

Student Leaders as Advocates

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The need for adult education programs and services is great, yet federal and state funding and enrollment have declined in the last 10 years – from nearly 2.8 million learners and over \$700 million in federal funding in 2001 – to 1.8 million learners and \$595 million in federal funding in 2012. Several states have also cut, or tried to entirely eliminate, adult education funding. “Although federal adult education has traditionally been supplemented by sizeable state-level matching funds, a decline in federal and state funding for adult education has resulted in states serving only a fraction of the students...who could benefit from services” (Foster, 2012, p. 1).

This reality means that the field is burdened to protect what federal dollars still exist; those of us in the adult education field - in the trenches - see the scope and urgency of advocacy work necessary to survive. But who should do this advocacy work? Who makes sure that the public and policymakers know and understand “what” adult education is and “who” needs adult education services? And, when and how often does advocacy have to occur to be effective? These are critical questions for a field already taxed with teaching or re-teaching everything that students need to succeed in the 21st century including technology competencies, college and career readiness standards, work-based skills, and civic engagement.

One approach to address these funding challenges is to engage our students in making the case to funders and policy makers for addressing their needs. We have been doing this for over 40 years at Pima Community College Adult Basic Education in Tucson, Arizona. We do this by laying the foundation for an active network of adult education student advocates, or Ambassadors, who can effectively connect with key community leaders and organizations. Student leadership development and civic engagement are an integral part of our programming, values, and philosophy. Because of the value placed on student leadership, we look for opportunities to connect students to the community and to connect the community to adult education. We do that with legislative visits, open houses, student leadership training, digital story training, involvement in community organizations that share similar values, election coverage, voter registration, state and national conferences, and field trips.

Every year, *in good times or bad*, our program and our students engage in civic activities that connect them to local, state and national policy makers. Programs can’t suddenly come out of hibernation and switch in to advocacy mode when there is a crisis; they need to make this an ongoing and systematic part of their work. This includes building and maintaining relationships with allies. For example, Richard Elias of the Pima County

Board of Supervisors notes his understanding of adult education when he says “I always have been an avid supporter of adult basic education, which is a necessary first step for so many people to move out of poverty and into a productive and rewarding life” (personal communication, December 1, 2015).

Additionally, advocacy work develops the skills and capacities of our students to be Ambassadors. The work has to be deliberate, strategic and intentional. *We don't just send students on field trips, and we don't just parade them in the front of events.* We truly value our students and the skills and experience they bring to us. We train student leaders to be Ambassadors with clear expectations about what their role is and what their leadership means to the field. As Ambassadors, they practice what they learn by actively engaging in Adult Basic Education advocacy to raise awareness of what it is and why it is important to families, to the K-12 system, and to the economy. For example,

- When we visit the Arizona capitol, the purpose is to raise awareness about adult education, nurture power and voice, learn about the government, and connect students to their legislators.
- When we visit with a City Councilwoman, the purpose is to ensure access to appropriate bus routes for students.
- When we testify at a local Board of Supervisor meeting, the purpose is to thank them for their support.
- And when we give a Congressman a tour of our centers, the purpose is to show how important classes and programs are for so many.

Importantly, these activities have increased support for our program, but we also witness the ways in which it transforms adult students who, for the first time perhaps, see their personal stories as an asset rather than a deficit. They see the power of

their stories in other people's faces. And they see the influence they can have on their own lives and on the lives of others. To see others gain that sense of power through their own voice is an impactful experience for all of us.

We offer our Ambassador training locally, statewide and nationally. The Ambassador training program is an intensive leadership initiative that supports student leaders in developing their skills to represent adult basic education and literacy in the larger community. Although, we have advocated side-by-side with students for 40+ years, we formally began offering Ambassador training in 2009. Since then, 200+ students have prepared themselves to be Adult Education Ambassadors in Arizona by participating in advanced representational leadership training and by leading meetings with public officials and community leaders. “Ambassadors develop skills to do the following: share their stories; educate the community about the importance of adult education; develop relationships with elected officials and community leaders; serve in leadership and decision-making roles both within and outside of the school; serve as members of an active student and alumni network. The four components of the training are: 1.) awareness about the role of adult education 2.) stories for change 3.) public speaking focused on message and delivery and 4.) planning and facilitating a meeting with an official. Adult Education Ambassadors have represented their fellow students and their communities in countless meetings with officials, providing outreach and information at public events and resource fairs, and by presenting at local, state, and national conferences.

