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My Life at the Arts Council of Richmond
or
An Analysis of A Senior Project on Advocacy
by
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Senior Project
Jepson School of Leadership Studies
University of Richmond
Richmond, VA

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My Life at the Arts Council of Richmond

or

An Analysis of A Senior Project on Advocacy

**Laura Yeatts
Senior Seminar
Dr. Hickman
April 20, 1994**

Advocacy Introduction

Arts advocacy consumed my life first semester, and I decided to continue my work with this issue this semester for my senior project. I did not feel that I had completed the work I set out to do at the Arts Council first semester, and that advocacy was too important to me to give up. In addition, I felt part of the staff “family” of the Arts Council and wanted to contribute and learn more. I have always been interested in education, and I was excited about the innovative arts in education plan the first time I heard about it. The senior project presented me with an opportunity to develop further my advocacy abilities as well as work on a project of my interest.

People often ask me what advocacy means and what I do as an arts advocate. Advocacy entails different activities, dependent on the issue, but all types of advocacy have certain characteristics in common. Advocacy is promoting one’s chosen cause by creating publicity, calling and writing legislators or others in power, developing programs to show off your cause, etc. The goal of all advocacy is to garner support from a wide range of people, especially those who can influence the success of your efforts. Most often that means influencing legislators who control

public funding and business leaders who make up the bulk of private funding. Advocacy takes place at the grass roots level with community canvassing or at the national and international level with massive campaigns.

Arts advocacy is a particular type of advocacy which focuses on the arts, whether visual, performing, or another creative endeavor. I never thought that I would enjoy advocacy, since I am often uncomfortable approaching people in a typical fundraising manner, such as calling people for money. I have learned that advocacy involves much more and is more sophisticated and complex than one might think. Many people think that while the arts are good, they are not as important as a police budget or education. The key for arts advocates is to show that the arts are crucial to the survival of our society, and that the arts can be integrated into all aspects of society. Moreover, the feeling is often that the arts are only for the elite and should be supported only with their money. One of my pet projects has been to work on ways to show the “average” person that the arts are accessible to him or her and can be meaningful to anyone. Advocates must make the arts a focus of the community, state, and nation, so that resources and an audience will be available.

Much of the work of the Arts Council has an underlying advocacy

basis. Of course, that is also a great deal of my focus, so I am perhaps biased in this regard. But the festivals and visual arts exhibitions are able to occur only with the financial support gained from effective advocacy, and they in turn provide exposure that is also a form of advocacy. As a “liaison” between other arts organizations and the community, the Arts Council also acts as an advocate for the arts in general, to assist the smaller organizations with gaining recognition and backing. Without effective advocacy, the arts would suffer.

The Setting of the Arts Council

The Arts Council of Richmond, Inc. is a local arts agency that provides both programming and services in the arts. Some of the events held during the year include The Children's Festival, June Jubilee, an auction, and Run for the Arts. In addition, the Arts Council presents services such as displaying artwork in the Richmond Airport and in local businesses, sponsoring programs in schools, and acting as a liaison with other arts organizations and the community. The organization is small for its wide range of activities, with only seven paid staff members and occasional volunteers.

The overall development and major decisions of the organization are controlled by a board consisting of community leaders, business people, and interested arts enthusiasts. The Director of the Arts Council, Adrienne Hines, works closely with the board members, as do any staff members coordinating functions with a board committee chair. Funding for the organization comes from several sources, including national, state, and local public funding, corporate sponsors at events, private donations, and any money made from events. I am perhaps the longest-running intern with the organization, since most interns are only there for

short periods of time or less hours a week.

One of the advantages of working in an organization like this one lies in the mix between creative expression and professional attitude. Moreover, the staff makes a concentrated effort to empower each other to complete duties, even with an untrained intern. There is a great spirit of cooperation which makes it both an enjoyable and a challenging place to work. In order to gain the most from interning at the Arts Council, one should take the initiative and offer to help even on projects unrelated to one's particular assignments.

