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Making Sense of the Education Workforce: A Snapshot of 10 Education Careers

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How is the education workforce organized? How does a motivated, passionate individual pursue a career in education?

Limited guidance exists about entering the education workforce, moving between roles, and what to expect in terms of job responsibilities. This opaqueness is problematic for soon-to-be college graduates considering entering the education sector, employees in the sector who want to pivot their careers, and system leaders who want to enable the recruitment and retention of talent.

We have not identified a publicly available, robust introduction to the education career landscape. For instance, the Occupational Information Network (O*NET), sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, contains hundreds of descriptors of almost 1,000 occupations

covering the entire U.S. economy, yet a search for education careers yields a set of results dominated by teaching roles^{1,2}. This presents an overly narrow view of available opportunities, leaving out many important roles and positions outside the classroom. With no obvious place to turn for comprehensive information about education careers, job seekers often lack a clear view of the landscape of opportunities within and outside the walls of the schoolyard.

This article is intended to begin filling that gap by examining various categories of education careers and showcasing individuals working within each category. For the purposes of this discussion, we define the education workforce as those working within and alongside both the pre-K-12 and higher education systems. Focusing on the full P-20 pipeline allows us to examine the pre-K-12 and higher education workforces jointly, rather than seeing them as separate spheres. With vastly different working conditions and incentive structures, individuals well-versed in one system may still be relatively uninformed about the other. Our descriptions of roles across the continuum highlight the complementary landscapes of education careers in pre-K-12 and higher education, illustrating potential areas for collaboration, continuous improvement, and innovation.

Our Process

We first developed a rough categorization based on our own experiences in the field and a review of available resources, ending up with nine categories of education careers that seemed to capture the major components of the workforce. To test this categorization, learn more about each type of role, and identify potential candidates to interview, we reached out to just under 500 individuals working in education and asking them to complete a 14-question survey. We also shared the survey with four list serves geared at education professionals and posted it on social media. As part of the survey, we asked respondents to place their current job within one of the nine categories, describe the most critical skills and experiences needed for success in their role, and comment on the most rewarding—and challenging—aspects of their work.

In one month, we received 128 responses spanning 25 states, from respondents with an average of 27 years of education career experience. Based on these results, we recalibrated our categorization and identified candidates for follow-up calls. Between September and December 2018³, we interviewed 28 survey respondents by phone, aiming for a range of professions as well as diversity in geography, gender, race and ethnicity, and level of

¹ Of the 13 results in the “Education, Training and Library” Occupational Group in the Occupational Outlook Handbook, 9 are teaching roles. Of the 4 non-teaching roles, 2 are library roles, 1 is a museum role and the last is an Instructional Coordinator. “Education, Training, and Library Occupations : Occupational Outlook Handbook:” U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/home.htm.

² The 75 results in the “Education/Training” career cluster are grouped into 3 categories: 1) Administration and Administrative Support (6 results); 2) Professional Support Services (10 results); and 3) Teaching/Training (59 results). Although more comprehensive than the handbook section, this cluster does not include jobs from 5 categories of our framework (Researcher, Advocate, Funder, Policymaker and Consultant). Moreover, the sub-categories of “Administration and Administrative Support” and “Professional Support Services” are not descriptive; the latter includes disparate roles ranging from Educational, Guidance, School, and Vocational Counselors (Student Supporter in our framework) to Instructional Designers and Technologists (Instructional Supporter in our framework). “Education & Training Career Cluster.” O*NET OnLine, www.onetonline.org/find/career?c=5.

³ Some of the interviewees have changed roles since they were interviewed. This article notes the interviewees’ titles as of December 2018.

experience. Despite this effort, we acknowledge that our interview sample is not completely representative of the diversity of individuals working in the education sector. In particular, white, mid-career females are overrepresented among our interviewees, as are residents of major urban centers. We do not claim that these are a scientific sample, but rather intend them to be helpful illustrations of the career paths that individuals can take within the sector. It is also worth noting that all job titles and descriptions were current as of the date each interview was conducted and that individuals may have moved to a new role or new location since that time.

Organization of Sections

Each section begins by noting the names and job titles of individuals who participated in phone interviews. We then explore the key themes that emerged from the interviews and survey results, with an emphasis on the skills required to carry out the core responsibilities of a particular role. We end each section with guiding questions to help jobseekers think through their own interests and skills.

Our analysis organizes the education workforce into ten categories, with each category including jobs with similar functions/duties. We also include a separate section to spotlight careers within the education technology sector, which do not fit neatly within any other category but deserve a special mention. Finally, we share a few concluding thoughts on the sector as a whole and promising avenues for future research. We hope that our categorization presents a more comprehensive picture of the education workforce than is available elsewhere, helping aspiring jobseekers understand the many opportunities available within the field.

