


SPEAK Out! Day

with Future
Teachers
Taking
the Lead

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Political advocacy works (Shilton, 2006). Organizations have long known that personal interaction between advocacy groups and members of political bodies can be effective in raising awareness and guiding policy. In 2009 the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD), now SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators, organized the first SPEAK Out! Day in an attempt to influence the U.S. Congress to support initiatives related to health and physical education. Participation in SPEAK Out! Day is open to all health and physical education professionals and students. This lobbying event is designed to gather health and physical education advocates in Washington, DC to represent their state and their profession, meet with members of Congress from their state, network with other health

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Day before SPEAK Out! Day planning session

and physical education professionals, and advocate for legislation that advances their mission. For example, in recent years attendees at SPEAK Out! Day have advocated for health and physical education programs as part of the Every Student Succeeds Act (SHAPE America, 2016).

In 2011 Karen Dowd wrote a compelling argument, encouraging health and physical education professionals across the nation to attend SPEAK Out! Day. She stated that advocacy, which focuses on education about a specific issue, should be local, regional and national. She suggested that advocacy initiatives such as SPEAK Out! Day should incorporate four actions: connect, engage, impact and invest (Dowd, 2011). When meeting with public officials, the conversation begins with information about the topic, and it can move on to lobbying for a specific measure.

Lobbying — which is the attempt to influence the actions of public officials — has been found to be an effective way to make public policy change (Yackee, 2015), and people advocating for a cause can influence government policymaking (Nelson & Yackee, 2012) with lobbying at the state and national level. In particular, student involvement in political advocacy and lobbying is being used in various disciplines. Physical therapy students joined physical therapy professionals in their Federal Advocacy Forum in 2008 (“Forum Participants Urge Members of Congress”). In 2010 the National Association of Chain Drug Stores (NACDS) began hosting a student advocacy program that is now a part of NACDS Day on Capitol Hill. On this day pharmacy students meet with legislators and staff to discuss legislation relevant to their profession (Adams, Matzke, & McCall, 2015). Social work students are also participating in political action days (Beimers, 2016; Moore & Johnston, 2002).

SPEAK Out! Day as a Student Learning Opportunity

In the years since its inception SPEAK Out! Day has been an effective lobbying event. In 2016 over 200 health and physical educators representing 46 states attended the event (SHAPE America, 2016). However, the majority of participants in SPEAK Out! Day are current professionals in the field. In 2012 Western Carolina University (WCU) decided to send students to participate in this professional event and has continued to send students along with faculty advisors each year.

Experiences beyond those in the classroom are important for students preparing to enter the teaching profession. Health and physical education (HPE) majors at WCU must devote time to professional development activities as a requirement for graduation. Students may meet this requirement through volunteering at local public schools, being involved in research projects on campus, assisting HPE faculty with professional projects, or other types of professional involvement. For the past several years some students have met part of their professional involvement expectations by traveling with faculty members to Washington, DC to be involved in SPEAK Out! Day. Through an application and selection process within the HPE program, four to five students are chosen each year to accompany two faculty members to attend the event.

Highlighting experiences from 2016, this article will outline the benefits of involving students in this type of advocacy, and it will describe how other schools and universities can involve their students in SPEAK Out! Day. There are four steps that can help make the program a workable model:

1. Secure funding to support the trip

2. Select students for the program through an application process
 3. Prepare students through discussions on political advocacy, proper etiquette, and expectations
 4. Share results and experiences upon returning to campus
- Each of these steps will be addressed in detail. Securing funding and selecting students to attend are the two steps that must be done early in the planning stages.

Intentional Learning, Logistics and Resources

When thinking about planning intentional learning activities for students, such as SPEAK Out! Day, many questions come to mind. What are the intended outcomes? How can professionals encourage and support students to participate? What are the logistics of such an endeavor? All of these are questions that need to be part of a planning process. They also can help to focus on the outcome. One of the things that WCU has done is to intentionally focus on these types of activities for students by including them in the strategic plan (Figure 1). Linking these types of activities to the strategic plan demonstrates intentionality and allows for consistently providing institutional support for these student opportunities.

Strategically focusing on activities such as SPEAK Out! Day legitimizes the voice that students have in shaping the direction of the field. They empower young pre-professionals to engage in the political process and show them that they can make a difference. It is hoped that this will transcend students' college experience and

extend into their careers as health and physical education teachers by helping them become advocates for their students and programs at the district, state and national levels, and doing so in a forthright, confident manner with research and data in hand.

