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Legislative Advocacy and Social Work Education: Models and New Strategies

LeaAnne DeRigne\(^a\), Mitchell Rosenwald\(^b\) & Fabio A. Naranjo\(^b\)

\(^a\) School of Social Work, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Florida, USA
\(^b\) School of Social Work, Barry University, Miami Shores, Florida, USA

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Legislative Advocacy and Social Work Education: Models and New Strategies

LEAANNE DERIGNE
School of Social Work, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Florida, USA

MITCHELL ROSENWALD and FABIO A. NARANJO
School of Social Work, Barry University, Miami Shores, Florida, USA

The National Association of Social Workers promotes legislative advocacy through Lobby Days throughout the country. Yet legislative advocacy can be an under-taught and underutilized skill set for social work students. This article describes a variety of pedagogical models and strategies that social work programs can employ to prepare students for legislative advocacy experiences, including Lobby Days. CSWE’s Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards are applied to the educational strategies. In addition, practical strategies to prepare for and implement Lobby Day are shared.

KEYWORDS LEAD Day, legislative advocacy, Lobby Day, social work education

INTRODUCTION

Students are drawn to social work for many reasons—from wanting to have their own private practices to wanting to change the world. A core component of the social work profession is a commitment to change whether on an individual basis or a societal one. Clearly, social work programs provide extensive training in clinical practice skills but the profession is also committed to training students to participate in the macro policy practice world.

The 2008 Educational and Policy Accreditation Standards (EPAS) of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) state that schools will educate
students to “analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that promote social well-being and to deliver effective social work services” (Council on Social Work Education, 2012, p. 6). We believe that the above EPAS (2.1.8) is the prime competency that relates to legislative advocacy. With this EPAS, the central task and spirit of policy practice is to familiarize and engage students in policy analysis and communicating their findings via the lens of legislative advocacy. EPAS 2.1.1 (“Identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly”) and EPAS 2.1.5 (“Advance human rights and social and economic justice”) also relate in our estimation to legislative advocacy. This article will connect EPAS competencies with the educational strategies presented in this paper to assist instructors when designing courses and curriculum.

The NASW Code of Ethics also espouses a commitment to policy practice as a core competency for social work students (NASW, 2008). Social workers are called upon to challenge social injustice and to pursue social change on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups (NASW, 2008). Research suggests that roughly 50% of professional social workers demonstrate high levels of involvement in policy practice after graduation (Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010). One event that can be a valuable component of that training is NASW’s annual student Lobby Day held across the country among the NASW Chapters. In short, this event provides a rich educational experience of legislative advocacy for social work students (among others) to travel to state capitols to meet with legislators and their aides. Interestingly, these events are called LEAD (Legislative, Education and Advocacy Day) in some states such as Florida, Massachusetts, and Michigan due to some concern over the term “Lobby.”

The challenge for faculty in schools of social work is to figure out how to incorporate this experience into the explicit curriculum of both undergraduate and graduate social work courses as well as to infuse the experience into the learning environment of the program (implicit curriculum).

LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY EDUCATION IN SOCIAL WORK: A REVIEW OF PREVIOUS LITERATURE

Patti and Dear (1975) wrote a seminal article on social workers and legislative advocacy that appeared in Social Work. In their review of the literature prior to their work, they located some fifteen publications, from 1960 to 1972 that had applicability to legislative advocacy. The literature promoting legislative advocacy in social work extends back at least to the 1960s. From Robinson (1960) discussing participation in the process of legislative advocacy to Thursz (1971) promoting social action, the writing on legislative advocacy appears to parallel the social movements of civil rights and anti-war in the 1960s and 1970s.
Models of Pedagogy and Legislative Advocacy

Since that time, social work researchers and professors have written about a variety of models of incorporating policy practice training into social work curriculum. A summary of these models can be found in Table 1.

The 3P method of Practicing Policy, Pursuing Change, and Promoting Social Justice unites students across courses and semesters to work on a targeted social justice issue (Heidemann, Jansson, Fertig, & Kim, 2011). Students at University of Southern California (USC) selected a social problem (homelessness) and a specific target issue (lack of affordable housing) to implement advocacy plans over the course of several years. Ultimately, the governor of California signed a bill that expanded access to affordable housing. Students and professors at USC worked in tandem with NASW to focus on this issue during the annual Lobby Day trip. A similar project was developed across several universities that put five students to work as legislative interns in the Missouri state capitol in which they worked toward passage of several community economic development policies (Sherraden, Slosar, & Sherraden, 2002).