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Teacher

Interviewees:

- **Gregory Karas**, interim registrar at New England College of Optometry; adjunct professor at Curry College, Bridgewater State University, and Wentworth Institute of Technology
- **Sarah LaDue**, 7th and 8th grade English teacher at Korematsu Middle School

Our personal experiences as students can be a misleading guide to the real day-to-day work of classroom teachers. As Sarah LaDue says, “So many people go into the job not having any idea of how teachers do what they do.” Much of the feedback we received from classroom teachers framed the reality of the work in stark terms: challenging but rewarding, frustrating but fulfilling, exhausting but inspiring.

Ultimately, what motivates classroom teachers to enter and remain in the profession is interactions with students and ability to make a direct impact on their lives. But the role undoubtedly comes with trade-offs. Being a good teacher, Sarah notes, takes “a lot of work that you didn’t see as a student.” Working in these roles allows for creativity and autonomy in course design. However, as Gregory Karas notes, this can also mean making constant adjustments to material to better meet students’ needs.

Indeed, many specific skills are required to be an effective classroom teacher. To start, teachers must have a keen social understanding and the ability to react quickly (but fairly) in situations with students. For Gregory, it is critical to be “sympathetic but firm,” even if that means that “sometimes you have to be the bad guy” who enforces rules and upholds expectations of students. Sarah describes the need to “anticipate how a kid will react” in the moment and to “alter your own reactions” based on their needs. She also stresses that, contrary to what she sometimes hears, her job is not just about patience: “Lots of jobs require patience. What’s challenging about being a teacher is breaking down skills and knowing how to make someone understand something.”

Teaching in higher education is often coupled with the need to carry out research and meet obligations to the institution (such as by working with other members of the faculty to examine and improve existing course offerings). Faculty prioritize how they spend their time on research, teaching, and other obligations based on the type of institution where they work and/or the nature of their contract. For example, adjunct professors like Gregory work on limited contracts (sometimes for just one course at a time). Many adjunct faculty have real-world experience in roles outside of academia and are not seeking tenure-track positions. Faculty performance can be assessed by students’ course evaluations, research productivity (measured by publications and research grants), and a variety of other factors⁴.

For all effective teachers, one constant is the importance of relating to students on a personal level. Some teachers tap into their own experiences to make these connections. For example, Gregory (who attended college on the GI Bill after serving in the military for eight years) has firsthand experience with the “trials and tribulations” that many students face as they work toward college completion, especially older learners and other nontraditional students. But, he

⁴ See, e.g. Miller, J Elizabeth, and Peter Seldin. “Changing Practices in Faculty Evaluation.” AAUP, www.aaup.org/article/changing-practices-faculty-evaluation#.XQvg7YhKjD4.

advises, all teachers can seek authentic connections with their students: “When you get in the classroom, just be genuine. Be who you are, and the students will respond.”

Questions for the jobseeker to consider:

1. Are you inspired by the possibility of making a direct impact on individual students' lives, or would you prefer to seek opportunities to make “long-term systemic change,” as Sarah puts it?
2. Reflecting on your own educational experiences and what you know of the teaching profession today, what appeals to you about the role of classroom teacher? What seems like it would be most challenging?

Student Supporter

Interviewees:

- **Eloisa Almaraz**, Program Director, Posse Bay Area
- **Jay Davis**, Director, First Year Student Enrichment Program, Dartmouth College
- **Nissa Pearson**, Coordinator of Student Support Services, Alexander Dawson School

Student supporters work inside and outside the K-12 and higher education systems to meet students' academic and nonacademic needs. They help rigid systems become more adaptive and responsive to accommodate a highly diverse spectrum of learning needs, desires, interests, and talents.

Within schools and institutions of higher education, services may be provided to the student population at large (e.g., through counseling or academic advising available to any student) or for target populations (e.g., students with learning differences, college students who are first in their family to attend/graduate from a postsecondary institution). At the K-12 level, schools may hire student support professionals, like Nissa Pearson, who help prevent students from falling through the cracks by advocating for students and expressing the students' needs and strengths to others. This requires establishing trust with parents and colleagues through open communication. For example, Nissa is sometimes the first person to tell parents that their child might be a different type of learner. Nissa communicates such that she is "giving advice not as a critic but as their child's cheerleader."

Community building is also an essential skill for student supporters in higher education. Reflecting on his 26 years of education experience, Jay Davis underscores that in his role directing programs for first generation and low-income students at Dartmouth College, his ability to build community is essential. "First-generation students need to have a community and safe spaces in which they can find like-minded people with similar life experiences." He recommends others in this line of work "check assumptions at the door and meet each person where they are. No matter what the demographic category, people vary tremendously."

Not all higher education institutions have developed communities of support for at-risk populations such as first generation college students. As a result, external organizations like the Posse Foundation fill gaps where the university has not sufficiently adapted for an increasingly diverse student body. By intervening in and partnering with universities, the Posse model enables underrepresented students to get on the radar of university admissions departments and ultimately graduate with a cohort.

