

Interview with Dr. Steve Chase: Career Guidance in Environmental Advocacy

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Dr. Steve Chase directs the masters program in Environmental Advocacy and Organizing at [Antioch New England Graduate School](#). A long time activist, writer, and popular educator, Dr. Chase received a [Switzer Foundation Environmental Leadership Fellow](#) in honor of his work setting up the program.

Dr. Chase guest edited the [Orion Magazine](#) special issue on environmental justice and his articles and essays on environmental activism have also appeared in [The Trumpeter](#); [Whole Terrain](#); [Z Magazine](#); and [Ethics, Place and Environment](#). He has also published essays in the books [Defending the Earth](#), [Grassroots and Workplace Democracy](#), and [The Environmental Justice Reader](#). He is currently completing a dissertation entitled "Educating Environmental Advocates and Organizers: How Graduate Environmental Studies Programs Can Become Dynamic Activist Training Centers."

Dr. Chase is currently a member of the [National Organizers Alliance](#), the [Boston-Area Popular Educators Network](#), and [United for a Fair Economy's National Trainers Network](#).

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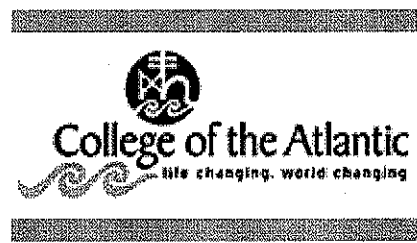
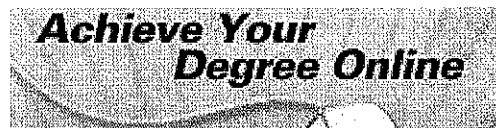
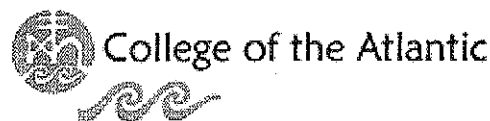
ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCACY

What is environmental organizing?

Many people see advocacy and organizing as the same thing. Yet, while both are activist strategies for improving how we organize and conduct our economic and political lives, there are some meaningful differences.

Public interest advocacy tends to focus on speaking on behalf of concerned but relatively inactive citizens. Organizing is more focused on helping concerned citizens connect with each other, build strong democratic organizations, and speak for themselves on issues that concern them - whether the issues are nature protection, sustainability, public health, corporate accountability, or social justice. The primary goal of

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organizing is to educate, activate, and mobilize large numbers of people to hold corporate or governmental institutions accountable to a more meaningful vision of the common good.

life changing,

Organizing adds another element to progressive change efforts by mobilizing collective action on the part of citizens, workers, and consumers to pressure powerholders into improving their policies or practices. Advocacy tends to rely mostly on persuasion. The combination of persuasion and pressure is very potent.

What are some of the specific tasks that organizers are responsible for?

The job titles and position requirements in the nonprofit advocacy and organizing field are actually quite diverse. In my own survey of job ads in the field, I found advocacy and organizing jobs under the job titles of Grassroots Organizer, Field Organizer, Environmental Advocate, Environmental Campaigner, Campaign Director, Education and Outreach Coordinator, Chapter Director, Political Director, Conservation Assistant, Project Coordinator, Regional Representative, Field Director, and Membership Director. I'm sure that there are many other titles used to describe such positions.



Some of these positions call for generalists, but others call for people with more specialized skills in policy research, tactical investigations, outreach and recruitment, media work, organizing events, supervision and democratic group process, fundraising, or directing electoral and issue-based campaigns. A wide variety of skills, temperaments, and tasks can go into a satisfying advocacy and organizing career.

Still, the overarching task of all organizers is to educate, activate, and mobilize people into organizations and campaigns that take collective action on the key issues of the day.

What are the three most essential skills that a grassroots organizer should possess?

Because of the intense interpersonal dimension of most organizing work, grassroots organizers need to have strong "emotional competencies" in self-awareness, self-control, empathy, and the arts of influence. One can really see this in the need for organizers to be good listeners. Public interest advocates tend to be great talkers, but grassroots organizers need to be great listeners as well. To be successful, they have to understand what people's concerns are, what would motivate them to take action, and then speak to them in ways that address their core concerns.

Second, while it is very unhelpful for organizers to be rigid ideologues, it is valuable for organizers to develop and share — in an open-minded and evolving way — their own analysis, visions, and strategies for change. This kind of informed guidance can be a tremendous resource to a relatively inexperienced group of people who are pooling ideas about how to address the problems or concerns that have brought them together. Organizers should not make strategic decisions for such a group, but neither should they withhold their best ideas — often based on years of study and experience. Organizers who are clear leaders can be very helpful to an organization's on-going development.