At the University of California-Berkeley a course was designed between the departments of social work and journalism to promote interdisciplinary collaboration among students in master’s programs in each discipline (Stone, English, Ekman, & Fujimori, 2008). The end product of that course was a single-issue magazine focused on social welfare policy issues. The outcomes of the project included increased understanding of the other’s profession and increased understanding of how to use the media to advance social justice issues (p. 170).

Another method is the use of the decision case method to teach policy practice (Wolfer & Gray, 2007). This is a great method for teaching students how to critically analyze social problems and the proposed solutions to them. Instructors facilitate discussions and pose questions that help students hone their opinions. “Students report significantly greater awareness of how they think and learn, greater ability to identify personal biases and assumptions, greater ability to both listen and express themselves, and increased problem-solving skills” (Wolfer & Gray, 2007, p. 48). Social work faculty can create cases that are based on local and state social welfare policy dilemmas.

Anderson & Harris (2005) found that designing an experiential learning course involving community-based research (to identify policy problems and solutions) worked well to increase student’s knowledge of policy concepts. Equally effective was scheduling the policy course at the same time as students’ practica and assigning students to analyze agency policy. It could also be incorporated into the Lobby Day trip with students assigned to meet with legislators to discuss their research findings.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Model/Strategy</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anderson &amp; Harris</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Students in their junior year social welfare policy course</td>
<td>Experiential service learning project posed by a community agency</td>
<td>Increased student knowledge of policy concepts and helped students feel more competent in using policy-related skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidemann, Jansson, Fertig &amp; Kim</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Students at University of Southern California over course of several years</td>
<td>3P method: Practicing Policy, Pursuing Change and Promoting Social Justice</td>
<td>Governor of CA signed a bill that expanded access to affordable housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoefer</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Students in a Politics and Social Work course at University of Texas-Austin</td>
<td>Creation of a course that infused more political content into social work.</td>
<td>Students are eager to continue their work in the political realm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manalo</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>26 graduate students in a Policy course</td>
<td>Students were required to lobby a local or state official on an issue of importance to them.</td>
<td>It was found that students report that they are more likely to engage in policy advocacy in the future as a result of the assignment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stone, English, Ekman &amp; Fujimori</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Students in a course at the University of CA-Berkeley</td>
<td>A course was designed between departments of social work and journalism</td>
<td>A single issue magazine was published that focused on social welfare issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sundet &amp; Kelly</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Second year concentration students in policy classes at the University of Missouri-Columbia</td>
<td>Taught to create and use Policy Briefs as lobbying tools</td>
<td>Document builds credibility for both the students and their schools, provides a tangible product that impacts policy making and teaches techniques that students can use in their professional careers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolfer &amp; Gray</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>University of South Carolina, Columbia</td>
<td>Decision case method with cases based on local and state social welfare policy dilemmas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition, models exist for infusing more political science content into social work education. Hoefer (1999) writes about a course taught at the University of Texas, Arlington (UTA) in “Politics & Social Work,” since 1992, that includes a variety of experiential learning assignments (e.g., testifying before a decision making body and getting a letter to the editor published in a newspaper). UTA also provides an internship opportunity in a legislator’s district office that combines constituency casework with policy tracking assignments.

Manalo (2004) allows students to either lobby on state level policy issues through (1) participation in NASW’s Lobby Day; (2) visitation at district office visits; or (3) volunteerism on a local candidate’s campaign. Analysis of the outcomes of these assignments found that the students reported that they would be more likely to engage in policy activities in the future. Similar research (Rocha, 2000) that compared an experiential learning policy course with a more traditional policy course found that both groups of students valued receiving education on political skills. The students in the experiential learning course perceived themselves as having a higher level of competency as a policy practitioner and reported engaging in post-graduation policy advocacy efforts at a higher level than those in the traditional course.

Sundet and Kelly (2002) describe the use of policy briefs as a key component of policy courses and later policy practice. Students put together policy briefs on key state bills. The document presents a side-by-side comparison of each side of the issue. They are then disseminated to decision makers including legislators, the governor’s aides, and directors of executive agencies. It is important to note that the policy briefs are neutral and do not advocate a particular position on bills. However, students could take a position on a bill as long as it was student-led and not dictated by faculty. The briefs could be distributed during the annual Lobby Day event.