Eloisa Almaraz manages a team that recruits, trains, and supports students who receive full-tuition scholarships from Posse's top-tier partner universities. A cohort, or posse, of ten students participates in leadership, academic, team building, and cross-cultural workshops before their arrival to the university. While enrolled at the university, posses continue to meet weekly alongside a tenured faculty member. Eloisa also notes the importance of community-building in this role, as she must make connections with families, university representatives, and students to enable commitment and engagement with the program. Eloisa also relies on data management, facilitation and communication skills to remain organized and effective.

Jay advises aspiring and current student supporters to "check your ego at the door. If you want to 'help' there is a presumption of weakness of the people with whom you are working. Avoid

the savior complex. Come at it with a sense of excitement to provide support to help people capitalize on their skills.”

Questions for the jobseeker to consider:

1. Do you have interest in supporting a particular type of learner?
2. Do you see yourself as a community builder? How have you enabled and sustained a sense of security and mutual support in a group?

Administrator

Interviewees:

- **Vincent Baxter**, Deputy Chief of Family Engagement, DC Public Schools
- **Michael Crow**, President, Arizona State University
- **Jennifer Malerich**, Executive Director for Academic and Global Engagement, Arizona State University

Although the title of administrator may sound rigid or vague, it encompasses a variety of high-impact careers that can positively impact learners' futures. Administrators execute the functions of K-12 and higher ed systems from end to end, from recruitment/enrollment to graduation/alumni services. Some administrators' roles are mainly compliance-oriented, and may involve ensuring their organization/system follows state and federal law and adheres to state, federal, or philanthropic grant requirements. But others are change-oriented with a mandate to identify opportunities for improvement. Forward-looking system leaders seek to instill the spirit of innovation throughout their ranks of administrators, rather than focusing on compliance above all.

When change is needed, tailoring an intervention to meet learners and families where they are requires a skill set sometimes known as intrapreneurship, an application of entrepreneurial skills and mindset to effect change within an existing organization. Instead of launching a new enterprise (spinning *out* an idea), intrapreneurs find ways to disrupt existing practices from *within*, sometimes in the face of calls to "adhere to tradition" or "slow down." For example, at Arizona State University (ASU), President Michael Crow recruits administrators with a penchant for disruption, noting, "institutional innovation is hard to pull off and requires leaders with an entrepreneurial mindset plus grit, curiosity, and creative problem-solving skills."

Jennifer Malerich works in the Office of the Provost at Arizona State University to "develop systems, programs and technologies that expand access to higher education and support student success." Provosts are the chief academic officers at college and universities who establish and execute the academic priorities of the institution. Jennifer's portfolio spans three aspects of ASU's undergraduate curriculum: 1) communicating degree program options and requirements (helping students navigate over 400 majors); 2) internationalizing the student experience (helping students develop global competencies abroad and at home); and 3) promoting career readiness (helping students connect career building skills to academics). Jennifer likes "being in a position to make changes or improvements that impact large populations of students, especially those who thought they could never attend college and/or study around the world and experience other cultures."

Administrators feed their desire to improve students' experiences by navigating complex organizations and systems. Relationship-building skills are crucial to advancing goals as departments within a university are not always connected through clear reporting lines, and K-12 school districts sprawl across county lines. Establishing trust with colleagues and 'networking' with others in the system will ease an administrator's path to achieving results.

Administrators must keep their eye on this big picture while also being aware of local subtleties. Vincent Baxter emphasizes the uniqueness of each of the 116 schools in the DCPS. The nuances prevent a district leader from using a standardized or "franchise" model to school transformation. Instead, he explains with an example, it is more helpful to "provide principals better examples of what high-performing teachers look like and then enable the principals to

change their own behavior” instead of central administration attempting to mandate teacher evaluation practices.

Vincent maintains that those who “make change in a serious way” are those who “have developed the full suite of what it takes to get something from an idea, to out into the world.” He adds a final step: “capacity building and teaching” so that the leader can one day move on from that idea and onto the next changemaking endeavor. This requires a “long game” mindset with an appreciation for the political nature of the work as more often than not, administrators do not see the fruit of their labors immediately. For many, the cyclical and political challenges of administrative work pale in comparison to the satisfaction of being part of an organization that is committed to growth, development, and progress.

Questions for the jobseeker to consider:

1. Do you seek a role that would enable you to continuously iterate and adjust your programs in response to real-time feedback? If yes, what about this type of process appeals to you? If no, what are your reservations?
2. Would you consider yourself an intrapreneur? Why or why not?

Instructional Supporter

Interviewees:

- **Renee Bass**, Senior Instructional Designer, Arizona State University
- **Christine English**, Grade 6-12 English Language Arts Instructional Specialist, Middletown Public Schools

Emerging technologies, differentiated classrooms, and increasing demands on classroom teachers' time are changing how instruction is developed and delivered. Instructional supporters do not work directly with students, but rather provide instructors with more tools for their teaching toolkits, whether employed directly by schools and universities or by nonprofit or for-profit organizations that offer services and products for a fee.

