

Lessons in Advocacy: We All Can Make a Difference

Jacquelyn A. Lowman
University of Maine at Presque Isle

Introduction

At first blush, there may not seem to be much in common between rural Aroostook County, Maine, and the rest of the U.S., particularly a typical business communication environment. Aroostook County seems to exemplify that old Maine expression, “You can’t get there from hee-yah.” It is the northernmost county in Maine and the largest east of the Mississippi (Michaud, 2013). You can actually get there, but it is not always easy. As drivers come up the major thoroughfare, U.S. Route 1, there is a sense of driving back into time. The little towns and villages have a 1950s aura. This is a place where a deal is still sealed with a handshake and you know better than to speak ill of people because they are probably related to half the town.

It is an incredibly beautiful place with large, pristine areas. The western part of the county is wilderness. Winters are long and hard. This is not a place for the fainthearted. Industries have closed. People have left. It can be tough to make a living. Income and educational levels are below those of the rest of the state, which itself lags behind the rest of New England (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012; Bureau of Business and Economic Research, 2013). But the people who thrive are incredibly resilient. They form relationships, build community and defy the odds.

There are truly no strangers in Aroostook County: just friends and acquaintances you might not have met yet. When someone has trouble, people are eager to help. Nobody leaves anyone stranded: everyone realizes that to do so could be a matter of life or death. It is humbling that people who have so little are always ready to share what they have. Aroostook County is also quite a tolerant place: people accept others’ eccentricities. In a rural area, people are keenly aware that they need one another to survive. So they tend to take people the way they are (K.A. Perkins, personal communication, 2010).

People seldom pass through Aroostook County on their way to someplace else. You have to want to go there. But just like a good, humble, taciturn Maine resident, “the County,” as it is called, is not good at marketing itself. It is a terrible self-advocate with an almost fatal modesty.

But the County really has much in common with any other group, whether it be a business, a government, a nonprofit organization, a class, or some other collection of individuals who are united in some way. In order for the group to endure and prosper, it needs to tap and build upon its resources. Despite the disparities in impetus for these types of groups, a common thread is that one of their greatest strengths is their people. No matter their products or professed, overarching reason for being, the groups do not continue without people. The people do not continue to be a part of their groups—to be truly engaged and integral parts—without buying into the groups’ purposes. In order for the people to buy in, those purposes need to matter to the people: they need to see what is in it for them. They also need to believe that what they can do, what they have to offer, can make a difference and advance those purposes. So one of the challenges for the groups is to make their purposes deeply meaningful on multiple levels and across a broad spectrum and then to help their people realize their own gifts and

how they can use them to advance the groups—in ways that enrich the individuals. One of the sub-challenges is helping people understand what it is that will enrich themselves: and how what they contribute can come back to them in a variety of fulfilling ways.

That is where the class PCJ 316: Advanced Professional Communication comes in. An advanced class that is all about advocacy, it needed a client that would let the students apply their advanced communication skills. They wanted to do projects to help the County. But, realistically, the entire county was just too vast to wrap their arms around, so they were looking for a surrogate.

Operationalizing Advocacy

Like any other profoundly nuanced term, “advocacy” probably has as many connotations as there are people who attempt to define it. But at its most basic, advocacy is marketing and branding. People often associate “marketing” with commercialism, with things that one can buy. They might squirm at the notion that a nonprofit has something to sell. But the divisions between concepts and concrete objects are, at best, indistinct. When Coca Cola, for example, touts itself as the “Real Thing,” is it talking, literally, about carbonated water? If so, its campaigns could be very simple: close-ups of glasses of liquid. Instead, people who buy Coke are buying into a lifestyle in which things are purportedly genuine, active, and filled with life and song.

Advocacy is on this same continuum. Sometimes people make a distinction between advocacy that is disinterested and altruistic and that in which the advocates clearly benefit. But, again, these are points on a single continuum. It is preposterous to say that the only “pure” advocacy is that in which the advocates gain nothing. There is always something to gain. A desired end point could be something as tangible as former residents of New Orleans’ Ninth Ward advocating for rehabilitation of their houses. It could be more abstract, as in the feelings of satisfaction non-local volunteers get from rehabbing the houses. The reasons behind advocacy are often complex. The displaced residents, for example, want to return home. But they also want to recreate community for others, revitalize their city, and make the region economically viable again. Effective advocates need something to fuel their passions. Otherwise, they will not find the fortitude to persevere. So a key to effective advocacy is not to have no self-interest. Rather, it is finding how that self-interest is inextricably intertwined with a greater good.

Opportunity Comes Jogging

The members of PCJ 316 would all operationalize advocacy as variants on this theme. But before they could do so, they needed their client and projects. The class was scheduled to begin in January 2013. By October 2012, the instructor had some broad ideas, but nothing sufficient for a class. That all changed on Columbus Day, October 8, 2012, when an opportunity literally came jogging the instructor’s way. She and a friend were having lunch at a little Italian sandwich shop. Suddenly, a man in jogging clothes, who had decided to take a break from his run, came in. The friend knew him and introduced him to the instructor. After chatting a few minutes, he decided to join the women. The man, Jason Ennis, works for one of the largest area employers, a large insurance company. But the real reason that the friend wanted the instructor and Ennis to talk was that he was on the steering committee for the Nordic Heritage Center. He asked the instructor if she had heard of it. She had noticed the sign on her trips between Presque Isle and Ft. Fairfield. She thought that the center had something to do with educating people about Nordic culture and ancestry and therefore would have relatively little to do with her interests and classes.

Ennis explained that the Nordic Heritage Center/Sport Club, located on a breathtaking hillside belonging to the two towns of Presque Isle and Ft. Fairfield, was started by a small group of people with a dream: a free facility to help people have healthy outdoor recreation and improve their lives at little to no cost. It had started and been sustained for nearly a decade by typical County generosity: a philanthropist had purchased initial acreage. Through the years, additional people had donated land or granted easements to use their contiguous properties. The Maine Winter Sports Center, funded by the Libra Foundation, underwrote many of Nordic's expenses and continues to do so (Chasse, 2013; Nordic Heritage Center, 2013; Maine Winter Sports Center, 2013). Those involved hoped that individuals and families would become members and pay the modest annual membership fee (\$15 for individuals, \$30 for families) (Nordic Heritage Center, 2013) to buy into the center and feel some ownership. Still, use of the facilities was completely open and free to the public.

