

# Developing Political Activism Awareness: An Interview with Jack Trammell

By Tamara Harper Shetron



*Dr. Jack Trammell's contribution to the field of education encompasses a variety of areas with one common denominator: equal access to higher education for all. He currently serves as the director of Disability Support Services at Randolph-Macon*

*College in Ashland, VA, where he is also an assistant professor, teaching Disability Studies in the Sociology Department. Dr. Trammell serves as the College Reading and Learning Association's (CRLA) Political Advocacy Committee representative to the Council of Learning Assistance and Developmental Education Associations (CLADEA). Over the past decade, Dr. Trammell has become a leading expert in helping postsecondary educators develop political activism awareness. Dr. Trammell obtained his undergraduate degree in political science from Grove City College, PA and his master's degree in Social Studies Instruction and Doctorate in Research and Evaluation from Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA. He has published over 24 books and numerous articles including his most recent publication *With Justice for All: A History of Disabilities in America* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, in press).*

**Tamara Shetron (T.S.):** Currently you serve as the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) Political Advocacy Committee (PAC) liaison to the Council for Learning Assistance and Developmental Education Associations (CLADEA). Can you explain what your duties are in this position and how these organizations benefit from having a PAC liaison?

**Jack Trammell (J.T.):** I've been a long time CRLA member and in this position, I gather and disseminate information about issues that have political aspects to them. These are issues that I feel might be of interest to people like me in disability support, or people in DE (developmental education), or people with tutoring programs and other types of learning assistance programs. My job is to try

to sift through, prioritize, and share information with people and also to think about ways that we can be more politically astute within our organization. My primary duties are to be a conduit for that information to go to CLADEA and for reaction and policy from CLADEA to go back to CRLA and to people I interact with. I also see this as an opportunity to highlight a personal axe I have to grind: get disability in higher education.

Both organizations benefit primarily by not working in a vacuum. CLADEA's purpose is to bring together resources and common interests and communication between sister organizations that should, and in fact do, have a lot in common with each other. They should demonstrate common cause in the political arena, in media, and so on. Part of the role of the PAC position is to keep that information flowing back and forth and to keep up the energy for being politically active and politically interested.

I have also seen this role as an opportunity for me to actually be an advocate, be out there meeting politicians, meeting with power brokers, interacting with administrators at other universities and in other systems, and so on. For me, it's also been a happy marriage of opportunity to talk to people in positions of authority and power about how disability intersects developmental education, learning assistance, and higher education.

**T.S.:** Judyth Sachs (2000), a leading scholar in educational political activism, stated that the main questions educators should ask themselves regarding activism are: "What is the best place to accomplish the project of becoming activist professionals in teaching?" "What is the best place for ME to be?" "What can I do from where I am?" (p. 78). Referring to Sachs's questions, can you describe your political activism from these three perspectives?

**J.T.:** In answer to the first question, the best place to accomplish the project of becoming political activist professionals in teaching is in your classroom. By that, I don't mean that you should be radically active in your classroom protesting or enlisting your students to protest or to become political activists. There may be situations in which this is

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*What is the best place to accomplish the project of becoming activist professionals in teaching?*

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appropriate, but what I mean is that you should pay attention to what's happening in your classroom, what your learning objectives are, and how they intersect with the issues that are out there.

Another aspect of this is that for many people the leap between the classroom and being out in the activism world seems like a chasm or a canyon, but actually it's not. Activism and political astuteness begin with really understanding what is happening in your classroom and starting to think of how it intersects with bigger issues such as wider trends that are taking place in education, in congress and state legislatures, and in councils of higher education doing work with developmental education and learning assistance.

Addressing the second question, what is the best place for me to be, other than working with students the best place to be is where you can connect with people who don't know what you do in order to help them understand your work. This may be with people in your university who don't understand your learning center very well or who don't understand the primary mission, purpose, and theoretical foundation of developmental education. As you become more comfortable and more able to move around fluidly, it may be meeting with your state or U.S. representative or any place you may be able to get information to people and where your activism might make a difference.

