



COMPOSING YOUR CAREER

INTRODUCTION

NYU Wagner sees public service as work that matters, work of public importance—wherever it happens. What does it mean for work to “matter?” At one level, it means that the work of public service has an impact on others, that it touches issues of public concern, that it is motivated more by mission than by money. Public service work also “matters” at another level: those of us who choose public service want our work to “matter” in our lives. We choose public service careers because we want our work to reflect our values; we want careers that satisfy our need to be of service or to transform some part of the world.

GOAL

Composing Your Career (CYC) is intended for those of us who know we want our work to matter but are still curious about how we will do that. It is a guide, a framework. It offers questions, not answers. It assumes, with a nod to Mary Catherine Bateson¹, that composing a career is a journey over time.

Key to NYU Wagner’s vision is that we will be a transformative experience for our students. We want to be a place that engages your active participation, that attracts students who want not just a credential but an education that continues to challenge and inform over time. We know that the students who get the most from Wagner are those who approach it actively, who create their education with us, not just accept what is given. This, then, is one approach to that possibility.

USING THIS GUIDE

While this guide is not something you must work your way through in a certain order, it might be helpful to start at the beginning, with the section called:

Getting Started with the Tracks Exercise will help you focus.

What Employers Look F.O.R. is another critical piece in composing your career. Once you have a sense of the direction(s) in which you may be headed, you’ll now need to know that employers look for your thorough understanding of:

- Field
- Organization
- Role

The S.E.E. Strategies combine what you’re looking for with what employers are looking for so that you’re

poised for a successful career by managing your time while in school. You want to be:

- Smart
- Experienced
- Engaged

The guide will work best for you if you think of it as a framework and not a manual. Make your own choices, using CYC as a jumping off point.

¹ Bateson, Mary Catherine. *Composing a Life*. New York: Penguin Books, 1990.



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GETTING STARTED

Organizations need a sense of where they want to go (mission and vision), an assessment of where they are (organizational diagnosis) and a plan of how to get from here to there (strategic plan). We want to suggest the same basic framework for thinking about Composing Your Career.

FOCUS

Some of you are clear about your direction, have a mission in life, or a clear sense of what role you want to take up in ten or twenty years and exactly what you need to do to get there. You may know you want to run an international NGO, or aspire to really change welfare as we know it, or create a financing system that makes it possible to equalize health outcomes. Others of you come with an interest in a specific policy area (transportation, urban education, child welfare), but not a clear sense of role. Others have a more general commitment to a sector (maybe nonprofit or government), but are open as to both area and role.

The task is to try to get clearer. You can start anywhere, but ultimately you need to narrow down some aspect of your career goals. If you are open to working in any topic area, do you know what role you might want (e.g. executive director of a nonprofit, but open to the issue area)? If you are not yet clear about the role you want to play in an organization, can you identify a

field you care about or a few you want to explore (e.g. open space, public transportation, waterfront development)? If you are still not sure about either field or role, can you target a setting (e.g. large public agency, international NGO, or small community based organization)? As we have said, getting clearer about your career goals is a process. We're encouraging you to start, to take a few first steps. We ask that you recognize that career goals change over time and with each experience. Don't feel as if once you have gotten clearer on your career goals that you are/should be committed to them indefinitely—this is an ongoing, organic process of finding your way, with lifelong opportunities for vision re-evaluation and adjustment.

All of you come with assets, strengths and preferences. We encourage you to work from your strengths and then identify skills you need to build or knowledge you need to acquire. In order to work from your strengths, of course, you need to know what they are —this guide and other resources at Wagner will help you do that.

Guiding Questions:

- What are my fields of interest? (e.g. children and youth, hospital administration, housing, international development)
- What change do I want to make happen? (e.g. improve access to health care, reduce juvenile delinquency)
- What roles might I want to play in an organization? (e.g. financial manager, policy analyst, urban planner, fundraiser, program director, executive director)
- When do I want to achieve these goals? (e.g. do I want to be an executive director in two years or in 20 years?)
- Is geographic location important? (e.g. New York City exclusively, eastern seaboard between Washington DC and Boston, the Bay Area)
- What skills do I have that I like to use? (e.g. analyzing, budgeting, writing, researching)
- What work values are important to me? (e.g. advancement, creativity, independence, recognition, stability)

- What leadership roles have I taken on? (e.g. task force at work, leader of student group, board member of a nonprofit organization)
- What do employers look for when making hiring decisions? (e.g. specific skill sets, experiences, education)

Next Steps:

- Develop focused, yet flexible, goals. Goals can include area(s) of interest, job function, geographic location, and kind of organization. Here are some ways to get there:
- Assess your interests, skills, and work values. Identify the range of organizations out there doing the kind of work you're interested in. Research what kinds of jobs exist in these organizations. Pinpoint the skills and experiences most often required in these roles.
- Talk to people - classmates, alumni, faculty, and staff. Discuss your job research with them. Listen to their stories.
- Try something on. Get involved. Have an experience so you can affirm whether or not you're on the right track.

