBYING

Description of Field

Government relations, also known as lobbying, consists of individuals and organizations engaged in promoting the interests of their employers or clients. Their activities involve monitoring legislative and executive activities to influence policy, legislation, regulations, or negotiations, on behalf of governments, industries, specific companies, interest groups or constituencies. In Washington, DC, lobbying is regulated by law, calling for disclosure by lobbyists of organizations or clients they represent, LDA (Lobbying Disclosure Act) or FARA (Foreign Agents Registration Act.)

In addition, lobbying may also be carried out by PACs (Political Action Committees) that represent specific constituencies or may simply represent themselves on stated issues. Lastly, there is a subdivision of Executive Branch Legislative Offices that represents various departments and agencies of the Executive Branch of the U.S. Government, charged with the purpose of influencing the Congressional Branch on legislative affairs.

Career Paths and Entry Salaries

Most of those seeking careers in lobbying begin with volunteer work on political campaigns for elected public officials, or as legislative staff on Capitol Hill, in State Houses or in governmental agencies. With such experience, graduates can often move to the mid-level of organizations; without such experience, graduates will typically enter in the research area or in roles that support more senior staff.

Moving in and out of government, sometimes known as the “revolving door,” usually increases a person’s marketability in both the public sector and private sector. There are few linear careers in lobbying as these positions are influenced by the ebb and flow of politics, or opportunities in the government. From a position as a research assistant, a person may become an analyst or manager within a lobbying organization or move to a position on the staff of an elected official or government agency.

Typical entry-level job titles include issues analyst, research analyst, and research assistant or associate. Salaries vary based on experience and professional contacts. Private sector companies typically pay more than non-profit and public interest organizations. The salary range in government relations can extend from the \$20s to more than \$150,000 with a median annual salary of \$49,000.

Demand

The lobbying industry is highly competitive, and without experience or contacts, graduates must be willing to start at an entry level. There is a wide range of issues, both international and domestic, that draws people to the field. A foreign government, a company with international trade concerns, or an advocacy group working on human rights may all call for representation by a lobbyist. Vacancies are rarely posted since many positions are filled by networking and by referral.

Qualifications Necessary to Enter Field

Government experience is a highly regarded qualification. Strong communications skills, both written and oral, are essential. A comprehensive understanding of organizational structure and legislative procedures is important. Excellent people skills, high energy, flexibility and willingness to work long hours are also important, as is the ability to compromise.

Students interested in lobbying careers must network and should consider volunteering on political campaigns or interning with a government agency. The contacts developed through volunteer work, internships, and experience in analyzing issues and understanding government processes, can be invaluable. A graduate degree in law or in public affairs/public policy is often helpful for advancement in the field.

Sample Group of Employers

According to the Washington Post, the number of registered lobbyists in Washington has more than doubled since 2000 to more than 34,750. Employers consist of public relations consultants, law firms, corporate lobbying agents, public interest organizations, trade and professional associations, political action committees and political parties. A sample listing follows:

Public Relations Consultants

- Burson Marsteller <http://www.burson-marsteller.com>
- Edelman <http://www.edelman.com>
- Weber Shandwick Worldwide <http://www.webershandwick.com>

Law Firms

- Arnold & Porter <http://www.arnoldporter.com>
- Patton Boggs LLP <http://www.pattonboggs.com>

Lobbying Agencies

- Morgan Casner Associates

Public Interest Organizations

- Children's Defense Fund <http://www.childrensdefense.org>
- The Brady Campaign – <http://www.handguncontrol.org>
- Public Citizen – <http://www.citizen.org>

Trade & Professional Organizations

- National Federation of Independent Business Inc. – <http://www.nfib.com>

Political Parties

- Democratic National Committee - <http://www.democrats.org>
- Republican National Committee - <https://www.gop.com>

Future Challenges of the Profession

As issues facing government become more numerous and more complicated, lobbyists become more important and more prevalent. While lobbyists serve as advocates for the interests of their employers or clients they also provide information to elected officials and staff that may be useful in the decision process.

Lobbying in Washington, DC is the most visible, but lobbying on the State level as well as lobbying foreign governments and agencies is growing. It should be noted that at the present time, regulations restrict the lobbying activities of former U.S. government officials.

Resources for Additional Information

Associations

- American League of Lobbyists (ALL) <http://www.alldc.org>

Internet Resources

- Advocacy Institute - <http://www.advocacy.org>
- Campaign Finance Guides <http://www.cfinst.org/legacy/eguide>
- Center for Policy Alternatives - <http://www.stateaction.org>
- Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest - <http://www.clpi.org/>
- Political Advocacy Groups <http://www.csuchico.edu/~kcfount/index.html> - A directory of United States Lobbyists
- Yahoo Directory of Government Lobbying Firms - http://dir.yahoo.com/Business_and_Economy/Business_to_Business/Government/Lobbying/

Publications

National Trade and Professional Associations of the United States, ed. by Buck Downs, John Damrosch, Mary Flanigan and Melissa Gutierrez, Columbia Books, 2006.

The Complete Guide to Public Employment, by Ronald L. Krannich and Caryl Rae Krannich, Impact Publishers, 1994.

Washington Representatives, published annually.