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# Civic Advocacy Policy Considerations and Communication for Medical Schools

Group on Student Affairs (GSA)

Medical Student Civic Advocacy Working Group

Association of  
American Medical Colleges

# GSA Medical Student Civic Advocacy Working Group: Civic Advocacy Policy Considerations and Communication for Medical Schools

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This document was created by AAMC's GSA Medical Student Civic Advocacy Working Group and is intended to aid institutions in considering how to engage in and support student civic advocacy. All content reflects the views of the GSA Medical Student Civic Advocacy Working Group and does not reflect the official position or policy of the AAMC unless clearly specified.

The AAMC (Association of American Medical Colleges) is a not-for-profit association dedicated to transforming health through medical education, health care, medical research, and community collaborations. Its members are all 155 accredited U.S. and 17 accredited Canadian medical schools; more than 400 teaching hospitals and health systems, including Department of Veterans Affairs medical centers; and more than 70 academic societies. Through these institutions and organizations, the AAMC leads and serves America's medical schools and teaching hospitals and their more than 179,000 full-time faculty members, 92,000 medical students, 140,000 resident physicians, and 60,000 graduate students and postdoctoral researchers in the biomedical sciences. Additional information about the AAMC is available at [aamc.org](http://aamc.org)

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## Introduction

Commitment to populations' health, community, and societal advocacy is an important component of physician professionalism, and we encourage medical schools to provide education, opportunity, and support for students to engage in patient and civic advocacy, a person's or group's engagement in the public sphere that promotes the public good by effecting political and social change. This document provides considerations and examples for schools to keep in mind when drafting policy related to medical student civic advocacy.

## Considerations for Medical School Policies

Medical schools are strongly advised to work with their university's governmental affairs office in developing and communicating political engagement and advocacy policies. The policies and practices for consideration in this document can serve as a starting point for administrators to develop their approach to policy. Individual school policies will vary based on state laws that govern expression on campuses, on individual university structure, such as whether a medical school is a public or private institution, and on general university policies related to civic advocacy.

General policy considerations:

- As stated within the AAMC's "[Guiding Principles for Civic Advocacy by Medical Students and Prospective Applicants](#)," it is important that students understand that they only represent themselves when engaging in advocacy, unless they are officially partnering with the governmental affairs office. For example:
  - If a student states that they are a student at a specific medical school, they should clarify that they only represent themselves and not their institution.
  - The privilege of wearing the white coat comes with responsibilities. When one wears a white coat, they are representing your school and the profession. All students should respect the symbolic power of the white coat and its representation of the aspirational virtues associated with medicine – humility, compassion, integrity, accountability, ethics, and humanism. Schools are encouraged to inform students regarding any rules around wearing white coats with school logos during advocacy events.
- Seek guidance from your legal counsel for policy alignment with Federal, State, and Local laws.
  - Ask whether there are legal limitations on the type or amount of advocacy the school can sponsor or support, either through hosting an event or through the use of school-purchased supplies.
  - What are the legal parameters around prohibiting student engagement in advocacy on campus?
  - Is there sufficient inclusivity in the policy for different viewpoints?

- Partner with your parent institution’s government affairs office for guidelines around:
  - Inviting political candidates to speak, or hosting a debate
  - Inviting current political representatives on campus to speak
  - Organized events for student issue-based advocacy

### Personal Advocacy Suggestions for Students

It is beneficial for schools to outline for their students the ways in which students can be civically engaged, rather than only dictating what should not occur. Some suggestions include:

- You may engage in personal political activity in your private capacity. If your opinions are framed by your experiences as a medical student, you could state “I am a medical student at \_\_\_\_\_, speaking today on my own behalf.”
- When engaging in civic advocacy, be sure to reinforce your personal/private involvement by using your personal email, phone, and computer. Avoid using resources located on campus or owned by your institution.
- If you’re considering writing an op-ed, you should seek guidance from your Communications, Public Relations, and/or the university Governmental Affairs offices for best practices.
- Join professional advocacy organizations, including local chapters at your medical school, statewide organizations, and national organizations. Attend meetings and engage in committee work or start a new chapter if one does not already exist. Physician and public health advocacy organizations are a great avenue to getting further educated and involved in advocacy efforts that relate to your interests and can represent opportunities to promote interdisciplinary work between law, nursing, social work, and others.
- Join student organizations or community organizations to learn and engage further on topics related to societal issues and public health.
- Attend town halls sponsored by your representatives and local governmental meetings, such as city council. This is an excellent way to get to know your government representatives and share your concerns directly.
- Write or submit testimony for city, county, and state bodies related to policies that impact social determinants of health.
- Foster collaborations with local community partners.
- Work with local and county public health departments.
- Plan a nonpartisan voter registration effort within your school or local hospitals. Connect with your student affairs deans for guidance on policy compliance and overall support.
- Plan educational programs for peers to discuss how to be an effective advocate within your local community by bringing in experts within your Governmental Affairs office, faculty members, and community partners.

