Peace Jobs: A Student's Guide to Starting a Career Working for Peace

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Book Review

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David Smith has created the first book expressly written to help idealistic students begin to develop a line of sight from learning about peace to how to work for pay for social change, for peace and justice, and for environmental protection. Those students can consider careers using only good conflict transformation methods—that is, starting with nonviolence. This is a book for those students, for all professors in the field, for high school guidance counselors, and for career counselors.

This is a necessary and long awaited addition to the field of Peace and Conflict Studies. While each student and every professor may relate differently to the approach Smith takes, he firmly starts a necessary conversation in our era of huge student debt, when only those who blithely accept massive debt, or those with some sort of wealth paying for their education, do not necessarily care to craft their expensive education toward a career.

Following his introductory chapters defining the field and grounding the reader in today’s career realities, Smith devotes a chapter each to: diplomacy; human rights and law; nongovernmental organization, humanitarian, and military careers; teaching; social justice and environmental action; health, community, and faith-based; the arts, science, technology, and media. He ends with a chapter on pursuing various peace-related degrees.

As one who understands the field of Peace and Conflict Studies as primarily differentiated from other disciplines by our assumption of the start point of nonviolent conflict transformation, I would not agree with Smith that his description of the U.S. or UN military careers are peace careers any more than I would hold that a Colt revolver is a Peacemaker. Similarly, I would reject careers that require a practitioner to employ “mediation with muscle,” that is, “Do what we say in the name peace or we will bomb you.”

Aside from those departures from our field as I view it, Smith assists us all in beginning to open our conversations toward far better program design, more helpful partnerships with potential employers, and starting to think
about the typology of career opportunities—government agencies, nonprofits, and private enterprise.

These considerations are already central for students. Smith helps recenter our advising, community engagement, and program design toward this primary need. Understanding the need to develop community partnerships with potential employers in a wide arc of endeavors will make our peace and conflict studies a far more attractive degree—major, minor, or graduate.

Along the way, interspersed strategically throughout the book, Smith profiles more than two dozen students who have indeed fashioned peace careers and he also profiles various employers from across the board of his job identification.

Those of us who advise students daily know that we are not preparing conflict workers as, for example, an audiology professor prepares a student for clinical employment, or a nursing student is prepared to pass state boards and find work in a hospital. We are nowhere near such standardization, nor do we have large employers looking to hire a dozen of our graduates.

Smith identifies several dozen peace-related careers from mediation to humanitarian aid to nonprofit to human resources to advocacy work, and many more. Learning about these real-life jobs can help professors craft coursework that can better prepare students for employment that is fulfilling to them—and can greatly help students design their degree program toward their newly understood career goals.

As one who already uses Smith’s book, I hope he updates it with successive editions every few years. It will continue to be a valuable tool for us all as we help students prepare to do what most peace studies students want to do—save the world, full time, and maybe even pay the rent and buy some groceries.

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