The facilities—trails, lodge, timing and waxing huts—are world class. They are so good that people had come from all over the world to participate in several World Cup biathlons held there. It has also hosted national and regional biathlon and cross country ski events (Nordic Heritage Center, 2013; Maine Winter Sports Center, 2013). At times it seemed as though the whole world was watching, but in reality, the only people watching were part of an exclusive group: competitive biathlon and cross country ski enthusiasts. If people had an image of Nordic at all, it was often of elite athletes in spandex. Nordic had an aura of being for “fat cats” as one of the instructor's students, a lifelong area resident, would often say. This was not an image that spoke to the vast majority of people in Aroostook County or Maine in general. People either tuned out or never heard at all.

So in many ways, the Nordic Heritage Center was like Aroostook County: a hidden jewel, a tragically well-kept secret with so much to offer. Its governing board was made up of true County inhabitants: tongue tied when it came to sharing its wonders. Nordic was ideal as a stand-in for Aroostook County. As one class member said repeatedly, “What's good for Nordic is good for the County.” So when Ennis asked the instructor whether she and her students would consider a campaign for Nordic, she jumped at the chance (J. Ennis, personal communication to instructor, October 8, 2012; J. Ennis, e-mail to instructor, October 19, 2012).

Ennis wanted a meeting in late October with the two Nordic board members who headed the outreach committee, the instructor, and himself. But serious illness delayed the meeting until December. From this point, the class's primary contact was Amanda Baker, one of the outreach committee heads (A. Baker, e-mail to instructor, December 7, 2012; A. Baker, personal communication to instructor, December 12, 2012).

Baker took the instructor for a tour of Nordic on Friday, January 11, 2013. The lodge has a Scandinavian flair, homage to skiing's origin. It is a proud testament to the fact that Aroostook County was the first place in the United States where people skied (Nordic Heritage Center, 2013; Maine Winter Sports Center, 2013). It sits atop a hill and its windows give a 360 degree view of the surroundings. People reach it by a long flight of stairs or a series of ramps. The lodge has a fully equipped kitchen, large dining area, great room with fireplace, and restrooms on the upper level. The walls are lined with historic photos, articles, and equipment that commemorate skiing. Downstairs, it has a hot tub, dorm rooms, and more restrooms.

As Baker and the instructor talked, it became clear that Nordic had little marketing, little sense of who used its facilities, and few ideas for attracting a wide spectrum of people. Its board had no one who was a professional communicator. Board members were not aware of how many members Nordic had or

how many had paid their dues. The board members were dedicated and did the best they could but were stretched too thin and were exhausted by the strain of trying to keep Nordic going. They were desperate for more people but without many ideas of how to attract them.

The spring 2013 PCJ 316 class was not a big. But what it lacked in numbers its members made up for in energy, ideas, and creativity. Six were taking the class for a grade and two community members were taking it as an open university class. Open university students have all the same experiences as credit earning students but do not pay and thus do not get a grade. To make the class even more affordable, the students did not have to purchase a textbook. For this class, the instructor had found a number of articles from peer-reviewed journals that she made available to everyone. Of the eight students, the instructor had had seven in previous classes. One of the community members was new to the instructor and to college, so the instructor was concerned about how this woman would interact with the other students, who all knew one another well. There were no problems, however. This community member easily engaged with the other students and her decades of experience working with nonprofits on membership and sustainability added valuable facets to the class.

Although Aroostook County can be quite homogeneous, the class was a fairly diverse group. They were from nearby towns, but also from Canada, California and Venezuela. They were primarily female, with one male and ages ranging from 20 to 70.

Hitting the Ground Running

What the class members were going to accomplish needed to happen within the 15-week semester, so they needed to hit the ground running. They needed to choose projects that they could take from conception to fruition within that window. They spent the first week getting oriented and talking about advocacy in broad strokes. They also talked a good deal about what their real client was: Aroostook County. Working with Nordic was a way to wrap their arms around helping their region.

The students visited the Nordic website to try to begin learning about their client. The website contains some valuable information, but also some clearly out of date data. Further, it has gaps, is not intuitive, and is not interactive or truly searchable. The class had questions and needed a human feel for the place, so two of the Nordic board members agreed to come to the class to provide answers and give additional background information.

During the third class session, Tuesday, January 29, 2013, Nordic president Nate Berry and Nordic board member Tom Chasse came to talk with the class. Chasse had been involved with Nordic since its inception. His connection to Nordic was through skiing: he had been the ski coach at the Presque Isle High School for 20 years. Berry had come to Nordic later, and his interest was mountain biking. Chasse was perhaps a generation older than Berry and did the majority of the talking. He filled the class in on some of Nordic's history: how Nordic had begun, the hard work, generosity, vision. He spoke of what it had taken to become a world class biathlon venue. Then he described how Nordic had broadened to become a four seasons' venue, saying that Berry's vision was expanding Nordic's appeal. But Chasse was also defensive, as though he was afraid to broaden Nordic's reach, to try to pull in a wider spectrum of people, for fear of being disappointed if it did not work.

One of the students asked, "What is your marketing plan?" Chasse said that the Nordic board members really did not have one—that they did not need one. For the big biathlon and cross country events that they held, marketing was handled by sponsors. Berry was less defensive than Chasse, but not much

more positive. He said that marketing was expensive and that they had few resources. For summer events such as the Nordic Trail Festival (a mountain bike race), they distributed fliers to bike shops, counting on word of mouth. When class members asked if Nordic had a feel for where the people who used Nordic came from, Chasse and Berry had little to offer. Class members talked about drawing people from all over Maine and parts of Canada for regular use of the facility—use that did not involve a specific event. Chasse was skeptical: “Nobody’s going to come from the southern part of the state (five hours south): they’ve got places just as good down there. We can’t even get people to come up here from Bangor (two and a half hours away).” A guest in the class that day, who was from southern Maine, disagreed: “I’m from that area. The places you’re talking about can’t begin to compete with Nordic.” The men did not reply.