Developments Leading up to the Senior Project

In order to understand the work I did on my senior project, it is beneficial to explain the developments within the Arts Council and my own role at the office before second semester. As stated previously, the Arts Council spearheads a new and different arts and education plan, which was recently named *Partners in the Arts* in recognition of its new status as a fully-realized program. This program is run by committees composed of artists, teachers, arts organizations representatives, business people, community volunteers, and others. The Arts Council as the initiator and leader of the program controls a large part of the program's overall plan and activities, but the organization must be careful not to appear to step on anyone's toes (power). *Partners in the Arts* will be a leading program of its kind in the nation, improving the quality of education for all students in the Richmond community.

One of the key sources of funding for this program came from the National Endowment for the Arts, which awarded the Arts Council and the arts and education plan the number one rank among local arts agency grant applicants. Accompanying this rank was a monetary award of \$150,000 over three years to start the pilot program; Adrienne received news of

this great accomplishment in late February. Funds had already been promised from other public and private sources, but the grant was a major boost. It is almost a Catch-22: in order to get the NEA money, we had to show community support and financial backing, but we needed the NEA grant as an incentive in community fundraising.

Several events occurred during first and second semester to advocate for this program, such as a day-long celebration of student art and participation by the arts organizations in the schools. This event was designed to show that the arts and education plan can only enhance and organize the existing programs in the schools; several organizations were concerned about losing their unique relationships with one or two schools. One aspect of advocacy is making sure that everyone buys into the issue at hand, so these events were crucial to achieving this goal.

I was not involved directly first semester in *Partners in the Arts*, although I stayed on the periphery by asking questions and participating in office discussions whenever possible. In fact, a reporter asked me about the plan one day when we were meeting on another issue; I expressed my faith and excitement in the program but fortunately could not offer much else concrete. I later found out that the controversy among the arts organizations was greater than I believed, and this reporter wanted to

gain some scoop from an unsuspecting intern.

I did gain valuable experience with other advocacy projects last semester, such as running an arts promotional campaign for Richmond in January and coordinating efforts with other arts representatives on a state and national campaign. In addition, I assisted Adrienne in gaining the support of legislators through letter campaigns, organizing visits during the General Assembly, and other advocacy projects. I also attended several meetings dealing with advocacy, so I would better understand its importance as well as know pertinent information when acting as an advocate. These projects kept me in close contact with Adrienne, who empowered me in several instances to act on my own. I also worked with Sally, the development and fundraising director, as well as other members of the staff.

At the end of the first semester, I was busy working on the Metro Richmond Arts and Humanities Month promotional campaign for January, as well as finishing other projects. Moreover, I wanted to move into a new phase of advocacy focusing on assignments related to *Partners in the Arts*, as well as continue to work in the political arena of advocacy. Adrienne believed that I would be of assistance to her as she concentrated her efforts on following through with the state and national legislatures.

The whole organization was gearing up for a busy few months working on *Partners in the Arts*, and Adrienne and I agreed that it would be a good phase for me to enter in advocacy. I could bring my skills and experience (though admittedly limited!) to promoting the arts and education plan as it neared the pilot stage. Adrienne and I discussed possible responsibilities in the new framework of a senior project, and we were both excited about my continuation as an “intern” (This is the easiest term to use in the office and when explaining my role at the Arts Council to those not familiar with the senior project. In fact, I know that most of the staff is not aware or has forgotten that I worked this semester with a slightly different focus, so they continue to use the term “intern”). I worked over vacation on my pet projects and prepared to enter a new phase of **My Life as an Arts Council Intern.**

Senior Project Description

My senior project consisted of a variety of tasks under the umbrella of advocacy, mainly championing the *Partners in the Arts* program. I have difficulty explaining all that I did on a weekly basis, mainly because it appears to be small and separate tasks that are unrelated. The key for me and for those who read about my project to remember is that no task is unimportant in an organization, although it may seem meaningless at the time. I do admit that I experienced frustration at times this semester when I felt “out of the loop” at the office because I was not there as often as last semester. I also believe that this lack of time hindered my ability to accomplish significant levels of complex work, since I could not complete these types of assignments during a few hours a week. In addition, I knew that I would have difficulty creating a significant body of work that other seniors developed over the semester, or making a significant contribution that I felt was needed for this project.

