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Taking Action: Stakeholder Participation and Engagement

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abstract:

A key component of any social change effort is in the engagement and participation of stakeholders. Regardless of the size, stakes, and subject matter of advocacy campaigns, outcomes depend in great part on the engagement of those individuals and groups who care deeply about the issue. Stakeholder engagement describes a process of accountability. How are stakeholders informed and empowered? Stakeholder participation is a metric that is used to look at advocacy effectiveness. Who is engaged and what are the outcomes? In this seventh article in the series, *Case-making and Systems Change for Arts and Cultural Education*, the author examines what it means to take action in advocacy for arts and cultural education.

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As part of our commitment to authentically engaged learning, this article has been formatted to encourage critical dialogue with the text. Throughout, there are numerous spaces to write, draw, or otherwise reflect while reading the text.

Introduction

A key component of any social change effort is in the engagement and participation of stakeholders. Regardless of the size, stakes, and subject matter of advocacy campaigns, outcomes depend in great part on the engagement of those individuals and groups who care deeply about the issue. Stakeholder engagement describes a process of accountability. Practitioners seeking to engage their stakeholders may consider the following questions:

- How are stakeholders informed and empowered?
- How is Stakeholder participation used as a metric to look at advocacy effectiveness?
- Who is engaged and what are the outcomes?

In this seventh article in the series *Case-making and Systems Change in Arts and Cultural Education,* we examine what it means to take action in advocacy.

Continuing to develop ideas as *Advocacy for Field* and *Advocacy for Sector*, this article specifically focuses on the following key concepts for practitioners:

- See the larger system and work within a local context
- Link communications strategies to goals
- Build adaptive processes that encourage engagement

Accountability to Stakeholders

In the literature of social change, the term *stakeholder engagemen*t describes the process of understanding stakeholders' views, being accountable to them, and using the information in decisions. A spectrum of engagement flows from inform, to consult, involve, engage/collaborate, and empower (McCarthy, n.d.). Examples of a stakeholder engagement process might include soliciting community input in a strategic plan, in the hiring of a local school superintendent, or weighing in on a state's education plan. Tactics used to solicit engagement include focus groups, surveys, community roundtables, and local planning teams. The intent of stakeholder engagement is to understand what is important to a range of stakeholders in order to be more accountable to them.

We like to think that our input has an impact on the decisions made, but too often we are left wondering if it made any difference. As stakeholders, we experience the "inform" and "consult" stages of engagement but are left out of "collaborate" and "empower." Likewise, some segments of a community are not heard from enough. Conditions that constrain engagement include limited knowledge or fatigue related to engagement issues, distrust, and lack of a prior history of community engagement (Marsh, 2018 and Perry, 2019).

A Voice for the Arts

A recent example of formal stakeholder engagement is embedded in the state funding formula for California school districts. California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) with its accompanying Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) details how school districts plan to spend state dollars. It sets out explicit requirements for community engagement. School boards must consult with community members, such as students, teachers, parents, administrators, and other stakeholders while making this plan.

Advocacy organizations such as CreateCA have recognized this as an opportunity for arts education advocates to have a voice in local education, to participate in setting financial goals for their district that include the arts. Similarly, some states have had success in gaining recognition for the arts in their state education plans. In a 2018 report from Education Commission of the States (ECS), 35 percent of all plans address access and participation rates in arts education as part of state accountability and/or reporting systems. These types of actions at the local and state level give arts advocates a voice within a larger system and are foundational for future policy and budgetary action.

In addition, some federal grants and applications for federal funds that include the arts, such as Elementary and Secondary School Relief Funds (ESSER) and Title IV, Part A (Student Support and Academic Assistance), often require community input as part of the application process. Accountability systems required in the adoption of state plans for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESSA) require

Communities of Practice[1] to support needs assessment efforts.

Local community input is also valued in activities such as the adoption of strategic plans for school districts and local cultural arts agencies and the hiring of school superintendents or public arts leaders.

Your Participation Matters

To understand how local school districts and cultural communities are engaged in these efforts and how you can bring a voice for the arts, contact your school district leadership or cultural arts agency to ascertain the process for community engagement. We live in a data driven world—for better or worse. Political campaigns, advertisers, and social media conglomerates track our every move, chasing every dollar and vote. As individuals we look for "likes" and "views" on social media as a sign of legitimacy and click on hashtags to engage.