THE TRACKS EXERCISE

Many of us know that we are committed to a career in public service, but figuring out what that means can be difficult. This exercise is great for people who are looking for a bit of focus. The exercise comes in three phases: Brainstorming, Analyzing, and Synthesizing.

I. Brainstorm

Download, photocopy, or cut out of the newspaper any job posting that appeals to you on one of two levels:

A.) You're drawn to this kind of an organization. You like its mission. You'd like your work to have an impact on this issue, population or area. You like the agency's approach to the work. And you could see yourself, someday, working for an organization like this. Don't worry about where it's located or whether you like the job description that's attached to the organization. Just focus on the agency's overall purpose. Circle the part you like and put it in a folder.

B.) You're drawn to this kind of job description. You like the way the responsibilities are bundled. You like the skills needed to perform the function of the position, and you could see yourself, someday, doing something like this in your day-to-day. Don't worry about the agency the description is associated with or whether you have the skills to perform the job. Just focus on the actual job description. Circle the part you like and put it in your folder.

Do this until you have a bare minimum of 50 selected items. The more you collect, the better. Remember, when brainstorming, we don't evaluate along the way, we just collect ideas. Once you have at least 50, continue to the next phase.

II. Analysis

Take the selected items out of your folder and see if you can find any patterns or common themes. Some

things to look for might include: issue, population to be served, approach to the work, geography, kind of organization, unit or department within an agency, and role.

III. Synthesis

Using the data gathered from your brainstorming and analysis phases, create at least one and no more than five potential job tracks for yourself. A job track is a way to put parameters around and frame your potential career interests, and can include any of the following that have meaning for you: issue or field of interest; subcomponents of the issue that are of interest; approach to the work; kinds of organizations that do this work; where these organizations are located; size of the organizations; potential departments within organizations; roles that you aspire to play; and the requirement of skills, education, experience, and knowledge to fulfill those roles.

Take stock of your qualifications and experiences as they relate to your potential tracks. Your tracks should connect to Composing Your Career and lead to a plan of action to maximize your time at Wagner. Your track should inform which courses you should take, the professors you should get to know, how you use your assignments, the events you go to, the groups you join, the people you seek out, the internship/ job experiences you look for and how you present yourself in a resume, cover letter, and an interview. Remember to reflect along the way to determine if this track feels like a good fit for you. If it does, continue on this path. If not, seek out additional tracks.





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WHAT EMPLOYERS LOOK F.O.R.

All employers, whether they know it or not, make hiring decisions based on the same three criteria. They want to know you're dedicated to their **field** of interest, that you can work within the culture of their **organization**, and that you can successfully perform in the **role**.

FIELD

In public service, commitment to issues counts! Do you understand the issues in the field, are you committed to the mission of the agency, do you understand how they differentiate themselves from other agencies working in the same policy area?

ORGANIZATION

Do you understand the organizational culture, are you a team player, do you behave in a way that convinces the employer you will fit into their world?

ROLE

Do you have the skills, experience, and educational requirements to perform the tasks necessary to function in the job?

Whether just beginning a career or well into a life of public service, we all need to keep in mind the employer's perspective in the hiring process. This entails finding ways to incorporate all of the strategies of CYC into your written and interpersonal communication tools when looking for work. It's not enough to be proactive – you also need to make sense of your activities. Employers are interested in articulate and focused individuals. How you communicate with them will be key to your success.

The resume is one of the most important elements of your job search. It is your introduction to an employer as well as a marketing tool designed to persuade an employer of your qualifications for a given position. Cover letters, in combination with the resume, should develop enough interest on the part of an employer to warrant a personal interview with you. The process of writing good resumes and cover letters help you organize your thinking and forces you to consider your qualifications for particular

positions. This process often helps identify what you have to offer employers, as well as areas for development while at Wagner.

While your resume and cover letter can gain you access to a potential employer, how you manage the interview process will ultimately determine whether or not you get a job offer. By knowing what to expect and being prepared, you can greatly enhance your chances of receiving and negotiating offers. Visit: <http://wagner.nyu.edu/careers/guides> to access our popular career planning How-To Guides.