Third, I think it is important for organizers to have strong organizational and social action skills. However, these skills need to be combined with an educator's zeal to train other people in learning these skills and developing their leadership potentials to the fullest. This focus on training others and cultivating their leadership capacities is a large part of what sets organizers apart from mere advocates.

What is the most challenging aspect of the field?

The biggest challenge I see is burnout and despair. Working in the field over many years is not easy. Advocacy and organizing jobs often pay less than comparable jobs in the private and public sectors. These jobs are often viewed by some parents, peers, and partners as not fully “respectable” compared to more conventional vocations. Additionally, organizing positions often lead people to work very long hours for the cause, sometimes leading to unbalanced lives. Furthermore, anyone who is passionately committed to nature protection, sustainability, public health, corporate accountability, political democracy, and social justice is vulnerable to inner despair during periods of reaction and retrenchment. It is easy in this situation to lose perspective, undervalue our small victories, or ignore emerging trends that may be in our favor. All of this can undermine a sense of balance, forward motion, and joy in living.

Luckily, creating balanced lives and healthy organizational cultures is not just desirable; it’s doable. If faced squarely, this problem can be addressed at both the personal and organizational level. NGOs don’t have to be emotional sweatshops, nor should they be.

Are organizing skills important tools in other professions as well?

Absolutely. I just read a book by Debra Meyerson called Tempered Radicals: How To Use Difference to Change Your Workplace. Her argument is that there are thousands of “tempered radicals” working within public agencies and private companies who share the same long-term goals as social and environmental advocates and organizers working in the nonprofit sector to hold these institutions accountable to the public interest. Her book is essentially a manual on how these tempered radicals can use tried and true organizing skills to change their organization’s policies and practices “from the inside.” So whether you are a professional advocate and organizer for a nonprofit social change organization or a professional “tempered radical” working within the private or public sectors, organizing skills are very relevant to making the transition to a more just, democratic, and sustainable society. We will definitely need both “insider” and “outsider” organizers to make this transition a reality.

JOBS IN THE FIELD: WHAT TO EXPECT

What are the kinds of experiences or academic backgrounds that can prepare someone for a career in this field?

My belief is that the most effective learning comes from a combination of “incidental” hands-on learning experiences alongside more formal learning opportunities with season activists. Happily, there are a growing number of innovative training programs for environmental advocates and organizers. The Environmental Careers Organization is increasing the number of activist-oriented internships it offers. Green Corps has run yearlong training programs for professional organizers for over a decade. Last year, Antioch New England Graduate School launched a new master’s program in Environmental Advocacy and Organizing — the only Environmental Studies program of its kind in the country. Antioch is offering a curriculum that covers: 1) scientific eco-literacy; 2) big picture political analysis, vision, and strategy; 3) organizational leadership skills; 4) social action skills; and 5) personal growth and life skills for the long haul. My own hunch is that other Environmental Studies departments will soon start offering similar programs.

Where are environmental organizing professionals likely to work?

Most paid environmental advocates and organizers will work in the nonprofit sector as part of local, statewide, regional, national, or international organizations and networks. According to researcher Ronald Shaiko, the advocacy and organizing wing of the US nonprofit sector is larger, more diverse, better funded, and better staffed than ever before in history. Indeed, he argues that there has been an “exponential increase in the number

of national groups” over the last thirty years. International NGOs are also an important employer of advocates and organizers. The British business journal The Economist puts “the number of international NGOs at more than 26,000, up from 6,000 in 1990” and argues that the biggest growth area has been in groups focused on “the environment, labour rights, human rights, consumer rights, and so on.”

Environmental groups operating at local, state, and regional levels also now number in the “tens of thousands” in the United States. While several of the more grassroots environmental groups still “operate entirely out of living rooms, churches, and community centers,” according to movement observer Brian Tokar, increasing numbers “have small offices and small staffs.” Restore: The North Woods is a good example of this trend. The group started through the volunteer efforts of a couple of “movement entrepreneurs” in the early 1990s and by 1995 had growth to a paid staff of three. Five years later, the staff had grown to eight employees.

While there are definitely more job openings in the public and private sector than in the nonprofit world, let alone the advocacy and organizing segment of the nonprofit sector, there are still thousands of organizing or advocacy positions. I do think that people can find work in this area, but it will likely take dedication to do so. Sometimes people will have to be flexible about where they work or expand the issues that they would like to work on; labor unions are hiring about 200 organizers a month, so that is clearly an area where organizing jobs are in demand. For people thinking about environmental jobs, it can be a bit tougher, but not at all impossible.