Renee Bass works "in house" with Arizona State University faculty to support the design, development, and delivery of engaging online courses and fully online degree programs. Designing courses typically takes at least 6 months to complete. Renee must build trust with faculty right from the start. The faculty member is the content lead, but instructional design is a team sport, involving collaboration with learning technologists, multimedia developers, and a management team. New assignments require the ability to pivot and modify priorities and timelines as instructional designers each support many faculty members simultaneously.

Christine English works "in house" at a school district to support the growth and professional development of 25 English Language Arts teachers in grades 6-12. It is difficult for teachers to focus on their own growth while shepherding the advancement of their students, so Christine's role as an instructional specialist (sometimes known as a coach) fills this gap through classroom observations along with one-on-one and small group coaching sessions.

A coach needs sufficient teaching experience, ideally in different contexts (different grades, schools, disciplines), to be able to help teachers work through issues and to model classroom management and teaching approaches. Christine emphasizes that years of teaching experience enable "greater nuance and depth of feedback and help coaches develop a stronger sense of empathy for classroom practitioners, and demonstrated expertise coupled with interpersonal and communication skills will help the coach establish the teachers' trust. The coach and teacher need to have open lines of communication to exchange feedback and suggestions. Coaching itself is a skill, grounded in adult learning theory, that strikes a balance between making the teachers feel valued and supported while also pushing them to grow, which may require difficult conversations. Finally, coaches require a good sense of organization and time management in order to identify feasible times for sessions, often working across multiple schools in a district.

Renee sums up her appreciation for the instructional supporter role with a look to the future. "My projects have impact worldwide, locally and also on just one student. I get to explore how to improve people's lives by increasing their access to learning opportunities. I get to challenge the status quo by striving to reach more learners. I am inspired because I think education is the ticket to change your life." Instructional supporters figure out how to deliver that ticket to the learner.

Questions for the jobseeker to consider:

1. What steps can you take now to dabble in coaching? For example, if you are a current teacher, how might you support other teachers' development? How might you develop coaching skills for adults?
2. Think about a time when you established trust with other professionals. What skills did you leverage to build that relationship?
3. How do you feel about working to advance the growth of adults? How will working with adults differ from working with school age youth?

Capacity Builder

Interviewees:

- **Leslie Abbatiello**, Director of Professional Development and School Improvement, Area Cooperative Educational Services
- **Tracy Fray-Oliver**, Associate Vice President, School System Partnerships & Programs, Bank Street Education Center
- **Parvathi “Parv” Santhosh-Kumar**, Senior Director of Impact, StriveTogether
- **Laura Wilson Phelan**, Founder and Executive Director, Kindred

Recognizing that individuals throughout the education system can benefit from professional development and support, a growing cadre of roles focuses on building the knowledge, skills, and abilities of adults in order to improve educational outcomes for students. These capacity builders work with many different groups of stakeholders—parents, teachers, principals, school district leaders—in varying combinations. And while their work overlaps with several other categories (using data to drive improvement as a researcher would, focusing on adult learning like an instructional supporter), they fill a unique niche as capacity builders.

Capacity builders come to their work with a “learner mindset,” as Parv Santhosh-Kumar puts it: “How are we continually seeking opportunities to better the work that we do?” Seeing learning as a core value for themselves and those they’re working with, capacity builders must be particularly attuned to the needs of adult learners. When hiring employees at her organization, Leslie Abbatiello looks at candidates’ ability to give a presentation, hold a coaching conversation, and discuss a workplace dilemma in order to “elicit their mindset and stance on resolving collaborative problems of practice.”

The capacity builder role requires an individual who can not only engage in this collaborative process of adult learning but also focus on learning alongside others instead of advancing specific solutions. Key to this approach is an attitude of humility and respect for the needs and ideas of others. As Laura puts it, “How do you know you’re getting the best ideas if they’re only your own?” Tracy Fray-Oliver describes her work supporting school and district staff as mostly “co-constructing and providing feedback. Rarely do I take a strong directive stance with partners.” Her role, instead, requires an “ability to define what high-quality work looks like” in a particular position and then “create opportunities to engage in learning together” to build toward that goal.

Therefore, capacity builders must be adept at critical thinking and able to get to the heart of an issue. Frequently working to uncover root causes and analyze the problem at hand, they take action in a resource-efficient manner, implementing changes that endure over the long term.

For this reason, many capacity builders come to the work after starting as a classroom teacher and being moved to think more systemically about the challenges their students are facing. Leslie worked as a classroom teacher for fifteen years before seeking out “different ways to make change,” particularly change that can “move the needle.” The status quo isn’t really working.” Parv frames this as the need for community-wide solutions, not just school-based solutions, and notes that the best days at her job involve “coaching teams of community leaders about how they will make a difference.” At these times, “I can see the ripple effects we might have.”

Finally, working alongside others to improve the education system often involves acknowledging and openly discussing power dynamics, particularly those based on race and class. Tracy notes, “A large part of my work is to be aware of the historical context of racism in the system,” while Laura’s organization works with parents to “talk explicitly about racism and poverty on systemic and interpersonal levels.” Only by confronting the reality of the current system can capacity builders seek to impact the future of education.

