



Interview with Michael O'Shea, PO '11 – PPA Major

1. What is it that you do? What are the duties and responsibilities of your particular job? What is a typical or atypical day/week

As the Education USA Officer in Canada, I work at both the Fulbright Commission and the US Embassy in Ottawa to promote U.S. higher education to Canadians. Because the goal of advancing higher education carries such a general mandate, my job involves a wide variety of tasks, which fall within three major categories of responsibility: recruitment, presenting, and administration.

On a daily basis, I advise students via phone and e-mail about education opportunities in the U.S. I also visit schools to speak about these programs; offer virtual presentations such as webinars to counselors, parents, and students; and meet with Canadian guidance counselors to discuss the process and merits of studying in the U.S. On the other end of the spectrum, I work to build relationships with American institutions looking to recruit in Canada. My job also involves a range of administrative tasks, including running content for the Education USA website, managing social media feeds to promote U.S. education, and planning events.

2. What is the biggest misconception about your job or field?

My current position sits at the intersection of two often-stereotyped fields, higher education and government. In higher education, there is a false and commonly held belief that, because students do not need advice, programs are fuzzy and not meaningful. In reality, students do need guidance, and higher education programs can deliver some critical services, such as career development. Bringing more students to the U.S. is also a national priority, and someone needs to work deliberately to help reach this goal.

At the U.S. Embassy, my job involves a lot of work with the government, which is often perceived as out of touch, overly bureaucratic, and unable to connect with people. My job has proven all of these stereotypes to be untrue. Although the red tape certainly exists, as it does in any government, working effectively and efficiently is possible if you understand the process and learn how to work through it. In my current position, I've had the opportunity to work on many meaningful projects, which must be completed on a timely basis.

3. What is a typical career trajectory for someone in higher education?

What I like about higher education is that there are a lot of possible career directions. Jobs range from government work to advising education policy, running education programs, or working at institutions like Pomona. While possibilities abound, there are also many things to think about in terms of career direction. My goals moving forward are to work hard every day, do cool things, and be a nice guy.

4. How can students best prepare themselves in college to work in your field?

There are many ways to get your feet wet in higher education. I think that gaining real world experience is the best and most direct route to build your resume and explore potential career paths. While you're still on campus, apply for a work-study

job at any student services office at Pomona. I found that my job at the Career Development Office was a wonderful entre into the world of higher education and a great way to learn how career services works. Completing an internship at the State Department or a doing semester in Washington, DC also provides excellent opportunities to build your resume and establish contacts in the field. Once you graduate, I would recommend participating in a program or fellowship like the Fulbright.

My Public Policy Analysis degree has also been quite helpful in the field, both during the interview process for jobs and in completing my work successfully. A degree in this field is broad, giving you policy development and policy analysis skills, both of which apply to a wide range of job functions. Armed with a public policy degree, you're qualified for a lot of different jobs, especially in the government and non-profit sectors. During my job search process, I was able to talk about my major and coursework in a variety of contexts and to a variety of employers.

5. How has your liberal arts education helped you in your position?

My liberal arts education has helped immensely. Many people have a misconception that the liberal arts are too broad—that they teach only book learning and produce students without any qualifications or specializations. In reality, I have found that a liberal arts education prepares students rather well for the modern workplace of limited job security and common short-term work. Endowed with some fundamental skills—critical thinking, writing, and speaking experience—that carry across any number of fields, liberal arts graduates can change jobs relatively fluidly in today's unsettled labor market. Through small class sizes and frequent small group collaboration, liberal arts grads have also developed strong socialization and team-working abilities. All of these skills are highly valued in the workplace and make liberal arts grads qualified for work in a wide variety of fields.

6. Is graduate school necessary for your position?

Going straight to grad school might be a good option for some. But my path (and a path that a lot of people take) is working for a few years before going back to school. This option provides some financial security, which helps with paying off loans and saving money for grad school. Spending a few years working also teaches you about the workplace, helps you learn about suitable career paths, and narrows down grad school options

7. I understand you participated in the Fulbright program. Can you tell me more about your experience?

During college, I had been working on park analysis, looking specifically at accessibility to park space in low income neighborhoods as a determinant of health. Following that theme, my Fulbright proposal was to look at park accessibility in low income neighborhoods in Canada and to make comparisons with parks in the U.S. After being fortunate enough to receive the award, I moved to Montreal to study at the McGill University Institute for the Study of Canada. During my year in Montreal, I drew some really interesting conclusions about parks, had the chance to meet great people, and gained some amazing enrichment opportunities. Fulbright has really opened a lot of doors for me over the past few years. The Fulbright name is also well-known around the world; people know the mark of distinction and academic excellence. Outside the formal recognition, Fulbright helped me learn about foreign cultures and languages— tools relevant to the modernized, global work place.

During my last few months as a Fulbrighter, a job opened up for an administrator position with the Fulbright program in Canada. I applied and was fortunate to win the job. The transition was a logical step for me.

8. Have you come across any fellow Sagehens in the workplace?

When you're in Southern California, everyone knows about Pomona College. But, when I moved to Canada, I became accustomed to saying "I went to a small liberal arts college in Southern California." When my new boss arrived at the U.S. Embassy and asked me where I went to school, I used the same line. After she asked which school and I said Pomona, she burst back: "I went there too!" I couldn't believe it—I'm now working for a Sagehen at the US embassy in Ottawa. Shortly after, I found out there are two other Claremont College graduates working at the same U.S. embassy. It's a small Claremont world!

9. Tell me more about your time as a student assistant at the CDO. Has it helped you in your current job?

I spent four years at the CDO as a student assistant, which really played into my current job. At the CDO, I had real responsibilities, working with students and coordinating events, and I was able to talk about those experiences while interviewing for my current job. Although the position asked for a Master's degree, I was able to balance my lack of an advanced degree with four years of real work experience in higher education. My position at the CDO also helped me decide to follow the higher education career path. I loved working with students and organizing events at the CDO, and I do a lot of the same work at my job today.