

Communicating with Congress About Science and Technology Issues

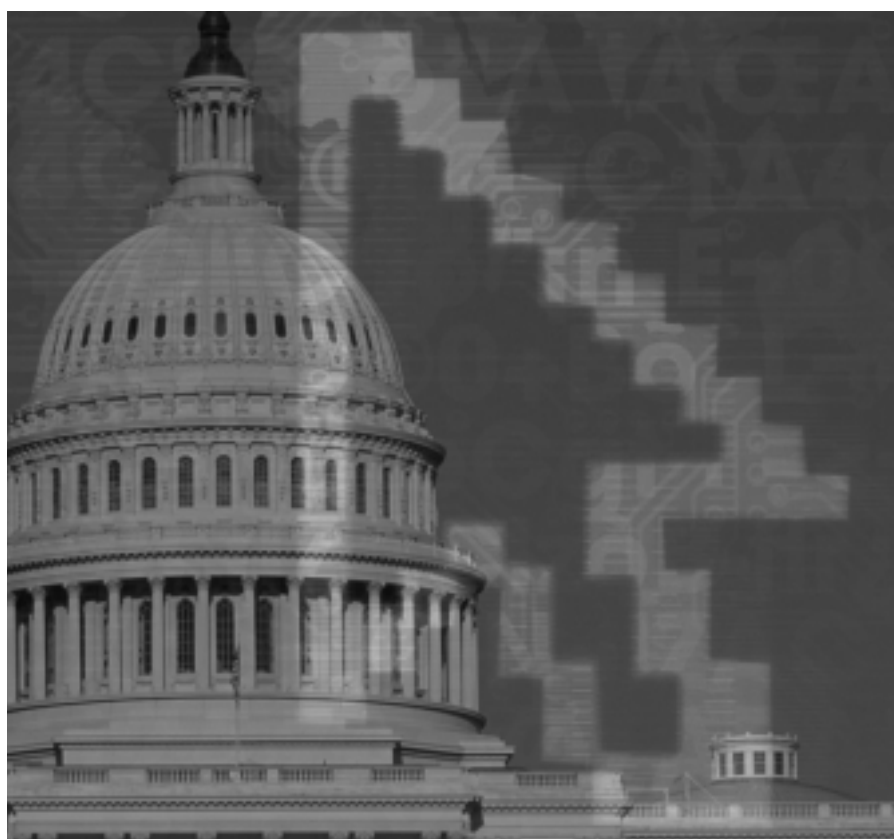
Advocacy may not appeal to academia, yet educating Congress on issues important to you reaps benefits that justify the effort

By **Laila Van Eyck**

"On the Hill, we work in a world with too few staffers, with too much work to do, and not enough resources. Most staff have broad knowledge, not deep knowledge about issues. That is why you are so vital. You are an incredible resource to us. You have more information about your issue than we could ever have," said Alan MacLeod, chief of staff for Congressman Ron Kind, speaking to participants at a recent EDUCAUSE conference.

In addition to (or because of) the sometimes, overwhelming job requirements, Hill staff tend to frequently change jobs. Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) studies indicate that 44 percent of Hill staff in personal offices have held their current job for one year or less. Also, the recent election means many more new faces in Congress and the Administration this year. Many of these members and their staff face steep learning curves as they begin their new jobs.

Not only is the lack of experienced staff a problem, but the traditional sources of information for policymakers on science and technology issues have either disappeared or important positions are left vacant. For example, Congress used to rely on the Office of Technology Assessment for objective analysis of complex scientific and technical issues, but the office was closed on September 29, 1995. Previous American presidents and members



of Congress have sought the expertise of a White House Science Advisor to coordinate science and technology policy across federal agencies, advise the president on critical science and technology matters, and testify before Congress. But as this article goes to press well into the new administration, the president had only recently nominated a Science Advisor. Furthermore, it is expected to take a few more months before he is confirmed by

Congress and assumes his new duties.

Consequently, members of Congress and their staffs need information about science and technology issues now more than ever. This means that EDUCAUSE members can help play an important role in providing the necessary information and expertise. Before you walk into your representative's office or invite them to your campus, however, there are several key points to keep in mind.

Plan Ahead

Do a little homework when planning your approach. Talk with your college or university government relations officer to get information about your representative's personal and professional interests. Questions to ask include

- What Congressional committees do they serve on?
- Do they have jurisdiction over science and technology issues important to higher education?
- Have they sponsored any bills pertaining to science and technology and your particular issue?
- What was their occupation before they were elected?
- Do they have relevant hobbies that could spark a dialogue?

You might find something, such as an interest in military trivia or a former career in teaching, that will help you convey your message to your legislator on a more personal level. Search for the most effective way of relating your issue to them so that it immediately captures their attention and imagination.

