

Placing Advocacy at the Heart of Adult Education

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Adult educators know that adults and families change their lives through adult education. It is, for some of us, what fuels our passion for teaching and keeps us in the profession. Adult education also positively impacts a host of social and economic issues. Yet this fact is largely unknown or misunderstood by the general public. Resources have become increasingly scarce, while at the same time adult educators are asked to do more with less.

Then comes the question: will we call or write our legislators because of issues taking place (far away) on Capitol Hill? A quick sense of urgency grips us. Why me? Who has time? Won't somebody else get the right information into the right hands? Shouldn't the information speak for itself? But we (proudly) reach for our cell phones anyway. We know the difference it could make for our students, and we can't afford to do any less.

If we care about helping adults, families, and communities, about changing lives through adult education, then we must place advocacy at the heart of it.

Advocacy—A Good Word Gone Bad?

At times it is unclear what, exactly, we mean by advocacy, and it's no wonder. There are so many different types of activities used to achieve public

policy outcomes aimed at improving adult education services. Some outcomes may not be directly related to public policy, like creating new partnerships and alliances, messaging and alignment, or strengthening organizational capacity. Other outcomes, like changes in awareness, attitudes and beliefs about adult education, strengthening public and political will, are (Reisman, Gienapp, & Stachowiak, 2007). Yet these all fall under the broad definition of advocacy, which “includes identifying, embracing, and promoting a cause. It is any attempt to shape public opinion, and promote the interests of your community” (Avner, 2002).

Advocacy includes activities like making partnerships and collaborations, engaging the media, educating the general public, inviting community leaders to speak at graduations, or hosting events to raise awareness of adult education. Some may interpret advocacy to be confrontational, rude, or alienating. In reality, effective advocacy is not this way.

Four Tenets of Advocacy

I have found the following four tenets to be key when working with grassroots advocates from local, state, and national organizations.

Tenet 1: Educating Versus Lobbying

Lobbying is always advocacy, but advocacy is not always lobbying. Whether you are advocating or lobbying, it is important to educate policy makers on the issues. If you are informing legislators of your program successes, along with the need and demand for services, then you are educating. If you are combining that information with a request for action on specific legislation (the issues plus “the ask”), then you are lobbying.

Tenet 2: With or Without Your Information

Legislative assistants (staffers) want to know what you think about adult education. They expect you to have a point of view. They are paid to talk to you. They gather information for their boss (your legislator) and make recommendations.

Legislators make decisions based upon the information they have from you. If they have no information, you cannot expect them to support you. If they don’t hear from you each year, they will assume it is not important and they can trade your issue (adult education funding, for example) off for something else. Wouldn’t you rather have legislators making decisions with your information than without it?

Tenet 3: Numbers Count!

As Art Ellison noted, legislators count the numbers of constituent responses per issue, so numbers do matter. Your response to an issue could push adult education over the threshold for your legislator’s office so that it is flagged as important and passed on.

Tenet 4: What You Can Do

As a citizen, you have the right to express your views with your legislator—your representative. As an

adult educator, you have unique, valuable expertise about the issues. Without this information, your representatives may make decisions that are not as well informed. If your program receives federal or state funding, it doesn’t mean that you cannot state your opinion as an individual. But as an individual, you should not do these activities from work or on work time, or using work equipment or supplies.

The relationship between the work to create advocacy outcomes—and the actual signs of—progress can be elusive, because “advocacy by its nature is complicated and its impact often indirect” (Teles & Schmidt, 2011). So what impact do we want to have? What outcomes do stakeholders want to see advocates achieve? Where are we doing well, and where do we fall short? What do we need to do in order to improve public policy advocacy for adult education that makes a positive impact?

Shifting the Paradigm

What stands out to me as I consider what’s needed for advocacy is the broad range of commitment to it in our field. Some local areas are tenacious advocates and have the support of their legislators. Other program areas participate to varying degrees and some do not participate at all. So those who do call, visit, and write their legislators carry the water for the rest. That is not a sustainable system because it is vulnerable to attrition as long time valued organizers and advocates retire or move. And in districts where more advocates are needed few may exist. As author David Rosen points out, “We need new blood in basic skills advocacy work.”