Guiding Questions:

- Is my resume targeted to a field of interest and/or type of work? Do I need various versions of my resume? (e.g. a fundraising resume, a programmatic resume, a housing resume, a youth-based resume)
- Is my resume geared towards the needs of the employer and the value I bring to them?

- Is my resume impeccably presented?
- Do I tweak my cover letters so they clearly articulate why I am interested in working for a specific organization?
- Do my cover letters emphasize the relevance and value that my skills, experiences, education, background, and interests would bring to a particular job/organization?
- Are my cover letters good enough to function as a writing sample?
- Do I know how to articulate how I can meet the needs of an employer in an interview?
- During an interview, am I able to behave in a way that convinces a potential employer that I fit into their world?

Next Steps:

- Assess your comfort level with both your written and interpersonal job search communications. Examine what has worked for you in the past. Assess what you may need to enhance. Take advantage of the services offered through NYU Wagner's Office of Career Services prior to starting your job search.



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THE S.E.E. STRATEGIES

Now that you have a sense of the direction(s) in which you're headed, as well as what employers in your field are looking for, we want you to manage your time at school so that you're better poised for a successful career. The S.E.E. strategies - **SMART**, **EXPERIENCED**, and **ENGAGED** - will help you get there.

SMART

At Wagner, we want you to be smart. We want you to do well in your classes, and we want you to be able to contribute to important conversations with sophistication and nuance. In doing so, you should choose your classes wisely, be thoughtful with your class assignments, and keep up on readings in your field(s) of interest.

Academics

Whatever the program and specialization you're in and whatever courses you are taking, we want to draw your attention to the opportunities to explore CYC within your classes, as they offer multiple venues for this exploration. Many courses offer students a chance to focus an assignment on a topic or organization of their choice. Our advice is to be strategic about each of these choices. Consider what you are working on learning and maximize the opportunities given you as a student to meet the people you want to meet or to learn more about an organization in your field of interest.

Guiding Questions:

- What opportunities are there in my courses to use assignments as a way to further my career exploration? (e.g. is there an organization in my field of interest that I can use as a case study for a project?)
- How can I use an assignment to interview someone in a role I am interested in pursuing?
- What elective courses should I take? (e.g. do I want to hone my finance skills, do I want a broad knowledge of economic development?)
- How can I take advantage of academic advisement? (e.g. which professors have done research or are working in my fields of interest, are there additional professors' office hours that I should take advantage of?)
- Are there self-study/reading opportunities?
- Should I form or join a study group of students who share a particular interest?

Next Steps:

- Identify what it is you are trying to learn more about each semester and review class by class where the opportunities are. And make sure to take your prerequisite courses first.

Readings in Your Field

Learning is a life-long process and developing the habit of reading professionally-related work is a key aspect of that process. While in school, you will have plenty of reading assignments, but even then, there are additional readings that can inform and enhance your understanding of field, organization, and role. We encourage you to use the time you are in school to set the lifelong "reading professionally-related work" habit so you can stay up-to-date and informed over time.

Guiding Questions:

- What reading do I now do in my field?
- What are professionals in my

field reading? What does the faculty read?

- What books or publications are most often cited or mentioned as having influenced the field?
- What on-line resources should I be keeping up on?

Next Steps:

- It may seem hard to find the time to take on more reading while you are in school, but reading more broadly can, among other things, keep you in touch with the main players in your field, what policy issues loom large, and how the external environment is shifting in ways that impact your field. Note the authors whose work had the most impact on you from class assignments and see what else they have written. Talk to professionals in the field and ask what they read. Ask faculty. Make lists. Collect material to read. Make time. Consider a professional “book group.”

EXPERIENCED

Work Experience

We believe students need both rigorous academic study on the graduate level and relevant practical experience in organizations to succeed in public service careers. Wagner is a place that values both theory and practice and offers multiple opportunities to integrate both.

Students enter Wagner with varying amounts of previous work experience and Wagner’s program and schedules allow for both full and part-time study. Wherever you are in your career path, we believe learning is a two way street. What you learn in the classroom can help you make

sense of what you are experiencing/have experienced at work, and what you learn on the ground can inform and enrich class discussions.

Full-time, part-time, paid, unpaid—the experience, and what you do with it, is what counts.