And, finally, what can I do from where I am? Again, I would encourage people to think in terms of the fact that you can't change the world in a moment; you can't automatically get an audience with the most important decision makers, but what can you do from where you are? Identify people or groups within your reach who don't know what they need to know about what you are doing. Start where you're comfortable interacting with people who don't know that much about what you're doing: that may be the office right next to yours, or it may be the state house. There is a comfort level and there is a need. You have to kind of balance these two factors.

**T.S.:** How do these questions relate to you in your position with disability support at Randolph Macon?

**J.T.:** From a disability support standpoint, the best place for me to be is working with students with disabilities because that really gives me a handle on where the tire hits the pavement and where policy and decisions make a difference in students' lives. The best place for me to accomplish the project of being an activist is to look outside my office door and in my institution, my community, my state, and my region to identify places where people and groups don't understand the kinds of experiences and barriers that students with disabilities are facing.

As far as what I can do, I realize that my time and resources are limited, but I feel like I can get some information into the hands of some of these people who need it whether they are in the office right next to me or down the road in Richmond where the state council meets. So that's a short version of how that would work in terms of disability support and my job.

**T.S.:** Bottery (1996) defined professionalism as being made up of three components: (a) expertise (the possession by an occupational group of exclusive knowledge and practice), (b) altruism (an ethical concern by this group for its clients), and (c) autonomy (the professional's need and right to exercise control over, entry into, and subsequent practice within, that particular occupation). Addressing each component individually, can you talk about how Bottery's concept of professionalism translates to real life political action for DE professionals?

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**J.T.:** Bottery's structure is a good one for thinking about the need and the imperative for political activism. The exclusive knowledge is the key piece. People making decisions don't have access to that exclusive knowledge. Decision makers draw their knowledge from particular information channels and networks, and that knowledge is not exclusive and not always based on best practice. I think the key thing is that as practitioners, we have knowledge that needs to be in other people's hands.

The ethical part of it is key. There is a moral imperative consistent with Bottery that says professionals should do all they can to get specialized information into the hands of the decision makers. Some people might argue that it's enough to go into their office and into their classroom and impact students in a day-to-day way that's meaningful, and that they can't take on the rest of the world. But I think Bottery's theory also suggests that in a lot of cases that may not be enough; there may be an ethical and a moral imperative to get this information to the right people, the decision makers. If you don't, decisions will be made that are likely to constrict, restrict, and dictate the way you do your work in the developmental education classroom or with students with disabilities or in learning centers. And then you have become a victim of

your own unwillingness to make sure appropriate information gets in the hands of others.

**T.S.:** With much educational research being funded by private corporations, such as The Gates and Lumina Foundations (Casazza, & Silverman, 2013), whose attention should educators be trying to attract?

**J.T.:** I realize that America as a country is built on economic freedom and capitalism and the profit motive, and education has traditionally struggled to understand how it should relate to capitalism. I would be very much delighted in the resources that are possibly connected to that culture, but I would also be leary of what kind of changes and filters that information would go through as a result of that. So, I tend to advocate for increased funding through the NSF (National Science Foundation), through the Department of Education, and through resources that have some degree of removal from the profit motive. Recognizing that foundations and corporate entities certainly have the lion's share of the money to fund some of these initiatives, I would still engage such sources but proceed with caution.

**T.S.:** What is the difference between the way an educator would approach a politician versus a private corporation?

**J.T.:** The difference is very obvious to me. Educators get a salary and job benefits, but I would say that 90 to 95% of the people who work in the trenches of DE, disability support, and learning assistance are not in it in large part due to the profit. We have research interests, we enjoy teaching in the classroom, and we love working with students who need to gain entry and access to higher education. There are many motives that influence what we do, but typically, the profit motive is not listed at the top of them; therefore, I am very distrustful of information that comes out of the profit-driven process.

**T.S.:** Does DE have current political strength, and, if so, how would you describe it? Is it coming from individuals, organizations? Locally or nationally?

**J.T.:** I think DE and DSS professionals along with everyone in the learning assistance business do have political strength, but I think it's sorely underrepresented and utilized. Strength may be a word that is anomalous at this point. I'm not sure that strength has been tapped into nearly the way it should be, and right now it exists primarily in the form of several large schools that have an impact on policy. For example, the California Community College system is a system with political clout that does impact California and, to an extent, the national

conversation. I think that there are individuals, like Hunter Boylan, who are highly respected in terms of their political views and their analysis of the landscape. I think the strength comes from individuals and some organizations like CLADEA that are attempting to have a voice at the table.