Develop Your Message

Keep your message brief and simple. Do not use jargon or unrecognizable acronyms. Use compelling examples or statistics to illustrate your case. For instance, can you talk about how your project or particular issue might affect people beyond the borders of your college or university? Could it lead to major scientific breakthroughs? Can it save lives? Might it protect people from harm? Does it improve our quality of life? Would it affect the economic development of your state? Does it relate to a state or national issue such as training workers, improving K-12 education, or protecting national security?

Be sensitive to your member's particular interests. Congress faces difficult choices over many competing interests and priorities. While not every project or issue can be linked to a direct benefit, whenever possible it is important to show how it has broad ramifications.

If your issue is a policy or budget item, find out where it is in the federal

policymaking process. For example, is Congress debating it in a committee, or has it moved out to a vote on the House or Senate floor? Do you have any background information (such as last year's funding level)? Your institution's federal relations officer may be able to tell you if your representative has taken positions on your issue in the past and advise you on what messages might be particularly effective with your representative.

Remain Flexible

You may not be able to arrange a meeting with your representative because of their extremely busy schedules — you may be directed to a staff member instead. It is just as important to discuss your issues with them (no matter how young and inexperienced

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they might appear) because most legislators rely heavily on their staff for advice and expertise in specific areas. But be aware that you may not get much time to make your case. Often, staff members have very tight schedules when Congress is in session, or they may be called away unexpectedly during your meeting. As a result, you should keep your comments brief and to the point.

As Howard Gobstein, vice president of governmental affairs and director for federal relations at Michigan State University, warned, "Be prepared for the unexpected. You may have to deliver your comments standing up in the lobby or running alongside a member of Congress as they are racing through the halls of the Capitol on their way to vote on a bill."

While you do not have to do wind sprints to prepare for your meeting on the Hill, you will need to be flexible and ready to adjust your schedule or

the length of your visit. Consequently, you should prepare a one- or two-page document that outlines your issue in greater detail to hand to a staff member at the end of your meeting.

Bring Your Representative to Campus

Representatives are more likely to remember campus visits and lab demonstrations than your visit to their office because campus visits can illustrate the intricacies of an issue with real people and events. If you choose this method, plan the visit carefully to produce a lasting, positive memory of an exciting educational experience.

Rhonda Norsetter, senior special assistant to the chancellor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, advised, "Don't just sit them in a room and talk to them — you want to engage them in a lab situation or a classroom. Have them watch an experiment in progress and meet with the faculty and students involved in the project." Bob Samors, associate vice president for federal relations at the University of North Carolina, suggested, "You can invite them to participate in a forum or panel discussion on campus. This may get them more invested into an issue because they are spending time and energy on it, and they participate in the educational process."

Become a Resource

Find opportunities to offer your institution's faculty and staff as a resource on particular issues. As Samors explained, "I call it going into a Congressional office with a hand extended, rather than looking for a handout." Ask the Congressional staff how you can help to provide useful, objective information on some of the numerous issues on which Congress promulgates legislation. The staff will appreciate your willingness to help them rather than always asking them for something. Norsetter similarly observed, "Serving as a resource is what we do best. Universities should make their expertise available to their Congressional delegation. If we don't provide this resource, we aren't doing our job."

Enlist Others in Your Effort

Students, faculty, and senior administrators can all be helpful in communicating your message. But it also may be beneficial to seek out advocates beyond the university community to help make the case for a particular program or initiative. Beneficiaries of these programs might include local business leaders and school district leaders. "I call these people third-party allies," said Samors. "They can be very helpful in adding another perspective. Their voices can sometimes be more valuable for making your case because they show how a program benefits a broad range of constituents beyond a particular college or university."

Conduct Follow-up

Sometime during the meeting, you should adhere to a time-honored Washington, D.C., tradition and exchange business cards. This will help you remember to whom to send thank-you

notes upon returning to your institution. Be sure to spell their names correctly — business cards are invaluable here.

In his comments to the EDUCAUSE meeting participants, MacLeod recounted instances where constituents have completely garbled the spelling of a staff member's name or inadvertently sent a thank-you note to the wrong person. This hurts your message and the staff member's overall impression of your visit, MacLeod noted. He also suggested that a thank-you note should reiterate some key points from your meeting to remind the staff member of the discussion.

Gobstein recommended that you not let your advocacy end there. Instead, follow the progress of your initiative through the appropriations or policy process. Contact your federal representative's office at key junctures to remind them of your continued interest in an issue.

Effective Advocacy

So, planning ahead, developing your message, staying flexible, becoming a resource, enlisting others in your effort, and conducting follow-up are some important steps to building a successful, long-term relationship with your Congressional representative. In the end, you can take personal pride in your efforts to advance the fundamental learning, research, and service missions of higher education, while also enhancing the quality of science and technology policy for the nation and its citizens. And someday, you may just get a phone call from a member of Congress or their staff saying, "Hey, I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about this issue we are working on" *e*

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