Questions for the jobseeker to consider:

1. What is the target population you are most interested in working with—students, parents, teachers, other school or district staff? What are the key needs of this population, and how can you help address them?
2. Have you had any experience with coaching or teaching adults? If so, what have you learned from this experience about meeting their needs and building their skills/abilities?

Researcher

Interviewees:

- **Remy Dou**, Clinical Assistant Professor, Florida International University
- **Signe Hawley**, Research Partner at the Imaginarium, Denver Public Schools' Innovation Lab

Whether working in a university, a think tank, a large research firm, or a state or local education agency, researchers are united by a love of learning. As one researcher responded to our survey, the best part of her job is “being paid to learn a lot every day.”

In the service of learning, researchers seek to collect and analyze data, sharing their findings to drive evidence-based improvement in education. While the type of data may differ from project to project, the need for strong analytical skills and a scrupulous commitment to high quality does not. Signe Hawley, who works at a research and design lab affiliated with Denver Public Schools, credits her graduate coursework for helping her understand the “core principles of data ethics and research,” along with the skills to use “statistics and data modeling, data analysis and visualizations.” Remy Dou similarly points to the need “to exercise rigor in everything I do. I want to be known as someone who isn’t just cobbling something together or fudging numbers. I want to have a reputation as a researcher that if I wrote it, it means something.”

One aspect of the work that many researchers enjoy is the creativity they can exercise to define their approach from start to finish, beginning with selecting the best way to collect data to deciding how wide to cast the net when considering what the data can say. Remy points to the need for both creativity and savvy in defining a research problem, along with “a sense of what really matters when it comes to identifying what’s worth spending research efforts, time, and energy on.” As decision-makers and funders can often sway these decisions, it is important for the research to balance these influences with what “people will really care about.”

In addition to working with data, education research requires a keen human understanding. Not all district and school staff are comfortable with data analysis and use, so Signe must think about “how to translate complex research processes to make them accessible for non-researchers to participate and own the process.” Of course, this approach brings its own challenges—in particular, building clients’ trust in a data collection process whose purpose is support and improvement, not evaluation or punishment.

Researchers have varying degrees of interaction with classroom educators. On the one hand, Signe partners closely with Denver Public Schools’ innovation lab, the Imaginarium, to design and test new practices that drive equity and empower learners. Being a part of the district allows her and the rest of her team “to build relationships with clients so we’re not just dipping in and out” to gather data. Other researchers engage with schools and students less frequently, and occasionally struggle with their distance from the field. Survey respondents commented on the need to proactively interact with students and teachers, while Remy described the importance of turning to current teachers as “collaborators” in his research.

Ultimately, all researchers seek to generate new knowledge that leads to a positive impact, such as seeing “a partner organization or district that we work with make a change as a result of our research or evaluation findings and recommendations” (in the words of one survey respondent). This certainly seems a fitting goal for those who have made a career from their love of learning.

Questions for the jobseeker to consider:

1. What skills do you currently possess with data collection, analysis, and reporting? Which would you need to build up before seeking a career as a researcher?
2. Are there questions that you feel driven to explore in order to produce improvements in education? What sort of interaction would you need with students, educators, or others to explore these questions?

Advocate

Interviewees:

- **Brandy Fluker Oakley**, Executive Director, Educators for Excellence-Boston
- **Krista Kaput**, Policy and Research Manager, Education Evolving
- **Jerry Mogul**, Executive Director, Massachusetts Advocates for Children

Being an effective advocate means amplifying the voices of those who lack power and access. Advocates speak out publicly to endorse or oppose particular causes, often targeting their message to policymakers, administrators, or others charged with making and enforcing rules and regulations. They may work at a nonprofit organization that advocates for a specific topic or represent a more loosely organized coalition of interested groups and individuals, always with the aim of influencing policy decisions.

Some advocates work directly with groups who have traditionally been left out of policymaking processes, helping them get a seat at the table alongside decision-makers. When Brandy Fluker Oakley was a teacher, she felt that her voice was stifled. She turned to advocacy to “give teachers a voice in what’s happening in their schools.” Similarly, as a classroom teacher on the South Side of Chicago, Krista Kaput noticed that the challenges faced by students in the community were not recognized. To give these kids a voice at the table, Krista turned to advocacy and now focuses on advancing student-centered learning practices through teacher-led school models and a supportive policy environment.

No matter the specific subject, advocacy works best when accompanied by heaping doses of humility and empathy. After all, amplifying the voices of others often requires silencing your own voice. As Krista puts it, “If I’m in a meeting about discipline in schools and there are students and families who have been impacted, it’s my time to sit back, listen, and learn.”

While many advocates are driven by a deep passion for their work, this passion must be combined with pragmatism. A primary skill for any aspiring advocates is practical coalition-building. According to Jerry Mogul, much of the advocacy process consists of “building relationships with allies and adversaries. We’re involved in a few coalitions with people we also advocate against in other situations,” but in all cases, he notes, the “guiding force is what’s best for kids.”

