

# The Future Is Ours:

## Lighting the Fire With Preservice Advocacy Experiences

Stephanie Baer

Figure 1. We got this. Power posing in front of the Capitol. Left to right: Mackenzie Mettey, Maria Jose DeSantiago Galan, Ariel Williams, Lily Ellison, Stephanie Baer. Photo credit: Stephanie Danker.

For the past 2 years, I, along with colleagues, have taken a small group of preservice art educators to the National Arts Action Summit (NAAS) in Washington, DC. NAAS is an annual event organized by Americans for the Arts (AFTA) that includes advocacy training and legislative meetings. I teach in a Midwestern, 4-year university art education program. I have come to believe that the teaching of leadership and advocacy skills is as critical as art content and pedagogy for future teachers of visual art. What better way to engage their developing skills than in our nation's capital alongside individuals from all over the country, learning about and educating others on national arts and art education policy? One of my students recently asked me if I thought other teacher education programs emphasized advocacy, or if it was just the arts. I wondered, did they? Shouldn't they? How do we want to situate future K–12 teachers to be agents of change and to promote arts advocacy? How can dispositional traits like confidence and efficacy, needed for art advocacy, be taught as crucial skills in the classroom? While Kletchka (2019) outlined a useful, detailed account of what happens at NAAS, this narrative focuses on the curricular preparation my colleagues and I thought necessary to prepare our students to engage in the events effectively. I highlight important paradigm shifts we experienced as a team of advocates and offer a call to the reader to share their story and consider advocacy as a critical part of the future of art and teaching curriculum.



## The Seeds of Advocacy

One afternoon, I heard a faculty member in the arts management program at my university talking about Arts Advocacy Day hosted by AFTA in Washington, DC, and his intention to attend again that spring. As a professor of art education, I had already actively incorporated confidence building and storytelling into my art education curriculum (Baer, 2017a, 2017b) and encouraged students to be aware of what was going on at a national level. I regularly asked students to identify current news stories in the arts and education and bring them in to analyze in class. They also consistently self- and peer-assessed their professionalism in video-recorded presentations and supplemented their professional development with readings like Angela Duckworth's *Grit* (2016) and Chris Anderson's (2016) *TED Talks*, which offer practical ideas to increase confidence, leadership, and perseverance. Our art education program encouraged students to be field leaders by presenting their work and experiences at local, regional, and national arts and education conferences. Needless to say, something clicked when I heard him describe the exciting NAAS events: boot camp for talking to legislators, an evening at the Kennedy Center, and a morning storming Capitol Hill and lobbying for the arts. The National Art Education Association's (NAEA, 2010) *Learning in a Visual Age* argues that higher education should model the nature of learning for the future. If using the arts and one's voice for change were as important as I preached in the classroom, this was my chance to prove it, and I felt I should include my students. I wanted to join the ranks of others who have advocated for the arts as a critical component of education, interdisciplinarity, and change (Freedman, 2007, 2011).

That 1st year, NAAS was eye-opening. All of us, students and faculty, maintained a deer-in-the-headlights expression for much of the experience, but we did our best to engage and energize alongside the other NAAS participants represented by students, professionals, and lobbyists from all over the country. The students did the best they could with the preparation they received but agreed with faculty on the need for more prepreparation next time. The following year we knew what we had to do.

## Laying the Groundwork for Advocacy

To better prepare our team of students and faculty, we created a series of three preparatory workshops specifically tailored to prepare for NAAS in the spring of 2019. That year, we would be able to bring four art education students and four arts management students as well as faculty from both areas to NAAS. The workshops were designed to prepare students for the Advocacy Boot Camp that occurred on the 1st day, as well as speaking with legislators on the 2nd day.

