



Legislative Guide

Chapter 2: Legislative Advocacy

Southern Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators

Revised August 2007

LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY MADE SIMPLE

Overview

On many issues, your legislators and other elected officials hear very little feedback from their constituents. Being contacted by even a few voters is often enough to mold or shift a policymaker's stance on an issue, especially if they have not had much voter contact on that issue before. Every letter, call, e-mail, fax, and visit counts.

To be successful, you must communicate with your Representative on a regular basis, not just when a crisis arises or you want something. A thank you can be as important to your long-range goals as a request for a special vote. If your Representative belongs to an appropriations, budget or education committee or subcommittee, he or she is likely to be aware of issues affecting financial aid. Even so, provide his or her office with written information concerning the proposed legislation that you are addressing. Your lobbying efforts will be better remembered if legislators receive both verbal and written reminders. Never exaggerate. Be accurate, succinct, and thorough.

Finding Your Legislators

A listing of U.S. Senators can be found at:

http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm.

US Representatives can be found at <http://www.house.gov/writerep/>, which will allow you to look up your legislator by ZIP code. There is also a form at the top of the House member web page at <http://www.house.gov/house/MemberWWW.html>. The House site also provides lists of members at <http://clerk.house.gov/members/index.php>.

Sometimes it is important to target members of particular Congressional committees. This information is available for the House at <http://clerk.house.gov/committee/index.php>. The list of Senate members by committee can be found at <http://www.senate.gov/> and clicking on the "committees" link.

Getting Phone and Fax Numbers

For federal legislators, you can call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121 or toll-free 1-800-962-3524 and ask for a particular legislator or committee. House of Representatives' phone numbers are also available at:

<http://clerk.house.gov/members/index.php>.

Phone and fax for the White House:

Call 202-456-1414 if you wish to speak to the White House switchboard or call 202-4561111 if you wish to call and comment on a topic. The White House fax number is: 202

456-2461.

You can also look on the White House Web site at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/contact/> for contact information.

Your Message's Perceived Priority

When you contact your legislators, be aware that they and their staffers tend to "rank" communiqués based on the format, and based on who you are. This is not always fair or just but it is a political reality.

In order of MOST to LEAST effective, these are the means of contacting legislators:

personal visit to the legislator's Washington DC office or home-state office

personally written email

Personally handwritten but LEGIBLE short letter

Personally typewritten or word-processed letter

phone call to a key staffer in the office

phone call to the reception staffers in the office

personally written fax

an obvious form letter or fax

an obvious form e-mail

Working with Staff Members

Congressional staff members, also known as legislative assistants or aides, are valuable resources. They are experts on issues. Contact staff members who handle education issues. They are usually friendly, helpful and knowledgeable and can help relieve the uncertainty or apprehension many people experience when they plan their first lobbying activities. These experts exert considerable influence on the voting positions of their representatives. Do not be disappointed if most of your contacts are with staff members. A legislator's time is limited and he or she relies heavily on staff members.

Ways of Communicating with Legislators

Personal Appointment

The most effective way to express your views to a member of Congress is through personal contact. It shows that you really care about an issue and are politically active. Personal visits to a Member's office not only can be rewarding, but also will set the stage for future communication. All Members operate at least one office in their local district in addition to their Washington office on Capitol Hill. Members usually visit their local offices throughout the year around regular holidays, and during those periods when Congress is in recess or "district work periods".

You can make an appointment to see a Member by calling or writing to the appointment secretary in his Washington or district office. Always give them as much advance notice as possible and indicate the amount of time needed and the subject matter to be discussed.

Be prepared to discuss the issue you specified and bring supporting material that you can leave with the Member that will strengthen your case. If the Member is not available and you cannot reschedule the meeting, ask to meet with the administrative assistant or staff member who handles education, appropriations, or budget issues.

You will often find that you may know a great deal more about the subject area to be discussed than does the Member or his staff. Do not be put off by their lack of knowledge, and take time to explain the issues clearly and succinctly. Remember that they have to follow many complex issues and cannot be an expert on every subject. If you can brief them well and convince them that you are providing them with valuable information, they may call upon you again to obtain your advice on the matter.

Developing a personal relationship with the Member and/or the staff will make it much easier to follow-up on future occasions. The following information is provided to assist you in establishing this valuable contact.

