

You Should be a Policy Advocate

TJ Bliss

My message to that small, but committed group that night at the museum is still true today: anyone can be an effective advocate for change, if that person is willing to persist.

The world can be divided roughly into three groups: people who create policy, people who advocate for (and often implement) policy, and everybody else. This may sound overly simplistic, but I've found the grouping to be true at all levels of governance and citizenship - from the United Nations to the local public library.

I've been involved in policy advocacy for several years, from several different positions. As an undergraduate student, I emailed the university president to advocate for a change to the textbook buyback policy at our campus bookstore. As a policy fellow at an international academic organization, I wrote and published white papers to advocate for national and state-level policies to help reduce the burden of textbook costs on college students. As a high-level bureaucrat in a state department of education, I testified before the legislature and spoke personally with elected officials to advocate for policies supportive of a new assessment and school accountability system. I also created a few policies when I was in this role, but even that required advocating for the policies to be approved by the State Board of Education. And, most recently, as a program officer in charge of a multi-million dollar grant program at one of the largest private foundations in the world, I funded several organizations to advocate for policies at the institutional, state, national, and international levels supportive of open educational resources (OER) and open licensing requirements on government-funded works. On occasion, I even engaged in direct advocacy about OER to university presidents, governors, and various national policy makers.

Most importantly, I have had the incredible opportunity to watch other people with far more experience and talent advocate successfully in many different contexts. Through this experience, I've distilled a few key lessons about advocacy that I think are generally applicable to you, regardless of your position or context. Yes, you too can (and should!) be an advocate for policies that make the world - or even just your world - a better place.

Policies solve problems.

A friend of mine who served as a policy advisor to a United States Senator defines policy as a "solution to a problem." If you think about any policy you know at any level (national, state, local, or institutional) you'll find this to be a true definition. Every policy ever enacted was designed to solve some problem - though some policies are more effective than others. While the relative importance of the problems can be debated, the policies themselves really only have this one function. Framing and focusing your policy advocacy around the core problem, or set of problems, you want to solve increases your odds of success.

A first key to effective advocacy is to *keep the problem you are trying to solve at the front and center of all your advocacy efforts*. If you forget or get distracted from the important problem, your advocacy is more likely to fail.

There are no small actors.

Dabbs Greer once said, "Every character actor, in their own little sphere, is the lead."¹ Through my own experience, by watching my friends and colleagues all over the world, and by studying history, I have come to believe that anyone can be an effective advocate for policies that solve problems and lead to a better world (or nation, or state, or college, or library). The position you hold in a society, system, or organization can and should influence the strategies you use to advocate, but a position of power is not required to effect change through advocacy.

Rosa Parks provided a remarkable example of powerful advocacy despite her lack of positional power. In 1955, when she refused to give up her seat on the bus, Parks was the secretary of her local NAACP chapter. It's true that she had been involved in activist and advocacy work prior to that fateful day, but when she made the courageous decision to refuse her seat as an act of advocacy for policies to ensure the fair and equal treatment of all people, she was by no means considered a leader of the Civil Rights movement, even in her hometown. It was only later, when the leaders of the movement thought her

1. Nelson, Valerie J. (1 May 2007). "[Dabbs Greer, 90; busy character actor played everyman-type roles.](#)" *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved 18 October 2016.

experience might make a good test case in the courts, that she became a well-known figure.

A second key to effective advocacy is to remember that *good advocates are not necessarily the people with the most formal power*. You can be an advocate regardless of your job title, position, experience, or background.

Argue, don't fight.

I have several friends who are widely considered to be experts in their field. While expertise and knowledge are definitely important to have when advocating for policy, some of these expert friends are better at advocacy than others. The best advocates among them, in fact, aren't necessarily the most expert or even the most experienced in the specific area for which they are advocating. What sets these folks apart from their equally (or even more) expert colleagues is that they have developed an additional kind of expertise in the ancient art of rhetoric. They have developed the skills and unique capacity to argue persuasively. These people understand and utilize effective rhetoric in their informal conversations, as well as when they are in formal advocacy situations, like giving conference speeches or testifying before a state legislative committee. In particular, my expert advocate friends never forget that there is a big difference between arguing with a clear purpose and fighting. Effective arguments -- meaning arguments that lead to outcomes, like persuading a policy-maker to take action -- almost always occur in the future tense, which is the tense of choices and decisions. Ineffective arguments (fights) almost always occur in the past tense, where the goal is to assign blame, or in the present tense, where the goal is to assign values (right and wrong). Arguing over who holds fault or who's ideas are best, or most moral, or most right will not lead to effectively persuading someone to agree with your advocacy position.²

A third key to effective advocacy is to *develop and improve your expertise in rhetoric so your conversations are productive, persuasive arguments rather than fights*.

2. There isn't space here to dive deeply into the powerful principles of rhetoric, so I recommend some excellent further reading on the subject. My favorite is a straight-forward and entertaining book called [Thank You For Arguing: What Aristotle, Lincoln, and Homer Simpson Can Teach Us About The Art Of Persuasion](#) by Jay Heinrichs (2017).

As you learn and exercise the tools and skills of rhetoric, your likelihood of successful advocacy will increase dramatically.

Advocate in your underpants (if need be).