Coalition-building also requires the ability to communicate with varied audiences in a meaningful—and respectful—manner. For Krista, working with state legislators of all parties means “working with people I might fundamentally disagree with.” With a goal to influence rather than irritate, navigating discourses and coalitions must be done tactfully, regardless of whether the audience is the state department of education, a coalition of fellow advocates, or teachers.

Working as an advocate requires significant strategic thinking and foresight—as Jerry puts it, knowing “the full set of tools that you can use and deciding which to use based on the situation.” Advocates may choose to develop particular skills in graduate school, allowing them to engage in legal representation, for instance, or advanced data analysis. But luckily for aspiring advocates who fear being buried beneath student loans, becoming an advocate doesn’t necessarily require a specific credential or degree. Brandy has a law degree and worked as a classroom teacher, but she finds the greatest value in “being from Boston and being a Boston Public Schools graduate. When people talk about certain neighborhoods and certain school communities, I know about those schools or know people who went there.” This kind of personal

understanding and experience is often a key driver for advocates seeking to amplify the voices of their constituents or communities.

Questions for the jobseeker to consider:

1. What policy issues are close to your heart?
2. Do you have any experience rallying a group to support or oppose a particular cause?
3. How comfortable are you building relationships with allies to advance a policy change, even when you disagree with those allies on other issues?

Funder

Interviewees:

- **Leo Bialis-White**, Senior Associate Partner, NewSchools Venture Fund
- **Ryen Borden**, Program Officer, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
- **Kevin Corcoran**, Strategy Director, Lumina Foundation

Perhaps the career with the most varied entry points and trajectory is the funder. Funders may work at a government agency, foundation, for-profit venture capital organization, or a hybrid entity established to invest in for-profit and non-profit enterprises. The source of funds, size, and mission may influence the culture and governance practices of the funding organization. For example, a family foundation will be guided by the wishes of the donor family whereas a corporate foundation may be guided by the sponsoring company's interests.

Funders have a strong command of their field in order to identify opportunities and make investment decisions—which means making tough decisions and taking risks. Ryen Borden's portfolio focuses on improving teacher and principal preparation, and she relies upon her 10 years teaching in a high-need school and working for a variety of teacher preparation programs to inform her strategic decision making. Leo Bialis-White thinks being a funder "is a balance of being a healthy skeptic and an empiricist. You want to see early data and have a willingness to take some risks and be bold." Kevin Corcoran adds that sometimes funding decisions need to be made "without all of the information you would like to have," and when navigating uncertainty, a "spirit of inquiry and humility and an ability to frame and execute strategy" are helpful mindsets and skills.

After funds are distributed, Ryen supports her grantees in implementing projects, troubleshooting challenges, and disseminating findings in order to achieve outcomes. These responsibilities require relationship and trust-building skills that can be difficult to maneuver because of the power dynamic that can develop between a funder and those receiving funds. According to Ryen, funders often look to reward programs that have 'demonstrated success,' but grantees also need to report honestly, especially if they won't meet a milestone.

Fostering this relationship requires the funder to have a mix of confidence and humility. Working assertively to execute a high-profile project enables the grantee's trust and motivation to grow, while communicating past mistakes and lessons learned will encourage recipients to be open about any present mishaps. Ultimately, funders need to be patient, especially if they aspire to create systems-level change. Per Leo, "catalyst and early stage funders [will invest in] ideas that mature over time, not overnight. You need to have a disposition that is open to balancing the hard realities of today with the promise of tomorrow."

The learning process for funders is continuous. Funders must have a strong command of what's happening in the field according to current and prospective grantees, beneficiaries of services, scholars, their funder colleagues and other stakeholders. To make sense of the education landscape, funders need to listen empathetically and build an understanding that spans multiple facets of education from curriculum design to socio-emotional learning to school leadership. For some, as part of the learning process, travel may be required to visit grantees and attend and speak at conferences.

Funders must balance independent work with networking in the field. Leo suggests that effective funders need emotional intelligence to build strong networks to identify opportunities, while also

building relationships across their field to foster collaboration with colleagues at their organization. Kevin asserts, "You need to be able to work with people who are smarter than you...If you are not able to recognize the brilliance of others, manage the tone and tenor of many interpersonal relationships or you are defensive... stay out of philanthropy."

Questions for the jobseeker to consider:

1. How do you make decisions? Are you comfortable taking risks?
2. Do you have the ability and interest in traveling to visit your grantees and actively listening to their needs, successes and fears?
3. Do you like to explore new possibilities and imagine how things could be different?

Policymaker

Interviewees:

- **David Cleary**, Chief of Staff, U.S. Senator Lamar Alexander
- **Angelina Hong**, Research Director, Massachusetts Joint Committee on Education
- **Mary Kingston Roche**, Director of Public Policy for the Coalition for Community Schools, Institute for Educational Leadership; former member of the Board of Education in Prince George's County, Maryland

Policymakers enact large-scale change by writing the rules that others follow, directing resources to incentivize particular activities, raising awareness of issues affecting the public, and setting the conditions that determine how governments function (for instance, by allocating funding). They may work within the legislative or executive branch at the local, state, or national level; alternatively, they may serve in an elected or appointed position, as with members of a district school board or state board of education.