Class members asked Chasse and Berry how they thanked volunteers. Individual committee chairs might thank their volunteers in different ways—or not—but Nordic had no standard way of doing so. Chasse said, “We don’t do much of anything formal for fear of leaving someone out.” Afterwards, students could not stop sputtering. “So you’re going to leave out everyone, not recognize anyone, because there’s a chance that you might forget one or two? That’s ludicrous! Why not just be extra careful not to leave out anyone? No wonder no one wants to join! It’s a wonder that they have so many volunteers. Talk about feeling unappreciated!” After they calmed down, they realized that they had an excellent opportunity to show Nordic board members just how important explicit recognition and gratitude are. The students needed to find effective ways for Nordic to do so and be able to demonstrate to its members why it is the right thing to do—but also the smart thing. Thanking people for their efforts is an excellent way to build team spirit, to get people to continue to volunteer, and to pull in additional volunteers.

The two men were very generous with their time and there was an underlying sense of urgency in their message. They clearly loved the center and were concerned about its continuing. For special events, they said that they were able to pull in hundreds of volunteers, but Nordic probably had no more than 50 actual members and of that number, far fewer were active. They knew that they desperately needed more members and would be deeply grateful for any help. “I know that we can help you,” the instructor said. “You’ve got a wonderful facility. I know that my students will be just like anyone else: enchanted by it. Now we just need to sell it. That’s our area. We can do it.”

After Chasse and Berry left, in their remaining class time, the class members talked about the challenges they faced, not just in determining and completing projects, but also in working with Nordic and getting its members to accept their work. “I don’t know,” one of the students said. “They seem awfully closed. They don’t seem to want to try anything new.” “I’m a member,” a community member said. “I tried going to one board meeting. No one even acknowledged me. I decided not to go back.”

“I don’t know if it’s so much being closed as much as being afraid,” the other community member said. “These people obviously love the place. Some of them have nurtured it from an idea into a beautiful facility. But they also see that it’s very much at risk. And they don’t know what to do about that.”

The board members’ visit had primed the students. Now they needed to visit, as the majority had never been to Nordic. So they scheduled a class fieldtrip for the next class, Thursday, January 31, 2013.

The day of the fieldtrip, it was sleeting. The class members also were not sure whether anyone would be there to show them around, but they knew that the lodge was unlocked every day from early morning until evening, so they were confident that they could get in. When they arrived at the Nordic Heritage

Center, there was no sign of life, but soon a car roared up and its driver, a young woman who introduced herself as board member Sarah Gahagan, apologized for being late. They set off up the hill. When the instructor had gone to Nordic a few weeks before, there had been lots of snow, but since then, much of it had disappeared in a January thaw. Things looked very different without the snow pack. As they got near the entry for the upper level, the awful truth dawned: the instructor was not going to be able to enter. The instructor is a paraplegic who uses a power wheelchair. The previous snow pack had created a natural ramp, but now it was apparent that Nordic was, essentially, inaccessible. At one time the concrete pad had probably been level with the ground. But over time, the shale had eroded so that now the concrete was several inches above the loose earth. Everyone stared at the entry, in the rain, trying to figure out what to do.

“Didn’t you bring your own ramp?” Gahagan asked innocently. The class members looked at her, speechless. “One of our members, Tom Chasse, has a son who uses a wheelchair. When he comes, he always brings his own ramp,” Gahagan continued. The instructor explained that she does not travel with a ramp: most paraplegics do not.

The instructor did not want her students to miss out on exploring Nordic. But she also did not want to sit out in the rain, waiting, so she told her students to go ahead inside and she would wait for them in the car. Without hesitation and with one voice they replied, “No way! We all go or none of us goes.” Seeing nothing to use for a ramp, one said, “We’ll just have to pick the chair up.”

“You can’t do that,” the instructor said. “This chair weighs 300 pounds—without me in it. You’ll hurt yourselves.” But by working together, they got her, chair and all, up onto the concrete pad and into the building.

Although this was probably the most palpable of their hurdles, it was just the first of many, both tangible and symbolic. When their spirits were low, it was a superb reminder that together there was nothing that they could not transcend.

The students were clearly appalled by the inaccessibility, but enchanted by Nordic as a whole. As they wandered about, exploring Nordic, the instructor said to Gahagan, “This is such a wonderful facility. You need to be sure that anyone who wants to access it can do so.” Embarrassed, Gahagan replied, “But other than Mike Chasse, there’s never been any need for access.” They looked at each other for a long minute. Then the instructor answered, “There was a need today. How can you know how many other times that scene has played out? How many people are you turning away? And what message are you sending about acceptance and welcome?” In order for Nordic to prosper, it needs to reach out to all.

The students asked questions as they toured the facility. Then it was back to school for a quick debriefing. The first words on everyone’s lips were, “We can’t work with a place that’s not more accessible.” The instructor pointed out that perhaps they could use their work to help Nordic be more open, in many senses.

In almost the next breath, the students commented on Nordic’s incredible beauty. One student spoke for many when she said, “I grew up in the County, so I had heard of the Nordic Heritage Center. But all I knew was that it had elite skiing events. I had no idea that it had so much to offer. Here we went out on a gray, rainy day without much snow—and it was still amazing.”

Picking Projects: Something for Everyone and Every Strength

The instructor asked the students to start thinking about possible projects for Nordic. The class members believed that if they developed good projects and products and could demonstrate their efficacy, the board would welcome them. They also knew that they had to continue to work on their advocacy and empathy skills so that they could work most effectively with and for Nordic and the County.

The students' goal was to give Nordic a solid foundation of projects on which to build and to give its board members a blueprint of additional projects and steps for after the class members were no longer involved. The class members were being asked to go boldly where they had not gone before, to go out on a limb without a net and make it work. The instructor had no doubt that the class members could stretch, grow, and do amazing things. But *they* had to come to believe that. So passion and perseverance were indispensable, along with open communication, support, and trust among all the class members.

At the next class, on February 5, the class members created a concept web on their whiteboard during a rapid fire brainstorming session. They tried to make tangible and explicit many of the things that Nordic needed. Most of the ideas dealt with membership, accessibility, and funding. The students knew that one size would definitely not fit all: there was no monolithic audience. They knew that Nordic had the image of being only for the spandex and bib (the uniform for high performance ski athletes) crowd. So they all looked for ways to counter and expand upon this image.