Many environmental organizations that once limited themselves to advocacy efforts are also now actively expanding their grassroots organizing efforts. This is certainly true of national groups such as the Sierra Club and Environmental Defense. As ECO has noted in its publications, today’s environmental organizations are increasingly looking for well-trained staff members who have “leadership skills;” the ability to foster “an environmental movement that appeals to all Americans, regardless of class, race, and ethnicity;” and the political expertise to return to the grassroots “with the understanding that a concerned, involved, informed, and politically savvy citizenry is essential for environmental success.”

What is the starting salary for those just starting a career in this field?

Very few people who enter the field of environmental advocacy and organizing are likely to make as much as they would likely earn in either the public or private sectors. Not surprisingly, money is not the major motivation of people who go into this field. People attracted to professional advocacy and organizing positions are primarily interested in finding fulfilling and challenging work, being around inspiring co-workers, and helping make positive changes in the world. Still, advocates and organizers can make a living doing this work, stay out of debt, and (with creative planning) prepare for a decent retirement. In his book 100 Jobs in Social Change, Harley Jebens argues that most advocates and organizers can expect to make “from \$19,000 to \$50,000” — roughly the same salary range as social workers. In a study I did of wage levels for environmental advocacy and organizing positions, the lowest starting salary listed was \$18,000; the highest \$80,000; and the average starting salary level was \$30,750. It’s a frugal, but doable life.

What will the job market for organizers look like in the next five years?

The overall trends during the last 30 years suggest an expanding job market for both advocates and organizers. However, the nonprofit sector is still vulnerable to various up and down fluctuations even in the face of this general trend. In a period of slumping stock returns and concerted efforts to gut the inheritance tax on the richest Americans, for example, the amount of philanthropic dollars flowing to nonprofit groups may contract during the next few years. This could have an impact on the rate of growth of employment opportunities in environmental advocacy and organizing. However, this potential downward pressure is also countered by an increasing number of people becoming concerned about the future who are also increasingly willing to contribute money to advocacy and organizing efforts. Indeed, the number of people giving to progressive political efforts — and the absolute dollars given - continues to rise. For those with the passion and drive, making a vocation in advocacy and organizing will likely remain a doable option in the years ahead — challenging, but doable.

Do you have any tips for starting a job search in this field?

The National Organizer's Alliance jobs page is a good place to start. You might also go to websites of organizations that you are interested in. Many of these organizations have job postings. Book marking these pages and visiting them once a month will give you an idea of openings in organizations where you might see yourself working. Additionally, requesting informational interviews will help you get a foot in the door and help your networking abilities. Finally, prospective organizers should be strategic about their internships and volunteer experiences and also know the print and online media of the environmental movement.

THE INDUSTRY

Is organizing as a profession gaining more popularity?

Absolutely. On February 3, 2003, the NPR program Marketplace ran a long radio story on "Activism as a Profession." According to the Marketplace reporter, more and more college graduates are being drawn to advocacy and organizing as a vocation. There is now even a "professional association" for folks working in the field (The National Organizers Alliance) which offers a great quarterly magazine and regional and national conferences. It is also telling that Green Corps attracts over 700 applicants a year for its 30 available training slots. The interest is out there. Indeed, in the year and a half that Antioch's Environmental Advocacy and Organizing Program website has been up, it has received more than 5,000 visits from prospective students. Increasing numbers of people are thinking about activism and organizing as a vocational option. I think this bodes well for the future of democratic social change in this country.

What are the goals for the advocacy and organizing field in the next five years?

Sage observers of the environmental movement like Philip Schabecoff argue that there are at least two central challenges facing the environmental movement in the next few decades: 1) facing the political reality that our society has increasingly become a corpocracy instead of a democracy, and 2) developing a well-trained cadre of grassroots organizers who can help the American people make the transition to a more just, democratic, and sustainable society, even in the face of the current corporate domination of the media and the public policy process.

A FINAL WORD...

Is there anything else about this profession that would be interesting or helpful to those interested in entering the field of environmental advocacy and organizing?

I think the most important thing to remember is that organizing works. One of my friends has a bumper sticker that says, "The Labor Movement: The Folks Who Brought You The Weekénd." That makes a great point. There is so much that we take for granted about life in the United States that was actually won because citizens, workers, and consumers were educated, mobilized, and organized to press for change. There is enormous power in collective action. Grassroots social movements have repeatedly shown that ordinary people can work together and win meaningful reforms—even when those reforms are opposed by powerful elites. This outcome is not inevitable, but movement victories have been won many times throughout history.

My own hope is to help increase the chances for the environmental movement's success by deepening the knowledge, skills, and wisdom of a new generation of activist leaders. As long-time community organizer Si Kahn argues, "Training is one of the most useful things for the long run that an organization can do. The more people we train, the more leadership skills we develop, the more powerful our organizations can become." □



EDITOR'S NOTE: For more information about the educational and career outlook for Environmental Advocacy, [click here](#).

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