- Leverage social media to engage in advocacy efforts and/or share credible health and health science information with the public. Social media can extend your reach and voice and allow you to amplify the voices of others. Know your institution’s social media policy and clearly state that views are your own.

### Civic Engagement Programming Examples

- Schools could support nonpartisan voter registration at orientation, outside the lecture hall, or sent over email. In fact, the Higher Education Act of 1965 requires institutions of higher education to distribute voter registration forms to students in advance of elections for federal office, governor (or other chief executive) within the state.
- Partner with your school’s Governmental Affairs office to organize or participate in a local, state, or federal legislative advocacy day (i.e., “Hill Day”) or participate in one organized by a membership organization.
- Governmental Affairs or local nonpartisan voter education organizations like the [League of Women Voters](#) can support educational programming. Examples include: how to do advocacy at the local and/or state level, how to reach out to and meet with your representatives, how to write an op-ed and get it published, how to research candidates and issues (hosted prior to an election), inviting physicians to speak who have served or currently are serving in a political role (appointed or elected).
- Critical thinking is an important skill and students should be given opportunity and space to have facilitated dialogues where they can explore their own values related to political and social issues. Host a panel or speaker on a particular issue for 20 minutes, allow 10-15 minutes for questioning, and then have students discuss prepared prompts in small groups with a peer facilitator. Or consider taking a journal club approach, with shared readings on a policy or advocacy topic and a faculty facilitator guiding the conversation.

## AAMC GSA Medical Student Civic Advocacy Working Group Glossary

<b>Activism</b>	A doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct action or campaigning, especially in support of, or opposition to, one side of a controversial issue
<b>Advocacy</b>	The act or process of publicly supporting or recommending, either individually or with a group, a cause or proposal, usually on behalf of others
<b>Civic advocacy</b>	Any activity by an individual or group that aims to influence decisions within political, economic, and social institutions - including activities and publications to influence public policy, laws and budgets
<b>Civic engagement</b>	Working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and nonpolitical processes
<b>Direct lobbying</b>	Any attempt to influence legislation through communication with: (i) Any member or employee of a legislative body, or (ii) any government official or employee (other than a member or employee of a legislative body) who may participate in the formulation of the legislation
<b>Grassroots lobbying</b>	Any attempt to influence legislation through an attempt to affect the opinions of the general public or any segment of the public
<b>Lobbying</b>	Activity designed to influence legislation
<b>Nonpartisan</b>	Not supporting or controlled by a political party, special interest group, or the like
<b>Partisan</b>	A firm adherence to a party, faction, cause, or person
<b>Patient advocacy</b>	Any activity by an individual or group that aims to advance or protect patients' rights, health, safety, and particular interests in relation to family members and/or the healthcare industry and its providers
<b>Political engagement</b>	A broad range of activities through which people develop and express their opinions on the world and how it is governed, and try to take part in and shape the decisions that affect their lives
<b>Professionalism<sup>1</sup></b>	The habitual and judicious use, learned and refined over time, of communication, knowledge, technical skills, clinical reasoning, emotions, values, and reflection in daily practice for the benefit of the individual and community being served and to facilitate meaningfully engaging and partnering with communities

<sup>1</sup>As an additional reference point, the ACGME uses the following language for Professionalism: Residents must demonstrate a commitment to carrying out professional responsibilities and an adherence to ethical principles. Residents are expected to demonstrate:

- compassion, integrity, and respect for others;
- responsiveness to patient needs that supersedes self-interest;
- respect for patient privacy and autonomy;
- accountability to patients, society and the profession; and,
- sensitivity responsiveness to a diverse patient population, including but not limited to diversity in gender, age, culture, race, religion, disabilities, and sexual orientation.