The class members learned that Nordic has a portion called the "Enchanted Forest," a name that really resonated with a number of them. Their resident Nordic member was able to tell them a little about it. Although a bit distant from the lodge, it has an enchanted aura and through the years, people have put statues of gnomes and elves in the trees and along the trail. The students also learned that some of the Nordic trails were paved, which would make them more accessible for people who had difficulties walking: they were thinking of people who were not fit, for people who were older or very young, and for people who had mobility impairments. The ideas kept pouring out. The students' visions piggybacked on one another's. They raced through their class time and people still had so much to say. They could barely contain their excitement and their beliefs that they could make a difference. They resolved that by the time they came back together for their next class, all members would have chosen their top three project ideas and be prepared to discuss them.

Class members still had their energy and enthusiasm in full force when they came back together on February 7. They went around the room, person by person, three times, all students briefly describing their project ideas. Perhaps because of the breadth of the possible projects and the relative diversity of the class members, there was no overlap. All of the projects were ambitious. Some (although surprisingly few) were infeasible.

Getting Buy-in Through Progress Reports: A Blueprint for Success

Class members had three months to bring the projects from conception to fruition: they knew that they could not present their client with incomplete products. The instructor was aware that that deadline might seem distant but that the projects would take steady, consistent effort. So to ensure that more immediate, weekly demands did not supersede the projects, the instructor helped the students break them down into smaller components, all with their own intermediate deadlines.

The instructor also created mechanisms for reporting and accountability. Every week, the students submitted a progress report. They needed to be able to say, succinctly, what their projects were and why they mattered—whom they were going to help. They needed to have a good grasp of what they wanted to accomplish in order to have a strong chance to actually do so. Because of the numerous hurdles that the students had to overcome to fulfill their projects, it was essential that they buy into them: a mere grade was not sufficient motivation. The students had to know that what they were doing was really going to make a difference to others, so they had to be able to explain their projects' significance, for themselves as much as for anyone else. Then the instructor needed to know, accurately and realistically, where the students were in their projects. So the students reported what they had done since their last report, what they realized that they still needed to do, and when they planned to have that done. They reflected on what they had learned and how they would build upon it, as well as shared their project successes and disappointments. They did these progress reports both orally and in writing. If people were having difficulties—or if something amazingly good happened—they certainly did not have to wait for a weekly progress report to share it. But by having that formal reporting function weekly, it kept people on track and provided a structure for support, ideas, and analysis.

When the students did their verbal updates, the other class members all commented in a very nurturing, supportive way. But this was not limited to that comment period. People also shared before, after, and outside of class. This provided an incredibly rich, fertile, collective pool of ideas and experiences. All the projects could stand alone: the instructor did not want any one member's success to be irrevocably bound up with that of any other. But class members never forgot that their individual products were all feeding into a synergistic whole. In order to make that sum as strong and full as possible, class members wanted to do what they could to help their other classmates prosper.

Every progress report concluded with a timeline. The students knew when their ultimate deadline was: they were to present to their clients on May 9. The goal was to have the projects done by then, with only minor adjustments possibly remaining. So people were able to put that down as their end point, and their starting line was the current time. There were intermediate deadlines for everyone: deadlines for rough and then polished drafts, for example. After filling in those fixed times, students completed the timeline by personalizing it, detailing how they were going to get from A to Z. They were able to make adjustments as they went along: the timelines were not rigid. But being able to draw up that blueprint and adhere to it made the students much more likely to finish.

As the students developed their projects, several met with the Nordic campus contact, Amanda Baker, who, inadvertently, provided one of the mantras for their class projects. At one point she asked, rhetorically, why anyone would want to join Nordic as a member, since people can use all its facilities for free. She lamented that Nordic had nothing special to give to members, as opposed to non-members. That served as a motivator for the students, who were determined to understand and promote what made Nordic worth a membership

The Students Become Advocates: Unpacking the Literature and Making It Their Own

Most of the people in the class took it because of the instructor: they either had a personal relationship with her or had heard positive things about her teaching. None of them came in with a clearly defined notion of what advocacy is or of how they could become practitioners of it. As one of the students said early on, "We know you and trust you. You've always believed in us and helped us to achieve great

things. So when you said that we would become advocates, even though we didn't know exactly how, we believed you."

Despite the vote of confidence, the instructor wanted her students to have a broad understanding of advocacy, activism, and social justice, both conceptually and practically. She wanted them to understand how they could use these principles and actions in their projects but, even more, throughout their lives. She wanted them to realize how incredibly powerful they could be.

In order to gain a solid theoretical and practical grounding in advocacy, the class read a series of 27 academic, peer-reviewed articles from journals of education, social sciences, humanities, policy, and law during the first five weeks of class. The students read and critiqued the articles, then discussed them, seminar style, in class. During the following month, all the students chose different aspects of advocacy, found articles to give the other class members background on them, and then led a class discussion.

All of the articles were useful, but the students connected with some more than others. In time, the students developed their own definitions of advocacy, but initially, they wanted the security of a preexisting concept. One by Royea and Appl was especially helpful: "Advocacy is telling or demonstrating something you know to someone you know in order to improve the quality of life for others" (2009, p. 89). The article also urged readers to realize that if they did not advocate, who would?

The students were all well aware that good intentions do not always translate into action. They really identified with an article by Howe, Sweet, and Bauer, especially the section that explored reasons (excuses) not to advocate. They had a deep, probing discussion of such excuses as: It doesn't really affect me; nothing's really wrong yet; someone else will take care of it; I can't make a difference anyway; I don't have time; I don't know what to do (2010). The students were very frank in their self-assessments, saying repeatedly, "Boy, that's me. How many times have I said something like that?" They all thought that examining the excuses and the reasons, none of which were truly valid, made them much more likely to be successful advocates.