Another university has documented the use of e-action alert lists as an assignment. Students are asked to sign up to receive e-action alert lists from policy organizations they are interested in, then respond to the alert requests, and document their experience (Tower & Hartnett, 2011). They found that 98% of students said they would remain on the e-action lists. They also reported that this type of advocacy was easy, quick and effective.

**INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES**

The authors of this article have a variety of instructional strategies that they utilize in the classroom. In their experience, these strategies support the EPAS and help promote civic engagement through legislative advocacy. These strategies are outlined in Table 2.


TABLE 2 Instructional Strategies for use in Policy Classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Place of Use</th>
<th>EPAS Competency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Invite legislators/campaign representatives to guest speak</td>
<td>Classroom</td>
<td>2.1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have students write letters to legislators/</td>
<td>Assignment</td>
<td>2.1.1, 2.1.5, 2.1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have students write letters to the</td>
<td>Assignment</td>
<td>2.1.1, 2.1.5, 2.1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>editors of newspapers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage a mock legislative session</td>
<td>Classroom/Assignment</td>
<td>2.1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop and Implement Advocacy</td>
<td>Assignment/Experiential Learning</td>
<td>2.1.5, 2.1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create and Maintain Blogs on Policy Issues</td>
<td>Assignment</td>
<td>2.1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend Lobby Day event in capitol</td>
<td>Experiential Learning</td>
<td>2.1.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Inviting a Legislator to the Classroom

There is tremendous value in inviting a legislator into the classroom. All of the authors have had this experience and observed the impact on students who get an opportunity to interact with a state senator or representative. Aside from the “celebrity status” that such a visit brings (which does serve in and of itself as a motivator for student attention), legislators who share their reasons for entering politics, the triumphs and travails, their support or opposition on particular issues all provide important vantage points for students to glimpse. However, in this author’s observation, the mere presence of the legislator suggests the largest impact, as “legislation,” “advocacy,” and even “government” do not seem such abstract entities. Indeed, there is no substitute from bringing the legislator to the student-citizen. It awakens the student to civic engagement and with guidance from the instructor, expands their ability to act. EPAS Competency 2.1.1 applies to this strategy, as students must demonstrate professional demeanor in behavior, appearance, and communication with the invited legislator. Any contact with elected officials gives students an opportunity to conduct themselves as professional social workers.

Inviting Campaign Representatives

Our schools of social work have also, in election years, hosted a debate between representatives from both political campaigns (e.g., Romney and Obama). In legislative advocacy, it is important to be mindful that the political agenda of the profession, that is, the policy statements that NASW endorses through its triennial Delegate Assembly needs to be negotiated with the real political diversity inherent in the social work profession, and thus reflected in the classroom (Rosenwald, Wiener, Smith-Osborne & Smith, 2012). Aside from helping students understand the issues at hand better and
motivating them to vote, students are provided with a firsthand encounter with campaigns in which one of the candidates will assume office soon. As all candidates espouse certain platforms, students have the opportunity to understand these positions more fully that will aid them in selecting which issues inspire them to write their legislators. Several EPAS competencies relate to this educational strategy including 2.1.2, which states that social work ethical principles are used to guide practice. When students listen to campaign representatives they “must apply strategies of ethical reasoning to arrive at principled decisions” in order to make their mind up about the candidate and their platform. The second competency that relates to this educational effort is 2.1.8, which states that social workers engage in policy practice by collaborating with colleagues and clients. The campaign representative can be a good person to collaborate with later on as their candidate may soon be the elected official making decisions on social policy issues.

Writing a Letter to a Legislator/ Newspaper

A simple yet effective way to engage students is to have them identify an issue of relevance and communicate their support or opposition of it to a legislator or other individuals or groups that may be able to influence policy (e.g., newspaper editorial boards). Writing a letter is an assignment in the authors’ policy-related courses and embodies a statement of position on an existing bill (or desire to craft a bill), a description of rationale for the position, and a closing paragraph on why it is important to the social workers and the clients/communities in which they serve. As a consequence, students are more informed on an issue and can more skillfully advocate for its support, opposition, or amendment. While only the letter itself is graded, students are encouraged to include the legislator’s response if possible. This assignment can be tied to a policy analysis assignment where students identify existing laws/bills and the gaps in policy with respect to adequacy, equity, efficiency and other policy analysis variables.