One critical skill for policymakers is listening well, understanding that what people say is not always what they mean. David Cleary uses the example of listening well, understanding that what people say is not always what they mean. He uses the example of someone who wants a blue wall: "They might mean peacock, or royal blue, or sea blue, but all they're saying is a blue wall. You need to figure out how to translate it." Mary Kingston Roche notes the additional step of probing for more information. While serving as a member of a county board of education, it was not enough to hear from speakers who came to public meetings. Instead, she would proactively seek out those impacted in order to listen "to their perspectives on proposed policies or decisions."

Another critical skill for policymakers is attention to detail. Working in the Massachusetts State House, Angelina says, "you really need to have either a photographic memory or incredible organizational skills" to keep track of extensive lists of bills and recall the details of particular policies. This is especially true around big deadlines in the legislative calendar, as well as on highly public issues. She and David also agree on the importance of preparation and foresight. Angelina describes the need to "recognize potential obstacles before they even happen," while David describes the "ability to think ahead" as a key skill in his role. Change at the policy level often occurs incrementally, so this kind of foresight must be practiced with the larger goal in mind as one persistently inches toward results.

Unsurprisingly, working in government means grappling with politics and being responsible (directly or indirectly) to an electorate. For senior staff like David, this means learning to think like his boss: "You have to be able to subsume yourself into his personality. It doesn't matter what you think or you want, you don't have an election certificate." For Mary, appointed to serve as a voting member of the district's governing board, this means taking in as many opinions as possible, using "evidence, including testimony and the perspectives of others, to inform my decisions," and then being clear about her reasoning: when there were "stark disagreements" among board members, she says, "I felt obligated to explain why I viewed the issue a certain way and why I chose to vote that way."

All three interviewees leveraged personal connections to find their way into policymaker roles, and while earning an advanced degree in public policy or administration can help in this field (all three interviewees hold master's degrees in related fields), working as a policymaker often means starting small. For instance, David worked his way from an education staffer in Senator

Alexander's office to legislative director to chief of staff over the course of 12 years. He advises aspiring policymakers to "accept that in the beginning you won't be important or in charge." But stick with it, as David has, and you may just find yourself "in the thick of things."

Questions for the jobseeker to consider:

1. How adept are you at reconciling competing viewpoints? Are you skilled at probing for information and understanding the intentions behind others' opinions?
2. How comfortable are you with making incremental progress toward your goals? Do you prefer seeking compromise or holding on to your ideals?
3. What is your tolerance for working in highly political environments?
4. Do you have any connections within your network who could connect you with policymakers or job opportunities in this field?

Consultant

Interviewees:

- **Jane Doe**, Associate Partner, large consulting firm⁵
- **Amanda Klein**, Founder and Owner, Structured Solutions LLC

A consultant's work is never boring, whether executed independently by taking on discrete projects or within an established consulting firm to provide advice to individuals or organizations. Our interviewees mentioned an appreciation for the fast-paced, ever-changing responsibilities that the role entails. Amanda Klein is an independent consultant who founded her own business to help educational institutions use data to boost family engagement. Working for herself allows her freedom to take on projects that interest her, with fewer constraints than in previous roles: Amanda appreciates "just getting stuff done and not having to run it past a thousand people."

Three sets of skills are particularly important for aspiring consultants. First, problem-solving. Consultants are called in to solve problems that organizations haven't been able to solve for themselves. Jane Doe explains that the role of the consultant is to "cut through the noise, structure ambiguous problems and complex issues," and then determine how to crack the problem. In some cases, consultants are hired because they have a history of success with a specific role or reform effort, showing that they have past experience solving similar programs.

A second important skill, closely related to problem-solving, is creativity. This can mean thinking about problems in a new way, or it can mean starting something brand new: Amanda needed to design her approach from the ground up, which builds on skills she developed at an earlier role in "program design and putting structures in place. I was able to craft my position, which was really exciting."

A third skill critical for a consultant is building relationships. When she goes into an organization to work on a project, Jane comes into contact with "a ton of personalities, agendas, and concerns. You need to be willing to push and dissent while somehow gaining buy-in and trust along the way." Networking with potential clients, meanwhile, requires not only interpersonal skills but also perseverance and gumption; as Amanda says, "I've learned I have to be shameless and just put myself out there, since it helps people remember who you are and what you do."

The two types of consultant roles do differ in some important ways. For example, working as a consultant for a large firm often requires long days and lots of travel. While independent consultants may also log many hours (and miles), they have more flexibility to take on projects as they come up. At the same time, the lack of organizational infrastructure for independent consultants puts more importance on the "hustle" for clients (as Amanda says, "I can't depend on a salary as much when I'm on my own"). Finally, whereas firms often recruit consultants straight out of college or business school, independent consultants usually have some prior work experience (and a set of business connections) before striking out on their own.