Our field also tends to be reactive more so than proactive. Some organizations are successful at being proactive—the National Council of State Directors of Adult Education, the National Council for Adult Learning, and CLASP are examples. However, we need to shift system wide to being more proactive

with our advocacy—across all adult education programs and organizations no matter their size.

“Programs can’t come out of hibernation when there is a crisis,” Regina Suitt wrote. “Building relationships with allies is a constant duty and is year round.”

“The field of adult education needs to create advocacy networks that rival those of AARP, NRA and the National Chamber of Commerce,” Art Ellison observed.

Further, we lack a current, national, advocacy agenda to which we can all agree on goals for advocacy—and hold a long term commitment to seeing them through. Let’s look at some themes that Ellison, Rosen, and Suitt raised.

Student Involvement—The Key to Effective Advocacy

Involving students in advocacy is the key to make advocacy a central, major part of what we do as adult educators. Advocacy should not rest solely on the shoulders of a profession. According to Ellison, “80% of the contacts come from students and 20% from staff and friends of adult education.” We know from experience that policy makers want to hear directly from constituents—especially those who benefit from services. Ellison warns that “the field of adult education will never become a true national movement until we understand that hundreds of thousands of students must be the driving force in that effort.”

But how do we involve hundreds of thousands of students?

One program doing its part is Pima Community College’s Student Ambassador Program. Pima provides the foundation for “an active network of adult education advocates, or Ambassadors, who can effectively connect with key community leaders and organizations,” as Suitt describes.

Of the many ways to involve students, one of the most effective is to have students meet in-person with policy makers. According to a 2011 Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) survey of congressional staff, 97% said “in-person visits from constituents” are the most influential way to communicate with a legislator who is undecided on an issue. (Goldschmidt, 2011).

In fact, in-state advocacy opportunities increased in 2011 when the House of Representatives more than doubled the number of congressional recesses each year (Boniface, 2015). This has made federal legislators much more accessible to advocates for program visits and meetings. For more information about how to arrange and conduct meetings with legislators and about Pima’s Student Ambassador Program, see COABE’s Legislative Center at <http://www.coabe.org/how-to-arrange-a-visit>.

Building an Infrastructure for Advocacy and Student Involvement

At the core of successful advocacy networks is a strong infrastructure for organizing. Our profession can take several steps to place advocacy at the heart of adult education by strengthening its organizational capacity and shifting from a reactive to a proactive approach. Here are some suggestions:

- Make advocacy a fundamental component of your organization’s mission and commit time and resources to it.
- In hiring practices, indicate that you require or desire candidates who have a passion for or experience with advocacy. Ask in an interview that they describe the ways in which they can see themselves advocating with or on behalf of adult education students.
- Make student leadership development and civic engagement an integral part of your programming, values and philosophy.

- Integrate lesson plans, aligned with college and career ready standards, in the context of civic engagement. For example, lessons might include learning how to write or ask questions of policy makers, or analyzing graphs and charts that include information on a wide range of social issues and evaluate them.
- Include advocacy training as a fundamental professional development component for program staff.
- Create a welcoming environment for staff and students to be able to discuss advocacy issues, and what they can do within and / or outside of the constraints of their roles for advocacy.
- Volunteer with your state and / or national organization or association to assist with advocacy.

State and national organizations should:

- Assess your constituents' needs about advocacy and provide targeted support.
- Establish or strengthen a public policy advocacy committee that drives the advocacy work of the organization. See one example from the Illinois Adult and Continuing Educators Association: <http://www.iacea.net/index2/index.php/legislative-center>
- Help local programs and advocates develop Local Advocacy Networks.
- Collaborate in advocacy initiatives and celebrate successes large and small.

