

"What to tell my parents about working for a nonprofit?"

Parental doubt, confusion, and guilt can add stress to an already hectic job search. Not everyone can have parents whose values for social justice and career dreams are totally in sync with their children's. Here are just a few possible challenges you may face:

Concern #1: We do not want you working in difficult or dangerous environments.

Your family may think your intentions are noble, and may even support the mission of your organization. They may, however, not be comfortable with you being out in the field (feeding the homeless, organizing workers in "bad" neighborhoods, or working with AIDS patients).

"Can't you have a desk job working for the same cause instead?," they keep asking.

These concerns are valid: direct-service work is often the most physically and emotionally exhausting work available in the nonprofit sector. These jobs also tend to pay less than administrative jobs, and the work is certainly not as glamorous as jobs where you spend time promoting or supporting a cause. You may be subject to greater risks, both physically and psychologically, and may be working with a community that is different from your own - low income, immigrant, of color, GBLIQ, etc.

Direct-service jobs are a great way for recent college graduates to break into the sector, providing a fast education in how organizations seek to serve the public's needs. It can be a difficult introduction to the sector, but any first job after college will be challenging

Such work also leads you to make a more educated decision about what communities you are most interested in serving, and what work you are most cut out for- you may find that you love working with kids, for example. This can lead to a longer career serving the community directly, or it can inform future advocacy on behalf of whichever group(s) you are currently working with.

Concern #2: We sent you to college so you could make money. How can you make a living working for a 'nonprofit'?

The good news is that starting salaries in the non-profit sector are not that different from those in other areas - such as publishing, education, etc. Although it's not necessarily a full answer to this parental concern, it can work to hold it off for a bit - that you would probably be making the same low starting salary no matter where you were working. Also, you will be able to "make a living," you just may not be able to go to the same trendy restaurants, buy a house as soon, or have the same name-brand clothes as some of your relatives or friends who went into higher-paying jobs.

In the long run, however this is an issue of your values versus your parents', and which sort of work makes you the happiest. It may also be one of the first major adult decisions you have made, and so your family is bound to be nervous. Reassure them that you can pay your bills, even if it means that you're living very modestly to start out. Let them know also that this was not a waste of your college education, but show them how your degree relates to your decision or the organizations you are seeking to work at, and how your education is helping you professionally in the non-profit sector. Once they see these things, they should be a bit more understanding of your decision.

Concern #3: Take a year or two "off" to do this stuff, but then we expect you to get a "real job."

Ask your parents why they don't consider a job at a non-profit to be a "real" one, and challenge them on their preconceived notions. Explain to them that the responsibilities of an entry-level job at a non-profit are often more challenging than at a business, and your opportunities for advancement in the early stages of your career may also be much greater than if you were to work somewhere else. What about that isn't real? It certainly isn't taking time "off," if anything, it should be a more rapid introduction into the professional world than you would get if given some less dynamic job in a business, again because of the greater variety of tasks that your job will probably entail. Your parents may have a point, however- you may want to change careers one day. Let them know that for now, you are serious about working in the non-profit sector. Maybe one day you would like to change, and if you do, you'll have some pretty solid work experience under your belt, and be well-suited to make a career change if you choose to.

Written by Action Without Borders-Idealist.org
and Ashley Bailey, Idealist.org Intern at The New School (NY)
Contact dan@idealist.org for more information.