

lies like truth

Chloe Veltman on how culture will save the world

Arts Advocacy 101



With the arts being a tough sell to funders and policymakers of late, it's been gratifying to hear that the NEA is now hard at work soliciting [grant applications](#). Only a few weeks ago, things looked extremely hazardous for the national arts funding body, what with the Coburn amendment threatening \$50 million in federal stimulus package funds from going to the arts.

If the Coburn amendment was finally defeated, it was largely thanks to the efforts of arts advocates across the country in making a strong case for the social impact that the arts have on people's lives and writing countless letters and emails to persuade policymakers to stop this catastrophic amendment from passing.

At a free, three-hour seminar held by [California Arts Advocates](#) (CAA) and [Arts Forum SF](#) (AFSF) yesterday evening, I got an extremely important basic education in the art of arts advocacy.

Until I attended the seminar, led by Brad Erickson, president of CAA and co-founder of AFSF, Deborah Cullinan, co-founder of AFSF and CAA board member, and Karen Ames, communications consultant and arts advocate, I had thought of the term "advocacy" as something scary to do with knocking at politicians' doors and camping out on the front porches of their homes.

The seminar taught me some important things I didn't know about advocacy. I learned that there are many different ways to be an advocate, some of which I already do in my daily life -- like writing this blog for example. Knowing what you want to achieve and figuring out the wide range of people / organizations to advocate to was another revelation I learned from the seminar. For example, policymakers aren't the only people to lobby -- local businesses, heads of granting agencies, local labor and arts leaders and political aides are other people to reach out to.

I also discovered that advocacy is a two-way/reciprocal thing. It's not simply about asking for something; it's also about seeing how the goal that you want to achieve as an advocate lends a hand to / stands in solidarity with the advocacy goals of other individuals and organizations.

The two biggest revelations of the seminar were to do with letter-writing and talking to politicians on both sides of the fence. I've been rather skeptical about the efficacy of writing letters to politicians in the past, even though I do it on occasion. I just can't believe that they actually pay attention to what I'm saying. But the workshop leaders insisted that the correspondence that policymakers receive from constituents really does make a difference. The volume of letters and emails counts as much as the messages contained within them.

In terms of the second revelation of the evening, I was interested to hear that advocating to politicians who don't support your wishes is a good thing to do. Never assume that just because someone doesn't share your opinion about, say, the importance of art in getting crime off the streets, that they can't be persuaded to support your proposal. Similarly, it's bad to assume that a politician who usually comes out in support of the arts will automatically get behind your advocacy goals. Both sides of the fence need to be treated with equal respect and persuasion.

Finally, here's the oddest bit of information I heard at the seminar: Even in these technological times, the best way to get a policymaker to pay attention to your request is by writing a handwritten letter and sending it via snail mail to his or her office.

I hope Brad, Karen and Deborah will run more workshops like this one in the future. This sort of training should be mandatory for anyone working or hoping to pursue a career in the arts. In fact, MFA arts programs should offer it as part of their core curricula.

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