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# The Art of Advocacy

SHERRY LEE MUELLER

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If practitioners of international affairs aim to influence policy, it is increasingly necessary for them to hone and utilize their advocacy skills. A somewhat amorphous term, advocacy encompasses a wide range of ideas and activities. For the purpose of this article, it is defined as the art of building relationships—often with elected officials—in order to shape public policy. Advocacy requires building a constituency that is articulate and willing to act. Whether the goal is to influence budgets, regulations, or other policies, advocacy is a fundamental tool of the most influential organizations.

As John H. Graham IV, president and CEO of the American Society of Association Executives, stated in his remarks at the Association TRENDS Salute to Excellence luncheon earlier this year, advocacy is one of several major challenges facing associations. He observed, “[a]s vital as they are to advancing America’s industries and professions and blending the interests of the government and the private sector, associations are too often outsiders in the policy-making equation.” Or, as senior reporter Caroline Preston wrote in a recent *Chronicle of Philanthropy* article, “[p]hilanthropy needs to step up its efforts to influence policy if it expects to produce big changes.”

Early in his tenure as Secretary of State, John Kerry also emphasized the importance of advocacy. In February, during his first major speech as Secretary, he urged international affairs advocates to make their best case. He asked: “How do we, together, make clear...that if we do the right

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*Sherry Lee Mueller was named President Emeritus of the National Council for International Visitors after serving sixteen years at the helm of its nationwide network of citizen diplomacy organizations. She is an Adjunct Professor at the School of International Service at American University, where she teaches courses on Cultural Diplomacy. Sherry and her co-author Mark Overmann are currently working on the second edition of their book: Working World - Careers in International Education, Exchange, and Development for Georgetown University Press. She earned her Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy and PhD from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.*

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things, the good things, the smart things over there, it will strengthen us here at home?” He went on to say, “I believe we do this in two ways. First, it’s about telling the story of how we stand up for American jobs and businesses—pretty practical, pretty straightforward, and pretty real on a day-to-day basis. And second, it’s about how we stand up for our American values, something that has always distinguished America.”

Secretary Kerry highlighted international exchange programs as a primary way to project U.S. values. He reminisced about testifying as a young Vietnam veteran in hearings conducted by Senator Fulbright, then chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. In his speech, Kerry noted that Senator Fulbright was keenly aware of the importance of sharing American values, and quoted the Senator as saying, “[h]aving people understand your thoughts is much greater security than another submarine.”

Drawing from the research methods used in the Jim Collins “From Good to Great” model, Heather Grant and Leslie Crutchfield wrote a book titled *Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits*. Advocacy is one of the six practices they identify as essential to the success of organiza-

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 service delivery alone. Consequently, they begin using policy advocacy to access government resources or to challenge legislation, thus expanding their impact.

Grant and Crutchfield assert that high-impact organizations may start out by providing great programs, but they eventually realize that they cannot achieve systemic change through

#### NCIV AS A CASE STUDY

Their conclusion about the imperative of advocacy certainly matches my own experience during almost sixteen years as CEO of the National Council for International Visitors (NCIV). Shortly into my tenure, it became clear that to really be effective, NCIV must be an active domestic constituency for U.S. State Department exchanges, particularly the International Visitor Leadership Program.

NCIV is the private sector partner of the U.S. Department of State and is responsible for the day-to-day implementation of the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP). U.S. Embassy and Consulate staff around the world invite foreign leaders to participate in the IVLP, including members of parliaments, journalists, and others who make daily decisions affecting U.S. interests. The IVLP offers such professionals the opportunity to experience the United States firsthand during two- or three-week trips. These programs are designed to link the foreign leaders to their American counterparts and to send them home with a greater appreciation of U.S. history, democratic institutions, and values. The IVLP aims to get “beyond the headlines” and to immerse participants in the America “beyond the beltway.” The fact that they spend much of their time with volunteers—professional contacts and hospitality hosts—gives the program a genuine grassroots appeal.

NCIV’s individual program agency and ninety-four community organization members embrace the mission of promoting excellence in citizen diplomacy—the idea that individuals have a responsibility to help shape U.S. foreign relations, as NCIV members phrase it, “one handshake at a time.” Thanks to training and other resources provided to NCIV through its unique partnership with the State Department, NCIV members have unparalleled capacity to design and organize programs for IVLP participants, as well as participants in other exchange programs. They strive to serve as an international gateway to their community. NCIV’s nationwide network, which includes 260 paid staff at its independent community member organizations and involves tens of thousands of volunteers, is uniquely situated to be a dynamic domestic constituency for the U.S. Department of State exchange programs.

### THREE-TIERED ADVOCACY

Efforts to engage the NCIV network and to orchestrate their advocacy activities with the U.S. Congress yielded useful insights into the art of advocacy. NCIV conducts advocacy on three levels. First, NCIV works through, and in some cases provides leadership for, several coalitions. It is instructive that another of Grant and Crutchfield’s six practices of highly effective nonprofits is the willingness to work in and build coalitions. They argue that it is not enough to strengthen one’s own organization. To make a major impact, organizations must also strengthen the field that is the context for their operations.

The Alliance for International Educational and Cultural Exchange, a coalition of seventy-six organizations, including NCIV, is the primary

group devoted to shaping public policy regarding exchange programs and urging Congress to allocate maximum funding for the Fulbright Program, the IVLP, and other State Department-sponsored exchanges. NCIV has worked closely with the Alliance leadership and staff by participating in Alliance Advocacy Days, supporting the Alliance's efforts at the state and local levels, and orchestrating the response of NCIV members to Alliance Action Alerts. NCIV also cooperates with the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, which is comprised of the U.S. Global Leadership Campaign and the Center for U.S. Global Leadership. The primary goal of this broad collection of companies and non-governmental organizations is to advocate for increased resources for the "150 Account" in the federal budget that funds development and diplomacy, including international exchanges.

