Introduction

Melissa Stimell

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 at the state level. 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 best to progress through the legislative process. Students choose existing laws they feel could be credibly challenged on ethical or moral grounds, and advocate for state legislative change.

Now in its 10th 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 2019, we anointed 24 citizen advocates for such issues as immigrant rights, juvenile justice, access to educational opportunities and renewable energy.

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 the 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 six.) This anthology contains excerpts from these assignments, updates on the bills, and links to more information on the relevant issues or organizations.

Once again, I must thank several people whose support over the past 10 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, now Director Emeritus of the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life, took the kernel of a unique idea and made it a reality. Ethics Center Board member and Former Massachusetts State Representative Jay Kaufman ’68, MA ’73 helped me to create a course worthy of Brandeis University. An expanding list of exceptional teaching assistants made the course a reality: David Duhalde, Kaitie Chakoian-Lifvergren, Andrew Hart, Misti Jeffers, Roz Kabrhel, Benjamin Kreider, Melissa Ross, Doug Smith, Cynthia Tschampl, and Christian Lopez.
This course is part of a national program based at Brandeis University launched in 2015, called ENACT: The Educational Network for Active Civic Transformation. Since the fall of 2016, ENACT Faculty Fellows have been teaching their own ENACT courses at colleges and universities in or near state capitals across the United States. There are now 29 trained Fellows in 29 states. In the 2019-20 academic year ENACT is expanding to all 50 states thanks to a multi-year grant from the Teagle Foundation’s “Education for American Civic Life” initiative.

Students in ENACT courses, like those in Advocacy for Policy Change, learn how to work with community organizations, state legislators and legislative staff members to advance policy. With the guidance of David Weinstein of the Ethics Center, ENACT has developed a robust national network of faculty, students and alumni that includes an online platform for resource sharing and collaboration.

Last year I was appointed Interim Director of the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life succeeding Daniel Terris, who became dean of the Al-Quds Bard College of Arts and Sciences at Al-Quds University in Jerusalem. In this role, I have had the privilege of further deepening my involvement with the national ENACT program.

ENACT is becoming a major voice in addressing challenges to American democracy by engaging young people around the country in civic activism built on knowledge, cooperation, justice and integrity. ENACT 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; Advisory Board member and co-founder of the Louis D. Brandeis Legacy Fund for Social Justice, Jules Bernstein; The Teagle Foundation; Advisory Board Member Mark Friedman; and the Rice Family Foundation. The students, Faculty Fellows and I are very grateful for their ongoing support. For more information, see go.brandeis.edu/ENACT.

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. We look forward to supporting the next cohort of inspirational citizen advocates in Advocacy for Policy Change at Brandeis University and with the continued national expansion of ENACT.

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