The authors have also assigned a letter to an editor of a newspaper. They are asked to articulate their position on a piece of legislation that is being written about in the newspaper. Students not only learn how to succinctly state their position but this is also great training for learning how to advocate for clients and services. Finally it is empowering to students to see their name and opinion printed in the newspaper. The authors have required submission not publication (though many students letters are published) in order to satisfy the requirements of the assignment. The EPAS that relate to this strategy include 2.1.5 that states that social workers advocate for human rights and social and economic justice. EPAS 2.1.8 also applies for students are asked through these assignments to analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance social well-being. Finally EPAS 2.1.1 is applicable because students must conduct themselves in a professional manner in their communication.
Staging a Mock Legislative Session

An engaging pedagogical tool on this topic involves the creation of a mock legislation session. In this session, students play various members of the state or federal legislative (as well as executive and judicial branches). Name cards denoting position are set up on desks organized around the room into sequentially a subcommittee and full committee in the congressional delegation, the desk of the chief executive and the judicial bench and plaintiff/defendant seats of the court. Students learn how to track the history of a bill from attaining sponsorship and introduction to a subcommittee to full House and Senate hearing, review by president or governor (depending on federal or state example) and review by Supreme Court (this is in the context of how legislation is seen throughout the checks and balances of the three systems of government.) EPAS 2.1.8 applies to this strategy as students are asked to collaborate with colleagues and clients for effective policy action (CSWE, 2012). As they learn the process of a bill becoming a law they begin to understand how the players in the system must work together to pass legislation in the interest of social well-being.

Elective Course

At Florida Atlantic University, an elective course has been developed and offered called Legislative Advocacy in Social Work. It is offered to BSW and MSW students as a follow-up to the foundation level policy course. In this course, the students are given the opportunity to advance their knowledge and skills of the policy side of social work. The class is in the spring semester at the same time that the state Legislature is meeting. Students are required to attend the NASW student Lobby Day (now called Legislative Advocacy and Education Day). They design an advocacy plan around a policy area or bill of their choosing. Students can work in groups or alone on the project. They actually put into action their advocacy plan while visiting the capitol including meetings with legislators, garnering media attention, and developing new advocacy partners. The authors have also assigned policy newsletters as an assignment. Students choose a policy area they are interested in and then summarize all the activity of the state legislature or the U.S. Congress during the span of a semester on that topic. This assignment is based on the documents that policy organizations often disseminate to advocates. EPAS 2.1.8 states that social workers will collaborate with colleagues and clients for effective policy action and this educational strategy is an excellent example of students practicing this behavior. Since students are executing an advocacy plan in this educational strategy EPAS 2.1.5 (social workers will advocate for human rights and social and economic justice) applies too.
Blogging

In a policy course that is offered online, one of the authors assigns students to write their own policy blogs where they reflect and respond to policy changes that are happening at the state legislature or U.S. Congress. The author created a blog at the same time that students were assigned to read and comment on (http://drdspolicyblog.blogspot.com/2011/12/welcome-to-dr-ds-policy-blog.html). Blogs can be viewed as the twenty-first century reflection paper assignment. The author has also required Facebook status update posts on policy-related news articles. The professor created a private Facebook group that included only the registered students in one section of an online policy course and then required that students post three original updates a week and three comments to peers. The idea was to incorporate online media resources that all students are familiar with and most likely using on a daily basis. EPAS 2.1.1 is practiced through these assignments, as students must conduct themselves in a professional demeanor in electronic forms of communication.

AN OVERVIEW OF LOBBY DAY/ LEAD DAYS PLANNING

The culmination of legislative advocacy for most schools and departments of social work occurs with the planning and attendance of lobbying at Lobby Day (LEAD Day). What follows are the authors’ comments from the vantage point of how each of their schools—Florida Atlantic University and Barry University—located within an hour of each other in South Florida - plan for their Lobby (now LEAD) Days.