The students were keenly aware that they needed to advocate, not only with entities beyond their client, but with their client and its members. They spoke frequently about the need to be respectful and sensitive to the board members and what they had accomplished, but also persuasive and gently assertive about what needed to change and progress. Many of the students had previously associated advocacy with (violent) protest or something where there was a winner and a loser. They wanted to avoid that, creating an experience in which everyone won. So an article by Robert Nash that talked about communication strategies for social justice advocacy really struck a chord. They liked Nash's (2010) classification into five communication styles: radvocate, madvocate, sadvocate, fadvocate, and gladvocate. The students both laughed and winced at some of the examples, finding the terms revealing and indicative. They resolved to all strive to be gladvocates who would operate "through invitation, generosity, and setting an example of 'tenuous tenacity'" (Nash, 2010, p. 14).

The students realized that their projects would really make them stretch, grow, and operate outside their comfort zones. Since most were going to create something from nothing, with no guarantees of success or acceptance, they needed some thoughts to sustain themselves. They found them in an article on social justice and activism for animals. Although the students had to adapt some of the principles, they found them very motivating. "Think positively.... We are not the radicals or 'bad guys' who are trying to impede human 'progress'.... Be proactive.... Be nice and kind to those with whom you disagree

and move on.... If we let those who do horrible things get us down or deflect us from the work we must do, they 'win'..." (Beckoff, 2010, p. 56).

Ultimately, the students came to believe in advocacy, in themselves, in their ability to be advocates, and realized that advocacy is personal. Michael Hutchins (2009) could have been speaking directly to the students when he said: "On a personal level, when 'we *are* social justice advocates' rather than '*do* social justice work,' we operate with authenticity and integrity. What we say we believe is consistent with how we feel and our behavior reflects that congruence" (p. 34).

As the students gained knowledge of and confidence in advocacy, they were able to integrate these facets into their projects. There was a cross-fertilization: their knowledge of advocacy informed their projects while conversely, as they developed their projects, the terms and concepts of the articles came to life for them. People who, just a few months before, would have never considered referring to themselves as advocates became quietly confident in that role.

When the instructor was explaining the class to the students, she told them that they were going to change the world—or at least their part of it. Although the students were humble and often gently and modestly demeaned their efforts, they all had a vision for their projects and what they wanted them to accomplish. The students understood that if they did not act, there was no one else to do so and came to realize that each one of them truly could bring about positive and significant change. The students managed to do the impossible: meld dreams with action. Drury and Reicher (2009) were describing people like them when they wrote: "To realize in the here and now aspects of a world that does not yet exist (e.g., freedom, authenticity, equality) is to bring that world closer—through empowering its agents with the belief that they can create it. In a very concrete sense, then, social movement activists need to be architects of the imagination." (pg. 722).

As one of the culminating aspects of the class, all of the students wrote a formal report on their advocacy projects. These reports were not for their immediate clients but were to give the students the experience of writing a formal, professional quality report that could go to a third party entity, such as a funder or granting agency. They were able to eloquently articulate their advocacy efforts from conception to fruition, explaining advocacy in a personal but also professional and scholarly way. They demonstrated how advocacy and their projects were inextricably intertwined and made persuasive cases for how their advocacy projects advanced, not only Nordic Heritage, but their primary and initial client, Aroostook County.

Putting Theory into Practice: The Students Spin Straw into Gold With Their Projects

The student body of a remote, rural institution shares some of the demographics of a typical higher education entity. Its student body is a blend of those fresh from high school, older students who are returning to school after an interruption, older students who have never been to college, and people who have been outsourced from their jobs who are trying to develop alternative careers. But as an institution in an economically strapped area, they can face additional challenges: many of the students are desperately poor; many must work full time to afford college or to support family; often they are first generation college students who thus lack a supportive higher education environment at home. They regularly have to transcend challenges that might devastate those without such resiliency. But those types of obstacles made the PCJ 316 class members all the more suited for advocacy, since it was not some theoretical abstraction to them. They never doubted the power of one person to make a difference: they did that on a daily basis.

Combining Marketing With Grant Writing

Among KJ's goals was to stay in Aroostook County, doing public relations and marketing. She also wanted to try her hand at grant writing, since she saw that as a really useful skill even beyond her involvement with Nordic. KJ did three projects for Nordic, some of which were immediately successful, while the third provided a useful base for more action.

KJ wrote a story about Nordic for a local paper in order to give a general overview of it for the many who did not know Nordic at all. Her article appeared in a May 2013 issue. As an additional piece of her marketing/advertising/public relations, she developed a poster for the Nordic Trail Festival, a summer mountain bike event that tries to attract a range of people with races, food, games, and festivities. Finally, KJ was struck by Nordic's inaccessibility, which she found both unfair and unfortunate. She saw accessibility as both the right thing to do and the smart thing, so she began a grant process for Nordic with Maine charitable foundations.

A Logo and a Legend

BB had started off as a journalism major, at her mother's insistence. Part way along, she had decided to follow her dream of becoming an artist, but continued her involvement with professional communication. For her projects, she looked for ways to use her artistic ability to help Nordic. Nordic had an existing logo—a lion on skis—but BB wanted to design one that depicted Nordic as a four-season venue. She quickly came up with one: a shield in four sections that showed binoculars (bird watching, spring), cycling (summer), hiking (fall), and, of course, skiing for winter. But she also wanted to learn the origin of the existing logo and, in particular, the lion mascot. The truth was mundane. When Nordic was first developing, a few of its members were at a pub one evening, discussing, among other things, the need for a logo. After someone spotted a beer sign with a lion, the men decided to take a similar lion, put it on skis, and adopt it for the logo. Nordic also had a lion suit so that someone could appear as the Nordic lion for photo opportunities at events.

BB wanted to give the Nordic lion a story, so she developed the character of Little Nordie. She created a prototype stuffed animal that Nordic could reproduce and sell for a souvenir. But she did not stop there: she created an origin story and put it into a storybook. *The Legend of Little Nordie*, with simple text and lots of graphics, tells Little Nordie's story. Readers learn how he came from Africa to northern Maine. BB's idea was that Nordic could also sell the storybooks, either with the stuffed animal or separately.