Nevertheless, my senior project consisted of the following broad assignments:

- **General Assembly:** coordinate Letters to the Editor and additional editorial support for the Virginia Commission for the Arts, assist with responses to General Assembly action on the VCA budget, assist the Director with planning Arts Council participation in Arts Advocacy Day in the General Assembly.
- ***Partners in the Arts:*** assist with the creation of guest lists and invitations for the Jane Alexander luncheon in March, create schedule of speakers, assist Director with seating arrangements and contacts with important contributors, work on set-up of event on that day, including running registration table, compose letters to guests, sponsors, volunteers, board members, legislators and others after the event, assist with creation of packets of media releases and pertinent information sent along with letters, arrange meetings with VA Congressmen from the Richmond area in May to promote the luncheon and *Partners in the Arts* as part of an overall arts advocacy process.
- **Work on a variety of miscellaneous assignments as needed:** assist with golf tournament that raises funds for children's programs, help with large mailings, attend board meetings and other events with Adrienne and other

staff to provide my observations, complete remaining assignments from first semester.

One of the ironic aspects of this list of assignments is that I still feel as if I am leaving out work I performed as part of this project. Most of my responsibilities are detail-oriented, as a result of working with Adrienne. She creates the idea usually, and I do the organizational aspects of the project. Moreover, as I will discuss in more detail later, most of my assignments place me in the role of follower rather than leader, but that is also a role every leader needs to practice at some time. Assisting the Executive Director is by no means a slack job for any intern; Adrienne gave me a great deal of responsibility based on my time limitation. I did have opportunities to be more creative and act on my own entirely, mainly in dealing with the General Assembly and doing follow-up work for the Jane Alexander luncheon. One of the skills I have learned is to emulate Adrienne's style of writing when developing letters for her; she is a dramatic person and the letters I write have to reflect that.

One of the characteristics of working at the Arts Council as an intern is that one never knows what to expect on a daily basis. Occasionally I am able to walk in and escape to my cubicle to finish work

Relationship to Courses

Part of drawing conclusions about the senior project is to relate it to what I have learned in my classes in the past two years. Not all of the courses relate directly to my senior project, and others I will discuss I have not actually taken. But I know enough about the “Decision Making” class, for instance, to know that I had to make decisions taking a variety of factors into consideration. My senior project gave me the chance to use the abilities I have developed as well as learn new ones which relate to a course in the Jepson School.

“Leading Groups” offered me knowledge about concepts such as group dynamics, norms, and leadership development; I observed these concepts at work at the Arts Council. One of the strongest characteristics of the Arts Council is its domination by women. Even though the board includes many men, there is only one male on staff. Norms are created and enforced by the women of the office, notably in the types of interactions people have with each other. We have a tendency to discuss personal issues often at work, whereas I have rarely observed Mark being as candid about his personal life as the women. In addition, norms such as a weekly staff meeting keep everyone in touch with each

other. Communication is very important within the organization, and it usually flows in all directions. There is not a strict hierarchy, so that everyone feels like part of a team rather than a boss or employee. The staff has spent a great deal of time this semester working on improving the effectiveness of the organization, taking such actions as analyzing Meyers-Briggs results to better understand why they react to each other in certain ways.

I have also observed how the Arts Council as a whole and Adrienne in particular work with members of the community and other arts organizations on advocacy projects. For instance, Adrienne discussed with me the frustrations in dealing with a large group of people on *Partners in the Arts*, not all of whom were enthusiastic about the program. She provided me with valuable insights into dealing with people with different agendas and attitudes, all of whom must come to some consensus. I have also sat in on several board meetings in which the members try to resolve conflicts and make decisions for the good of everyone.

During my senior project I had several opportunities to use the competencies the Jepson School espouses for leaders. As stated before, I faced tough decision-making choices at times, and I had to find an answer

based on the situation at hand. It really hit home to me through this project that a leader must examine every situation differently, because no one instance is like any other. For instance, although I had to deal with members of other arts organizations, I had to approach all of them differently. *Partners in the Arts* also is a perfect example of needing conflict resolution, because it was not readily accepted by everyone who would be involved. I found that I had to be careful what I said and to whom, because it was a sensitive issue to some. Adrienne approached it from a win-win perspective, trying to get others to realize that they would benefit more from giving up a little control than by refusing to cooperate on the plan.