Logistically speaking, all planning for SPEAK Out! Day needs to include the details. In the WCU program planning starts at the beginning of the academic year. Funding sources need to be targeted for the trip, and it is beneficial if SPEAK Out! Day can be linked to institutional goals. At WCU funding sources include the Health and Physical Education Majors Club, the Provost's Office, and departmental funds.

The funding that is received from the Provost's Office, an intentional learning travel grant, is tied to the University's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). The QEP is a campus-wide effort, required by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), that focuses on enhancing student learning. The QEP at WCU is committed to enhancing student learning as it relates to students synthesizing their university experiences. The funding from the school is linked to the school's strategic plan. These funding sources are mission specific, and they support the university's mission of developing teacher candidates as well as university citizens. The fundraising activities of the HPE Majors Club also link well with the Carnegie classification of an "engaged university"; the chief activity is a service project that supports the campus community. In most higher education settings additional sources of funding could include student government funds, undergraduate research funding, school partnership funds, and the like.

Figure 1.
Excerpts from the WCU School of Teaching Strategic Plan

Our Vision:

To develop reflective teacher leaders as ethical and innovative educators who are problem solvers and who advocate for their students as agents of change in their schools and communities.

Our Mission:

We are first and foremost teachers who inspire a passion for learning and teaching in those we teach and mentor. We are scholars of learning and teaching. We are advocates for social justice. We actively collaborate with our community partners to bring about positive change in students' lives, the community and the world. We are an innovative faculty working toward the common goal of modeling evidence-based practices, embracing diversity, and leading the profession as inspired colleagues and mentors.

Our Core Values:

Collaboration: We value collaborative and inclusive relationships with our students, colleagues and our community and school partners.

Diversity: We value a diverse and global perspective that is inclusive of people of all cultures, nationalities, races and orientations.

Engagement: We value engagement with our region to meet the educational needs of the broader community.

Excellence: We value intellectual and personal transformation through excellence in teaching and the sharing of new knowledge through scholarship.

Leadership: We value teacher leaders who are problem solvers and who advocate for students and the profession.

Wellness: We value health and well-being both for the individual and the community.

Strategic Direction #1: Prepare High-Quality Teachers for our State and our Region

Goal 1.6: Provide co- and extra-curricular learning opportunities for teacher candidates that align with the university's Quality Enhancement Plan.

- Initiative 1.6.1. Seek out and facilitate professional development activities that support candidate growth beyond the program curriculum.
- Initiative 1.6.2. Create opportunities for teacher candidates to learn to advocate for the profession.

Student Perspectives before the Experience

The SPEAK Out! Day experience has become a popular event for WCU students. Early in the fall semester HPE faculty recommend students as candidates to attend SPEAK Out! Day. Students are then asked to submit a brief application (see Figure 2). As a part of the application process for going on the trip, students are asked a series of open-ended reflection questions. The HPE faculty look over the applications, discuss which students will represent the university well and will make a good impression at SPEAK Out! Day, and select the group.

For some of these students the trip is the first time they have traveled to the nation's capital. The learning experience of walking the halls of Congress and getting a better understanding of how government works is no small opportunity in and of itself. But having an opportunity to meet the leaders of SHAPE America and to interact directly with members of Congress is a professional development experience that few health and physical education undergraduates will have.

Before heading to Washington, DC in 2016, the students were asked for some background information about their perceptions of advocacy. Only one student expressed having some experience in advocacy with a previous role in a student advisory council in high school. The other students had no experience and were somewhat nervous about how to advocate for health and physical education in Washington, DC. Faculty members asked about key points the students thought would be compelling to legislators. They responded to this question with overlapping messages of the

importance of today's health and physical education attributes. One student wrote:

Quality HPE programs do more than just attempt to get students to have a balanced diet and by physically active. We focus on making students productive members of society who are mentally healthy and able to work well with others. No other subject matter focuses on these affective objectives. Teaching students problem solving and goal setting skills, as well as how to cope with their feelings and others', is essential to producing well-rounded Americans.

