

What Does a Public Policy Professional Do?

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BY STAFF WRITER

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- A public policy professional should have strong interpersonal skills, including active listening and communication.

- **Public policy is ideal for individuals interested in government and politics.**
 - **"Public policy graduates shape policy in a variety of ways, including leading nonprofit organizations, researching data for think tanks, working within government institutions, and representing clients before elected officials."**
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A public policy career is ideal for individuals that are interested in government and politics. Active listening and interviewing skills help public policy professionals identify the specific problems and needs of a constituency.

Public policy professionals should have strong problem-solving, presentation, and oral and written communication skills. They must be able to persuade audiences or propose compromises to get policy changes enacted.

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What Skills Are Required for Public Policy?

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Interview With a Professional in Public Policy



Na'ilah Amaru

Advocacy and Policy Strategist

[Na'ilah Amaru](#) is an advocacy and policy strategist with more than 15 years of experience. Na'ilah served as policy advisor to former Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed; legislative aide to Representative John Lewis; and executive director of the New York City Council's Black, Latino, and Asian caucus. She consults with community-based organizations on issue-based and legislative campaigns. She also consults with nonprofits to maximize their social impact. Na'ilah earned a master of public policy from Georgia State University.

What is public policy?

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Public policy is a governmental decision to pursue a specific course of action in order to solve a problem or achieve a goal. More importantly, these governmental decisions express certain values and beliefs about different groups of people in society that impact policy design. These policy designs create winners and losers and reflect who the government deems as deserving (or not) of support or punishment through public policy.

Through a political lens, the process of creating public policy is a multistage cycle that never ends. From legislative agenda setting to evaluation, each step reflects different issues and competing stakeholders.

While issues and stakeholders may vary, their goal is the same: to influence policy decision-makers in prioritizing their respective issues and implementing their chosen solutions. Although all steps in the policy process are critical, I've learned that it is the agenda-setting phase that is key because the winners control which issues are focused on and how those issues are addressed.

This power sets the stage for every subsequent step in the policy process. The social issues we talk about, how we talk about them, and our solutions to those problems are all connected through the public policy process. Public policy determines who wins and who loses, while the political arena determines who has the power to decide.

What is so valuable about earning a degree in this field right now?

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A public policy degree is timeless. No matter the political landscape or geography, there is always a need to solve society's problems and create meaningful social change. The value of a public policy degree is anchored in its versatility, the skill sets it develops, and the ultimate impact policy has on society.

Versatility is key for those who want the freedom to work across the government, nonprofit, and private sectors; tackle various issues; operate in different capacities; or all of the above. A policy degree is not limited to a specific expertise, but rather provides a multitude of options to explore different opportunities.

Skills developed in a policy program include research, writing, analysis, problem-solving, and communication. While all these skills are crucial in the policy process, problem-solving and effective communication skills are the most critical because policy professionals are in the business of solving social problems and must be able to translate different information to vastly different stakeholders at any given time.

From interacting with elected officials, government agency heads, nonprofit leaders, lobbyists, and the general public, effective problem-solving and strong communication skills create the necessary thread connecting different aspects of the policy process and lay the groundwork for a successful career.

The impact of a public policy degree cannot be overstated because public policy changes lives. Today's world needs a new generation of leaders who are driven to find the best solutions to society's problems. A public policy degree begins that journey.

Can graduates of public policy programs find careers all over the country?

Graduates of public policy programs lead successful careers across sectors and throughout the United States. Public policy graduates shape policy in a variety of ways, including leading nonprofit organizations, researching data for think tanks, working within government institutions, and representing clients before elected officials.

Therefore, the possibilities for a career in public policy are bountiful and meaningful.

What did your career trajectory look like after you graduated? How did you end up in your current position?

Before I graduated with my public policy degree, I worked as a community organizer, nonprofit program coordinator, public interest lobbyist, government grants manager, and electoral campaign operative. These combined experiences led me to pursue a master of public policy.

After I graduated, I worked on Capitol Hill as a legislative aide; served as executive director of the Black, Latino, and Asian Caucus for the New York City Council; and returned to public interest lobbying at the state level.

Given my diverse and deep experience navigating policy landscapes from the grassroots to Capitol Hill, my consulting services have evolved to collaborating with community-based organizations on issue-based campaigns and legislative advocacy.

What are the pros and cons of working in public policy?

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The benefits of working in the public policy field are numerous, but chief among them are expanding your worldview, enjoying diverse work environments, and making a difference. Constantly being challenged to expand your own understanding of the world is a key benefit of the public policy field.

Given the nature of politics and advocacy, as policy professionals we are exposed to different ways of thinking about the same issue. New information and different lenses provide unique perspectives to addressing age-old problems.

The possible variety of work environments in the public policy field is also a benefit. Are you an introvert who prefers to work quietly in a stable 9-5 job in an office setting? Or are you more of an extrovert who loves talking with people from all walks of life and prefers to be "on the go?"

The public policy field has jobs for each side of the spectrum and everything in between. From cubicles to town halls, the public policy field offers opportunities for nearly every type of personality, preference, and passion.

Although the negative aspects of the public policy field may include navigating inflated egos, enduring power dynamics, and fighting against political expediency over sound public policy, in the end, the greatest benefit of a public policy career is using your time and talent to make positive change for the greatest number of people.

In truth, public policy exposes you to all different types of personalities, and

there is no shortage of inflated egos, particularly in the political arena. Egos can get in the way of good policy. You must learn quickly how to work with those types of people in a way that neutralizes their potential damage and moves your projects forward.

In addition, power dynamics are a constant struggle. Financial power and political power deeply impact the field of public policy. By understanding the motivations and the political, social, and financial capital of each stakeholder, you will be able to navigate an ever-changing political landscape.

Political expediency over sound public policy is a challenge at every level of government. It is an unfortunate truth that policy decision-makers will often choose the easy way instead of the right way. For example, many public policies are reactionary, and some laws are passed swiftly to appease certain segments of the public rather than creating a thoughtful, inclusionary approach to solving the issue.

Thus, the consequence of political expediency can be ineffective at best and devastating at its worst.

What advice would you give to public policy graduates and lawyers just starting their job search?

The public policy field is inundated with people who prioritize building a professional network based on titles and access to certain people. When I worked on Capitol Hill, people would ask me, "Who do you work for and what do you do?" before they asked me my name.

Don't be that person. Building meaningful relationships with people rooted in a shared sense of purpose will be far more valuable than any Rolodex full of

fancy job titles. Ask yourself (and answer honestly): Why do you want to embark on a career in public policy?

The public policy arena is a battlefield, one in which you will achieve hard-fought victories and suffer soul-crushing defeat. It comes with the territory when you're working with opposing forces, different stakeholders, and competing political agendas. Your "why" is your North Star, and it will guide you through every possible scenario and give you purpose on the dark days.

One of the best lessons I've learned is that public policy is like a hammer. It can be used to build or destroy. By mastering political dynamics and building authentic social networks, we can turn our passion for doing good into positive social impact for all.