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The Role of Individual Involvement In Global Political Advocacy

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This paper discusses the importance of personal involvement in political advocacy and the need to understand the cultural and institutional influences that shape it. In today's competitive, fast-paced world, it is no longer enough to be good at your job. You also must be able to articulate the importance of your position and the value you bring to it. By necessity, librarians and information professionals are called upon increasingly to be advocates for their jobs, their profession and for the libraries in their communities or the information centers inside their own organizations. The importance of political advocacy cannot be overstated; what could be at stake is no less than the future of your library and the services it provides to the people who depend on it.

The Nature of Political Advocacy

- If you are involved in efforts to encourage conservation, improve public health, expand public literacy or increase your library or information center's budget, you are already engaged in political advocacy.
- A former President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, once observed "We all inhabit this small planet." He might well have added, "And we often agree on very little." For that reason, advocacy is both necessary and desirable. It is the active pursuit of a course of action intended to influence decisions by those in positions to wield private or public authority among competing ideas or conflicting interest groups.
- There is no magic to political advocacy. It is determined simply by "what you want to say," "who you want to say it to," "who will deliver your message" and "how it will be

delivered." While there may be no magic to advocacy and the answers to these questions may seem obvious, the tactical approaches employed in effective advocacy will depend largely upon the accepted cultural norms and established political processes in different countries and among different cultural groups.

Making Advocacy Work for You and Your Organization

- Success in political advocacy begins with the interest and willingness of a single person to become involved in the political process -- whether locally, nationally or internationally -- that could eventually involve other like-minded individuals next door or throughout the world.
- The Special Libraries Association (SLA) began just this way and has been operating successfully for nearly a century. SLA was created to represent the interests of a new breed of librarian in a rapidly changing world, and its mission is just as relevant today as it was then -- perhaps more urgent. Dramatic advances in information technology are changing the role of libraries and librarians, seemingly overnight.
- With information more and more easily accessible on the Internet, some have even called into question the need for librarians. This type of thinking, though misguided, appears to be gaining in popularity as companies and other organizations seek to trim budgets and continually increase profits. Managers need to comprehend fully, however, that real cost savings and improvements in efficiency are not achieved by the elimination of librarian and information professional positions.
- While some ill-informed executives may assume all the information their organizations need and want is available for free through general subject search engines, this is not the case. The copyrighted content of many articles, publications and books is not necessarily accessible on the Internet. This is also especially true of many technical journals and other highly specialized information that companies need to make important strategic decisions.
- Without question, general subject search engines are extremely helpful in finding all sorts of useful information. The information needs of an individual, however, can be very different from the complex needs of an organization, such as a corporation, law firm or research institution. That is why it does not make sense to substitute the knowledge and experience of information professionals and librarians with unfiltered, disorganized and sometimes incorrect or misleading information from search engines, no matter how good they may be.
- A survey of middle managers in the United States released by the consulting firm Accenture in January 2007 found that managers spend up to 25 percent of their time searching for information they need to do their jobs. Perhaps this would not be so significant except for the fact that more than half of these managers indicated that most of the information they found was of absolutely no value to them.
- With the future of many libraries uncertain, librarians and information professionals must become accomplished at making strong, information-based arguments about

their worth utilizing persuasive data such as that referenced above. They also must become adept at employing effective advocacy techniques to help decision-makers recognize the value librarians and information professionals provide to their libraries and to the customers they serve.

- SLA currently represents more than 11,000 librarians and information professionals globally, and advocacy is a large part of its mission. Unquestionably, the advocacy tactics SLA employs today are more extensive and sophisticated than they were at the beginning of the 20th century; but the goal remains the same, to represent and advance the interests of SLA members, their customers and their organizations.
- There are six basic components of political advocacy. These include:
 - Identifying an issue or potential problem;
 - Determining what needs to be done;
 - Developing action steps to achieve success;
 - Soliciting support from like-minded individuals and organizations;
 - Drawing attention to the issue through online and media outreach activities; and
 - Seeking to influence decision-makers through public and inter-personal communication.
- No matter the cause or idea espoused, advocates must understand the decision-making process they hope to influence. Seasoned political advocates around the world understand that a successful advocacy campaign often depends as much on the subtleties of process as on the strength of ideas. For example, a librarian may be prepared to make a well-researched and effective argument for a larger library budget. If, however, the annual budget has already been set, he or she may have little alternative but to wait until the following year to make the funding request.
- This is why a number of influencing factors also must be considered along with the six components of advocacy, listed above, when undertaking an advocacy campaign. These factors include: timing; the strength of opposing forces; the influence of key ministers, legislators or government officials; the impact of a successful effort on existing programs and budgets and the degree of cooperation that can be expected from like-minded organizations and individuals.
- Timing is crucially important to the success of any advocacy campaign. The legislative process of every country is unique and operates at its own rhythm and pace. In order to be successful, advocates must understand these rhythms and act accordingly. For example, they must consider when the legislature is in session, when it is most advantageous to introduce legislation, when legislators are in the capital and when is it appropriate to seek media coverage of their issues. By understanding the way decision-making bodies operate, advocates dramatically increase their chances of achieving the outcomes they desire.
- Before undertaking an advocacy campaign, it is necessary to assess the forces allied against you. By understanding the nature of the opposition and its arguments, advocates can develop the best possible strategies for overcoming them. Some of the questions advocates must consider are; how well-funded is the opposition, does the opposition speak for the majority or minority of stakeholders and is the

