Psychology’s Next Generation of Advocates

For early-career psychologists and members of the American Psychological Association of Graduate Students (APAGS), coming to Washington, D.C., in March to advocate for professional psychology on Capitol Hill can be life-changing. Good Practice spoke to four attendees at this year’s Practice Leadership Conference (PLC) about how the experience influenced their advocacy efforts on behalf of psychology:

Opening up possibilities

Sydney Morgan, a counseling psychology graduate student at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC), was so energized by PLC that when she spotted Rep. Emanuel Cleaver, D-Mo, on the plane ride home, she was eager to make contact.

Cleaver deplaned too fast for Morgan to catch him, but she’s not going to let that stop her. Says Morgan, “I plan to give his local office a call so I can chat with him.”

That sense of being able to act at the national level was prompted by Morgan’s participation in PLC, she says. But Morgan has been an advocate since starting graduate school. She began as a campus representative for APAGS, then moved up this year to become the southeast regional advocacy coordinator – helping to organize grassroots advocacy activities. In addition, Morgan and other UMKC counseling psychology students are active on campus, pushing for gender-neutral bathrooms and urging the counseling center to fill openings with staff who reflect the university’s diversity.

Meeting legislative staff at the D.C. offices of her representative and senators was eye-opening, says Morgan, who was surprised by how open and supportive they were. She plans to use her newfound confidence to engage with legislators at the Missouri Psychological Association’s upcoming advocacy day. She also plans to stay engaged at the national level. “Legislative advocacy seemed a lot more manageable than I thought,” she says. “There was a feeling that we could make a difference.”

Learning new tactics

Even before attending the PLC, Elyse Mowle was intent upon a career in advocacy.

“It’s the way to have the most impact on as many people as possible,” says Mowle, a clinical psychology graduate student at Texas A&M University and state advocacy coordinator for APAGS. While researchers help psychologists learn how to treat people and practitioners put that knowledge to use, she says, none of that matters without the policy component. “That’s all out the window if there’s no access to health care,” she says.

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– Sydney Morgan
Mowle first took interest in psychology advocacy after attending a legislative day sponsored by the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues about a year and a half ago. Then she got involved with APAGS. Now she’s helping the Texas Psychological Association fight against a move to consolidate all mental health practitioners – including master’s level practitioners – under a single licensing board.

A PLC session called “The Deregulation Movement: Strategies for Policy Advocacy” offered useful tips for fighting that battle, says Mowle, noting that the session featured the story of how the Rhode Island Psychological Association successfully fought a consolidation battle.

The most important lesson she’ll take back to Texas? Building a coalition with a broad array of mental health practitioners in the state. “Psychologists, psychiatrists and the master’s level providers often disagree on things,” Mowle admits, noting a history of “bad blood.” Mowle now plans to find ways to engage these professionals in the fight to keep their separate licensing boards.

Renewing a commitment to advocacy

Annie Derthick, PhD, almost didn’t come to the PLC, because she was so disheartened by the current socio-political climate in Washington. “There’s so much negative energy wrapped around Washington and our government, says Derthick, a psychologist at Providence Family Medicine Center in Anchorage. Now she’s glad she did.

Derthick has always been an advocate in her personal life, focusing most recently on lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender health care and religious freedom for immigrant and refugee populations. For Derthick, that kind of advocacy is an extension of her role as a clinician. “If I have a patient in my office who’s experiencing depression or anxiety as a result of being in an oppressive system, part of my clinical work is to fix that system, not just to ‘fix’ that person,” she says.

Derthick was struggling with her role as an advocate on behalf of psychology itself, however. “I have had to find a way to reconcile that agenda with my own personal agenda, which is fighting oppression,” she says. That happened
over the course of the PLC, thanks to the opportunity to spend time with other early-career psychologists and diversity delegates facing similar identity crises. She has started to reframe professional advocacy as championing the cause of access for the underserved. Derthick is now planning to create a continuing education program just for early-career psychologists and students in her state—a kind of advocacy primer with the association’s state advocacy and federal advocacy coordinators, which will be held in September 2017.

“I hope 20 years from now, we’ll be able to look back and say, ‘Remember our first PLC? Wow, look how far we’ve come!’”

– Dawn Huber, PhD

Preparing for leadership

Dawn Huber, PhD, was always a reluctant leader, more inclined to take a behind-the-scenes approach to advocacy. But when she met APA Practice Organization head Katherine C. Nordal, PhD, at a Practice Organization event, Nordal encouraged her to come to PLC for a thorough grounding in everything she needed to know.

“I went back to my state association and made a deal: If they would get me to PLC, I would finally step up and be the president-elect-elect,” says Huber, an assistant clinical professor of health psychology at the University of Missouri School of Health Professions. The association’s president-elect-elect system is a mentorship model that allows for a seat at the table for a few cycles before assuming power, explains Huber, who will take on the role in June.

Huber has long been active in advocacy at the state level, whether testifying at the state house or meeting with state legislators. PLC represents “a big stepping stone” toward feeling comfortable with federal-level advocacy, says Huber, noting that she was “raised in a family that really valued the idea of using your voice to speak up for others.”

In addition to the skills training at the PLC, Huber appreciated the opportunity to network with the pipeline of psychology’s future leaders. “I hope 20 years from now, we’ll be able to look back and say, ‘Remember our first PLC? Wow, look how far we’ve come!’” she says.

Written by Rebecca A. Clay