## Becoming a Team

Freedman (2011) aptly noted that "leadership may take a charismatic leader or leaders to initiate change, but it also requires a distribution of power for lasting change to occur" (p. 41). As university educators, we knew that no matter how active we were as advocates in our own right, the message we had about the importance of art would not continue or spread without creating and then teaching a team of advocate leaders. The first workshop we held was dedicated to the student advocates getting to know one another better and becoming familiar with current legislation involving the arts. The students were coming from both art education and arts management program backgrounds. They needed to find a shared vision for developing their stories and common language for speaking with their legislators. My arts management colleague and seasoned attendee of Arts Advocacy Day led students through the AFTA website and the plethora of resources available there. He gave them a quick rundown of what to expect during the trip to DC and encouraged them to look up their state legislators as well as their voting records. The student advocates needed to know who their audience would be in DC and the best way to deliver their "big ask." The "big ask," we learned, was ultimately what we were asking of the legislators once we shared more personal narratives (i.e., \$167.5 million in funding for the National Endowment for the Arts and \$40 million in funding for arts education programming through the Every Student Succeeds Act). The student advocates were given homework after the first workshop to explore the AFTA site and identify a piece of legislation that was important to them.

## Developing Personal Stories

I led the second workshop a week later, inviting students to construct their 2- to 3-minute stories to share with legislators. The stories needed to be short to facilitate four students speaking in a 20-minute legislative meeting. Intimidating audience aside, this was about helping students find the core of what they believed about the arts and why. What personal experiences led them to feel that way? Why did they hold such beliefs? While this is not an easy connection to make so quickly, we explored "good" storytelling structures (Karia, 2015) by deconstructing commonly known Disney stories and TED Talks. If together, we could identify the parts of a story that created meaning and influence, the students might better build their own stories based on a consideration of the audience. Once the crucial elements of such stories were identified as character, conflict, spark, change in character, and takeaway (Karia, 2015), the student advocates began to identify those elements in their own stories. Often, the most difficult part was identifying those personal, visceral details that would ring

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true to a listener seemingly unconnected to the arts. How could we get others to understand our meaningful, personal experiences?<sup>1</sup> Moreover, how could we use those stories to persuade action and change?

Our student advocates also needed to consider how to share their stories with confidence. In addition to exploring storytelling, I encouraged students to become more aware of their presence. We talked about what made a strong impression and how their physical presence was also a crucial element in telling their stories (Anderson, 2016). Strong gestures, positive facial expressions, confident vocal tonality, and a steady handshake could pave the way for a productive encounter riddled with nervous tension (Cuddy, 2012). I worked with students to introduce themselves quickly, efficiently, and with friendly and engaged strength. They practiced shaking hands with one another and delivering a shorter version of their stories. The student advocates' homework was to complete their story and begin the practice of telling it to others.

### *Testing the Waters*

Student advocates were asked to show up to the final preparatory workshop dressed as they would on Capitol Hill. They would deliver their story in a role-playing situation to a guest. The faculty had invited the executive director of a statewide arts advocacy agency to be the "legislator" to whom each student advocate delivered their message in turn. Several of the students still had some work to do in developing their story or practicing the delivery. However, all clearly had invested important personal connections and were ready to try. As the students shared their short stories, each was met with a round of applause. As a team, they recognized the struggle and growing anxiety that had surfaced as we approached the event, but they empathized with one another and easily supported each other. They saw the larger purpose and could critique one another's attempts with growing individual leadership. They were becoming more acquainted with what so many before them had already articulated about the vital role of arts in the community and other disciplines (Freedman & Stuhr, 2011; Zimmerman, 2012), the role of arts advocates and educators in standing up for needed policy change (Milbrandt, 2012), and how identities can shift as we discover what we believe and what we want for education (Burton, 2012; Hausman, 2011).

Our "legislator" guest provided valuable feedback about both content and delivery. Some stories needed more "umph" with another statistic or two, and others simply needed to be shared in a louder, more confident voice. He then commented that our students would be some of the most well-prepared advocates at Arts Advocacy Day, as they had their stories ready and were already practicing and envisioning what it would be like on Capitol Hill.

### *An Agenda for Change*

Within 2 weeks of our last workshop, we were on the road to Washington, DC. The next few days would be a whirlwind, and the excitement grew the closer we got to Washington. Americans for the Arts hosted the Advocacy Boot Camp the next day, which included several speakers, briefings, and strategy sessions on legislation, then held state meetings to plan the next day's appointments on Capitol Hill. In the middle of the day, I leaned over to one of our students to get a sense of how she felt. "We got this," she said. "We already know a lot of this!"

Arts Advocacy Day arrived, and the culmination of our preparation was a mere Metro ride away. A few power poses (Cuddy, 2012; see Figures 1 and 2) for good measure, and we were ready. I needed to trust that the preparation we worked so hard to structure had given the student advocates what they needed—content and confidence. They had so much to share, and such valuable perspectives that I believed could make a difference.