opposition's argument based on fact and reason or simply emotion? Even if opposition seems insurmountable, it is important to remember that sound arguments fueled by passionate beliefs frequently carry the day.

- An important factor in the success of any advocacy effort is the support or opposition your position is likely to receive from important ministers, legislators and officials in the government. Often the success of a campaign hinges on the ability of an advocate to influence one key member of the legislature or of the executive branch. This is why it is extremely important to learn which legislators or public officials have the most influence on the outcome of a particular issue, how their constituents would be affected by proposed legislation or policy changes and which legislators would seem to be natural allies based upon their previous voting records. By identifying likely opponents and supporters, advocates can seek to influence these legislators or officials directly or with the help of constituent groups.
- It is useful to remember that every change in law or in public policy affects someone, somehow. For that reason, it is wise to determine who could be helped or hurt by the changes you are advocating and how they will be helped or hurt. That is why it is wise to ask, how will this proposal affect existing budgets, could there be unanticipated consequences and, if approved, how will the change be paid for and by whom? When advocating proposals that could have far-reaching financial consequences for taxpayers or for other interest groups, it is advisable to view the proposals through the eyes of those who will be required to implement or pay for them. This makes it possible to develop persuasive answers to the questions that will inevitably be asked by legislators and others.
- Collaborating with like-minded individuals and organizations can be extremely effective in pursuing advocacy initiatives. The power of one voice can be amplified significantly with the help of others. When considering which groups or individuals might be helpful supporting your advocacy, you may want to consider which professional or trade organizations are most closely aligned with your issue, which organizations' members would be impacted favorably by your efforts and is there a notable individual with a particular personal interest in the issue you are addressing? It is a truism of political advocacy that the more people you mobilize behind an issue or a cause, the more power the effort will have and the more likely it is to achieve success.
- While the basic elements of political advocacy, as noted earlier, remain constant, advocacy tactics and approaches differ from country to country and culture to culture. So, too, does communication. Understanding the subtlety of political communication in one's own country is an absolute requirement for exerting influence and getting things done. The same is true when seeking to affect change across international borders.
- The United States Institute of Peace conducted research several years ago on the influence of cultural factors in U.S. negotiating style as part of its ongoing Cross-Cultural Negotiation Project. The Institute brought together 30 international diplomats, policy-makers, and scholars to discuss the U.S. approach to diplomacy. The researchers found that negotiators from the United States have a unique style that is forceful, urgent, legalistic and results-oriented. They also found that culture

significantly influences diplomatic interactions and affects the outcomes of diplomatic endeavors. According to their conclusions, culture influences the content of negotiations, for example, what is negotiable and what is not, and how it is accomplished. A lack of cultural knowledge or insensitivity to cultural differences can lead to a breakdown in communications and, ultimately, to a breakdown in diplomatic efforts.

- Cultural considerations play an important role in the negotiating styles of other countries as well. Additional research conducted by the Institute found, for example, that Germany seeks "security, stability, and community" in diplomacy based upon geographic, philosophical, historical, and economic considerations. France, on the other hand, tends to be pragmatic and would rather ally with other nations than act unilaterally. Only when it is confident unilateral action will achieve desired results will France act alone, researchers say, and it looks to its history for guidance on such matters. If the Institute were to conduct similar research on the diplomatic styles of other nations, it would not be surprising to find disparate sets of cultural influences.
- Those concerned with domestic or international advocacy would be well-advised to learn as much as possible about the cultural influences on and the nuances of political communication in their countries and those of other countries before embarking on an aggressive advocacy agenda.

