

The Importance of Understanding the Difference

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This column by the ALSC Advocacy and Legislation Committee replaces the Everyday Advocacy column written by Jenna Nemece-Loise. This committee is focused on empowering and supporting advocacy and legislation efforts on behalf of libraries, children, and families!

To say I was terrified of advocating and lobbying is an understatement. Before joining the ALSC Advocacy and Legislation Committee in 2016, I didn't understand the difference between advocacy and lobbying. I assumed they were one in the same. This is not true! Understanding this difference will help library advocates become more comfortable and successful in their efforts.

So, what is the difference?

The simple difference is this: Advocacy is supplying policymakers with information that demonstrates your library's value. Lobbying is asking policymakers to vote a specific way in support of libraries.

Anyone and everyone can become an advocate. Advocacy is about educating policymakers on issues that affect the lives of people at the local, state, and national levels. By making our voices loud and clear and sharing our library stories, policymakers are empowered to find impactful solutions to problems we are constantly facing, like budget cuts.

Lobbying, on the other hand, is about influencing a vote in legislation. It's making a specific ask of policymakers to support or oppose a bill that has been introduced to legislation.

A common misconception is that library employees are not allowed to engage in advocacy because employees of a nonprofit or government organization are prohibited from lobbying. But don't be fooled—advocating is not lobbying.

Feel empowered to share your stories and engage with your policy-making stakeholders to help them understand the library's value in children's and families' lives. This isn't about keeping our jobs. This is about providing children and families with the best support and library services we can possibly give.

While we CAN advocate on work time, we CANNOT lobby on work time. While on the clock, we cannot make a specific ask of legislators to vote one way or another.

However, this should never stop us from lobbying on our own time. Advocacy and lobbying, although different, complement each other. Our advocacy efforts will have a better chance to reach their full potential if we take the extra step to lobby and make specific asks of policymakers. They need each other to truly flourish. To be most effective, we should consistently advocate the value of libraries and lobby to make specific asks of our policymakers. Let's make them well aware of the positive impact we make on society and the necessity of our institutions!

Here are a few examples of advocacy activities vs. lobbying activities.¹

Advocacy

- Contacting your representative of Congress to explain how children and families were positively impacted by a federally funded grant, such as the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA).
- Educating your member of Congress about the effects of a policy on the children and families in your community.
- Inviting city council members to your library to show them specific services and programs for children and families, demonstrating their value and worth.
- Asking your volunteers, Friends of the Library organization, and/or library foundation to speak on your behalf to your stakeholders and policymakers.

Lobbying

- Asking your member of Congress to vote for, against, or amend a specific bill that has been introduced to legislation. For example, asking your Congressman to support the Museum and Library Services Act of 2017 that would reauthorize IMLS. This is statute MLSA (S. 2271).
- Emailing your friends, family, and acquaintances and urging them to contact their members of Congress in support of or against a piece of introduced legislation.

- Preparing materials or organizing events in support of lobbying activities, such as writing elevator speeches that ask policymakers to support or oppose a piece of legislation.
- Attending your state’s Library Legislative Day.

There’s a lot you can do to get started:

- Everyday Advocacy has made library advocacy work simple, fun, and empowering.² Become an Everyday Advocate today and start making advocacy part of your daily work.
- Subscribe to ALA’s District Dispatch (www.districtdispatch.org). This will give up-to-date information on national-level library policy, such as MLSA (S. 2271), from ALA’s Washington office. District Dispatch conveniently lays out the actions you can take to contact your legislators and congressmen about important library policy. This is lobbying made quick and simple for all.

Lastly, the ALSC Advocacy and Legislation Committee will be presenting at the 2018 ALSC National Institute this September in Cincinnati, Ohio. We hope to meet you in person and discuss all things advocacy and legislation. Go forth, fellow advocates, and lobby your hearts out! 🗣️

References

1. Adapted from YALSA’s 2017 Advocacy Toolkit: <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/sites/ala.org.yalsa/files/content/2017%20Advocacy%20Toolkit.pdf>.
2. “Everyday Advocacy,” American Library Association, accessed March 20, 2018, <http://www.ala.org/everyday-advocacy/>.

Index to Advertisers

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