But regardless of the setting, all consultants benefit from displaying confidence and a belief in their own expertise. Amanda acknowledges the importance of "owning that I can be an expert and be paid for that." And having received advice early in her career to "be more confident" and

⁵ We refer to this interviewee as "Jane Doe" or "Jane," as her firm has requested anonymity for the purposes of this article.

“speak up more often,” Jane offers her own advice to others: “Develop an area where you know you’re an expert. It helps buoy you to speak with pride and feel like you have something unique to contribute.”

Questions for the jobseeker to consider:

1. What is your preferred pace of work? Do you like to work on a single project for many months or years, or do you prefer a fast pace and variety?
2. What is your approach to networking? Do you enjoy meeting new people and seeking new opportunities for yourself?
3. In what areas are you an expert?

Spotlight: Education Technology

Interviewee:

- **Sachi Takahashi-Rial**, Manager of Partnerships, YouthTruth Student Survey (San Francisco, CA)

The ten categories described above group jobs based on similar functions and actions. We highlight education technology separately because of the variety of functions individuals might perform as they work to advance an education technology product or service.

The scope of education technology solutions ranges greatly, from mobile applications made available to students for free to learning management systems sold to districts and universities. EdSurge, a leading education technology information resource leader, groups ed tech investments from 2018 into 5 categories: curriculum products, teacher needs, school operations, post-secondary, and other⁶. Technologies can transform a classroom and help teachers assess student performance, disseminate learning materials (from e-books to virtual reality), and foster student collaboration. Technologies also help school and university leaders manage human resources, finances, and student services more efficiently.

EdSurge organizes its ed tech job board into thirteen job categories, six of which map to our education career categories (as shown below).

Education Career Category	EdSurge Job Category
Teacher	Higher Ed Faculty & Instruction K-12 Teaching
Administrator	Higher Ed Administrative K-12 Administrative / Leadership
Instructional Supporter	Curriculum Design
Researcher	Research

Although the development of technology products requires technical skills (represented in EdSurge’s Engineering job category), a variety of non-technical jobs exist as well. For example, Operations roles range from technicians to accountants to human resource specialists. Product & Design includes creative roles to develop and continuously improve the product/service and project management roles that exist to keep teams focused, effective, and on schedule.

A single job may include responsibilities that span the Customer Success, Marketing, and Sales categories, especially in a startup environment where employees tend to perform multiple roles due to the small nature of the team. For example, Sachi Takahashi-Rial develops partnerships with districts that want to gain feedback from their students through survey services. To secure incoming business at her ed tech firm, Sachi presents to superintendents and school boards and listens and responds to their needs. Sachi also leads professional development workshops for staff at the partner districts to increase her clients’ proficiency using survey data for strategic planning purposes. Her role requires public speaking, communication, strategic thinking, and relationship-building skills. A business development role like this one also requires a resilient

⁶ Wan, Tony. “US Edtech Investments Peak Again With \$1.45 Billion Raised in 2018 - EdSurge News.” EdSurge, EdSurge, 15 Jan. 2019, www.edsurge.com/news/2019-01-15-us-edtech-investments-peak-again-with-1-45-billion-raised-in-2018.

mindset with a commitment to continuous improvement as some potential clients may decline the services.

Sachi suggests the culture of an ed tech company will depend on its structure (nonprofit, public benefit corporation, traditional for-profit) and its stage/age (early seed funding, more established). She has observed that July through October is the busiest time of year for ed tech firms whose clients are schools and districts because it takes about one year to move from shopping for technology support to implementing the new technology. After making a purchase in the spring, the clients prepare for implementation over the summer, which typically means the clients (who are using the technology for the first time) require customer support. Some companies need to hire temporary staff at this time to meet demand, making this the busy season a good time for a jobseeker to get a foot in the door at an ed tech firm, in some cases by taking on a part-time role.

While the categories that we offer and that EdSurge uses aim to capture the variety of roles within ed tech, the sector is relatively young and new roles are still emerging. Within the coming years, we expect to see further changes in how ed tech products are developed and marketed that could shift these categories—or create unforeseen new types of roles.

Final Reflections

Each of the sections above highlights the experiences of individuals working within the education sector, posing guiding questions that are meant to help aspiring job seekers assess their own interests, preferences, and skills. While we intend for our categorization to cover a wide range of roles within the field of education, we realize that our framework does not capture all of the nuances of a diffuse and uncoordinated sector. And as we see in the field of ed tech, developments in how to address student needs may lead to the emergence of new roles, many of which require skills that cut across traditional workforce categories. For instance, someone working on developing and disseminating a new classroom app may simultaneously need a deep understanding of instructional design, insight into how to connect with teachers, and knowledge of how to measure success, not to mention a keen sense of the local, state, and national policy environment.

Therefore, even though we know this is not the final word, we hope our categorization serves as a useful starting point for job seekers preparing to enter the education workforce—and for individuals already working in the field eager to better understand the richness of the education landscape.

About the authors:

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