Advocating for Languages – Lessons Learned
By Anne Fountain, Associate Professor of Latin American Studies, San José State University. Reprinted, with permission from SWCOLT’s Newsletter.

At the May 2007 JNCL Delegate Assembly I gave a brief retrospective on twenty years of advocacy experiences. This report sums up that presentation with a focus on lessons learned.

For me public advocacy began at the state level with FLANC, the Foreign Language Association of North Carolina. In 1987 I was elected President of FLANC, just as North Carolina was rapidly expanding its foreign language horizons with a Foreign Language in the Elementary School (FLES) program to be implemented on a state-wide basis. The first step in our efforts to persuade the public was writing and publishing a brochure to explain the Basic Education Program (BEP) legislation, which promised to put foreign language instruction in the state’s K-5 public schools and have it available for students through grade twelve by 1993. We were so excited about the North Carolina Initiative, we designed a bumper sticker that proudly proclaimed: “North Carolina: First in Foreign Language.”

The lesson here: Publicize in many different ways.
We also pushed for and promoted professional development for teachers and printed, in the FLANC newsletter The Catalyst, a September 1989 letter to Governor James G. Martin that thanked him for providing Governor’s Language Institutes in the summer for North Carolina FL teachers. The 1990 newsletter asked teachers to write to the Governor and express appreciation for and support of the summer institutes.

The lesson here: Always say thank you.

As FLANC President I attended my first JNCL function, coming to Washington in 1989 and meeting with the staff in Senator Terry Sanford’s office. I secured a letter from the Senator for the FLANC newsletter and a commendation for North Carolina’s summer immersion camps put into the Congressional Record. While in Washington for the JNCL meeting in 1989, I took advantage of an invitation from a former student who was working at the White House (handling Supreme Court nominations) to take a private tour of the White House in the evening—an unforgettable experience.

The lesson here: Advocacy can be rewarding and exciting.

In the JNCL Context I have lived through times (Dave Edwards will remember this) when some legislators, apparently forgetting that they are public servants elected by voters, refused to see their constituents, yet other moments when access was easy. Being a delegate from North Carolina (where I lived for decades prior to moving to California) meant that there were sometimes real challenges in getting support from the state’s senators for the aims that the language profession was pursuing. In the JNCL congressional visits we sought to find common ground, even if it was only a tiny patch of earth, and to always be courteous. Promoting languages for security needs was usually an effective approach, and sessions with the legislative aides were always cordial.

The lesson here: Do not be discouraged and always be polite.

When John Edwards was my senator, I could build on school ties. My daughters went to the same high school (Broughton) as Wade and Cate Edwards, and my younger
daughter tutored at the Wade Edwards Learning Lab, the learning center established by the Edwards family after Wade’s tragic death. In the Edwards office many of the staff and aides had been students of mine or had a connection with Broughton High School. I encouraged my daughter when she was a student at Georgetown University to be an intern in Senator Edward’s office, advice she now wishes she had taken. 

*The lesson here: Schools, students, and former students can be powerful allies in advocacy.*

With my congressmen, I was fortunate, first with David Price and then, because of redistricting, with Bobby Etheridge, because our interests were aligned. I supported them and they supported me. Congressman Etheridge would see me without an appointment, because I gave to his campaign, made common cause with his educational goals, attended his birthday celebrations, and helped him with outreach to the Hispanic community in North Carolina. One of my former students became the Hispanic liaison for his office in Raleigh. Now that I live in California, I attend the annual barbeque sponsored by my congresswoman, Zoe Lofgren.

*The lesson here: Offer support to politicians and donate to campaigns as feasible. I got the advice to contribute to campaigns from Jon Strolle at a JNCL meeting and he is right: You need not give huge amounts but it really helps to be on the list of donors.*

Advocacy interests and expressions can be varied. I represented SCOLT, the Southern Conference on Language Teaching, at JNCL beginning in 1995 and created a “SCOLT page” for the publication *SCOLTalk* as a way of assigning a designated advocacy space in a regional setting. We also began regular advocacy sessions at the annual SCOLT conference. Later I represented SAML, the South Atlantic Modern Language Association, and reported to their board about JNCL activities. Currently I am representing SWCOLT, the Southwest Conference on Language Teaching, have an advocacy position on their board and promote a regular advocacy session at the conference.