Another friend of mine was once a senior policy advisor to the U.S. Secretary of Education. He was (and continues to be) an advocate for open policy, a position that argues that copyrightable works produced with public money should be openly licensed to allow unfettered access to those resources by the public. During his time in Washington, my friend had the opportunity to advocate for the inclusion of an open policy in a major \$2B grant program for community colleges being developed by the Department of Labor. Most of his advocacy activities occurred during regular business hours through phone calls and face-to-face meetings with his Labor colleagues. His regular efforts seemed quite effective, with the open policy provision being included throughout the program drafting process. Then, at 5 pm on the day before the program was set to be approved, he learned that top lawyers in charge of legal review at the Department of Labor wanted to remove the open policy provision. My friend had plans that evening, but quickly scrapped them in order to make one last effort to advocate for the policy he cared so much about. After making several phone calls, he eventually found himself at home near midnight, in his underwear, on a three-way call with the lawyer from the Department of Labor - who opposed the policy - and a lawyer from the White House - who my friend knew supported the policy. After a constructive, multi-hour argument (not fight!), the dissenting lawyer finally conceded on the merits of the open policy and agreed to keep it in the grant program. I've tried not to visualize the merry dance my friend must have done that night - and, for his neighbors' sake, I hope his blinds were closed!

The point here is that sometimes, effective advocacy requires us to seize the moment when the moment presents itself, even if the timing is inconvenient. My friend could have simply declared defeat when he learned at the last hour that his policy would not be approved. The working day was done and evening plans were set. Instead, he rolled up his sleeves (and removed his pants), and argued right down to the final minute. His tenacity paid off, to the tune of \$2B in openly licensed content now available to the public.

A fourth key to effective advocacy is to *seize key moments and be willing to sacrifice your time, energy, and plans to make your case*. Good advocates don't just advocate when it's convenient for them, or during regular working hours; they advocate whenever the opportunity presents itself. Often, they *make their own opportunities*.

Avoid advocating alone.

When I worked at a large private foundation, the grants I made went to several different organizations who advocated for a similar cause. These organizations had people with strong advocacy skills, but they each approached advocacy in their own ways. For example, some focused on direct advocacy to elected officials, others tried to influence institutional leaders, and others wrote op-eds and white papers to inform the general public. Sometimes these advocacy efforts overlapped and synergized, but most of the time they operated in their own independent spheres. Recognizing the potential benefits of a coordinated approach, we made a decision to support the formation of a formal policy advocacy coalition. In making a new round of grants, we asked the various organizations to work together on a preamble to their grant proposals that outlined areas of advocacy overlap, distinct policy goals, and a set of norms for collaborative engagement. Because of this coalition structure, these organizations have been able to draw on each others' strengths, respond more quickly to opportunities, and generally improve their advocacy efforts in meaningful ways.

A fifth key to effective advocacy is to *coordinate and collaborate with others who care about your cause*. This collaboration can occur at any level, and may even just be with one other person in your organization or network. Typically, the more people involved in coordinated advocacy, the better.

A night at the museum: A conclusionary tale

A couple of years ago, I received an email from someone who worked at the Smithsonian. She asked if I might be willing to meet to talk about effective strategies for advocating for a particular policy that a few other museums around the world had recently instituted. As an advocate myself, I happily agreed. On the appointed date, I wandered into the main hall of the Museum of Natural History and looked for my contact, whom I had never

met. She found me immediately and then told me that several of her museum colleagues would be joining us for the conversation. As these colleagues appeared one by one, they introduced themselves to each other as though they had never met. And, indeed, they had not. It turns out, the Smithsonian is a much bigger and less coordinated place than one might imagine!

After introductions, our host led us through the bowels of the museum to a classically-adorned conference room somewhere secreted beyond the public's view. Then she kicked off the conversation by explaining that, despite meeting in person for the first time that evening, this group of strangers/coworkers shared a common cause: they desired to advocate for a policy that would allow for the entire Smithsonian archives to be digitized and made available to the public under an open license. The implementation of this policy would allow for people everywhere to access and use the museum assets for any purpose, in perpetuity.

With enthusiasm in her eyes, my new friend looked at me and asked a simple question: "What's the best strategy for advocating successfully for this policy?" I thought about it for a moment, and then replied, "There isn't one."

She and her colleagues were deflated. They had brought me there in the hopes that I would be able to give them a silver bullet strategy – the key to accomplishing their noble goal. But the reality, as I explained it to them, is that there is no single approach, no magic recipe for successful advocacy. As I thought about all of the various efforts my friends and I had made over the years, it occurred to me that the only common element to every attempt at advocacy was this: *persistence*. Those who succeeded with advocating for policies persisted. They persisted even when they were alone. They persisted even when it was inconvenient. They persisted even when people wanted to fight. They persisted even when they felt small. And they persisted even when few people agreed with them on the problem that needed to be solved.

My message to that small, but committed group that night at the museum is still true today: *anyone can be an effective advocate for change, if that person is willing to persist*.

About the Author

TJ Bliss is the Director of Development and Strategy at Wiki Education, a non-profit that connects higher education to the publishing power of Wikipedia. Bridging Wikipedia and academia creates opportunities for learners and researchers to contribute to, and access, open knowledge. Before joining Wiki Education, TJ was a Program Officer in the Education Program at the William and Flora

Hewlett Foundation. In that role, he gave \$45M in grants to over 30 organizations working to expand the reach and efficacy of Open Educational Resources (OER). TJ completed a Ph.D. in Educational Inquiry, Measurement, and Evaluation from Brigham Young University, a M.Sc. in Biology from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and a B.Sc. in Microbiology and Molecular Biology from Brigham Young University. Connect with TJ on Twitter (@tjbliss) or via email (tjbliss@gmail.com).