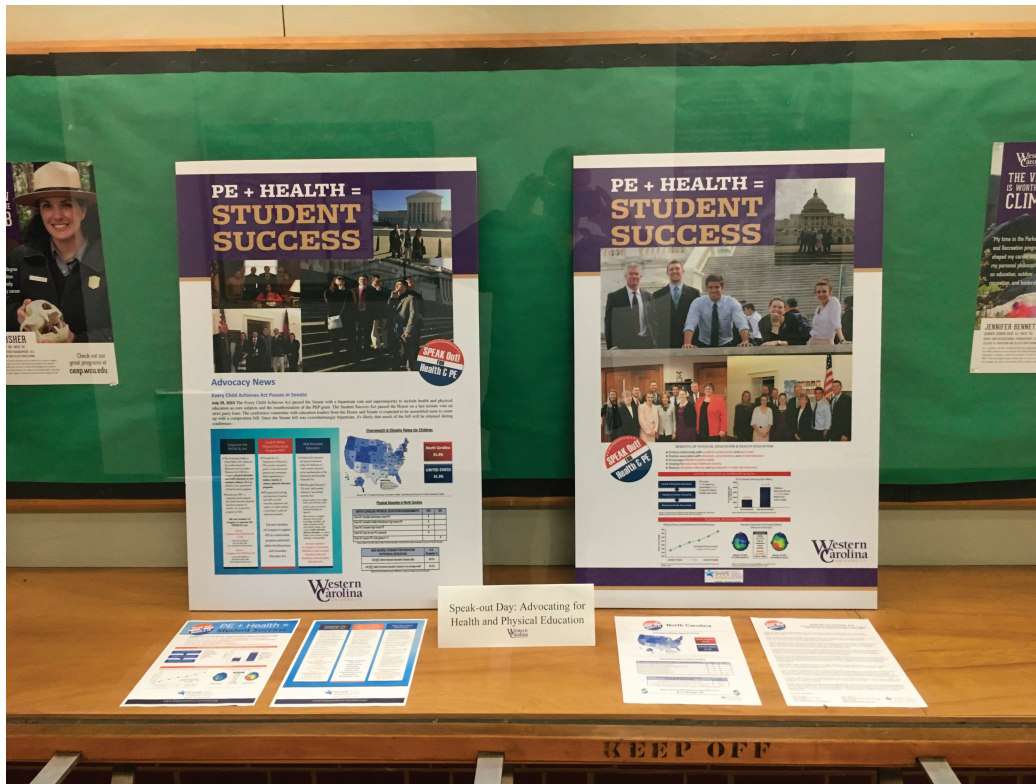
Another responded:

Physical education is not only great for the body but also the mind. Many studies have found that students who participate in physical activity have better grades than those who do not. It teaches kids skills that they can use throughout their lifetime. It teaches self-confidence and team work, relieves stress, and fights obesity.

The final question asked how this experience would benefit them personally and/or professionally. The students wrote that they were excited to see how the process in Washington works. One student commented that he had been fascinated with politics and curious about laws, bills, rights and how decisions are made that affect the American population. Another student pointed out that this will be "a great opportunity to see if I can make a difference and fight for something I believe in." Overall the students were anxious to see the process by which laws and bills are made, and they were hopeful that they could make a difference with the legislators they would meet.

Figure 2.
Student application for SPEAK Out! Day

Name:
Email:
Cell phone number:
Campus address:
Year in school:
1. Have you ever visited personally with a state or federal legislator?
2. What is your previous experience with advocacy?
3. What are a few key messages about school health or physical education that you believe would be compelling to legislators?
4. How will this experience benefit you personally and/or professionally?
5. How do you plan to use this experience in your future profession?



Display poster for the WCU HPE building

Student and Faculty Perspectives during SPEAK Out! Day

Once students and faculty arrived in Washington, DC, they attended a preparatory session for SPEAK Out! Day. Health and physical education advocates from nearly every state gathered together for a presentation from SHAPE America. Attendees learned about the latest political issues related to the field and lobbying strategies. Participants were grouped by state, so students were able to meet other professionals from North Carolina and discuss state issues as well. Before heading to the Capitol, faculty worked with their students on their specific presentation and discussed talking points. Students were each given a point to stress when they had the opportunity to meet with legislators. Students then practiced their part of the presentation.

When the WCU group arrived for their first meeting with a member of Congress, the students realized how fast these legislative meetings are. One student said, “The first thing I learned is that the representatives are very busy. They often have assistants that meet with you who relay the information to the representative.” Another noted, “Time is limited and you must know your material well.” The talking points need to be very specific, with the end goal in mind, and students must try to get the representative to commit to their position. The WCU participants met with representatives and assistants in conference rooms, their personal offices, and even hallways. The students came to realize that the representatives meet with groups and individuals all day, every day. So making an impression, leaving talking points (or in this case a folder of material), and sending a follow-up email are all important so the message is not lost in the crush of day-to-day meetings.