*The lesson here: A concern for advocacy is portable and can be applied in many different settings.*

It would not be fair to mention JNCL without saying something about California. I had been coming to the Delegate Assembly for years and knew individuals from California, like Ray Clifford at the Defense Language Institute and Jon Strolle of the Monterey Institute for International Studies. But I didn’t know any representatives from the California Language Teachers Association (CLTA) until I met Lorraine D’Ambruoso of San Jose at a Delegate Assembly. Lorraine is the perfect example of what a single person can do for advocacy. When she became the Executive Director of CLTA, she got the organization focused on advocacy for California and connected to national advocacy issues at JNCL.

*The lesson here: One person who is passionate about advocacy can make a difference.*

Among the highlights of my experiences with advocacy were: Serving on the Joint National Committee for Languages (JNCL) & National Council for Languages and International Studies (NCLIS) Board of Directors for two terms, 1995-1997 and 1997-1999, and suggesting a comprehensive advocacy exhibit (a booth where a full range of materials could be on display) for the ACTFL joint conference in Nashville in 1997. The idea behind the ACTFL display, which I discussed with Harriet Barnett at the Northeast Conference, was to share resources and learn from one another. Why reinvent the wheel?
The lesson here: Learn from others and find good examples of advocacy materials that can be borrowed or adapted. Many state organizations have excellent resources and ACTFL has a strong advocacy portfolio. The Modern Language Association offers free and/or downloadable brochures about language learning.

Being present for occasions to honor the champions in our field was a privilege. I was fortunate to be part of celebrations honoring the service of Dean James Alatis and J. David Edwards to the language and international studies professions, and I was able to contribute to the JNCL Recognition Reception for Senator Paul Simon by securing for the Senator an honorary membership, complete with framed certificate, from a Spanish Honor Society. We all owe a profound thanks to Jayne Abrate for surprising Dave with a well-deserved tribute in 2005.

The lesson here: Celebrate success and honor those who have been advocacy pioneers.

Some of my advocacy initiatives had settings outside of JNCL and professional meetings. One was writing an advocacy article: “Strategies for K-8 Programs: Advocating through professional organizations,” which appeared in Critical Issues in Early Second Language Learning, published by Scott Foresman-Addison Wesley in spring 1998. Other activities included making advocacy part of a graduate course on professional issues, at University of Southern Mississippi in 2003, and submitting testimony on Title VI of the Higher Education Act in June of 2003. Most recently, I had a hand in inviting Christine Lanphere, the 2007 ACTFL teacher of the year, to the Department of Foreign Languages’ Annual Banquet at San José State University. As we honored Christine we proclaimed the power of languages. It was a wonderful evening with a dynamic teacher of the year, a record attendance, the University Provost on hand, and good publicity. This is certainly advocacy at its best!

The lesson learned: Advocacy can take many forms, and ACTFL’s Teacher of the Year initiative is a great resource for advocacy.

Along the way I’ve learned to connect professional interests with public servants. I’m a specialist on Cuba and José Martí, and in 1998 I presented a portrait of Cuban patriot and poet, José Martí, to New Jersey Congressman—now Senator—Robert Menéndez at a Cuban American celebration in Newark. Since I also teach Hispanic literature of the United States, I suggested an author friend, Francisco Jiménez, for a chapter in John Edward’s book, Home: the Blueprints of Our Lives, and was able to reconnect with both Francisco and Senator Edwards at a book signing in San José in spring 2007.

The lesson here: Professional expertise can help in reaching political figures.

These are some of the lessons learned from twenty years of advocating for professional issues. And to those I would add:
Consider using a lobbyist. If you don’t have time, pool organizational resources to invest in someone who has time and legislative know-how. CLTA, the California Language Teachers Association, has done this very successfully.

- Bookmark <languagepolicy.org>, the website for JNCL-NCLIS, on your computer’s browser.

- And, last but not least, write to say thank you. I can’t stress this enough. A well-crafted expression of thanks can make a difference. One of my choice memories from JNCL work was receiving a personal reply from Senator Thad Cochran in response to a hand-written note to him making a connection with Mississippi, and saying thank you.

Anne Fountain, August 2007