Student Ambassadors have had many wins along with challenges over the years. In Tucson, two free standing adult education learning centers were built through the hard work and effort of student leaders, along with grassroots community organizing and

passionate policymakers. They told their stories at City Council meetings, at County Board of Supervisor meetings, at marches, at community meetings, in neighborhood homes and in their classrooms. Those two buildings built by and for students stand 15 years later as a testament to the power of student story and student advocacy.

In Arizona, student Ambassadors worked to address a crisis at the state level. In 2003, adult education was completely eliminated from the state budget. Student Ambassadors from around the state, along with community supporters, worked for months to ensure funding was put back into the budget. Thanks to committed legislators and the Governor, adult education funding was fully restored! (For more information about this effort, see <https://vimeo.com/9186597>).

Again during the recession in 2009, adult education funding was removed from the 2010 budget. After three and half years of students' tireless work, adult education Ambassadors, legislators, and community friends, state funding was fully restored in 2013. Indeed Arizona State Senator Steve Farley credited this effort with saving adult education.

Legislators are overwhelmed with emails, letters, and calls from constituents and non-constituents alike, so it is easy for a policy message to get lost in the shuffle. Nothing penetrates the legislative fog like a personal story related face to face by a constituent. In Arizona the hard, consistent work of the adult literacy community over many years played a key part in restoring program funds in a political climate not normally friendly to social services (personal communication, November 3, 2015).

Besides restoring funding, engaging students in advocacy for adult basic education has additional benefits. Students learn transferrable leadership skills that they can utilize in their future careers and in life in general. Many times, after completing adult basic education, student advocates continue their education to become teachers, activists, and some even work either within the adult basic education or other service organizations where they received help. Another benefit is the long term relationships many students build with policy makers. Legislators benefit too. They see firsthand how their decisions affect real people, families and communities. This civic engagement learning is appreciated at the national level. Congressman Raúl Grijalva, a member of the House Education and Workforce Committee, voiced this view when he said:

Civic engagement is critical in helping new immigrants and disenfranchised students learn how to advocate for themselves and others. There is no better way to learn about government than to meet policy makers and learn about the political process first hand. Students who understand their power in our society inspire and empower others to do the same, which is truly profound to see (personal communication, November 20, 2015).

Advocacy doesn't always involve politics or politicians. If students meet with a prominent Faith Leader or Business owner or Community Board, two things happen: The community learns about adult education AND these leaders become our allies when or if we need them.

The dismantling of adult education opportunities for the hundreds of thousands of working people throughout the nation disregards the needs of not

just the most vulnerable among us, but the future welfare of our nation as a whole. The development of opportunity outside the “pipeline” thinking is precisely what we need to consider when planning our advocacy activities. And including students in the struggles and triumphs of advocacy work is critical to our survival as a field as well as the survival of the programs and classes they so greatly need.

Student voice is at the heart of our work in adult education. Students come to us to acquire the language and basic skills they need to thrive in their daily lives. In a larger sense, students developing their voice means gaining the skills to fully participate in community and civic life, influencing public decisions that will affect them and their families. Their ability to speak and advocate for themselves—in the workplace, in their children’s schools, in their communities—is critical to their success and well-being. The Ambassador training provides adult learners a recognized role in which they can publically speak about their own experience and represent the common interests and needs of adult education students. Moreover, students develop skills and confidence in their leadership that transfer to other personal and professional roles.

There are countless advocacy approaches that work well. In a perfect scenario, students would have a team of politically savvy leaders, community supporters, legislators, and, in some instances, a lobbyist working with them to strategize and plan. There would be marketing materials, glossy brochures and flyers. It’s essential to employ a variety of strategies for different situations. We have found in Arizona and in Pima County, that students are their own best advocates. Maria Eugenia Carrasco, an Adult Education Ambassador summed this up when she said, “We all have the right to stand up and talk about what we don’t like and try to change it—that’s Democracy to me” (Goldberg, Magisos, & Nowicki, 2004). ❖

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References

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