Strengthening the Base of Support

In shifting from a reactive to a proactive stance in advocacy, we must stay involved at the local, state, and federal levels. Adult education is vulnerable and funding can easily be cut or be eliminated entirely as in the examples Ellison and Suitt described. Establishing a Local Advocacy Network for federal

advocacy is one way to keep the conversations going at the local level and motivating grassroots networks to action. A local advocacy network has a leader and possibly someone who agrees to co-lead, so there are no gaps in communication—especially when there is an active alert that requires responses. They keep the local advocates informed of issues and mobilize them only in times of need.

Elections Campaigns

Elections campaigns are another way to strengthen the base of support. Presidential and gubernatorial campaigns, as well as state and local elections, are opportunities to engage candidates on the issues. Adult education advocates ask questions of candidates and obtain responses in writing as well as in person. Advocates may meet with the education staff on the campaign, then remind elected candidates of their words after elections. Adult educators can also raise the questions in town halls, for tips see: <http://www.congressfoundation.org/news/blog/1114>. Online town halls are also gaining traction and may provide venues for advocates to raise questions of candidates (Lazer, Neblo, Esterling, & Goldschmidt, 2009).

As a way to keep current officials informed of the issues, advocates might send them the questions as well. It's an engaging way to publicly raise awareness, and build a base of support while learning a lot about the candidates. For example, ProLiteracy, with input from National Coalition for Literacy members, has developed a Presidential Candidate Survey for the 2016 elections. These questions can be used by any advocate for local and state elections. See: www.national-coalition-literacy.org.

Media Campaigns

David Rosen has called for a media campaign, and he's right. "It has been almost three decades since

the last major media campaign for adult literacy, Project Literacy U.S. (PLUS), that was sponsored by major television and radio broadcasters with the help of the Ad Council.” We haven’t seen a major media campaign targeted at influencing public opinion on adult education issues and the investments it brings across sectors and in society. We need funders to consider this as an important means for making headway in adult education, and to help fund such a campaign.

New Media, New Strategies

Additionally, new media gives us new opportunities to articulate a clear message, voicing adult education impact and needs. A recent example is a fact sheet from Ace of Florida: *Adult Education, the Choice that Makes the Most “Cents.”* See: <http://www.aceofflorida.org/ace-facts/>. COABE has also issued a series of papers and corresponding fact sheets on adult education issues and they are on the website.

In another survey conducted by CMF, they found that 94% of the House Chiefs of Staff felt a “1-2 page issue summary” left behind after a meeting is somewhat or very helpful, while only 18% said the same of a “5 page or greater length” document (Congressional Management Foundation, 2014).

Communicating with Congress

According to a 2014 poll conducted by CMF, social media is changing the way offices interact with constituents. According to CQ Roll Call, the study shows that “a handful of well-conceived comments on social media may be just as effective as thousands of emails.” Between ten and 30 similar comments on a social media post are enough to get an office’s attention. However, social media does not yet allow staffers to discern which posts are from constituents in their state or region. But as social media use evolves, we may see it become a more

effective form of communication with Congress. See more at: <http://www.congressfoundation.org/projects/communicating-with-congress/social-congress-2015#sthash.u2d3jMdb.dpuf>

Organizing Advocates

Finally, social media may provide an effective means for advocates to organize, share strategies, and ask and answer questions. Facebook private groups make it a useful place to discuss sensitive information and get support from one another and from the host organization. Facebook is already familiar to many, so most advocates do not need to set up an account and learn a new tool to participate. For case study examples, see CQ Roll Call: <http://connectivity.cqrollcall.com/3-organizations-that-use-facebook-private-groups-for-advocacy/>.

Conclusion

We have seen many successes in our advocacy work over the years, thanks to organizers and advocates across the country. But reacting only during times of proposed cuts is not enough. It takes a lot of educating in order for our advocacy to be effective. And who better to educate others on the issues than adult educators and students? We can and do make a difference every day; let’s bring that same level of passion from our teaching to our advocacy and place it at the heart of adult education. We cannot afford to do any less. ❖

Jackie Taylor has been an adult educator, passionate advocate, volunteer, and organizer at the local, state, and national levels for over 20 years.

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