

## *Advocating on the Hill: My First Experience*

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Isn't it exciting to have the opportunity of going to the nation's capital and meeting with our elected officials and their staff to make the case for International Education?

Yes, absolutely! I can tell so from my own experience, since I was among the 90 Advocacy Day Participants from 31 states and the District of Columbia on March 16 in Washington D.C.!

But first of all, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to NAFSA Region X for making my trip financially possible, for I was one of the 2 lucky receivers of the Advocacy Day travel grant. And of course, my appreciation also goes to my boss, Ms. Brens-Watson, for her support and permission to attend this event in spite of our busy office schedule.

This experience on the Hill was valuable for me in many ways. The following are only a few among the many reasons.

First and foremost, what we learned at the training session the day before meeting with the officials could also be useful for future advocacy effort at the local level. There we studied and learned the basics, principles, rules, strategies, skills, tips, and the art of advocacy, as well as what critical issues to discuss and how to convey our ideas most efficiently.

Also, it was a rare opportunity to meet with the legislators and their staff to make our voice heard and to see and learn about the government functions. On the Advocacy Day, we, individually or in small groups, visited about 130 congressional offices to discuss with the elected officials or their aides about issues concerning the Fiscal Year 2012 budget, the Simon Study Abroad Act, and Immigration Reform. By the way, 17 of the total 90 advocates were from the state of New Jersey! Our group had a brief meeting with Senator Robert Menendez briefly and did meet with his staffer Ashley McCabe for a longer session. Each of us had a chance to voice our concerns and tell our compelling personal stories about issues affecting our local community. Specifically, I focused on regulations governing non-immigrants in F/J/H status that I think do not make much sense, such as restricting F2 dependents from attending school or no grace period for H1B temporary workers, etc.

In addition, it was wonderful to meet and be inspired by many NAFSA leaders at the national level including Marlene M. Johnson, Executive Director and CEO, and leaders and friends from Region X including Erika Rohrbach, our Chair of 2010, and Sal Longarino, NAFSA's 2010 Advocate of the Year.

By the way, I am not a person of politics. Nevertheless, I now have learned the power and impact of advocacy. Yes, advocacy matters! We all can help make a difference in issues that we care about. For instance, NAFSA's effort in bringing about changes in the Cuban travel regulations finally resulted in its revision this January, permitting academic, religious, humanitarian, and people-to-people travel once again. We should all try to seek opportunities to advance international education and exchange.