Guiding Questions:

For People Recently Out of College with Less Than Two Years’ Relevant Experience:

- How can I draw on whatever previous experience I have had (e.g. in undergraduate leadership roles, summer work, community service, work after college) to help me relate to ideas being discussed in the classroom? (e.g. how might my work as a summer camp counselor inform the discussion of human resource management, how might my volunteer work in a soup kitchen help me participate in a discussion about poverty alleviation in a policy class, how might my role as student group treasurer help me understand financial statements?)
- As I look for an internship, what kinds of organizations are out there doing the kind of work I’m interested in? (e.g. what are the top 20 employers in my field, what agency is doing cutting-edge work?)
- What kinds of roles are there in these organizations for people with my experience and skill set? (e.g. researcher, data analyst, program coordinator, executive assistant) Do these roles exist as internships, or as regular employment?
- What do I want to learn through this work experience? (e.g. new skill sets, confirmation that this particular issue area or field is compelling, an opportunity

to demonstrate competence of some sort)

- Do I want to work while I am in school? If so, part-time or full-time?
- How can I bring what I am learning at my internship or work into the classroom, and how can I apply what I am learning in the classroom to current challenges at work?

For People Relatively Early in Their Careers and Working in Their Field of Choice

- How can I apply what I am learning directly to the challenges I face at work? How can I bring my learning’s from the field into the classroom in a way that will help me develop my own theories about what works?
- If I am working and going to school at the same time, what “stretch” assignment can I take on? (e.g. if I am mostly in a staff role at headquarters, could I get some operational or field experience; if I have been in one unit and need a broader systems perspective, can I join a task force at work that would expose me to different perspectives/roles/systems/people?)
- If I am not working while I go to school, what internships can I get that will help me set the next steps in my career trajectory? (e.g. does my internship best position me to work outside the New York region after graduation, as I plan to do?) What organizations will expose me to best practices? (e.g. excellent leadership models, strong professional networks)

For Career Shifters

- What skills and knowledge from my previous career or other relevant experience can I leverage as I shift to a different career?
- How is the job/sector that I am

moving from similar to the job/ sector that I am moving to? How are they different? Are there common themes and experiences? (e.g. required financial statements in a private organization versus government)

- How can I get experience in this new field of interest? (e.g. can I serve on a nonprofit board of directors; can I find or create an internship, even very short term, which gives me some exposure or experience?)
- Do I need to think of a “bridge” job? (e.g. if I am trying to go from being a lawyer in a firm into healthcare administration, does it make the most sense to try to find work in the counsel’s office of a hospital or healthcare system?)
- How can I develop my capacity to integrate learning from both theory and practice?

For Seasoned Professionals Already in Their Field of Choice

- How can I maximize the opportunities to apply what I am learning in the classroom to challenges at work?
- How can I identify one or two ongoing challenges for me in work settings (e.g. struggling with delegation, difficulty asking for or giving feedback) and then use the Wagner experience as a laboratory to take risks and learn?
- How can I develop my capacity to integrate learning from both theory and practice?
- How can I use school to broaden my horizon at work?
- How can I think of next steps at work? (e.g. going from a local to a national platform on a policy issue, managing a much bigger operation, writing or speaking about what I know)

Next Steps:

- Whether you are clear about your career goals or juggling multiple possibilities, your next move should advance you in some direction you want to go. It can add to your repertoire of skills, it can build experience, it can confirm or eliminate possibilities, it can bring you into contact with people you need to know, it can credential you by association - and, of course, it can bring real meaning to your life and make a difference to others. You don’t need to know everything about where you want to end up to get started.

Volunteer Work

Volunteer work matters in many ways. It builds community, serves people, bridges divides, teaches, and broadens perspectives. Volunteer work can also be a great way to practice skills, enlarge networks, and gain experience.

Guiding Questions:

- In addition to the rewards of service, what can I learn from my volunteer experience? (e.g. what can work in a food pantry teach me about service delivery, how can serving on the PTA help me understand the challenges of school reform?)
- What professional skills do I have that can benefit a nonprofit organization?
- Do I want my volunteer work to use the skills I have and be similar to the work I do on a daily basis or do I want it to be something completely different? (e.g. some people who are already good managers like being on an advisory board, while

others might want to get the chance to do some direct work with clients)

- Are there opportunities for “stretch” assignments in my volunteer work that would enhance my skill set? (e.g. serving on a fundraising committee, giving public presentations, conducting intake so I can hone my listening skills)
- What commitment can I make and keep to a volunteer position? Do I prefer a series of one-shot assignments (e.g. New York Cares), a weeklong engagement like Alternative Spring Break, or am I able to make a more regular or longer-term commitment?

Next Steps:

- Decide how and when volunteer work is going to fit into your life over time. Be mindful of keeping the commitments you make here as other people will be depending on you.

ENGAGED

Your Network

Networking is the strategic cultivation and development of your pool of professional contacts. It is more than collecting other peoples’ business cards or asking people for a job. Networking puts you in touch with people you might not otherwise encounter. It opens doors. It offers opportunities. And it is best done when you are not desperate for a job.