What does it mean then for us as individuals to engage in meaningful

advocacy that goes beyond the single click or one-time action? While the field is coming around to the idea that advocacy is part of our everyday (not only when we want/need something), we're good at putting it off. The most common barriers to advocacy seem to fall in the "lack of" category: time, knowledge, self-confidence. Perceived obstacles are complicated by the overwhelming tide of advocacy requests as well as the need to assess the veracity of source information. More concerning are the barriers of fear and disenfranchisement. Fear of reprisal is very real for our community, as is a feeling that one's voice doesn't count.

Every congressional office (and likely state office holders as well) has constituent data tracking software for calls, emails, and letters. Elected officials want to know what their constituents are thinking. Not every call will result in a desired outcome, but every point of contact has the potential to result in the desired action. A congressional staffer reported that if there is an issue where the member is undecided, then they will look to the tracker to see if people have called or offered to help them make a decision.

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1   Within the State Support Network of the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, communities of practice (CoPs) focus on the school improvement challenges or topics identified as a result of needs assessments and other feedback from States, districts, and technical assistance partners.

The Power of One

The metrics of engagement are built on a single action. So-called "#hashtag activism," used in conjunction with personal narratives (storytelling) on social media, has the potential to amplify the narrative and create a strong bond between diverse yet like-minded activists (Yang, 2016). See my previous discussion of this topic in Article 2, *The Power of the Individual*.

Here are some ideas for strengthening your advocacy chops and and impacting those metrics:

- Introduce yourself to your school board member or state legislator. Relationships matter. Be prepared to share data and a personal story. (Go to your school district and your state's official websites to identify members.)
- Participate in stakeholder input opportunities, such as when a community hires a new cultural arts leader or a school district superintendent.
- Learn more about the data and research that exists in your community, such as data available through the Arts Education Data Project and State Data Infrastructure Project for Arts Education.
- Participate in grassroots campaigns. One-click campaigns from trusted sources such as national or state advocacy organizations provide an easy entry point for advocates.
- Use social media to leverage good news; use campaign hashtags.
- Join your professional association and/or arts or arts education coalition.
- Volunteer to serve on your district or community planning team.
- Attend school board and/or city council meetings to get a better understanding of how things work.

What is important is your engagement in the process. Find advocacy avenues that fit you and your values. Then push yourself just a little outside of that comfort zone for ever greater impact.

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Creative Generation believes that youth create change. We are a values-driven global collective that collaborates with young creatives and those who cultivate their creativity to take local actions towards global changes in pursuit of a more just world. Founded in 2019, Creative Generation operates five signature programs: The Campaign for a Creative Generation, the Institute for Creative Social Transformation, The Academy for Creative Leadership, the Incubator for Creative Impact, and the Foundation for a Creative Generation. www.Creative-Generation.org

The Creative Generation Journal aims to create a scholarly space to amplify the voices of young creatives and practitioners who catalyze social transformation and document and disseminate promising cultural, education, and social change practices which cultivate creativity in youth.

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Laurie Schell (she/her) serves as the Senior Specialist for Content and Training with a focus on case making and systems change. In this role, she contributes to specific projects related to professional development and curriculum development.

Laurie is founding principal of Laurie Schell Associates | ElevateArtsEd, providing consulting services and issue expertise in arts education. Widely recognized for leadership in the nonprofit and education sectors, Laurie Schell has worked to foster arts education through strategic alliances and partnerships, policy and advocacy campaigns, innovative programs, directed research, and mobilizing constituencies for action.

Ms. Schell served as the the inaugural director of Music Makes Us (2012-2017), the public/private music education initiative in Metro Nashville Public Schools, jointly supported by the mayor's office, music industry, and the school district. During her tenure, participation in music increased to over 60% of the K-12 student population. Forty-five classes were added in 18 schools, with over $5 million raised in private and government funds to augment district funding.

Previously, Ms. Schell was the executive director of the California Alliance for Arts Education (2001 – 2011), where she led a successful campaign to secure a historic $605 million investment in K-12 arts education, co-edited numerous policy papers, and co-created the Insider's Guide to Arts Education Planning, now in its 3rd edition.

Ms. Schell holds a B.A. from Stanford University, an M.A. in Liberal Studies/Dance from Wesleyan University in Connecticut and pursued further studies at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. She currently serves on the board of Save the Music Foundation and ArtsEd Tennessee, a statewide advocacy coalition.