Florida Atlantic University Experience

The distance to the capitol will determine how much planning a school will have to do in order to attend NASW Lobby Day events (LEAD). For schools within an hour or two, the event will most likely only cover one day and involve very little planning aside from arranging transportation. For schools that have to travel a far distance, the planning requires much more time and effort. Florida Atlantic University (FAU), as well as Barry University, are located more than eight hours from the capitol of their state (Florida). This requires that the schools stay overnight at least one if not two nights in a hotel and raise or commit thousands of dollars to the trip. This is an excellent opportunity to involve students in the planning and implementation of the trip.

At FAU, students created a student organization that runs the entire event with the help of one faculty advisor. Students raise over $10,000 a year to pay for nearly all the expenses of a two-night trip to the Capitol. They are responsible for the entire event including pre-trip training events, registration, bill
Legislative Advocacy

and policy issue identification, transportation, trip events including a dinner with legislators, meals, rooming lists, fundraising, as well as coordinating student advocacy plans. Students gain a wide array of leadership skills by being involved with the organization. They feel real ownership of the trip and the experience. More than 120 students attended in 2013.

Barry University Experience

At Barry University, we plan for LEAD Day as a full commitment and collaboration on the part of students, administrators, and faculty. Once agreement and support from faculty and administrators has been obtained, the work of planning is assigned to a work-group representing all interests. One of the first tasks of this group is to assess what resources are available (finances, student and staff commitment) can be committed for the project. Then administrators reach out to the appropriate student organization(s) on campus. The role played by students, through their associations and individually, must not be underestimated. From planning to organizing and implementing, and from marketing to recruitment of participants and fundraising, the role of the students may be critical in the successful implementation of this effort.

The work-group (consisting of select students, administrators and faculty) develop project goals and objectives as well as a fundraising campaign. The goals and objectives may include the anticipated number of participants or attendees, the activities to be carried out prior to-during-and-after the event, expenditures to be subsidized by the school or to be passed-on to participants, and an evaluation process to determine the success of the effort or the areas that may need improvement. In addition, important steps include coordinating legislative advocacy training with the state NASW Chapter and researching travel and lodging options based on projected attendance, months ahead of the event. As we move closer to the event, recruitment for attendance and implementing the fundraising plan (which may include raffles, sale of school-related promotional materials baked goods, phone-thons) occur. Over 60 students attended in 2012. EPAS 2.1.8 that states that social workers collaborate with colleagues and clients for effective policy action applies to the work of attending lobby days.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION, RESEARCH AND POLICY PRACTICE

Haynes and Mickelson (2010) write:

We do not want advocacy to be left only to advocates; we want professionals, current and future ones, to see its compatibility to social work values as an impetus to enter the political arena. We hope that advocacy
becomes the central mission of our professional association, a mandated standard for all social work education and practice, and a daily part of every social worker’s experience. (preface)

Toward this end, we have provided a discussion of legislative advocacy models and strategies as well as two school’s different routes to Lobby Day (LEAD Day) preparation that holds promise for students to demonstrate their skills. This discussion can add to the foundation of discussion for how best to carry out the EPAS with respect to legislative advocacy. From both the models detailed in the literature and the authors’ classroom and instructional experiences, a range exists for how best to envision, plan, and implement a variety of legislative advocacy educational activities. While it is a natural culmination for students’ legislative advocacy to culminate in Lobby and LEAD Days across the country, this is not a requirement. Initiating legislative advocacy activities in the classroom holds much promise in and of itself as we hope students transfer classroom activities to practice.

The previous reference to Lobby/LEAD Days does bring up an important point that relates to planning. We have presented two different models of planning for these days that vary with respect to student-faculty-administrative involvement and initiative. Schools and departments of social work should initiate discussions prior to planning with all of these stakeholders to identify the best planning structure for the school’s/department’s culture and resources.

With respect to evaluation, broader evaluations of legislative advocacy activities—both in and outside of the classroom—should occur to assess their efficacy. For example, mixed-methods of questionnaires and focus groups would provide promising cross-validated data that informs both the successes and challenges in student learning this competency. This data would serve to assess existing models as well as identify future models of the best route to “deliver” legislative advocacy education.

Finally, Haynes and Mickelson’s (2010) charge for policy-oriented social workers speaks to the continued need and power of social workers who believe in, and are competent, to impact change at the legislative level. As social work students become social workers, regardless of license status or position, they will be informed of what needs that the clients and the communities that they serve, as well as the profession have. Having ample preparation in skill development and experience at the university level can help promote increased comfort and competence as they continue to advocate legislatively for the issues of the day.

REFERENCES