I also spent a good deal of the semester reflecting on my own leadership, which is what we learned to do in "Leading Individuals". In order to lead others, I must also know what makes me act and think the way I do. I want to give some of my tests to the staff at the Arts Council, because I believe that some of them are very indicative of how people will approach a work situation. I also believe that my experiences at the Arts Council have been crucial to my leadership development, providing practical experience to correlate with the information gained in the classroom.

This senior project related to a variety of contexts, just as the Arts Council falls into more than one context. Obviously the greatest influence on the organization is the arts industry, which is not directly discussed in the Jepson School. Those who work in the arts are usually creative and casual, at least as far as the work atmosphere. At the same time, the Arts Council is run like a business, with financial issues and professionalism very much a part of the domain. I found several characteristics from the "Formal Organizations" class occurring at the Arts Council, such as working with a mission and goals, the boundaries between the external and internal environment, and the structure of the organization.

In addition, there were several parallels to the "Community Organizations" class, since the Arts Council can also be considered a community organization. Fundraising and finding board members are a constant theme in any community organizations book, and I observed and even participated in dealing with these issues with my senior project. I even participated in a fundraiser recently to raise money for the children's programming of the Arts Council. Moreover, I had to cross into the political sector often in working with legislators to gain more funding for the arts organizations in Virginia. Issues of bureaucracy, party

divisions, and different priorities featured strongly in my personal projects. While one could probably find some aspect of my senior project to relate to a leadership studies course, these were the major ones I encountered in my senior project.

Relationship to the Curriculum Goals

This senior project allowed me to utilize the curriculum goals of the Jepson School in a variety of situations. I functioned more as an informal leader within the Arts Council, although my title of “Intern” carried some formal leadership connotations. Actually, the title of Intern means “follower” to most people outside and even within the organization, since most interns carry out work rather than create it. It was difficult at times to act as a leader this semester since I was only in the office a few hours a week versus the twenty-plus I spent last semester. Therefore, I had less time-consuming and innovative responsibilities than last semester. On the other hand, we had several interns come in for short periods of time, and I was able to exercise leadership with them as the “senior intern”.

My major responsibility this semester has been to help others exercise leadership, due partly to the type of projects of the Arts Council and partly to the time issue discussed above. I assisted Adrienne, the Executive Director and the other staff members in their work, often completing many of the details of a project. Adrienne in particular is a creative visionary who often needs help to complete the organizational

aspects of her creations. For instance, I often make all the phone calls needed to set up meetings and then report back to Adrienne.

Teamwork is crucial to the success of the Arts Council, and it is expected that everyone will contribute their abilities whether it is their pet project or not. I have noticed that others contributed their time when I have projects to do, even if it is faxing meeting requests when I have to leave for the day. Therefore, I feel a greater responsibility to reciprocate whenever possible. Moreover, I actually enjoy having a variety of tasks assigned on a given week, because it makes my job more exciting. I also have gained a greater perspective on the mission of the Arts Council, which has enhanced my experience this year. I inspire trust and commitment by taking the initiative to ask what someone needs from me and then following through.

Advocacy requires very creative responses to issues, so that all the parties involved feel the topic is worth supporting. I have gained a great deal of knowledge in my work at the Arts Council, especially about how to deal with people effectively. I have been able to use that knowledge this semester to solve problems, as well as adding knowledge gained from other experiences. Combining creativity and knowledge is the key to resolving many of the discussions we have at the Arts Council. For

example, I spent time one morning working out a proposed schedule of speakers and those who would sit at the head table for the Jane Alexander luncheon. While this may not seem that important to some people, these two factors were important in ensuring continued support of the arts and education plan. I had to use my understanding of the plan and the people involved, as well as some imagination of the event, to put together a schedule that would satisfy everyone.

Unlike a leadership analysis paper or another more abstract senior project, I had a very hands-on experience that does not lend itself to a discussion of modes of inquiry very well. I did have to use a variety of competencies learned from the arts, feature-writing, and other areas to apply to the projects at the Arts Council. One of the benefits of this experience has been the chance to think critically about the leadership knowledge and practice of myself and others. For instance, I have observed Adrienne as she acts as a leader and found that she has certain strengths as a visionary and motivator but also has problems with organization and details. In addition, I have analyzed my own leadership practice within the Arts Council; more will be said about this later.