Virtual Welcome Center

MW, one of the community members, had been one of the instructor's students, graduating the year before. MW had a spellbinding vision for what Nordic could be and started out with ideas for making Nordic a classic tourist attraction, replete with an elaborate welcome center. She wanted interactive media, furnishings, materials, and staff. Initially, she proposed to write grants to fund this and to then implement them. The instructor pointed out that, although these were all good ideas and worthy goals, MW needed to complete a project in three months. It would take much more time than that to create the welcome center of her dreams. Reluctantly, she agreed.

MW quickly bounced back, however, and decided to create a virtual welcome center—an online version. Although Nordic already had a website, it was not very attractive and was not kept well updated. It did

not mention that Nordic was a nonprofit, and it did not have anything special for members. MW's idea was to have a "Members Only" area that would give members exclusive access and information—make them feel as though they were insiders. As a local resident, she agreed to continue to be involved with Nordic's website, seeing this as a good way to support the community.

Organization, Technology, and Word-Smithing—With a Latin Flair

The other class members teased CV, calling him their token male since he was the only man in the class. He also really expanded their diversity: in a university dominated by county and Maine students, CV stood out by being from Caracas, Venezuela. Although he was not a native speaker, he was a professional communication and journalism major. Besides his origin, CV stood out in PCJ because he was a gifted athlete, breaking school records in baseball. He spoke and wrote strongly accented but good English and was gifted technologically.

Since this was his last semester at UMPI, CV also had his fieldwork practicum with the instructor, which they decided he could fulfill by taking on a very large project for Nordic. CV decided to create a manual for Nordic that could serve as a "how to" for its members. It would contain information about all of the projects that the students had accomplished, as well as offer suggestions for and ways to implement additional projects that dealt with advertising, community-based projects, fundraising, and marketing/branding. CV had created another book (a diabetic cookbook) several semesters before, and it had remained his favorite project, which he wanted to draw upon. He enjoyed bringing disparate elements together, giving them logical order and making them look good. He wanted the book to serve as a continual, reassuring presence for the Nordic board members after much of the class's involvement had ceased.

CV came up with three additional projects for the advocacy class. Drawing on his love for technology, he created a membership database that had such categories as demographic data, the kind of membership people had (individual or family), whether people wanted to volunteer, and if so, in what capacities. To partially offset having to continually update the website, CV designed a template for an electronic newsletter. His third project might seem surprising for a non-native speaker: CV wanted to develop a slogan for Nordic. Despite an understandable accent, CV regularly coined pithy phrases, so he spearheaded the slogan drive. Class members looked at existing memorable slogans and campaigns and found that they contained a verb and had six words or fewer. The students wanted something that would reach out to everyone, have a sense of adventure and potential, and be memorable. Their winner was: "Unlock the possibilities in ME." The slogan's last element was a play on words: along with being a first person pronoun, it also referred to the state of Maine's abbreviation. The idea was that as one unlocked one's own possibilities, one also discovered the potential of the region and state.

A Fairy for the Forest

From the time that KY, another PCJ major, heard the term "Enchanted Forest," her thoughts were all about fairy houses. She wanted to create something that would pull people who were not Nordic's usual constituents: people who were not typical athletes. She had grown up with an image of Nordic as a place for elite athletes, but the fieldtrip to Nordic shattered those preconceptions. Now she wanted to find ways to help others have a comparable experience. Having families with children come to Nordic to build fairy houses using existing forest elements in order to learn about preserving and protecting the environment seemed the perfect solution. The children could either assemble the houses in the Enchanted Forest or create them in the lodge and take them to the forest afterward.

KY knew that she needed to engage both children and adults. She could take nothing for granted: neither that they knew where the forest (or even Nordic) was nor that they knew how to build a fairy house. She also realized that she needed to give them motivation. So she designed materials to do those things. She developed a brochure for families that provided a map and directions that they could keep afterward as a souvenir. She also created a protagonist/heroine, Fickle the Fairy, and developed a storybook for Fickle in which the fairy is trying to find a place to live. Fickle has misadventures, then finds the Enchanted Forest, which will be perfect if someone will just build her a house. What child can resist a fairy's appeal?

KY had also wanted to start a fairy house tour circuit to bring people from away into the region. She ran out of time to complete this last component, but gave thoughtful suggestions to Nordic for how it could incorporate this once the fairy-house-building project was well established.

The Power of Persistence

LV was also an art major and a PCJ minor. She had a strong penchant for applied arts and graphics, intensified by her four years as editor of the campus student newspaper. She chose three projects that would help Nordic market and brand itself. The class had learned that Nordic had little idea who used its facilities. If they did not have to register for specific events, people would come and go without the opportunity to say where they were from, what brought them to Nordic, etc. LV decided to rectify that by designing a prototype guest book. LV also decided to create a series of brochures, one for each of the seasons at Nordic. To do this, she had to learn to use a new graphics program, but that was not the biggest issue. Nordic had very few photos available that did not feature snow and elite skiers: that is what it was known for, and that is what it tended to promote. The class's Nordic connections were not very helpful for this—they simply did not have suitable images. But finally, through Web searches, LV connected with a photographer who had many Nordic photos and generously gave her permission to use them.

The project that LV initially thought would be easiest turned out to be most vexatious. LV had family members who had been part of efforts to place such items as commemorative bricks, plaques, and benches at hospitals and other nonprofits. Her idea for Nordic was for it to sell commemorative bricks that could pave a walkway, garden wall, or be in another prominent venue. Her vision was that people would pay a certain amount to have messages inscribed on the bricks. Thus the hunt began. When she learned that the local brick maker for Aroostook County had gone out of business, LV was able to get prices from southern and central Maine, but that was just for bricks. Her contacts told her that she would still need to find someone local to engrave them and that that would be expensive. The only local business that did that sort of work was the one that produced the area's cemetery monuments. As the only game, not only in town but also in the entire region, the owner was incredibly busy. After an initial contact, LV tried to follow up probably a dozen times over the next two months. The semester had ended and the instructor was about to deliver the class projects to Nordic representatives, when LV gave the monument company one more try—and had success. She got prices for three different options, just in time for the instructor to present them to Nordic.

The Membership Pro Who Dove Into College

PK, the other community member, had a few extra hurtles since this was her first college class: she did not know the other students and initially had concerns about being able to do the work. But she had a

wealth of life and practical experience. She had worked at a high level with a national nonprofit for decades and was active in many volunteer groups, from senior organizations to wildlife refuges. She now had her own business, doing educational training for the Red Cross. She was a pro at all things pertaining to membership and nonprofit organizing. After a few classes, it was as though she had been part of the program for years.