When taken seriously, networking acknowledges the importance of building and maintaining relationships with other people in and out of your field. It assumes that we need each other, not just to get our

next job, but to succeed in our current roles. It assumes that none of us knows all we need to know.

Networking involves reciprocity. It takes work. People with good networking skills follow-up. They remember what they've learned. They think to send other people notes to thank them for a meeting or send on an article they've read that they think might interest the other person. They often refer colleagues on to others in their networks and are willing to act as resources for each other.

Guiding Questions:

- What kind of a network do I want to create?
- At this stage in my career, what are the one or two most important things I am seeking from my network?

Next Steps:

- Step back and think about your existing networks and what shape they're in. Do you need to reach out and reconnect with some folks? Do you need to find current contact information on some? Sit next to someone new each time you go to class and spend a few minutes before or after class talking with them about their work. Arrange some informational interviews. Figure out what you want to learn.

Student Groups

Wagner and NYU offer numerous opportunities for students to come together around common themes or shared interests. Participation in student group activities can help you demonstrate existing skills, practice

new competencies, develop content

knowledge, and deepen your pool of professional contacts. You may or may not have been active in student affairs in college. We encourage you to consider the benefits of joining or taking a leadership role in a student group during graduate school from a professional development perspective. Know that prospective employers often consider student leadership roles as indicators of leadership potential.

Guiding Questions:

- What existing groups speak to some aspect of my identity or interests?
- Are there existing formal or informal student groups that could provide the beginning of a network for me?
- What skills do I need to develop further? (e.g. public speaking, financial management)
- What leadership roles might I take on? (e.g. president, treasurer, ombudsman)
- What "stretch" assignments might I volunteer for? A stretch assignment gives you the opportunity to develop a new competency or skill. (e.g. outreach, event planning, fundraising)

Next Steps:

- Identify those groups with which you have an affinity or ones that you want to learn more about. Decide how much of a role you want these groups to play in CYC. As a beginning, you might start small and attend a meeting of a group in which you're interested and talk with current student leadership about ways to get involved with activities.

Events

New York City and NYU are full of events related to public service. Events can provide an easy way to explore new ideas or interests, learn about new developments in a field, challenge your assumptions, expand your content knowledge, and meet people.

Guiding Questions:

- How can attendance at events contribute to CYC?
- Is attendance all that is required or do I need to work on my networking skills or my ability to formulate concise and informed questions?
- How might offering to speak at certain events further my career development strategy?
- If I can't get to an event in person, is there a way to learn about what happened? (e.g. videos, podcasts, blog posts, press coverage, a colleague)

Next Steps:

- Mark off time in your calendar each month to attend events. Sit next to someone new each time you go to an event. Listen in on who asks interesting questions or has a unique twist on an answer that intrigues you. See if you can get the attendance list and notice which people you might want to connect with.

Professional Associations

Professional associations offer a network almost by definition. Some are membership based, with dues and considerable structure, including regular conferences, journals or other membership services. Others are less formal. Whatever your field

or your area of interest, professional associations offer a way to keep in touch with the developments in the field and other professionals.

Guiding Questions:

- What professional associations am I involved with now? What purposes do they or could they serve?
 - What professional associations exist in my field or area of expertise? Do they have a student chapter? (APA, ACHE, ASPA)
 - What do I have to offer? Would getting better known in a professional association help position me? How can I make that happen? Can I serve on a committee or present at a conference
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Next Steps:

- Identify the relevant professional associations in your field.

Reflective

We know that being exposed to professors, classmates, experiences, and perspectives on the world can shift our thinking of what we want to do. Opportunities that we never knew existed may arise. We may get totally new ways of looking at the world. Or we may find that what we thought we wanted to do isn't really a good fit.

Developing successful careers in public service is a uniquely individual pursuit, and the process can take on many paths. For some of us, the course may be straightforward. For others it may be a long and winding road.

It can be the case that the goals we set for ourselves at the beginning of our tenure at Wagner still have

meaning for us 12 months later. It is also not unusual to discover that being exposed to different classes, work experiences, and people will alter our goals and perceptions about the work we want to do.

Guiding Questions:

- Am I still committed to my earlier goals?
 - Am I on the right path?
 - How can I take my career to the next level?
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Next Steps:

- It is appropriate to periodically check in with yourself. Some people like to do this every semester - others do it once a year, say on their birthday or New Year's. Reflect on the experiences you've had over the last few months. Consider what still resonates with you, and adjust your strategies accordingly.