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# COLLEGE to CAREER

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## Social Impact/Activism

### Opportunities

Employers include nonprofit organizations and foundations, political consulting firms, lobbying organizations, and professional societies.

### Education Needed

- Most community organizers and community outreach specialists have bachelor's degrees.
- Foundation directors and executives, program directors, and lobbyists have master's degrees.
- Lobbyists and foundation executives have doctoral degrees.

### Salaries

- Community organizers: \$33,000
- Community outreach: \$53,000
- Public relations managers: \$58,000
- Program directors: \$72,000
- Lobbyists: \$101,000
- Foundation directors: \$113,000



## Overview

Social activists work to promote, guide, or impede changes in government or business policies and influence the actions of individuals and groups. They build connections among groups and communities and disseminate information on specific issues to create awareness and influence social change.

Many of society's problems are related to the chemical systems that make up the environment (or the chemicals that pollute it), medicines and agricultural chemicals that can affect standards of living, and leaders who abuse their own people or their opponents in war. International teams of scientists can act as diplomats among their respective nations, working to communicate their common goals to their fellow citizens and national leaders, or they may do forensics work to detect the use of chemical weapons or monitor environmental treaties. Scientists may also work to improve standards of living in developing nations by helping citizens set up education programs, provide and implement new technologies, and/or create new jobs in areas such as environmental remediation and sustainable agriculture and manufacturing processes.

## Typical Work Duties

- Communicate with thought leaders, policy makers, business leaders, or community organizations through publications, speeches, public events, or media
- Research the effects and implications of legislation, business activities, and local customs
- Organize responses to natural and human-made disasters and destruction of the environment
- Formulate position statements, goals, and priorities for campaigns
- Participate in international delegations to monitor treaty compliance and build cooperation through formal and informal diplomatic efforts
- Track environmental changes, chemical weapons, disease epidemics, and pollutant spread on local and global scales
- Develop messages and talking points for movement spokespeople
- Work toward improving the standard of living in developing nations by opening channels for financial resources, education, and technology from developed nations



## Education

Educational requirements vary widely, depending on the type of work. Many volunteer positions require only an avid interest in a particular social issue. Most community organizers and community outreach specialists have bachelor's degrees, although many of them have master's degrees as well. Master's degrees are more common among foundation directors and executives, program directors, and lobbyists. A significant number of lobbyists and foundation executives have doctoral degrees.

Many community organizers have no prior work experience beyond a bachelor's degree in their area of specialty. Community outreach specialists, foundation directors, program directors, and lobbyists tend to have more than two years of experience, while foundation executives most commonly have more than 15 years of experience.

High-level positions such as program directors or foundation executives may require specialized knowledge of a specific field, such as medicine, pharmacy, public health, environmental science, and alternative energy sources, among others. Additional experience in managing projects and people (including volunteers), fundraising, budgeting, public relations, and marketing is required for high-level positions. Knowledge of how to work with government agencies, legislative bodies, academic institutions, religious institutions, and grantmaking foundations is helpful.

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## Licenses

Professional licenses are not generally required for this type of work. Federal and state governments, however, require paid (and sometimes unpaid) lobbyists to register and be authorized by their sponsoring organization.

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## Work Space

Community organizers and outreach specialists must often work in the field. Educational events and rallies often occur in the evenings or on weekends (sometimes outdoors in inclement weather), when volunteers and interested community members are available. Program and foundation directors and executives must often attend fundraising and social events after hours, and travel may be required to meet with potential donors, legislators, and community groups.

Science diplomacy programs encourage scientists from various nations to work with each other on specific issues, often in the absence of strong official diplomatic ties between their respective governments. Scientists act as unofficial envoys to communicate their message to governments and citizens. This type of work requires international travel and the ability to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers.

Some types of work may be done in an office or telecommuting environment. Issues research requires monitoring news feeds and social media, as well as interviewing community members and conducting focus groups. Web developers and content managers, graphic artists, and copy writers develop educational and publicity materials as staff members, freelancers, or volunteers.

Most activism-oriented workers work for organizations having fewer than 100 people, although some foundations and professional societies are significantly larger.

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## Is This Career a Good Fit for You?

Social activists must be able to work with many different types of people, have excellent communication skills, and be able to persuade people, including those in positions of power. Activists may be called on to make persuasive oral presentations, write and respond to e-mails, or write press releases, opinion pieces, review papers, white papers, social media postings, and publicity materials. An ability to research and analyze the facts and opinions underlying an issue is very important. Scientific activists must be able to look at problems and issues not only from a scientific or technical standpoint but also from the point of view of human rights, ethics, and legal and regulatory constraints. They must have a keen awareness of current events and trends. They must listen to the needs and concerns of community members and be able to demonstrate how the causes they support affect the daily lives of the people they are trying to influence. They must be able to articulate the benefits that scientific advances offer to specific segments of society, and they must engage fellow scientists, policy makers, and lay persons to contribute to their efforts.