The university professors who accompanied the students left with the perception that the legislators and staffers were very interested in hearing from the students during the meetings. It appeared that members of the Congressional offices enjoyed the fresh approach from students. It became evident that representatives were more excited to hear from the future teachers than from the seasoned professionals. Staffers asked very specific questions about why the students want to be teachers, why they feel so passionate about health and physical education, and where they want to take the profession. It was a proud moment for the faculty members to see the students so excited to talk about their chosen field. The students spoke from the heart and from their personal experiences, and they did more for the profession in those few minutes than several of the professors have been able to do in years. The accompanying professors found themselves talking little in the meetings, preferring to let the students advocate at a much higher level than just talking points.

A specific example of how the students effected change was when they met with the aide of a Congressman who at first did not seem to support the HPE agenda. As the WCU students and faculty entered the meeting, she barely spoke and had noticeably closed-off body language. After presenting the talking points, the students talked about where they want the profession to go. The transformation of both parties as the students expressed their experiences in health and physical education was visible. The aide expressed that initially she was not looking forward to the meeting because of her “horrible” experience in physical education. She specifically talked about dodgeball and how most “PE teachers had just let the kids play basketball each day as she sat in the bleachers.” At that

point the students were very specific about how they would teach their classes, what their curriculums would include, and the overall importance of lifetime health and fitness activities. By the time the meeting was over, the aide had a completely different demeanor. Upon meeting the same aide the following year, she remembered the group and pointed out that she was wearing running shoes just for this next visit.

Student Perspectives after the Experience

After the trip the students were asked to reflect on the visit and identify what they felt were the most significant aspects of the advocacy experience. “I learned that the fight for health and physical education is a very big deal,” said one student. The students came to realize that their voice, along with supporting members of their profession, could make a significant difference. “It was exciting to see so many people pushing the agenda for health and physical education,” and “the legislators in the offices were just normal people” who listened to the students.

Students were also asked to put together a video of their SPEAK Out! Day experiences that could be shared on campus. This video is used within the department to showcase student work for the university and how student experiences can transcend into future advocacy projects. Given the current political climate surrounding education at nearly every level, it is imperative, now more than ever, that young people advocate for their future. By participating in a large, well-coordinated advocacy event such as SPEAK Out! Day, it is hoped that students will feel empowered to take this action to their state and local levels. They can do this by participating in, or even coordinating, “Day on the Hill” events in their respective state capitols.

Additionally, taking a “grassroots” approach at the local level can help to shed light on the importance of health and physical education in educating the whole child. Rallying support for health and physical education and bringing that forth to a school board meeting can help give it the attention it needs. Another valuable lesson for students who participated in SPEAK Out! Day was the importance of having “true facts” (i.e., documented evidence) to support their arguments. Staying connected with their state and national professional organizations is also essential to their own ongoing professional development, education and currency in the field.

Conclusion

When reflecting on their participation in SPEAK Out! Day, the WCU students reported that through the experience they learned a great deal about the issues that health and physical education professionals face, as well as the importance of seeking legislative assistance to help the profession meet its goals. They talked about the feeling of accomplishment they got from speaking to legislators and hearing national leaders say that they support health and physical education in the schools.

Possibly the most important thing that comes from the students’ experiences is the inspiration to continue to be advocates for health and physical education beyond the walls of their schools. The students expressed a desire to attend SPEAK Out! Day again as professionals and stated that it deepened their commitment to the profession and to their continued involvement in professional organizations, such as SHAPE America.

In 2013 three students who attended a SPEAK Out! Day event from WCU had their first opportunity to co-author a professional

journal article to recount their experiences on Capitol Hill (Claxton, Kopp, Skidmore, & Williams, 2013). In that same year one of these students had her first experience as a presenter at the AAHPERD convention speaking on the same topic (Claxton, Skidmore, & Braxton, 2002).

This annual experience has been one of the highlights of the HPE department at Western Carolina University. Posters have been created that recount these visits and are displayed in the front display case of the department building, the students have created short videos that are on the department’s webpage, and in 2016 students and faculty presented their experiences from the trip to external reviewers during the university’s accreditation poster session.

Taking students to an event such as SPEAK Out! Day is an opportunity to implement the actions of which Dowd spoke: connect, engage, impact and invest. Students connect with one another and the faculty who accompany them to SPEAK Out! Day. They engage with their elected leaders and with leaders in the profession, and they network with professionals from across the country. Both students and faculty have an opportunity to impact the profession by advocating for support at the national level. And the investment of time and effort that the students put into preparing for SPEAK Out! Day — as well as the investment they see in their professors and mentors who also are making contributions of time and effort to this important undertaking — may go a long way toward launching them into a lifetime of professional advocacy.

Few universities are using SPEAK Out! Day to enhance their students’ learning experiences. Based on the student learning that WCU has observed and the potential for more students to advocate for their future profession, more colleges and universities should take advantage of this opportunity.

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