After the congressional kickoff event, my team set off to our first meeting. We waited in lines, got through metal detectors, and made our way through alarmingly sterile hallways. Each door looked like the next, aside from the nameplate, state flag, and seal. I was careful to make eye contact with each student advocate and asked if they were ready a few too many times. They were ready, they promised.

The first meeting unfolded as it did the previous year, save the more prepared student advocates and faculty this time around. We were met by young interns and aides and asked to wait in the small area by the reception desk. An aide (sometimes it was the legislator's art policy aide, sometimes not) would take us into a back room of the small congressional office where we could all sit down. She apologized for the congressman's absence and verified we were there to talk about the arts. I launched into a short introduction about who we were, where we were from, and how each student had an important message to share. With that, the student advocates took the ball and ran. Their practiced stories flowed together in a beautiful battle cry for arts. They were sincere, informed, and compassionate, weaving their stories together. The aide's response was short but affirmative. It was clear the aide was looking for the "big ask," and often, it was the only time their pen would meet the paper. What exactly were we asking for? \$167.5 million in funding for the National Endowment for the Arts? Yes, and so much more. Sometimes the aides would respond by mentioning how the congresspeople appreciated the arts and how they would pass along our information to them when they returned to the office. My colleague and I finished by thanking the aides as well as the students, and, after taking business cards, got a picture with all of us before leaving. Lily, one of our students, had this to say about the meetings:





Figure 2. We got this. Power posing in office hallways.

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Honestly, it was pretty intimidating leading up to the moment we walked through their door. Our professors reminded us that they want to hear what we have to say, which helped ease my nerves. It felt empowering to be able to take immediate action and go straight to the people who make the rules and advocate for what we need for the arts. (personal communication, March 13, 2019)

Our last meeting that day was with a congressional aide to a congressman who had a poor voting record for supporting the arts. Needless to say, we were not expecting a warm reception. However, as the student advocates were telling their stories, a strange look came across the aide's face. Thinking we might have overstayed our welcome, I braced myself for what might come out of his mouth. Once the last student finished her story, I smiled, looking over at the aide. To my utter shock and delight, the aide said, "So can I tell you *my* story now?" We were all taken aback and replied a bit too enthusiastically, "Yes!" He continued by sharing his own background in theater and how he used to work backstage, learning a great deal from being involved in productions. At that moment, he had a six-person cheering section, excited that we had at least inspired him to remember his own connection to the arts—even if just for a moment.

After a quick lunch, our team joined a few others at the US Department of Education. We heard from a few individuals about educational programming in the arts and federal grant opportunities. We had the opportunity to introduce ourselves; answer questions about our experience in Washington, DC; network with administrators in AFTA and NAEA; and see current K–12 student artwork exhibitions on display. This was yet another opportunity for our student advocates to be part of a wider community of arts advocates—to raise their voices and be seen as students who cared enough to show up.

On the way home, we talked to the students about their incredible accomplishment. We may not see immediate results, but we showed up. We used our voices and our stories to make a difference. We did it not because it was easy, but because it was important. This was the work of an art educator, we told them. We encouraged them to continue their work through leadership in the field. As Freedman (2011) said, "It is time to reclaim the curriculum. To do this, we need creative leadership by teachers, professors, and community educators who are willing to take action" (p. 40). The student advocates had some thoughtful reflections on this:

**Lily:** I think that not everyone realizes just how many ways in which the arts have affected them. Throughout school, my art teachers have been some of the most impactful people in my life whom I have created lifelong relationships with as I have grown up, and are a major part of the reason I am in these fields of study. I can't imagine where I would be without art. Looking back, the arts helped me through periods of struggle that I didn't fully understand I needed at the time. Growing up with the arts has shaped me into the person I am today, and I am delighted to continue to grow and develop as a person through art. I think that every child deserves the opportunity to explore and grow through any form of art.

**Maria:** I feel more empowered. Having the chance to go and meet with legislators on The Hill is an empowering thing. We know that we can advocate and that we have that voice to advocate for education that we are passionate about, but also for other things. I know it's made me think about how I can advocate for other things that I'm passionate about.

