NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF GRADUATE-PROFESSIONAL STUDENTS

NAGPS

PRIMER ON LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY

A successful visit with Congress members is one that is well-prepared. It requires careful study of each member - their voting history, their position on issues, their background, the nature of their district, and more. It also requires passion, honesty, and a desire to connect on a meaningful level. As you prepare for our upcoming *Advocacy Summit and Legislative Action Days,* we encourage you to review this primer. It will help you schedule meetings, understand your Congress members, engage meaningfully in your meeting, and effectively expand on your relationship afterwards.

PREPARING FOR ADVOCACY

Your primary goal in meeting with members of Congress should be creating or expanding your relationship with the office. Offices are bombarded with information on a regular basis and thus need to have trusting relationships with experts and constituents. The success of your advocacy will hinge upon this relationship, so your "ask" will have a greater impact when you've connected with them on a meaningful level.

For many academics, the directive to prioritize relationship over facts is foreign. Yet this is the most successful way to engage with the public and with members of Congress. Members must balance many needs: the financial situation of their constituents, their personal values, ideology regarding the role of government, and values and religious beliefs, just to name a few. The facts of any particular issue intersect with these other factors, and therefore understanding these complexities - and your member's perspectives on them - are vital in your advocacy.

IN-PERSON ADVOCACY

In-person visits from constituents is the most influential way to engage with Congress members. Whether this happens in DC or in their home districts, it conveys an earnest desire to communicate and connect. Most important in these meetings is the presence of constituents. These are those whom the members represent, and meeting with constituents are so important that claiming to have a constituent with you, and then not, is one of the greatest offenses an advocacy or lobbying group can make in legislative advocacy.

Therefore, when constituents make the time and effort to schedule an in-person meeting to talk about the issues they care about, members take note and listen. And when these meetings are used to cultivate relationships, you can ensure that your carefully measured opinions will continue to be heard in the future.

In-person meetings can happen in their Washington offices or in their District offices. Regardless of where the Congress member is, you can almost always meet with a staffer in either location. If you meet in the District, you can often meet on the weekends as well as the weekdays.

Before your Congressional Visit:

- Become familiar with how Congress works. Understanding how bills pass through Congress, the timing of appropriations, and what is necessary for legislation to pass will influence the timing and manner of your advocacy. Contacting your representative concerning a bill that is in the wrong chamber, the wrong subcommittee, or that is "dead on the floor" will do little good, and it might paint you as someone who isn't paying attention.
- Include a constituent. This is non-optional, as doing otherwise will leave a very bad impression and be automatically painted as distrustful and deceptive.
- Work with your institution's federal relations office to schedule and confirm meetings.
    - If you cannot work through your federal relations office, you can schedule meetings with members through their scheduler, the contact information for which is on their website. Provide all the requested information at the time that you schedule the meeting. You are far more likely to get a meeting scheduled if the constituent is doing the asking.
    - Schedule the meetings between two and four weeks in advance (ideally about 3-4 weeks).
    - Be prepared to meet with a staffer instead of a member - and do not consider meeting with a staffer any less significant than meeting with a member.
- Keep the group small (<5 people).
    - Not only are office spaces often small, you have limited time to get your point across, and too many people with different messages can dilute the impact and the effect of building a relationship.
- Familiarize yourself with Capitol Procedures

- Review relevant maps:
    - The Capitol Building
    - General Guide to Office Numbers and Locations
    - House Office Buildings
    - Senate Office Buildings
  - Review the list of prohibited items: Note that these include large bags, any food or drink items, and aerosols, as well as any object that could be used as a weapon.
  - If you move from one area of the Capitol to the other (from the House offices to the Senate offices, for example), you will be searched again. Therefore, if you purchase any food or drink items on one side, you cannot take them with you to the other side.
- Plan the logistics of your meeting, especially if you are meeting at the Capitol
  - Be familiar with the member's office location. Review the maps and guides above.
  - Arrive to the building at least 30 minutes before your meeting (you must go through security)
  - Arrive at the member's office at least 5-10 minutes before your meeting.
  - Have their phone number on hand in case there is a chance you will run late due to another meeting running behind.
  - Be flexible: their schedules can get rearranged at a moment's notice. Be gracious in the event of changes in with whom you will meet and when.
  - Be prepared to meet in unique places. Congress members and staffers lead hectic and busy lives. You may end up meeting in a conference room, a small closet, or in the hall. Do not interpret this as disrespectful.
- Do your homework on your member
  - Find out what they are passionate about, and use it to your advantage. This will help form the basis for the most productive and successful office visits.
  - Find out their positions on the issues for which you are advocating
  - Know their committee assignments. Members who sit on committees relevant to your issues will be more influential on pertinent legislation than others.
  - Know the issue assignments of the staffer with which you will be meeting (most likely, they will be education-related, but this is not guaranteed)