Engaging Decision Makers

- Broadly speaking, most advocacy activities are targeted at decision-makers at different levels of government. For individuals who have access to decision-makers in their government, it is essential that they educate themselves on the issues before seeking to change laws or to modify existing policies, systems or processes. Some people may be intimidated at the thought of communicating with representatives of their government. They may believe these officials have more knowledge than they because of the positions these officials hold. That is generally not the case. Frequently, those most knowledgeable about a subject are those who care the most about it. And when you think about it, who knows more or cares more about the work you do and what your customers need and want, than you?
- Government officials typically know more than the average citizen about the operations of government. That is why, as indicated earlier, it is essential for those interested in successful advocacy to understand the intricacies of policy and how it is created before engaging public officials in substantive discussions. But once armed with this policy knowledge and process understanding, a citizen can feel much more secure in sharing his or her expertise with officials and advocating for his or her position within the norms of their country's cultural boundaries.
- If, however, after reviewing the intricacies of public policy, studying the subtle nuances of political communication and familiarizing yourself with the decision-making process, you have reservations about approaching government officials personally, you may want to work more closely with the International Federation of

Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). As you become more familiar with IFLA's advocacy approach and develop insights into what makes its efforts successful, you are likely to gain the necessary confidence and expertise to begin your own advocacy efforts.

- Another effective approach for beginning advocacy outreach is to collaborate with other organizations to advocate jointly for your positions. SLA routinely collaborates with other library and information associations to pursue shared public policy goals and objectives. These coalitions serve to organize the efforts of groups with similar public policy goals so that a unified message can be conveyed to government decision-makers.
- A good example of coalition building is IFLA's involvement in addressing what is called the "Digital Divide." In today's world, access to information and knowledge is a prerequisite for economic vitality and growth, and has the proven capacity to raise the living standards of millions of people throughout the world. While the digital revolution may have extended the frontiers of the global village, paradoxically, the vast majority of the world's inhabitants remain isolated from its benefits. As this gap between those with knowledge and those who seek it widens, so too does the gap between rich and poor nations.
- Recognizing this growing disparity between nations with and without access to technology, the International Telecommunication Union, a United Nations' organization devoted to advancing the development of international communications technologies, decided in 2001 to hold a World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and place it on the agenda of the United Nations.
- Working collaboratively with IFLA, SLA has sought to ensure that the needs of information professionals worldwide are understood. I attended the IFLA meetings prior to the first phase of WSIS in 2003, and former SLA President Pam Rollo attended the IFLA meetings prior to the second phase of WSIS. At each meeting, IFLA adopted a plan of action for the global library community with regard to the desired results of each phase of the Summit.
- As one outcome of WSIS, the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) was created and will meet every year through 2010 to discuss where the Internet is headed and how it should be governed. I attended the first IGF last year in Athens as SLA and IFLA's representative and work is already underway for the next IGF meeting in November. My primary goal in these talks is to ensure that librarians and information professionals have as much access to a robust, organic and valuable Internet as possible.
- Throughout SLA's rich history, its policy efforts also have evolved to become more interactive between staff and its membership. Staff serves to inform the membership of government activity in the issue areas of concern to the information profession. Without the support of the membership, however, success would not be possible. The primary goal of SLA staff is to maximize the involvement of the membership and gain influence in government processes, not merely to gain consensus on SLA Public Policy.

- SLA staff members continually update the membership through a variety of communication vehicles including online newsletters, blogs, wikis, and Information Outlook magazine, as well as through numerous chapter visits, networking events and SLA's annual conference. This communication is extremely important as a way to encourage members to become personally involved in SLA's advocacy efforts.

The Journey of a Thousand Miles Begins with a Single Step

- Successful advocacy begins with the commitment of one person to make a difference.
- Despite different political and cultural norms, successful advocacy typically incorporates: identifying the issue or potential problem; determining what needs to be done and developing actions steps; soliciting support from like-minded individuals and organizations; calling attention to the issue through online and media outreach activities; and seeking to influence decision-makers through public and inter-personal means.
- To advocate successfully, it is necessary to have not only a thorough understanding of the law or policy you seek to change but also a good working knowledge of the decision-making process you hope to influence.
- There is no single formula that guarantees success in political advocacy. What works in one country, may not work in another. And what worked in your country the last time, may not work the next time. Be patient, persistent committed and flexible in your approach to long-term advocacy strategies. With knowledge and truth on your side, you can move mountains. It may seem like you are moving it a boulder at a time sometimes, but progress is measured in results, not time spent or setbacks encountered.

The Special Libraries Association (SLA) is a nonprofit global organization for innovative information professionals and their strategic partners. SLA serves more than 11,000 members in 75 countries in the information profession, including corporate, academic, and government information specialists. SLA promotes and strengthens its members through learning, advocacy, and networking initiatives.



For more information, visit SLA on the Web at www.sla.org.

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