

Effective Legislative Relations*

Communicating with Your Legislators

The first step to establishing effective legislative relations is simply getting to know your assembly and senate members, and congressional representatives at the federal level. The more you know about those who are elected to represent your district, the easier it will be to communicate with them. Take the time to learn about your legislators. It will be helpful in delivering your message more effectively. For example: what are a legislator's committees and leadership assignments? Did the legislator or any family members attend a technical college? Other helpful information may include: special interests, legislative background, election history, political allegiances, professional memberships, major political contributors, and previous community involvement.

Common sources of information to help you get to know more about your legislative representatives are:

Newspapers and Media—Newspapers provide an excellent source of information regarding legislators, legislative issues, and voting records. Television broadcasts provide coverage of legislative sessions and policy meetings.

Legislators' Own Newsletters—Newsletters are designed to keep constituents aware of the activities, accomplishments, and interests of an individual legislator. Newsletters often request constituent feedback, which provides an additional format to communicate with your legislator. Be sure to request that you be added to the email distribution list for the newsletter or any other publications available through your legislator. Another source of information is newsletters distributed by the leadership in both the Assembly and Senate.

Internet—Legislators have their own websites. These websites are extremely useful for finding information about your legislator. Both houses of the Legislature, the Governor's Department of Finance, and the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst's Office maintain websites. Full text of bills, committee analysis and schedules are available online.

WTCS Board Association's Publications—These materials often focus on current legislative issues being reviewed at the state level. In addition, it also is advisable to review newsletters published by other organizations representing faculty, other local elected officials, taxpayers, business and industry, and political parties. Review of other publications develops a breadth of knowledge regarding legislative issues and special interest allegiances.

Campaign and Political Party Activities—Direct involvement in a campaign is one of the best ways to meet and understand your legislator. This is also one of the easiest ways to develop access to a legislator and to get to know the person on a first name basis. These activities provide a network of people to call upon for assistance in influencing a legislator's perception of an issue. Participation in local fundraisers and political events provide visibility, an opportunity to communicate with your legislator and staff, and shows your interest in the political process. These functions also provide an opportunity to meet friends and supporters of the legislator. Legislators face reelection frequently and need to retain and rely on grass roots support. Your participation at such functions could be essential to both the legislator and your community college district.

Community Activities and Local Workshops—Involvement in community activities provides additional exposure to legislators and increases your visibility to the public as well. Recommended activities include:

- Making community contacts - business, media, civic and interest groups
- Increasing your involvement in the community beyond just those things relating only to campus activities
- Building a base for future coalitions and linkages with other organizations.

As a technical college board member, administrator, faculty member, employee, student or other district representative, it is important to maintain visibility with your legislator and community. If a legislator knows you, your later communication to that legislator may carry more weight than letters and contacts from unknown citizens.

Regular communication with your legislator will aid in developing reliance on you and the community college district for accurate and timely information. Communication can take the form of personal visits, letters, phone calls, emails, fax and campus activities. Through ongoing communication you can assure your legislators and their staff that you are available to assist them and provide information; identify key issues facing technical colleges and your district; and advise them on the conditions at your community college district and the potential effect of pending legislation on your district and its students.

Prior to any formal communication, do your homework. It is important to appear well informed on the issue at hand. When possible, become aware of your legislator's position on issues and legislation. Remember, you are a public relations spokesperson for your district.

Person-to-person communication is usually the most effective and conducive to establishing an ongoing relationship with a legislator. Such meetings with legislators can be scheduled in the local district or at the State Capitol in Madison. Sometimes legislators schedule meetings with constituents while attending special events or meetings that may be held outside the district. Examples could include conferences, workshops, political party conventions, or other special events where the legislator is in attendance.

To request a meeting with your legislator or staff, it is advisable to contact the scheduling staff at least one week in advance. The length of the meeting can vary depending on the issue and time available - anywhere from 15 minutes to a lunch. Many legislators find early morning breakfast meetings a convenient time to meet with constituents. Remember, the goal is to establish and foster an ongoing relationship.

Steps to an Effective Meeting With Your Legislator

Reconfirm your appointment and be prompt.

Legislators' schedules often change and your arrival at or before the scheduled time will likely result in more time with the legislator.

Be well informed and prepared to share your knowledge.

Approach the legislator with sufficient information to respond to questions and inquiries, to articulate arguments, and to courteously counter arguments. One well reasoned meeting, letter, or phone call is more effective than many illogical or inaccurate ones. Before the meeting, meet with other board members, staff and the public to get input prior to meeting with the legislator. Discuss ideas and become aware of the community response.

Don't walk in with an army.

More than five people will create the opportunity for a politician to make speeches rather than participate in discussion.

Introduce yourself; note your purpose and objective for the meeting.

Be as concise as possible. Depending on the time of day, your legislator may be on a limited schedule and time may be of the essence. A prepared information packet will serve to focus the discussion and will reinforce your visit after you leave.

