

THE LEGISLATIVE POWER OF STORYTELLING

By Kariny Contreras-Nuñez

Over the past two years, the Indiana affiliate's Government Relations Committee (GRC) has undergone a metamorphosis.

As co-chair, I've had the opportunity to witness our once largely inactive committee grow by 250 percent, launch an advocacy certificate series to train affiliate members, and hold its inaugural state advocacy day—all within the span of 24 months.

Just as importantly, our affiliate has embraced storytelling as an important advocacy tool. In meetings with state legislators during our advocacy day, it became clear that coupling quantitative information with qualitative storytelling rendered a more lasting impact. And to share the most compelling stories possible, we needed to ensure our committee included professionals with a multitude of perspectives and life experiences.

USING STORIES TO BUILD EMPATHY AND UNDERSTANDING

To illustrate this point, let me share a couple examples where we witnessed the power of storytelling.

During our affiliate's advocacy day, one of the items we discussed with lawmakers was Indiana Senate Bill 54, which proposed requiring all high school seniors to file the FAFSA. As many of us know, high school counselors are already overwhelmed by the numerous responsibilities that fall within their purview. The original draft of the proposal would have required additional work and effort on the part of the counselor, particularly those working in districts with high student-to-counselor ratios.

Although we shared data on student-to-counselor ratios by district in the state of Indiana, legislators found those numbers more compelling when intertwined with accounts from our high school counselors. One of our public high school counselors provided a typical daily schedule that walked legislators through the numerous tasks she must tackle. This provided context and a deeper level of understanding beyond the data sets. It was easy to see the lawmakers' disposition shift toward empathy as high school counselors shared their stories. This ultimately culminated in various amendments to the bill promptly after our advocacy day.

Another example was House Bill 1086, which proposed that all students in the state of Indiana qualify for in-state tuition, regardless of their immigration status, as

long as they could prove they had resided in the state for at least a year. Although the bill ultimately did not pass, our discussions with legislators again spoke to the importance of personal narrative in giving a face to the numbers. Storytelling provided a deeper understanding of an undocumented student's milieu.

One of our counselors within the Indianapolis Public School system shared stories of students at the top of their high school class who were unable to attend college because they did not meet the requirements for in-state tuition due to the complexities of their legal status. In one case, a student was mostly unaware of their legal status until the point of filling out their college application.

I personally shared the story of a close high school friend who was undocumented and, as a result, could not attend many of the schools to which she applied. Though we were ranked next to one another, our postsecondary options varied widely. At the majority of schools to which she applied and was accepted, her status ultimately prevented her from enrolling. And her story, sadly, is not unique. Millions of individuals with untapped potential continue to reside in the only land they have known to be home, but remain unable to fully access the

GET INVOLVED!

The government relations committees (GRCs) serving NACAC's 23 affiliates are in need of professionals who work with students, or are themselves, from marginalized communities. Your involvement helps give a face to those most directly impacted by our advocacy issues.

Given the current societal crossroads, it is imperative to bring a multitude of perspectives into our legislative policy and advocacy work. GRCs are distinctive in that they look externally beyond our association and institutions, focusing instead on the legislative bodies whose policies affect our profession and our students.

These committees are uniquely positioned, at both the state and national level, to help those in marginalized communities—making it vital that we have inclusive representation.

At the Indiana ACAC, we've seen how firsthand knowledge and personal stories can play an invaluable role in advocacy work. I urge you to reach out to your affiliate today to learn how you can lend your voice to the important work happening in your state or region.

transformative powers of higher education. And that group grows larger with each graduating class.

Although some of the legislators we spoke with on that day held opposing views on HB1086, they listened and empathized with the unique circumstances surrounding this population. By shifting the attention to specific individuals affected by these issues, we gave a face to the millions of people facing this struggle. Qualitative information coupled

with quantitative analysis provides insight into the scope of the problem and the severity with which it has impacted individual lives.