Second, NCIV as an independent organization established its own advocacy events, such as an annual "NCIV Breakfast on the Hill" and other Congressional outreach activities during the annual NCIV National Conference. Board leaders, thanks to an active Advocacy Committee, have also worked closely with the CEO and staff to orchestrate visits to state and district offices, and advocacy training is offered at each national and

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regional conference. Congressional staff at the national and local levels are recruited to help offer this training and to distill lessons learned about creating and conveying a message—the "ask" of an advocacy campaign.

The third tier of NCIV's advocacy is the CEO's activities as a private citizen. Whether putting in a high bid

for breakfast with the Congressman at a silent auction for the Arlington Symphony or hosting a modest campaign fundraising dinner at home every two years, it is vital for the CEO to walk the talk. If members are urged to build relationships with members of Congress, the CEO must demonstrate her ability to do this as well.

## LESSONS LEARNED

While the lessons outlined below are familiar or seem intuitive to some readers, it is useful to review them. They are described in a U.S. context, but much of the underlying theme is relevant the world over.

**1. Building relationships with congressional staffers is as important as building relationships with members of Congress.** Despite having large portfolios, staffers are not as fragmented as members of Congress. Members are expected to have a general knowledge of all topics affecting their constituents, while staffers are responsible for a subset of these topics, such as foreign affairs and immigration. Therefore, the key target may be the legislative aide for foreign affairs in the DC office or the chief-of-staff in the district office. Staffers have the ear of the member of Congress and conduct research on a myriad of topics. Becoming a source of reliable information for a staffer is a significant stride in advocacy efforts and results in a genuinely reciprocal relationship.

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**2. Focus on state and district offices.** There is often much more staff continuity at the local and state levels. Find the right balance between contact that is excessive to the point of annoyance and limited contact that is insufficient in making an organization stand out. Ask staff contacts if they want to receive the organization’s e-newsletter. Always send invitations to major events. Use every possible method to demonstrate the organization’s outreach and involvement of constituents.

**3. Do your homework.** Learn about a member’s international experience and interests before meeting with him or her. Attend town meetings, pancake breakfasts, and other events at which the Congressional representative or senator speaks. They are almost always accompanied by staff that will be glad to talk with advocates. Asking useful questions at these events is helpful; it establishes credibility and raises the organization’s visibility.

**4. Listening is the cardinal rule.** During advocacy training sessions, NCIV members are cautioned that if they are talking more than listening, they are not being effective advocates. An ideal first question in any meeting is, “How do you happen to cover foreign affairs for the Senator?” Perhaps the staffer responds by talking about his experience teaching English

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in China, prompting the advocate to describe the impact of a recent IVLP Chinese delegation trip on the community they visited. Emphasizing the local impact of the program is key. Finding common ground is essential to relationship building.

**5. Be conscious of time.** Members of Congress and their staffers have extraordinarily demanding schedules; sometimes, they “take a meeting” in a corridor. Being aware of this helps advocates to be concise. The most productive meetings are not necessarily the longest. A ten-minute encounter during which a staffer takes notes and you develop a plan to involve the staffer in advocacy training may do more for building the relationship than a forty-minute rambling discussion with no tangible result.

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**6. Clearly make “the ask.”** Good advocates have a one-page “leave behind” that succinctly captures the mission of their organization, what they hope to achieve, and the current status of relevant legislation. Quotes from participants and respected constituents can strengthen this document. Some staffers prefer stark statistics. Others love a good story. Finding the right descriptive mix of quantitative impact and illustrative stories on this one-pager and during discussion is central to the art of advocacy.

**7. Provide audiences of constituents.** The best way to get an elected official to appreciate the work of an organization is to invite him to speak. The venue an organization chooses and the audience it assembles conveys a lot about its outreach and the constituents involved. Decide with deliberate care who serves as a greeter, who makes welcoming remarks, who makes the official introduction, and who gives a token gift at the close of the event. By all means, that memento should be a signature gift that represents the work of the organization and will be displayed at the representative’s office. A mug made by a local artisan, a paperweight with the organization’s logo, or a framed photograph adorned with the organization lapel pin are examples of gifts NCIV has used effectively in its advocacy work.

**8. Recognize excellence and give credit.** Part of an association’s role is to hold up excellence and identify ways to reward the behavior it is encouraging. The NCIV Excellence in Advocacy Award was invented for just this purpose. The last time it was presented, Congressman Keith Ellison made the presentation to the recipient, the president of the Minnesota

International Center. NCIV invited him to do this at the opening plenary session of the National Conference, so this recognition occurred in front of the largest possible audience and conveyed to NCIV’s entire network the high value the organization places on advocacy.

When thanking a member of Congress, be sure to compliment the staffers most instrumental in arranging for the congressperson to speak at an event or sponsor or sign on to a resolution. Copy those staff members.

It is ideal to email the thank-you letter promptly and then hand-deliver the same letter plus some handwritten notes on the copies to their offices. The art of expressing appreciation and sharing credit is at the heart of effective advocacy.

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Some colleagues may be hesitant to engage in advocacy, believing erroneously that they cannot dent the consciousness of their legislators. In this time of increasing complexity fueled by technology, harshly competing political interests and a seemingly intransigent reluctance to compromise, there is no choice. It is irresponsible *not* to advocate for causes you embrace. The admonition that Irish statesman Edmund Burke offered several centuries ago is still relevant: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” And as Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple*, has reminded us, “The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any.” ■