By and large, I would say there is a huge potential for both professionals and organizations in the field to have a strong political impact that we haven't tapped into, and that's where CLADEA wants to develop resources and people.

**T.S.:** When DE professionals speak out, how can they make sure that they are not misrepresenting or creating a conflict of interest with their institution?

**J.T.:** It's important that you have a canned statement that you use all the time. It seems a little bit cliché, but it's a good thing to be thinking about all the time. You can't represent your university in one sense because your university is typically not even represented by the president and members of the board. It's a much bigger entity, and so when you speak out, it's best that you speak out from your position as an individual with your specialized information. In most cases, it's appropriate to state overtly that you're not representing the views of the institution, but that you're representing your interpretation of this information from your experience.

Developmental education, disability services, and learning center professionals should understand that just because they can't represent an institution publicly doesn't mean they can't have an opinion. You do not give up your free speech rights when you become a learning professional. There may be some odd cases when you sign a nondisclosure form specifically related to some aspects of your work, and, of course, this does not trump those kinds of legal understandings or agreements, but in general terms, you do not give up your voice when you become a learning center specialist or a developmental educator. Educators are still allowed to have an opinion, but individuals need to be very overt in saying I'm not representing the institution; this is me and my experience.

**T.S.:** Malcolm Gladwell, (2010), *New York Magazine* staff writer and author of *Blink* and *The Tipping Point* states, "[social media] makes it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact." Are there effective ways for DE professionals to use web-based communication such as social media?

**J.T.:** I think that social media makes it easier for activists' expression to have an impact. Anybody who studies the web realizes that the YouTube video that goes viral is something that couldn't happen in the old world where movie making was

controlled completely by the Hollywood cartel. The Hollywood cartel still exists, but YouTube is also a place where many – but certainly not all – a famous commercial, video, or home movie has been able to reach a wide audience and to have an impact.

Democracy is built on constituency, and it's built on the power of numbers. Jefferson feared the tyranny of this majority, but democracy is built on the power of the majority. I would say that social media not only makes it easier for activists to express themselves, but it makes it easier for them to develop a majority force and have an impact. The caveat is not to expect that everything you do will have that kind of viral impact. If learning assistance professionals were tweeting and Facebook posting on political issues in education in their states, 90% of it would be lost in the shuffle, but the key legislator who was a friend and picked up on something from another educator's Facebook page or blog about things in higher education, could make a difference.

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**T.S.:** DE professionals often serve marginalized student populations such as those underserved by their previous educational experience. Marginalized populations tend to have the least amount of political acumen. Should DE instructors encourage students to become more involved in our political process? What ways can their voices be heard regarding their experiences with DE?

**J.T.:** I think educators should encourage students to be involved in the political process. The danger is that we might sway them or influence them by our own views and, as instructors, administrators, and teachers, we always have to try to balance what we think would be a teachable moment with pushing our own views and our own agenda. We should not teach students to believe or think how we do for the sake of forwarding the cause. On the other hand, I think that without students being actively involved in this political process, our job is a lot harder because students are coming through DE and they're being impacted by these policies. They're being impacted by the information the decision makers have, and I think it would be against our best interests not to encourage them to be involved. But, we have to do that in a way that

is transparent and not an attempt to use students as a front for our own political agenda. That would be a mistake.

In general terms, we should encourage students to be active because the experiences that they are having are dictated by politically driven processes. All education constituents – administrators, faculty, staff, and students – should be more engaged in politics, and some of these students will be in positions of influence after they're out of school. In terms of the way their voices can be heard, I think it is appropriate to use mixed methodology in assessing DE, disability support, and learning center success. Currently, we have a push for data driven decision making, but there's not necessarily a reason that the data-driven process can't involve the qualitative experiences of the students that are coming through our programs. That should not be, of course, the sole means of assessing and driving the conversation. Given what we know about how quantitative processes work in so many data-driven funding processes, we are the ones who are in a position to push the other side of that data coin, so to speak, which are these real life experiences and the difficulty of accommodating diverse learners in higher education. We hear them all the time, and we have an obligation to help others hear those voices too.

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