**Mackenzie:** It kind of proved to me that like, okay, there's some things I can't change right now, but the fact that I can go and take action immediately, if I want to, just empowers me, and inspires me to go and continue doing it. I feel like this is going to be a domino effect for wanting to get better as a person, as an advocate, and especially just knowing that there are some things I want to improve on myself, so, knowing that I'm at a certain level and I can just keep going up.

**Ariel:** I feel like I actually understand what it is and what it looks like. It's on a whole other level of advocating—it's going there and talking to the people that can change something. So I think I've grown a lot within the past couple months of preparing and then actually doing this. You guys opened my mindset around it all.

### An Important Lesson

During the Advocacy Boot Camp, the master of ceremonies from AFTA made a crucial point concerning a troubling attitude of defeat extended by arts advocates themselves. He told us to stop perpetuating the narrative that the arts are always the first things cut with economic difficulties. Often, he said, we as artists, art teachers, and purveyors of art are the first to lament about the tragedy of the arts being taken away from schools. I know I am guilty of adding to that argument. While, of course, this is true in some places, it is not the national narrative (Americans for the Arts, 2019b). It is not the story we should be telling. We need to be advocating through powerful stories of engagement with the arts. We need to lean on statistics like how 91% of Americans believe

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that the arts are vital to a well-rounded education (Americans for the Arts, 2019a). What this may tell us is that lawmakers and school boards may not have the information they need to advocate for the arts themselves and make the best decisions for our students. They need to hear our stories. They need to see the humans behind the numbers—and hear us articulate the numbers that matter to the argument. It is up to those of us who know and have experienced the power of the arts to teach others (not just our students) about it.

To advocate well and in a way that invites listeners rather than repels them, we need to carefully craft and practice our stories and then tell them. We need to be an informed community willing and able to inform others. We cannot expect others to fight for us or argue on our behalf. All of our voices matter, and each story adds complexity and richness to a discourse in need of authentic narratives. It is also important to shift our perspective from an “us versus them” mentality: those who love and appreciate the arts versus those who cut them from schools and communities. It is not that simple. We need to be teaching students that advocacy is a complex process with many factors and variables, but the constant is their belief in and dedication to how the arts have changed their lives. Their stories can be a catalyst.

After returning from NAAS, I was helping a student revise his ARTed Talk (Baer, 2017b) that he would deliver at the end of the term. His message was about how his high school art class had taught him more than he knew at the time. He learned about social-emotional intelligence and how to communicate effectively with peers. When he first came to me with his script, he had written about how sad it was that the arts were disappearing from schools. However, after shifting my perspective about perpetuating a negative outlook about the arts, I encouraged him to reconsider his approach. I talked to him about how our state department of education had adopted art as part of a “well-rounded curriculum.”

It is not everything we want for students in our state, but it is a move in the right direction. He reworked that part of his message, and I was surprised by the hope in his talk as a result. In essence, that is what we are asking of lawmakers when we advocate. We are asking them to shift their perspective and listen to someone else’s story for a moment. See the world from my eyes. Feel what I feel.

The better and more practiced our stories are, the more easily others can shift their perspectives; the more we can invite others in through purposeful advocacy curriculum, acknowledging the diversity of our audiences, the more accessible our message becomes. If we believe the arts truly are for everyone, we have set ourselves the task of telling that story to anyone who will listen. As a teacher educator, I work to engage new generations of arts educators to be leaders who tell powerful stories. The momentum I have experienced with this focused curriculum on leadership and advocacy is generative and exciting and must begin before students enter the field as practitioners. Preservice teachers and novice educators have as much to contribute to the future of art curriculum as any veteran teacher (Baer, 2019). We need to teach our students and future teachers how to develop and embrace their leadership and ability to advocate. The habits we begin in the classroom, whether it is appreciating the arts or telling a powerful story, will build a strong foundation for the future of art education. The next generation must be ready to stand up and share how their lives tell the story of the power of art. As one student aptly said on the car ride back from DC, “I know I am on fire. Can you say the same?”

For more specific advocacy and storytelling resources, see Baer (2019). ■

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See NAEA’s *Advocacy White Papers for Art Education*: [www.arteducators.org/advocacy-policy/advocacy-white-papers-for-art-education](http://www.arteducators.org/advocacy-policy/advocacy-white-papers-for-art-education).

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