Enthusiasm and perseverance help you see your project through in the face of opposition. Diplomacy and conflict resolution skills help you bring adversarial groups together to achieve common goals. An ability to analyze broader issues underlying the problem at hand, think strategically, and formulate a compelling vision is critical to advancing social change.

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## Technical Skills

Activism work takes many forms. Each type of job function requires its own set of skills, and no one position requires a person to be good at everything. Some typical skills include:

- Research and writing skills and an ability to translate scientific and sociological studies into compelling narratives for policymakers and the general public
- Critical thinking and analytical skills to build a case for your cause and develop persuasive responses to opposing points of view
- Physical stamina and a willingness to travel and work unconventional hours
- Computer skills, including website design and management, statistical research and analysis, desktop publishing, online survey software, e-newsletter content and mailing list management, and social media management
- Graphic design, photography, and videography skills
- Foreign language skills and knowledge of foreign cultures and customs
- Business management skills, including project and personnel management, fundraising and budgeting, and knowledge of tax and legal requirements
- An ability to speak in front of large audiences, testify at legislative hearings, and give interviews

to members of the press

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## Career Path

Unlike many chemical specialties, social activism can be pursued on any level, from part-time volunteer work to running your own nonprofit organization. Many activists start as volunteers for nonprofit groups, professional societies, academic organizations, political campaigns, or neighborhood organizations. Scientists can use their expertise to help craft talking points, write op-ed pieces, or serve as subject matter experts at town hall meetings and hearings.

Because many activist and advocacy efforts are informal or entrepreneurial in nature, career paths and income can vary widely. Official sources of labor statistics often list activism work according to specific job functions. Some typical job titles include: community organizer, community outreach specialist, foundation director/executive, lobbyist, public relations specialist, and program director. Those wishing to become more involved may apply for fellowships or grants that allow them to spend a year or two working full-time on specific issues at think tanks, government agencies, universities, or nonprofit organizations.

Full-time careers include project management work at foundations and nonprofit organizations, which may lead to leadership positions in these organizations. Some individuals use their experience to establish their own nonprofit enterprises to address specific issues. These enterprises range from one-person operations to global efforts employing hundreds of people. The most common employers are organizations employing fewer than 100 people.

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## Salary Information

Salaries for this field can range from nothing, for strictly volunteer work, to more than \$150,000 annual base salary for foundation executives. Independent consultants and one-person operations may have an income that fluctuates with the supply of grant money, donations, and other sources of income.

Salary information is not readily available for activists working specifically in science-related fields, but median base salary data is available for activism-related work in general. Community organizers make \$33,000; community outreach specialists, \$53,000; public relations managers and specialists, \$58,000; program directors, \$72,000; lobbyists, \$101,000; and foundation directors, \$113,000 (salary.com).

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## Future Employment Trends

The rise in social media has spawned numerous campaigns focused on "cause-oriented" activism, which blur the line between social and political causes. They seek not only to influence legislation and policy but also drive consumer and lifestyle choices and address societal issues in general. Interactive websites, e-mail, electronic philanthropy (including crowd-funding efforts), and electronically generated databases have changed the way in which nonprofits communicate with the public and with donors, and they created a demand for persons proficient in the necessary skills.

Public opinion is increasingly driven by instant access to multiple sources of information. Subject matter experts are needed to help promote (or oppose) causes and courses of action by using a variety of media and marketing platforms, as well as in-person meetings and written studies. Examples include testifying at hearings on oil pipelines and fracking initiatives, explaining climate change research to the public, and preparing information for consumers on cosmetic and pharmaceutical products.

### Real-World Chemists



Rolande Hodel started a career as a synthetic bench chemist working for pharmaceutical companies focused on drug delivery.

### [More about Rolande](#)

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Philip Rodenbough joined the U.S. Peace Corps. For two years he volunteered as a chemistry teacher in West Africa: first in Burkina Faso and then in Guinea.

### [More about Philip](#)

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#### Related Resources

### Professional Organizations

- [ACS Green Chemistry Institute](#)
- [American Association for the Advancement of Science \(AAAS\)](#)
  - [AAAS Center for Public Engagement with Science and Technology](#)
  - [AAAS Center for Science Diplomacy](#)
  - [AAAS Center for Science, Technology and Sustainability](#)
  - [AAAS Scientific Responsibility, Human Rights and Law Program](#)
  - [Inter-American Institute for Global Change Research \(IAI\)](#)
- [Center for Science in the Public Interest](#)
- [Chemists Without Borders](#)
- [Consortium for Science, Policy, and Outcomes \(CSPO\)](#)
- [Engineers Without Borders–International \(EWB-I\)](#)
- [New York Academy of Sciences](#)
- [Scientists Without Borders](#)
- [Sierra Club](#)
- [Union of Concerned Scientists](#)

### Other Resources

- [Amherst College career website, social activism page](#)
- [Occupational Outlook Handbook. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)
- [O\\*Net Online](#)
- [National Conference of State Legislatures](#)
- [Salary.com](#)
- [Sense About Science](#)
- [Tamara Dillon. Groupmakers and grantmakers](#)