THE WORK AHEAD: EXPANDING OUR ORGANIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

There are, of course, potential dangers when using anecdotal evidence. Stories are limited in perspective and can be misleading as they only account for the experience of the storyteller. Additionally, the storyteller has privilege as it is their perspective being showcased. Narrow perspectives can be propagated by either an individual or an organization's collective frame of reference. After all, an individual can only attest to their experiences and could be biased by such. Similarly, an organization or advocacy group can be hindered

NACAC WANTS TO SPOTLIGHT YOUR AFFILIATE'S WORK!

NACAC and its 23 affiliates share a common mission to serve and support the needs of the admission counseling professionals and the students we serve. Your affiliate broadens NACAC's awareness of your regional and statewide needs—we greatly value affiliates' guidance as we expand our work together.

Does your affiliate have a project, program, or model NACAC and other affiliates should know about? Do you love your tech? Your committee system? Your conference? How are you solving problems and building community? We'd love to feature your wins here.

Please send your inquiries or articles to the editor at journal@nacacnet.org.

by a homogeneous composition. Homogeneity in an organization exacerbates concerns of narrative privilege, especially if the storyteller's experiences are unchecked by data or reason.

To resolve these potential conflicts we must first emphasize the importance of supporting personal stories with quantitative information. Data can give us information on the larger scope of the issue, mitigating concerns of a narrowed perspective. Next, we can work to make sure that our organization is composed of individuals representing myriad perspectives in the transition from high school to college.

Many of the policy issues we advocate on are narrowly represented within our organization, regional affiliates, and GRCs. Consider the types of students most often impacted by high student-to-counselor ratios, undocumented status, poor curricula, or need-based financial aid assistance. These students are likely in low socioeconomic, ethnic, or racial minority groups, and may be enrolled in public high schools with limited funding. Oftentimes, those who can speak to these student experiences are counselors who are already burdened by large caseloads and may not be a part of our national or regional organizations due to cost. Moreover, professionals on the college side who can speak to these policy issues tend to specialize in educational equity or diversity recruitment, and many are already involved in numerous internal-facing diversity and equity committees at the institutional and affiliate levels.

To improve our national and state advocacy work,

I would like to invite all counselors from underfunded school districts and all professionals who specialize in diversity, equity, and inclusion at colleges and universities to connect with your local affiliate's government relations chair. It is only through your perspectives that we can provide lawmakers with personal testimony...

GRCs must create broader and more representative coalitions. The first step is to encourage more individuals from underrepresented backgrounds to join our organization—secondary school counselors in underfunded districts—while being conscious of the fact that they're already overworked. Alternatively, GRCs can partner with secondary school counseling organizations. Moreover, and most importantly, we should encourage professionals who work closely with marginalized populations or who have experienced these challenges directly to become involved in their regional affiliate's GRC. By expanding our organizational perspective and coupling these stories with data, we can resolve the conflicts that can arise from narrative privilege.

I would like to invite all counselors from underfunded school districts and all professionals who specialize in diversity, equity, and inclusion at colleges and universities to connect with your local affiliate's government relations chair. It is only through your perspectives that we can provide lawmakers with personal testimony on the effects of high student-to-counselor ratios; the scope of the challenges faced by Black, Indigenous, and students of color; and the ways students from

rural and low-socioeconomic backgrounds are hindered by a lack of opportunity.

You may be overwhelmed by the idea of getting involved in a government relations committee. You may feel unsure of where to start or worry you are ill-prepared or already have too much on your plate. Please know that it is our pleasure to bring you into the fold. We can equip you with the necessary skills and data sets to complement your experiences working with students from marginalized populations. I also recognize that many of the individuals we most need are already involved in numerous organizations to promote these initiatives either within their institution or regional affiliate. If you are in this predicament, consider shifting involvements or engaging minimally with your GRC to start. Additionally, the onus should not rest solely on the shoulders of BIPOC professionals. If you know a colleague who would be able to speak on our policy initiatives and is interested in advancing our work, please encourage them to join as well. [↗](#)

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