Written Correspondence

Why to Not Send Postal Letters Anymore

Because of the post-9/11 security issues, it can take up to THREE MONTHS for postal mail and package delivery services to get through to legislators and their staffs. All incoming mail and parcels are subjected to thorough analysis for bombs, poisons and biological agents like anthrax. This means that sending physical letters is, in 2002 and for the foreseeable future, practically useless for activism purposes. The same goes for sending mail to the White House.

Generally, email and faxes are the recommended way to communicate with your legislators.

Much of the following discussion is applicable regardless of whether you are faxing, emailing or sending postal letters to Congress.

Written communication is the mainstay of your relationship with your Representatives. They appreciate receiving written statements and supporting information of constituents' views.

Written correspondence should not only express viewpoints the author believes to be important, but they should also be calculated to maximize the chances for a positive response from the politician. Although the tone of letters to individual representatives should be quite different, each should be truthful and strive to enlist an ally for at least

one important aspect of the overall battle for adequate and sensible student aid legislation.

Writing a convincing letter to your Senators or Representatives is not difficult. These guidelines can increase the impact of your letter.

1. Write on your personal or business stationary, if possible.
2. Sign your name over the typed signature at the end of your message.
3. Write your return address on your letter, not just on the envelope.

When writing to members of Congress, the salutations Dear Senator (last name), and Dear Representative (last name) should be used.

The Senate address designations SR, SD, and SH stand for Russell, Dirksen and Hart Office Buildings respectively. For House offices, three digit office numbers are in the Cannon Building, four-digit numbers beginning with **1** are in the Longworth Building, and four digit number beginning with **2** are in the Rayburn Building. All Senate offices have the zip code 20510 and all House offices have the zip code 20515.

Letters should be addressed as shown below:

The Honorable Jane Doe
xxx Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable John Doe
xxx House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

All room and telephone numbers can be verified by calling the Capitol Switchboard at 202-224-3121.

Postal and e-mail addresses and phone numbers for senators are available on-line at: http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm. The same information for Representatives is at <http://www.house.gov/house/MemberWWW.html>

Except for letter to the President, whose letters should be closed with "Very respectfully yours", most letters are closed with "Sincerely yours".

Sample Letter

Date

The Honorable United States Senate/House of
Representatives Washington DC

Dear Senator/Representative:

Congress will be considering H.R. 246 in the next two weeks. This resolution calls for major cuts in student financial aid programs. The proposal would force students to borrow more money and repay the loans at higher interest rates. The student's college choice will again become a matter of economics. Students will be forced to choose colleges they feel they can afford instead of the educational program they need. This will especially affect students who would like to attend private colleges.

At "Z" College, students would lose about \$850,000 in federal funds. This would affect about 51% of our undergraduate student body. Furthermore, the proposed elimination of in-school interest subsidy on student loans would be a financial burden, especially for students from low income families.

I appreciate your concern for education. Please make higher education funding a priority for our nation's future.

Sincerely yours,

F. A. Administrator
Director of Financial Aid
"Z" College

Style

- Write a personal letter. Avoid stereotyped phrases and sentences that give the appearance of "form" letters. They intend to identify your message as a part of an organized pressure campaign and minimize your impact. Organized letter-writing campaigns, often generated by an interest group, are considered less important by members of Congress than letters from individual constituents. Instead, write your views in your own language.
- Convince without arguing. Make your points as successfully as possible, but remember that you are not debating your Representative. You are trying to persuade him or her on your point of view.

- Be careful in the way you categorize people who disagree with you. Name-calling can distract attention from your point.
- Be reasonable. If you ask for something impossible, threaten, or say "I'll never vote for you unless...", you will not help your cause and will probably harm it.
- Be as brief as possible. Letters should be no longer than one page in length. Many issues are complex, but your opinions or arguments stand a better chance of being read if they are stated as concisely as the subject matter will permit.