    - Resources: Their personal websites, their official House/Senate websites, https://www.govtrack.us/, etc.
    - We recommend using a handheld notebook to make important notes that you can review in-between meetings. Include their office location, the meeting time, the staffer and their area of specialty, any significant items in the member's background, and any other relevant notes. You don't often have a lot of time in between meetings, so having something on hand will be beneficial.
- Know current and upcoming legislation, especially for those related to your issues.
    - This means that you know not only that a bill has been submitted, but where it is (subcommittee, committee), whether the member you are speaking with has sponsored it (or other similar legislation), and pieces of the legislation that are significant.
- Have "leave behinds" ready.
    - At minimum, you should have your contact information, preferably in the form of a business card. If you do have a business card, have this ready when you meet them. (You can get a small number of quality cards at reasonable prices at different online retailers [moo.com, etc.]).
    - You may also consider providing a 1-2 page document summarizing your key points and providing any reference information (this should also include your contact information). We will be providing you with leave-behinds during our *Summit*, but you may create your own.
- Practice your pitch in advance.
    - Meetings are typically scheduled for 20-30 minute slots, so plan a 10-15 minute pitch (to allow for questions or other speakers).
    - Keep it organic: know what you want to talk about, but don't be rigid or inflexible in case the staff member wants to go in a different direction.
    - Leaving a good impression and developing a relationship is more important than saying what you planned.
- Dress appropriately
    - Washington, DC, remains one of the most conservatively dressed cities in the country, and professional conservative appearance is expected when you meet with members at the Capitol. Remember - you want to be remembered for your professionalism and your preparedness, not for how you look.
    - For both men and women, dark suits with subtle, classic style elements would be ideal. Avoid bold colors or attention-grabbing embellishments. For men, pick a classic, stylish tie and a neutral-colored shirt, along with conservatively-styled dress shoes and

matching belt. For women, avoid plunging necklines, short hemlines, and dramatic jewelry. Bare legs should be covered, so if you are wearing a skirt, we recommend pantyhose as well. Comfortable shoes are a *must*. You will do a lot of walking (potentially fast walking), and you do not want to be limping into meetings. In fact, reportedly, the number one cause of injury on the Hill is wearing heels. Do not become a statistic.

    - Body modification: We recommend removing any piercings other than one per ear and covering any visible tattoos. Avoid dying your hair any bold colors leading up to the visit.

During the meeting:

- Greet them with a handshake and formally introduce yourself and the school or organization that you represent. **Make sure to identify yourself as a constituent.**
    - They will often hand you a business card (which gives you an opportunity to give them yours). If you are meeting with more than one staffer, or are inclined to forget names, set the cards in front of you (casually) in the order that they sit so that you can refer to them if you need to.
- Thank the member or staff for taking the opportunity to meet with you since you know that their schedule is extremely busy.
- Present your information in a direct, organized and timely manner.
    - Start positive: Thank them for the work they have done and, in particular, supporting any legislation that benefits your issues.
    - Prioritize your topics, starting with the most important issues, in case you run out of time. Prepare to only talk about 1-2 issues and have specific goals related to those issues in mind. Once you have developed a trusting relationship, you can expand on other issues at future meetings.
    - Have an "ask" - Increase funding for science research? Support legislation for graduate student mental health? Expand opportunities for student immigrants?
        - Cite specific bills and legislation titles as necessary
        - Make it clear what you want them to do: vote yes, vote no, increase funding, etc.
    - Make it personal, and let your passion come through. Use stories to connect emotionally with the member or their staffer. Connect the issues to local concerns and their constituents. Make it real for them.

  - Keep statistics and numbers to a minimum. A good rule of thumb is to plan conversations around a 90:10 ratio (90% emotional connection (pathos) and 10% facts (logos).) However, be prepared to provide additional facts and data, if asked.
  - Answer questions - *honestly* - and be ready to say, “I don’t know.”
    - Genuineness goes a long way here. Admitting that you don’t know something - or even admitting that the issues are not black and that you could be wrong - can build their trust in you in significant ways.
    - If they ask for something you don’t have on hand (e.g. particular evidence, a link, a document you’ve drafted, etc.) tell them that you will send it to them once you get home - and then do it.
- Leave politics at the door.
  - Meetings will not be successful if they are antagonistic or aggressive. Focusing on where you may disagree with the member is a poor strategy, and you will make little positive progress - and may cause harm. Instead, aim for emphasizing commonalities, building positive relationships, and identifying strategies to move forward on the relevant issues.
- Be gracious: They get a lot of criticism and not a lot of gratitude - be one of the few. Focus on building bridges, not criticizing.
- Be polite, respectful, and attentive.

After the meeting:

- Send an email:
  - Thank them for meeting with you and restate your “ask”. Offer yourself as an “on the ground” resource for the issues you discussed. This is a great opportunity to make a positive lasting impression and build a relationship with your legislator and their office.
  - If they requested additional information or asked for something from you, include it in this email. If you had a leave-behind, attaching it here will help them keep track of who you are and what you discussed.
  - Keep in touch and continue to be a resource.
    - Continue to follow-up, as appropriate, throughout the year. Keep all communications direct, respectful, informative, and concise.
    - However, be wary of becoming a “pen pal” that over-communicates. Keep it pertinent to the issues and relevant to legislative movement.

        - Use this judiciously. Each time you thank them or extend help, you build social capital. Each "ask" spends that capital. Be sure to keep some "capital" in the bank.
- Continue to connect with them via email, phone, future meetings, and district events (for more information, see "Other Types of Advocacy")

OTHER TYPES OF ADVOCACY

- Phone
    - A common refrain is to "call your representative," and believe it or not, this can be an effective way to make your position on an issue clear, especially if all you need to convey is the direction for a vote. Many congressional offices track the calls and emails they get and submit regular reports to their members regarding the issues about which their constituents care. It does actually make a difference.
- Email
    - When a particular issue requires in-depth advocacy, an email may be best. This allows you to provide relevant documentation and a more thorough and nuanced perspective. This is especially effective if you already have a relationship with an office and if the issue at hand is one that you've already discussed with them.
    - If you have met with an office, you were likely given a staffer's direct email address. Use this for these communiques as they can keep track of the messages you send. If you have not met with a staffer, members have a contact page on their websites that you may use.
- District Events
    - Visible engagement in the community at events the member is hosting can go far to build your trust with the office, especially if they already know you. This is especially true if you volunteer for different events.
    - The more constituents you can bring who care about your issues, the more likely the member will be to recognize the significance of the issue and pay more attention to it.