Reflecting on Advocacy
Where Do We Fit In?
A short list of big ideas about advocacy
By Nicole P. Dyszlewski
The word advocacy is not one that I use regularly. The first time I encountered it in my professional life was in the American Bar Association’s Preamble of the Model Rules of Professional Conduct while I was in law school. Those rules state that, among other rules, “As advocate, a lawyer zealously asserts the client’s position under the rules of the adversary system.” Perhaps it is because of the wording of that sentence, specifically the invocation of “zeal,” that I have always linked advocacy with religion and proselytizing.

This year, at the AALL Annual Meeting in Seattle, I learned that the Association’s 2010-2013 Strategic Plan and the new 2013-2016 Strategic Plan, approved by the Executive Board in December 2012, include an Advocacy category, specifically the goal that “AALL and its members will influence legal and government information policies in the public and private sectors.”

At first, I found it hard to reconcile the mission of my library, the goal of the Association, and the neutrality of my job as a law librarian. Isn’t advocacy in law librarianship a bad thing? I have always understood my job at the Maine State Law and Legislative Reference Library to be an exercise in information neutrality. As a nonpartisan staffer of a political organization, I thought that one of the greatest values of the library is its ability to provide credible information free of partisanship and politics. Wouldn’t being called to be an advocate by AALL endanger that which we hold most dear? While at the Annual Meeting, and since I have been back from the conference, I have reflected on advocacy and discussed it with my colleagues. After much consideration, I think that there are ways to advocate in service of the basic democratic principles at the heart of law librarianship and to enhance the credible, reliable information we compile and provide. Providing information free of bias is our greatest strength, and it can be our most powerful advocacy tool, as well.

Through my discussions with coworkers and colleagues and consultations with the resources in our libraries, I have come up with a short list of big ideas about advocacy. I would encourage you to reexamine your thoughts about advocacy, try the ideas on my list, and come up with ideas of your own.

1. Prepare for the battle.
2. It’s not about you; it’s about them.
3. Subtlety is not a bad thing.
4. (De)focus your attack.

Prepare for the Battle

One of the perks of our profession is having unfettered access to legal information. One of the skills of our profession is having the ability to identify and synthesize meaningful information, especially meaningful information about law and policy. One way to be an effective advocate is to be prepared with information relevant to legislative advocacy, such as a bill number, the date of any public hearings on a bill, the details of different proposed amendments to a bill, or a legislator’s voting history on an issue. The nuts and bolts of preparing for legislative advocacy are available online in the AALL Advocacy Toolkit at www.aallnet.org/main-menu/Advocacy/aallwash/Advocacy-Toolkit. Not all forms of advocacy involve lobbying legislators. During these times of budget cuts and uncertainties in the legal profession, it is also important to prepare for institutional or financial advocacy. While at the AALL Annual Meeting, I attended a Research Instruction and Patron Services Special Interest Section meeting. One topic of discussion was the circulation of nontraditional items in our collection (iPods, book stands, phone chargers, etc.). Part of the discussion centered on the popularity of these items and the ability to justify their expense. Anna Blaine of New York Law School commented that her library keeps statistics on as many metrics as is feasible. In fact, she said it even has statistics on earplug requests. While keeping statistics in and of itself is not necessarily an advocacy tool, it is something your library can do to prepare itself for future advocacy. Collecting data may be time-consuming, but it also may be impossible to recreate those same statistics in retrospect. Having credible data available to justify library services and expenditures can be an important advocacy tool.

It’s Not About You; It’s About Them

A reality of advocacy is that sometimes your best argument is not the argument that would convince you, but the argument that you think about what you want. I think about what they want. I don’t bait a hook with strawberries and cream. So when I go fishing, I don’t think about what I want. I think about what they want. I don’t bait a hook with strawberries and cream.” Envisioning your issue or institution from someone else’s point of view may require some intellectual flexibility and out-of-the-box thinking, but this skill will surely increase your abilities of persuasion.

Subtlety is Not a Bad Thing

There are many law librarians, myself included, who are not able to advocate for legislation because of the conditions of our employment. This prevents us from taking a position on an issue, calling our legislators, or doing many of the activities traditionally thought of as advocacy. Does this mean we cannot advocate for our institutions or our profession? No! There is a type of advocacy called “constant advocacy.” Using this method, one speaks not from a soapbox, but rather from a reference desk. According to the American Library Association’s 2012 publication Grassroots Library Advocacy, “The best way to accomplish this is by being a really great library and providing people with stellar service. … If you make your library the crown jewel of your community and a source of local pride, it will be much harder for people who want to be reelected to cut your budget when the topic comes up for discussion.”

While some of us will never send an email, make a phone call, speak at a rally, organize an advocacy day, or even officially take a position on an issue, we will be able to send a message with our commitment to customer service.

(De)focus Your Attack

My co-worker Alex Burnett and I were arguing the other day about the extent to which public patrons are entitled to certain library services. We were debating about the formats in which taxpayer-funded libraries should or must provide access. We are both passionate about the mission of our library and equal access to information, even if we disagree about a specific product or service our library offers. When I asked him his thoughts about advocacy, he said the passion we have for public service and citizen access is what can make advocacy effective. As law librarians, we are advocating not just for our libraries, but also for an array of fundamental rights and ideas, such as access and equality. The underpinnings of our profession are sure to make a strong argument stronger. Those rights and values can also take a profession that not all voters and elected officials are aware of and make it more relatable. When advocating, sometimes the focus of your argument may seem small, but really it’s as big as a universal precept.

After speaking with colleagues, attending the Annual Meeting, and consulting selected resources, I compiled and now share this list of introductory ideas about advocacy. While advocacy may include lobbying legislators on an issue, it also may not. It is my hope that you can use this list as a springboard for community engagement in whatever form of advocacy to which you feel called.
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