Substance

- State your reason for writing. Personal expertise is your best supporting evidence. Explain how the legislation would affect you, your institution or students, or how it would affect your community or state.
- Identify the subject of your letter clearly. State the name of the legislation about which you are writing. Give the house or Senate bill numbers or the short abbreviation of the bill.
- Suggest improvements. If a bill deals with a problem that you admit exists, but you believe that the bill takes the wrong approach toward solving the problem. Explain what you think is the right approach.
- Ask your legislators to explain their positions on the issue. As a constituent, you are entitled to know how and why your members feel as they do.
- Thank you Senators and Representatives when they vote in a way that pleases you to take some other action you like. Your members will appreciate and remember complimentary letters. On the other hand, do not hesitate to communicate displeasure as well, which will also be remembered.
- Share expert knowledge with your Representatives and Senators. They cannot be extremely knowledgeable in all fields, while many constituents are experts in some of them.
- If you have met your member or have some other connection over and above that of constituent, draw attention to it in your letter.

Email

Each Congressional office maintains a different policy about how email from constituents is handled. Most Members of Congress have a public e-mail address to which e-mail can be sent. To access the e-mail address, you either can visit the individual Member's Web page (via www.house.gov or www.senate.gov) or locate them through www.onslac.org. Many Congressional offices provide a generic, automatic acknowledgement that your email has been received but will follow up with a specific e-mail response to your issue or letter via regular mail. A handful of offices do not respond to e-mail, but count the input on the tonic.

Using email to contact your Representative or Senator is an efficient and quick way to communicate. Using most of the same guidelines as outlined above when letter writing will help ensure that professionalism and quality are not sacrificed at the expense of speed.

To the extent possible, try to use the format and styles for written communications identified above.

Telephone

A well-timed telephone call also can be an effective way to get your point across to a Member of Congress or a legislative staff member just before a key vote, particularly when you have already developed a personal relationship with them. Be prepared and have your facts correct before placing your call. Remember that you can often save the cost of a long distance call by expressing your views to the staff in the Member's district office. If they hear from enough people over a key issue, they will pass the information on to the Member

Timing

Try to contact your Senators or Representatives regarding your position on a bill while it is still in committee. They usually will be more responsive to your views at that time, rather than later on, when the bill has already been approved by a committee. This may not, however, always be the case. Sometimes your legislator may reserve judgment, and his or he vote until constituency sentiment has crystallized.

Targeting

Concentrate communications to your own delegation. Your district's Representatives and your state's Senators cast your votes in Congress and want to know your views. Writing to all 435 Representatives and 100 Senators, who cast their votes in the interest of other districts and states, will have little effect. In particular issues, however, you may want to write to the appropriate committee and subcommittee chairmen, who influence the course of the legislation about which you are concerned.

Frequency

Quality counts more than quantity. Your member will pay more attention to one especially persuasive letter than several repetitive ones. Do not try to instruct your Representative on every issue. Write more than once on an issue of particular importance if you have something new to say.

To Whom Should I Write?

People are often uncertain about whom they should write. Depending upon the issues and circumstances, write to your own congressional Representative and/or to the chairpersons of various key committees or subcommittees on education or appropriations. The person to whom you are writing should influence both the content of the letter and closing. For instance, if you are writing to your own Representative, you should use your own home address. However, if you are writing to a committee chairperson, you may wish to use your institutional title and address to emphasize your expertise. Be sure you cleared your position with the senior administration of your institution before using institutional letterhead. Letters written by financial aid administrators to Representatives should indicate whether they express the official institutional position, the organization's viewpoint or their own personal opinions. In some cases you may wish to write a letter for the signature of the President or other high-ranking member of the organization or administration. Such a letter may have a greater influence.

Telephone Numbers and Websites

The following telephone numbers may be particularly useful for tracking down information in Washington:

- Capital Switchboard 202-225-3121 (The office of any committee, subcommittee or members of Congress can be reached through this number.)
- Senate, Senate Document Room 202-224-7701 Senate Majority Secretary 202-224-3835 Website www.senate.gov
- House of Representatives House Document Room 202-225-3874 House Majority Floor Services 202-225-7350 House Minority Floor Services 202-225-7330 Website www.house.gov

Other Contact Numbers Senate and House Bill Status 202-225-8646 Website Thomas.loc.gov/bss/d105query.html

Federal Government Switchboard 202-655-4000 (All local (DC) government departments and agencies can be contacted through this number.)