PK decided to tackle a number of membership aspects for her project. She was a Nordic member, although she was quick to point out that she had not paid her annual membership fee in years because no one had asked her. She had gone to one Nordic board meeting years ago, but after no one acknowledged her, she vowed not to return. Still, she was willing to try to help Nordic again and was invaluable to the class because she could fill in its members on aspects of Nordic that they would not have otherwise questioned.

All class members were appalled that Nordic did not note its 501(c) (3) status on its membership form or its website. PK corrected that—and other issues—by designing a new membership application. From her years of involvement, she knew that Nordic too seldom thanked volunteers, so she decided to make it easy by designing a thank you card and thank you stationery. She designed a few different versions of membership cards that people could use as ID cards when placed in a plastic sleeve attached to a lanyard. She had ideas for membership displays and checklists for materials that Nordic would need, including supplies and what they cost. Perhaps most impressively, she compiled job descriptions and how tos for food services during events, breaking this down by position: greeter, host, maintenance, cook, dishwasher, etc. She noted that Nordic needed position descriptions for every event committee: medical; people working races for timing, safety, making sure people stayed on course; etc. Without this spelled out, people were too dependent on others' memories and things were forgotten or left to the last minute. PK also underlined that Nordic needed a clearly articulated risk management policy. Further, she noted that there needed to be clearer lines of authority and ways to cut through bureaucracy. For example, if people needed to restock the first aid kit, they should be able to access petty cash and not have to go through a hierarchy to get to the treasurer.

PK had incredible gifts for breaking things down and organizing. She was very sympathetic to the Nordic board members, busy people who were devoted to Nordic but often lacked specific expertise. She was already invested in Nordic, as her membership indicated. She offered to continue to be involved with Nordic and, specifically, to help the outreach committee, under whose purview membership fell.

Finding a Niche and Creating a Partnership

TU wanted to help Nordic find a niche and ensure that it became truly accessible. Her project was to bring about a partnership between Nordic and Maine Adaptive Sports and Recreation. She saw this as a way for Nordic to reach an untapped constituency and to completely and radically dispel the notion that it was only for elite athletes in bibs and spandex. She knew that healthy, challenging outdoor recreation is about much more than sports: it is about building character, confidence, inner strength, and self-respect. Adaptive recreation would benefit and pull in so many in addition to the clients, such as their families, friends, and the volunteers who helped. TU's goal was to prepare proposals advocating the partnership from both Nordic and Maine Adaptive's perspectives. She aimed to show each side why this was a win-win situation so they would continue to move ahead even when she could not be involved.

One of her tasks was to educate each side about the other. Maine Adaptive was founded in 1982 by an orthopedic surgeon who saw one of his young cerebral palsy patients happily skiing at a nearby facility.

Thus Maine Adaptive was born. It is a nonprofit organization, completely funded by sponsors and donations, whose purpose is to provide healthy recreation lessons and experiences to those with permanent disabilities, ages 4 and up. Once people apply and are accepted, everything is free, from lessons to equipment. Through the years, Maine Adaptive had expanded its sports and venues, going from skiing only to also include snowboarding and snowshoeing in the winter. In the summer, it now encompasses golf, cycling, paddling, and fishing. It used a number of locations, but at this point, they were all in central and southern Maine. That meant that it was missing half the state. Partnering with Nordic would mean that it could then reach out to people all over Maine (Maine Adaptive Sports & Recreation, 2013). Nordic would provide a wonderful facility, trainable volunteers, and a supportive, responsive environment and culture.

Nordic would gain a niche, generate some very positive marketing, and take a huge, bold step to serve the entire County. It would partner with an organization with much more experience to share, could get training and ideas, and would acquire connections. Once Nordic was in the network, people who had previously gone to other facilities would be more likely to come to Nordic. Maine Adaptive was a chapter of Disabled Sports USA and Professional Ski Instructors of America (Maine Adaptive Sports & Recreation, 2013). Being associated with those organizations, as well as the other venues that Maine Adaptive used, would be a great boon for Nordic.

TU did develop two proposals, addressing Maine Adaptive and Nordic, respectively. She knew that she would be presenting to Nordic on May 9, 2013, and wanted something definitive to say, so she focused on Maine Adaptive. She had some initial phone conversations with the program director, then, because of their busy schedules, they began to correspond by e-mail. TU hoped that the director would promote the partnership at a board meeting since TU could not travel the five hours each way to advocate in person. But because it was a proposal that no one present owned, it was easy for it to drop off the agenda, which happened more than once. To take it the next level, to make it real for both Maine Adaptive and Nordic, someone needed to advocate for it in person. That could not be TU, who was graduating and returning to California. So the instructor promised to pick up the baton.

Show Time: Engaging the Client through Presentation

As a way to help advocate for Nordic, the class members decided to present at University Day, the University of Maine at Presque Isle annual event where students present their research and experiential learning. Since this was in April, it would be a dress rehearsal for the culminating presentations to the Nordic board members. The students packed a great deal into their 30-minute slot, touching upon all nine sets of projects. Three or four of Nordic's dozen board members attended to get a preview of the longer presentations set for the following month. Few of the projects were completed on that April 10, but the students had a good feel for how they were coming together. The Nordic board members seemed excited about the projects they were getting, listening intently and commenting among themselves about how they could best use them. This was an excellent dry run for the students, who could get a sense of how Nordic would receive their projects.

By the time the students presented their projects a month later, many of them were finished. They had a longer time to present (75 minutes), but much more to cram into that window. Every one of the Nordic board members attended, which was a little overwhelming for some of the quieter students, although their confidence rose as they presented. Interested in the project based learning and advocacy, the UMPI president and another nonprofit advocate also attended, making it a packed house.

The students talked about their projects, why they chose them, how they developed. Although it was a lot to absorb, the Nordic members listened attentively. Because all the projects were not completed or graded, the students did not hand them over right then. But the students were eager to answer questions. The UMPI president said that the students had obviously done a great job, but she wanted to know how likely Nordic would be to use what the students had produced.

