In the spring semester of the 2009-10 academic year I embarked on an experiment with 13 dedicated Brandeis University undergraduate students and the logistical, financial and intellectual support of the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life, and the Legal Studies Program at Brandeis University. Together we created “Advocacy for Policy Change.”

This course combines an investigation of the ethical dilemmas that arise in the process of lawmaking with hands-on advocacy work. Students are encouraged to think deeply about the complexities of shaping laws for constituents who hold diverse viewpoints about what is right and good for society and how to best progress through the legislative process. Students choose existing laws they feel could be credibly challenged on ethical or moral grounds, and advocate for legislative change.

Now in its fifth year, “Advocacy for Policy Change” is dedicated to the creation of citizen advocates, individuals prepared and motivated to create a just society through legislative advocacy. In 2014 we anointed 22 citizen advocates for such issues as homeless youth, workers’ rights, prison reform, and the environment.

Working in teams, the students research their chosen issues and design and implement models of legislative advocacy. State legislators and advocacy organizations advise each team to help them understand the lawmaking process, connect with colleagues, and set realistic goals. Each student completes a series of assignments related to their project, in formats relevant to advocacy work, such as an “elevator speech,” an op-ed, and a short video. [The full list of assignments is on page 6.] This anthology contains excerpts from these assignments for each project, updates on the bills and budgetary line items, and links to more information on the relevant issues or organizations.

Once again, I must thank several people whose support over the past five years has been invaluable. This course would not exist without the ongoing support of Professor Richard Gaskins, my mentor and the Director of the Legal Studies Program. He and Daniel Terris, Director of the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life, took the kernel of a unique idea and made it a reality. Massachusetts State Representative and Brandeis alum Jay Kaufman ’68, MA ’73 helped me create a course worthy of Brandeis University. An expanding list of exceptional teaching assistants made the course a reality: David Duhalde, Andrew Hart, Melissa Ross, Cynthia Tschampl, and this year’s assistants Roz Kabrhel and Doug Smith.

This course is part of the Advocacy for Policy Change initiative, designed to encourage citizens to bring moral and ethical insights to the legislative process. This initiative is supported by generous multi-year commitments from International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life International Advisory Board member Norbert Weissberg and his wife, former Board member Judith
Schneider, to whom the students and I are very grateful. For more about this initiative, see brandeis.edu/ethics/atbrandeis/advocacy.

Brandeis University students are committed to combining academic rigor with hands-on work in pursuit of social justice. Each year a new cohort of advocacy students develops skills that will serve them far beyond one semester. As we prepare for the sixth year of “Advocacy for Policy Change” we look forward to its continued growth, and to supporting the next cohort of inspirational citizen advocates.

Melissa Stimell
Professor of the Practice in Legal Studies
Director of Internships, Legal Studies Program
Internship Coordinator, Social Justice and Social Policy Program