White House 202-456-14141 Website <http://www.whitehouse.gov>

LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY FOR ASSOCIATIONS

Introduction

As a leader of your Association, you will be expected to monitor the legislative activities affect student aid issues and your constituency. Your role will encompass many elements including: knowledge of the basic position of your constituents on each major legislative issue facing the state or nation, your ability to speak for that constituent position at all levels of impact, your communications network within your organizational level, your ability to bring into force your constituent institutional support, your organization's internal communication network for receiving, analyzing, and reacting to legislative information, and your organization's ability to formulate and recommend legislative initiatives.

In order to affect these activities in a positive and effective manner, it is important for you to understand not only the specifics of the legislative process, but also how to interact with your constituency, others in the student aid technical and policy arena, and how to affect public policy on student aid.

Leadership Functions in the Advocacy Process

In terms of results, legislative advocacy is nothing more than an attempt to secure passage of a piece of legislation, or an attempt to stop the passage if the measure is considered to be undesirable. The accomplishment of that end, however, is a sensitive, intricate process at which astute association leadership strives to become skilled. Successful legislative advocacy demands that association leadership be expert in communication, personnel management and administrative organization. It demands of leadership a sensitivity in perception not only of verbal but nonverbal communication as well. Further, it requires association leadership to sort through masses of input data to glean from it the basis for an opinion that is representative of the individuals and groups originating the input.

The determination of constituency opinion is a challenging process. This is not necessarily so because of their reluctance to state their individual opinions but it becomes difficult to assimilate those individual and group opinions into a posture which you can communicate in the attempt at successful legislative action. Certainly constituency opinion may be gleaned from professional meetings, but it may also be necessary for you to establish a communications network within the association you serve. That network may consist of different media for surfacing constituency opinion, for communicating constituency opinion to legislative leaders and for communication to your constituents the actions of various legislative bodies as they deal with issue that relate to your constituency.

Coalition Building

The battle over funding student financial aid programs can be won or lost based on the amount of grassroots pressure brought to bear on Congress. While letters to and visits with Members of Congress by institutional administrators are vital, they may not be sufficient. Members are frank in saying that those programs for which they receive the most letters, calls and visits (especially from constituents) are likely to be the ones that fare best in the funding fights.

The Washington-based educational associations do their best to present to Congress the key arguments, statistics, and other information in support of student aid and postsecondary education from a national perspective. But it is the recipient—students, families and institutions—who provide the vital perspective of how the changes will affect voters in the Congressional districts and in the states. They must be educated and organized to actively address student aid issues that affect them. It is therefore, essential for you to work closely with other institutional administrators to educate students, parents, alumni, and others to organize a coordinated and comprehensive campaign supporting the Federal programs of student assistance.

The following are constituencies you should attempt to work with closely. The list is certainly not comprehensive and will vary from institution to institution.

Students: As the recipients of aid, students are the most directly affected by changes to student aid programs, and they can be one of the most effect lobby groups.
Effective methods to inform and work with students are:

- Contact the campus student government and other student groups to share information and strategies. Encourage them to organize letter-writing campaigns to schedule student visits to district offices of Members of Congress, to publish open letters to all students, and to hold local hearings on student aid issues.
- Work with the campus newspaper and radio station to disseminate information. The leaders of the campus student aid organization should perhaps arrange an interview with the station.
- Send a letter from the president and/or the director of student financial aid to all students informing them of proposed changes and suggest they write to Members of Congress.
- Make certain that every student who contacts the financial aid office receives information about changes. A useful idea is to encourage aid recipients to write to their Congressman or Senator thanking them for the aid they are currently receiving or expect to receive and thanking them for their continued support of the program.

- Work through the academic departments to notify students of any changes in student aid. This can be a good method of reaching graduate students who may or may not have participated in an outreach effort of this type previously.

Faculty: Professors are becoming more active in the fight against student aid program changes and as advocates in the fight for additional aid. Faculty can be reached by working with the American Association of University Professors, the local faculty union, faculty senates, etc. Faculty can also be helpful in developing economic impact statements resulting from the loss of aid dollars.

Parents: The parents of many students continue to pay a large share of college costs and thus will be greatly affected by any changes. Parents, more than students, have been more vocal in expressing to Congress their concerns and their support of student aid. You should ensure that parents are fully informed of any changes to student aid programs from which their children may benefit. An open letter from your institutional President may be one way to emphasize this fact. It may also be useful to contact the local or state parent/teacher association chapter to reach parents of secondary school students. In a political sense, parents have a potentially great influence since they best represent the voice of the Congressman's voting district.