Arts advocates must use a great deal of imagination to inspire others to work for a cause, as well as to make the arts exciting to the

general public. I spent a great deal of time deciding how to capture the attention of those who are receiving information about the arts with the letters I wrote and promotional materials I created. I also found that it takes a great deal of courage to approach people for support and convince them that your cause is worthwhile.

The arts and education plan calls for changes in the way the arts are utilized in the schools and how the networks of cooperation between the schools, arts organizations, businesses, and politicians are formed. Imagining the outcomes of this program for the students and the overall community was not even the most difficult part of the process; convincing people to bring about this change together was the hardest aspect. The Jane Alexander luncheon was an important symbol to the community that *Partners in the Arts* is a viable and worthwhile program. In this case, everyone working on the program in some aspect is a change agent, since we are leading the way to a new method of education for the community.

One of the most beneficial aspects of an internship and senior project is the opportunity to reflect and analyze my own development as a leader. This is a crucial aspect of leadership that I feel is often overlooked in the normal leadership studies class; we need to turn inward occasionally. I find challenges in my senior project which present me

with the chance to expand my areas of knowledge and become a better leader. These nine curriculum goals, as I have paraphrased them, may not always apply in their entirety to every situation, but they provide a good framework for me as a student and practitioner of leadership.

Leadership Analysis

As I am nearing the end of my senior year (Yeah!) and my time at the Arts Council, there are several conclusions which I can draw about leadership. The original idea behind the senior project, as I understand it, was to contribute our leadership skills in a significant way to the community. I believe that I accomplished the goal of contributing my skills, but I am still unsure whether it was a significant contribution. Part of my dilemma lies in the fact that I do not have a body of work to display as my contribution to society, as someone who did a paper of specific project for an organization would have. I considered including copies of my files as an appendix to my paper, but then I realized that that was not necessary. No one else wants to read the letters I wrote or the paperwork I collected over the course of eight months. In fact, I am not sure what I am going to do with them when I officially leave the Arts Council next week. The joke to that is that I feel like I never really leave, because there is always one more project for me waiting if I want it. No one ever tells you what to do when you leave an organization; I am going to go through withdrawals when I no longer have to go to the office each week.

Momentary lapse into babbling- anyway, I do have some issues of leadership to discuss. Someone suggested that I write about effective followership (Thanks Dr. Hickman!) since I had expressed the feeling that I had not acted as a leader to a great extent. Followership is a concept that has been underrated and under-discussed in the leadership studies as far as I am concerned. I believe strongly that every leader should learn how to be a follower before becoming a leader. Therefore, my experience at the Arts Council has provided me with much experience in this role that has already begun to help me in other situations where I am the leader. Moreover, no organization runs well without followers, provided of course that at least most of those followers are effective. Effective followers do a great deal of the work, provide support to the leader, and even initiate action and act creatively as a leader would. Effective followers also make good leaders because they are prepared for leadership and understand the needs of followers.

Much of the work I did in my senior project would probably fall under the category of effective followership, based on my understanding of the concept. I carried out the vision of my leader through completing details, yet I also offered my own suggestions when working closely with her. Moreover, I had certain assignments that I had full responsibility for and

utilized leadership skills on a regular basis. I differed from other followers in my focus on leadership; I approached my work from that perspective. In addition, I made my observations of others based on my studies of leadership.

I have noticed that I have a difficult time separating my senior project from my internship; to me the senior project just meant I spent another semester at the Arts Council. I have tried to discuss only my senior project period, yet I wish I could explain what the overall experience has been like. I am not sure that the average reader would believe that I have actually done some good work at the Arts Council, work that I believe had value. Moreover, I do think that I have contributed significantly to the organization and the community as a whole in a long-lasting way, even though much of that did not occur specifically in the job assignments of my senior project. Yet I think I fulfilled the overall goal of a senior project more than I would have had I done an isolated project that did not relate to anything else I had done before. In my case, I have been able to continue work that I love and feel is worthwhile, while being able to come to some culmination of the past two years of leadership studies.