Many of the Nordic board members replied. Curiously, no two had been especially attracted by the same thing: they all found unique features in different projects. They said that they did not honestly know when they would be able to implement them all. But they thought that, over time, they would be able to put at least much of what the students had produced into practice. The instructor met with Nordic representatives in June and was able to hand over the majority of the projects. She also pledged that she and some of her students would continue to be involved. The partnership is ongoing.

Transcendent Lessons

Many powerful, broadly applicable lessons emerge from this advocacy campaign. Although no two situations would ever be exactly the same, those who teach or practice can adapt and apply many of these strategies in their unique cases.

Find a Way for People to Buy In

The members of PCJ 316 accomplished marvelous things. They produced excellent, professional quality work. They gave a struggling nonprofit a powerful shot in the arm. They helped it look at itself in various ways, gain fresh perspectives, see new possibilities, and ask why not instead of why. The class members never doubted that they could do great things, that they could make a real difference. Why? Because they worked on an overarching project that had enough breadth that they could all buy in and utilize their unique talents. They believed in themselves, partially because others believed in them. Failure was not an option. They did not know exactly how their projects would turn out, what particular twists they would entail. But few doubted that they would be successful.

Help People Discover Their Niche

Years ago, when the instructor taught an advocacy class in North Dakota, Pete Haga, community/government relations officer for the city of Grand Forks, came to speak about advocacy, buy-in, and getting people involved. He believed that all had gifts that they could tap, although they might not always be apparent. What he said resonated and has stayed with the instructor ever since. "Everyone's not a leader in the traditional sense. You can't count on everyone to storm the Bastille with you. That's OK. You only need a few people to do that. But you need a lot of people to do a lot of other things. What some people may want to do is hold a sign by the side of the road saying, 'This way to the revolution.' But they do it really well. And you need that. Big things are made up of a lot of little things. Your job is to help all find their niche" (Haga, 2007).

Help People Make the Professional Personal

So you have to trust people. But blind trust is not good for anyone: neither the person trusting nor the one trusted. There is too much potential for misunderstandings, ambiguity, and disappointment. Thus, you also need to know people and have a good sense of the demands and needs of your advocacy cause. The class members had a very finite window in which to make meaningful progress. They did not

have to fully accomplish everything that they initially proposed within the class. But they had to achieve some of it, both to give their client a foundation on which to build and to demonstrate their good faith and reliability. They could not just parachute in, point out what needed fixing, and walk away. They needed to be sensitive to what their client had achieved, where its members were, and how they felt. In short, they learned that empathy is an essential component of advocacy. As class members looked for models for how outsiders can deal sensitively with subjects, they watched a video about Pulitzer Prize winning photographers. One of them, Carol Guzy, gave the class its working definition of empathy. “Empathy is not imagining how you would feel in a particular situation. It’s *feeling* how the other person is feeling” (Guzy, 2009). As they developed their work, class members sometimes half joked that they could paraphrase JFK’s famous Berlin speech and say: “Ich bin ein Nordic Heritager.” Although the phrase would have been a joke, the feelings were not. Over time, they all came to care deeply about Nordic. Their interest was not only professional, but personal. The students worked so hard because they were channeling efforts into improving life for everyone—including themselves.

Help People Embrace Reporting Progress

The projects that turned out most successfully were those of the people who most fully embraced the reporting function. There was a correlation, although not necessarily cause and effect. Breaking the projects down into manageable chunks that the students needed to complete along the way to their ultimate goal may have been critical to success. Yes, the people who did well thinking and acting in these ways might have done so even without the reporting steps. Logical, organized, methodical people might not have needed external cues to get them to the finish line. But the cues may have gotten them there with less stress. Or the projects may have been stronger because they could thus be more focused. And for people who were not so organized, who tended to get writer’s block or to procrastinate, gaining some structure, even if from an external agent, was clearly helpful.

Give People Continual Feedback and Encouragement

The progress reports and timelines were invaluable tools. They helped preserve trust, let the instructor better know her students and what they wanted to accomplish, provided an indispensable means to guide and encourage, and kept complex and nuanced projects on track. Again, the people who were the most successful, who had the best experiences, whose projects were most effective were those who put most into their progress reports. In some cases the people who did so were already highly focused, organized individuals who were perhaps more likely to be successful anyway. But the people who were most successful also undertook more complex projects than their classmates who did not so fully embrace reporting out. They were also willing, indeed eager, to do more drafts of their products, again embracing communication and feedback. The communication only works if it is truly communication: when the students submit progress reports, the instructor needs to provide guidance and feedback. After viewing some student projects, one of the instructor’s colleagues once asked how she could coax such work from her students. After she told him about the progress reports, he asked, “Do you respond to those progress reports?” “Yes, that’s the whole point.” “That sounds like a lot of work” (C. Johnson, personal communication to instructor, 2012). It is a lot of work, but it is the path to people accomplishing amazing things. There are no shortcuts.

Give People the Opportunity to Be Extraordinary

When the instructor was a child, she heard a story about an elementary school teacher who was tapped, one year, to teach the gifted and talented class. The teacher was thrilled and lavished each child with

attention and support. Sure enough, every child achieved more than any of her students ever had previously. At the end of the academic year, the teacher thanked the principal for assigning her such gifted students. It was then that she learned that they really were a typical class: they had just lived up to her expectations. This is probably an urban legend, but there is something to be said for giving people the opportunity, means, and confidence to achieve. Fast forward many years. At the end of a semester, after reviewing student projects, the instructor confided in a friend, marveling that she had such extraordinary students. Her friend replied, "They're the same students that everyone else has. You just give them an opportunity to be extraordinary" (K.A. Perkins, personal communication, 2011).

The key to advocacy is to help people discover the tools and paths to become extraordinary. Truly, we all can make a difference. We all can be the difference. Let us start today.

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JACQUELYN LOWMAN has worked in a broad array of venues, from commercial publishing and journalism to academe. Her first love is teaching and guiding others to communicate: to help them realize their gifts. Her program at the University of Maine at Presque Isle specializes in marketing, branding, advocacy. The beautiful rural surroundings foster resilient, creative people.