Alumni: Alumni potentially can be very politically effective because of their numbers and their diversity. While many of them were financial aid recipients, they may have brothers, sisters and neighbors who are now in need of assistance. They often are not informed of current details of student aid funding, therefore, you should develop a mechanism to keep the informed and report back to you their findings on student aid issues.

Trustees: Many Trustees can be extremely effective in contacting Members of Congress because of their influential positions in the community. Many of them have personal access to Members and key decision-makers in government. Their contacts should be identified and used discreetly on key issues.

High Schools: High school students are future college students and aid recipients. They are generally poorly informed about possible changes and reductions in Federal assistance. An attempt should be made to reach these students and their parents through the local high school. Share information with the principal and other administrators, especially the college counselors. During "college nights:" for high school seniors, you or your association should have materials about the student aid programs available for distribution. Encourage the campus student government to work with the high school student council. Articles can also be placed in high school newspapers.

Local businesses: In many towns, the college is among the largest employers. The economic impact of the loss of student aid dollars (and the potential reduction in students and faculty) on local business may be significant. While the U.S. Chamber of Commerce has been supportive of the Administration's budget cuts, local chambers may be persuaded to support the college or university in seeking adequate funding of higher

education. One particular industry to contact is the banking community, because of their involvement in the student loan program.

State Officials: Often the best way to influence Congress is to have the Governor, state legislators, state education officials, mayors, city and county councilmen or other state and local officials contact them. In many states, higher education consumes the major part of the state budget and plays a major role in the state's or the locality's political and economic climate. Many presidents have close relationships with state senators and assemblymen. Brief these officials on the effects of the student aid program changes on your institution. Ask them to express concern or support to the state's Senators and Representatives.

Labor Unions: On the national level, labor unions such as the AFL-CIO have actively supported funding for education, including student assistance. Most labor union members rely on such aid to send their children to college. Contacts should be made with local and state chapters of various unions to encourage their involvement.

Media and Newspapers: Contact local media and newspapers to show them the effects of any changes proposed for student aid. Utilize the press materials that NASFAA has sent to your office, your president and/or school's public relations officer.

Local education writers are always interested in how changes in national programs will affect local schools. Supply them with local data and identify local students that they can interview or use in human interest features.

Contact local radio and television stations, and encourage them to invite someone from the school or the state Financial Aid Association to appear on talk shows. Emphasize the seriousness of the programs and accentuate the positive features of the programs and the numbers of students the programs have helped.

Other organizations: There are many other community organizations supportive of and affected by student aid: civil rights groups, women's groups, farmer's organizations, senior citizen's groups, etc.

Tips for Effective Communication with Congress

As a financial aid administrator or partner you have the ability to effect change in behalf of your students and institutions; however, the manner in which you do this may indeed impact the outcome. Practical tips are shared in an effort to increase your effectiveness in the political process. Your efforts can and do make a difference!

If you are a constituent, say so. Legislators pay much more attention to messages from constituents than from non-constituents, because only constituents can vote for (or against) them in the next election.

State in clear language the reason for your contact - and get to the point quickly Indicate "support for or against" an issue upfront as often staffers don't get to the details but simply take counts.

Get to know the staffers - This may provide the leverage you need to make direct contact with an elected official.

Be tactful – Don't alienate the powers who will ultimately make the decisions for you, your students and your institution.

Brevity is best - It's the same premise as "Simple is More" (not to exceed one page in length where possible).

Use statistics to illustrate major points - Localize them to your campus - How will your students be impacted by a regulation or a proposed regulation?

Use anecdotal evidence to illustrate your point - One cannot underestimate the power of a flesh and blood example - Be careful, however, about privacy unless you have a signed release to mention a specific name and circumstance.

Acknowledge the efforts of the elected official - Regardless of the nature of the contact, express appreciation to the elected official for the work that's being done in behalf of students.

Retain copies of correspondence and share information - If you are responding to a NPRM or Reauthorization Task Force request, share your response with the appropriate entity (e.g., NASFAA).

Source: Adapted from the Midwest Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators