Strategic Communications to Advance and Advocate for Self-Direction: Practical Strategies for Influencing Policymakers, Funders, and More

In the wake of COVID-19, self-direction is facing innumerable challenges, but also unprecedented opportunities to grow and reach more older adults and individuals with disabilities. **Applied Self-Direction has partnered with Burness, a DC-based firm focused on social change, to offer a new course to help those working for self-direction to meet the demands of the moment.**

This course will highlight some of the practical elements of communications work, from strategic planning to message development to storytelling to media relations, with a dedicated class on op-ed strategy and writing. After completing this course, you will have a grasp of what constitutes a news story from the perspective of journalists – and you will be on your way to developing the skills to "pitch" those stories.

This course will teach you how communications work in practice, why it's critical to your organization's success, and what you personally can do to advance self-direction. A primary aim of this course is to teach you how to influence policymakers, funders, and more. We expect skills such as these will be essential to support self-direction during these difficult times.

Course Instructor

For the past three years, Andy Burness has taught a course on strategic communications at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. He has adapted his course curriculum to focus specifically on strategic communications to support self-direction.

Andy is the founder and president of Burness, a mission-driven global communications firm supporting organizations with a social mission and the people they serve. He is a long-time advisor to the self-direction movement, starting with the Cash & Counseling Demonstration and Evaluation. He has collaborated for over 20 years with movement leaders such as Kevin Mahoney and Pam Doty regarding communications strategy and tactics to further self-direction.

Course Objectives

1. You will better understand the role of communications as a driver of positive social change, including for self-direction.
2. You will better understand the strategic communications planning process.
3. You will be better equipped to translate complex information in ways that are more accessible to the public you seek to influence for policy change.
4. You will become more confident in your skills to be a successful change-agent in support of policy change you seek.

Course Format

This course includes six 90-minute classes held virtually every other week. Each class will include a lecture, interaction with other classmates, and Q&A. Office hours will be held during the off-week for you to ask more questions and continue the conversation from the previous class. The goal is to have a 12-week learning experience requiring very little of your time, but a high level of interest and energy related to improving your strategic communications skills and management of others who do this work.

You have an opportunity to do optional reading to supplement class learning. Readings will be made available the week before each class.

Course Calendar

Date	Time (EST)	Topic	Description
Wednesday, September 9th	2-3:30 PM	Introduction to the field of Social Change Communications	Explanation of the "Research/ Evidence to Impact" model, including translation, media and advocacy – as well as attention to audience, message, story, and community voice.
Wednesday, September 16th	2-3 PM	Office Hours	
Wednesday, September 23rd	2-3:30 PM	Messaging, Part 1	Introduction to the science behind messaging or framing, what constitutes a message, and effective and ineffective examples of messages. Explanation of the PROBLEM – SOLUTION – ASK – HOPE – URGENCY message deck. Message strategies for engaging audiences beyond the "choir," sometimes in search of common ground between ideological opponents. First opportunity to write and voice messages. Depending on time, focus on Message Discipline and Message Delivery, with emphasis on controlling the moment, as opposed to being a passive, reactive discussant. First opportunity to write and voice messages related to self-direction.

Date	Time (EST)	Topic	Description
Wednesday, September 30th	2-3 PM	Office Hours	
Wednesday, October 7th	2-3:30 PM	Messaging, Part 2	With an understanding of messaging theory, we move to Message Discipline and Message Delivery, with emphasis on controlling the moment, as opposed to being a passive discussant. We'll introduce the concept of "asset framing" that minimizes stigma and celebrates positivity. Second opportunity to work on common messages for self-direction, working through a scenario related to care for older adults and individuals with disabilities. Exploration of the most effective messengers.
Wednesday, October 14th	2-3 PM	Office Hours	
Wednesday, October 21st	2-3:30 PM	Storytelling	A primer on effective storytelling for policy change purposes and why storytelling (beyond data alone) is critical for advocacy. Some of our discussion will be guided by the optional class readings. We will also develop and deliver stories in small groups – newly empowered to believe that each of us has stories to tell. Through a series of case studies, video clips and interactive exercises, we explore how to strategically and responsibly use stories in advocacy.
Wednesday, October 28th	2-3 PM	Office Hours	
Wednesday, November 4th	2-3:30 PM	Essentials of Media Relations	An introduction to the news process. Examination of basic news terms and how they apply to the policy influencer. What is and isn't "news" from the journalist's perspective? Consideration of advocacy potential through seemingly ordinary meetings and mundane gatherings such as commissions or task forces.

Date	Time (EST)	Topic	Description
Thursday, November 12th	2-3 PM	Office Hours	
Wednesday, November 18th	2-3:30 PM	The Op-Ed	Make the news. Strategy behind the op-ed and a primer on how to write and place an op-ed, and then use it for advocacy purposes.
Wednesday, December 2nd	2-3 PM	Office Hours	