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Storytelling For Advocacy

Storytelling as an Advocacy Tool



Stories enable people to connect across differences and to generate narratives that hold together groups, organizations, and movements. Stories can further unite peoples when there is a set of diverse storytellers sharing their experiences. This coming together around stories ensures that inclusivity of all peoples is practiced and honored, leading to communal understanding and sustained progress. Thus, stories can reauthor the web of narratives we live in, change the personal narratives we have, and change the mythic narratives that influence our worldview.

Authentic, impactful, and inclusive storytelling is not a resource to be used transactionally— always use first-person narration, which grows the respect, dignity, and leadership of the storyteller. Additionally, Swipe Out Hunger embraces asset-based framing in our storytelling efforts, which defines the community we serve by their aspirations, instead of their challenges.

Storytelling is also the perfect way to cultivate leaders. Storytelling is not just a tool to create emotional assets, but rather, when done correctly, can change lives, empower leaders, and strengthen your movement.

First, let's talk about how to collect stories. How do you respectfully ask students to tell you their story and remain mindful of any cultural sensitivities? Then we will touch on how you can leverage those stories and influence your advocacy efforts and grow your movement.

Story Collection Best Practices

Keep these best practices in mind when collecting and telling stories from those with lived experience.

1

Ask and Confide

The reason many people haven't told their story is not that they don't want to, but that no one has asked. It can often feel like no one is interested in their story, their voice doesn't matter, or their experiences have been incorrectly framed and used for someone else's benefit. Just asking a student if they wish to tell their story in their own way can have a significant impact. It reminds them of how important their voice is and that they have the power to change and better the campus and community.



Storytelling is, first and foremost, built on trust. Make sure you confide in the person and they can confide in you. Be empathetic, friendly, and culturally responsive. After all, this person is taking time to be vulnerable with you and they should feel appreciated. Let them know that their story will not be used without their consent nor exploited by those with greater privilege.

2 Understand and Listen

Everyone's story is different and everyone views their own lives and experiences through their particular world lens. Listen more than you talk. Make sure you always remember to empathize and understand the other person's experiences, especially if they are much different than yours. You might not have lived through similar experiences. It is your responsibility to listen to their story and comprehend it as it is.

To get you started, here are a few questions:

- Tell me a little bit about yourself.
- What is something extraordinary about yourself you would want people to know? What are your dreams?
- What resources do you have access to help provide food for you and your family?
- What systemic, institutional, and personal obstacles do you face when accessing food for yourself and your family?
- Where do you see yourself and your family in one year?
- If you could tell your elected officials one thing, what would it be?
- If you could tell your school administration one thing, what would it be?

3 Emphasize Their Power

Remember, we are not just collecting stories, but also growing leaders. A student telling their story is just one step in the journey towards leadership. Emphasize that their power not only consists of their story, but of their ability to lead others in this movement through relatable experiences.



4 Be Anti-Transactional

We are not collecting stories for the sake of collection or for something in return. Story collection is an opportunity to build an empowering and uplifting relationship with the storyteller. Their journey with your group does not end with their telling their story.

5 Follow-Up

As a group committed to empowerment and non-transactional leadership, it's essential to follow-up with a storyteller with opportunities to get involved in your group. You will want to do this soon after you collect their story and not let too much time pass. Follow-up with a thank you note and ask them if they would like to get more involved. You can send a blurb of their story, asking if it is accurately framed and if they consent to you sharing their story on social media, through newsletters, or other communication channels.

6 Eyes Are The Window To The Soul

Sometimes we can empathize with people through our visual connection more than an oral story. If they are comfortable, ask to take a photo of them, have them send a picture, or even record a video of their story. You don't need to be Steven Spielberg to do this; any smartphone will work or consider a recorded Zoom interview.

Leveraging Stories

1

Story Collection Happens Everywhere

Any moment you interact with students or volunteers, you have an opportunity for story collection. From tabling to club meetings, you can always be ready to capture and collect stories. You should also make sure to obtain a variety of stories from different audiences. Even if you have a student leader who hasn't experienced food insecurity, but is passionate about ending hunger, that is a remarkable story to tell too! Aim to always center diverse voices and when you can, prioritize those students with lived experiences of these issues.

2

Create An Organization System

Don't let your hard work go to waste. Too often, stories that are collected get thrown into a spreadsheet or on papers left in a desk drawer. Make sure you create an organizational story bank (whether it's a blog, social media account, spreadsheet, website, or other medium). Create a system for checking, updating, and sharing these with others. Within your organization system, remember to develop tags, which will help you organize your stories. Examples of tags are items such as freshman, food pantry, parent, SNAP, etc.

3

Mediums

Stories can be captured in so many different ways: online forms or surveys, paper forms while tabling, photos, video, and audio recordings. Offer diverse mediums for people to get involved and tell their stories. If possible, it is always advisable to have a visual accompanying a written story.

4

Create and Be Creative

There are so many ways in which you can use stories for advocacy. Here are just a few:

- **Storytelling series via blog or website**
 - This is a wonderful way to bring to life the real impact of your work. To communicate your work beyond numbers and data, but the real lives of those you support.
- **Videos**
 - Giving a face and voice to the story can be extremely powerful to create empathy and connection to your mission.
- **Social media story posts**
 - Facebook
 - Twitter
 - Instagram (Posts & Stories)
 - TikTok
- **Media pitching opportunities**
 - When you reach out to any media, including your school newspaper, make sure to either bring a story into your interview or have the reporter speak with someone who has a story to tell.
- **Stories as focus e-mail/newsletter**
 - Bringing in the real the impact of your work can be an amazingly effective way of reaching through the often-boring language of e-mails and engaging your audience.
- **Storybook/packet**
 - A storybook is a packet of stories of the students that you have impacted. This is a great leave behind/send ahead for legislators and administrators and shows the firsthand impact of your work.
- **Story quote pledge cards**
 - Story Pledge cards are your story packet but in short form. It could be a pledge card (sign up form) with a pledge to help end hunger on campus while on the other side of the card is a photo or story of a student.
- **Speaker series**
 - Find ways and times for each of the students you work with to be able to tell their story. It's a speaker series at club events or team meetings. Make sure to always include a story in every opportunity.