Don't insist on a commitment before your legislator has considered all the facts.

A legislator has various considerations, such as other constituencies, other provisions in the bill, and possible future amendments to weigh before making a commitment. Also, do not be carried away by a friendly reception and interpret this reception as support for your position without having heard this support stated.

Don't be afraid to tell the legislator that you can't answer a question.

Promise to obtain the requested information and get back to the legislator as soon as possible.

Thank your legislator.

You are aware of the pressures and time constraints and therefore you especially want to thank your legislator for taking time to meet with you.

After you have met with your legislator, send a formal thank you for the meeting. Reiterate some of your major concerns as a reminder of your needs. Use your visit as a positive opportunity to continue to communicate with your legislator in the future. If progress or positive results occur from your visit, don't hesitate to write or call and express your appreciation. Consider your visit only one part of an ongoing relationship.

Letters from constituents regarding matters of concern to the state and district are an important method of communication. Few legislators have access to information specific to their own district on most issues before a committee, their caucus, and on the floor. The information you can provide in a letter is important, not only to the legislator but also to committee consultants, caucus and leadership staff as well. It is not unusual for a legislator to quote from a constituent's letter when preparing to speak on an issue in committee, caucus, floor, or group meeting. Legislators keep a count of the mail on important issues before the Legislature.

Writing Your Legislator

You may be called upon to write or contact your state senator and assembly member on issues of importance to Wisconsin's technical colleges. At such time, background information will be supplied. ***The following guidelines will help you draft the most effective letter.***

- Be courteous, brief, and to the point, limiting your letter to one page.
- Make sure the legislator knows this communication is from a technical college board member or district representative in the legislative district.
- Explain how the proposed legislation or issue affects your technical college district, students, and community and why you support/oppose it.
- Don't attempt to give "expert" opinions. Express how the legislation would affect your technical college district based on your experience and knowledge.
- Refer to bill numbers, authors and status whenever possible.
- Ask your legislator to let you know what his/her thoughts are on the matter.
- Write the letter in your own words. This is more effective than copying background information verbatim.
- Request that your legislator take a specific action by stating what you desire. State the facts as you see them. Avoid emotional arguments. If you use dollar figures, be realistic.
- Keep all communications friendly and respectful. Don't make threats or write in a belligerent manner. Be sure to thank your legislator for considering your views.
- Use your technical college district or personal stationery when appropriate.
- During the legislative session mail should be directed to the legislator's capitol office rather than the home district office.
- Send a copy of your letter to the President's office.
- Send a thank you note if the legislator votes in support of your viewpoint.

Telephone Contacts

Sometimes the League may feel it is necessary to contact your legislator by telephone. ***If you are requested to make such a call, the following guidelines will help:***

- When the Legislature is in session, it is most effective to call at the Capitol office in Madison. During the Legislature's recess, the legislator will be available at the district office.
- Ask to speak directly to the legislator. Occasionally time will not permit legislators to accept or return phone calls, so be prepared to ask to speak with the staff person who is handling the particular issue.
- When the legislator or staff member is on the line, identify yourself and mention the name of your community college district.
- State the reason for the call. Use bill numbers and author if possible. You should feel comfortable with the issue and the League's position on it when making the call. Explain how the proposed legislation affects your community college district and why you support or oppose it.
- Discuss only one issue per telephone call.
- If the legislator's position is the same as yours and the college's, express agreement and thanks.
- If your position differs from the legislator's, politely express disappointment and offer some factual information supporting your views.
- Say how the legislation would affect your technical college district, students, and community based on your experience and knowledge.
- Ask the legislator to take a specific action. State the facts as you see them and avoid emotional arguments. If you use dollar figures, be realistic.
- Keep all communication friendly, respectful and brief. Be sure to thank your legislator for considering your views.
- Thank the legislator and then follow-up with a written note.

Other ways to bring your college closer to legislators include sharing research done on campus that may be of value, offering to assist the legislator with special projects using the expertise of local college staff, and seeking the advice of legislators on major issues being addressed by the district board.

A legislator's success is dependent on their staff and your ability to influence a legislator may also be dependent on that staff. Whether you seek to schedule a meeting, have a call returned, or provide information, the better you know the legislator's staff, the greater your chance of success.

Coalition building is another important tool to strengthen legislative relations. Coalitions can represent broad-based community support rather than a single, special interest. Lobbying is more effective in the plural. It pays to secure the support of others in the efforts of the technical colleges. Persuade community leaders, civic groups, homeowner associations, large corporations, local small businesses, other segments of education, and local and state governmental entities to become involved and support the Wisconsin technical colleges.

Newspapers and editorial boards are excellent forums for generating community support. Keep local news personnel apprised of campus and state level activities. Use the media to encourage other people and groups to become involved with their technical colleges. Send letters to the editor of your local newspaper.

*Source: Community College League of California, www.ccleague.org.