College Reading and Learning Association
Political Action Committee: A Guide for Educators

November 1999

This Guide is designed to help you make the most of your time and efforts. Your level of participation in the political process will determine the degree of success of the College Reading and Learning Association in informing our elected officials about developmental education, academic support services, and the students we teach and serve. The effectiveness of CRLA’s political efforts rests upon the relationships between CRLA members and their elected officials.

This Guide is a general introduction and reference to the basic elements of legislative and political activism: the How’s and Why’s. It is helpful for you to understand the machinations of the political system; however, it is most important that you participate in the process. In the final analysis, your participation is the most effective influence on the political process and influence follows only from your active involvement.

Action Plans

1. Remind colleagues to update their voter registration prior to the November elections.
2. Consider sponsoring a Candidates’ Forum to allow individuals who are running for office (especially legislative candidates) to meet the public and answer questions.
3. Encourage colleagues to vote.
4. Send official letters of congratulations in mid-November to those who win the general election for those legislative districts which serve your college. Notes of condolence to the defeated candidates are appropriate, even if the defeated candidates were not popular on your campus. Many candidates have risen from the ashes of defeat and even unsuccessful candidates remember who befriended and supported them.
5. A formal meeting with newly-elected or reelected legislators should be scheduled before the end of the fall semester in mid-December. This meeting will allow you and other faculty leaders to discuss details of the upcoming legislative session. Present concerns requiring action in writing with a rationale and documentation for the consideration of your legislators. This meeting is crucial and will set the tone for future legislative interactions.
6. Watch for legislative committee assignments which will be made early in the legislative session. Find out which committees are key for your college.
7. Meet with your legislators in their local district offices, sometime in February and plan two follow-up
visits for later in the session. It is often more effective to meet with your legislators in their local offices when they return home for the weekend.

8. Maintain your professional memberships and dialogue with other professionals in your field concerning legislative actions and issues.

9. Develop a system of communication among your colleagues that will allow you to disseminate information quickly.

10. Encourage colleagues to write individual letters to legislators on important issues to your institution and the profession.

11. Send letters of thanks to legislators after the session is over and address specific ways their representation was appreciated.

Consider inviting legislators to your campus to visit your classes and see first-hand the work that you do. Remember that legislators can make presentations to classes and talk about many issues of interest to college students. For example, a legislator who has sponsored a hate-crimes bill would be a valuable resource in a social problems class. (Although the primary motive in inviting a guest speaker is to provide a valuable learning experience for students, invitations to legislators can also provide visibility and goodwill for your college and your profession.)

You Can Make A Difference

Your legislators were elected to represent you – whether you voted for them or not. If you want them to represent you, you must make sure that they know your views.

Members of Congress want to be re-elected. Therefore, they have a vested interest in wanting to listen to their constituents, especially when those constituents take the time to express their views.

Personal contact is the most effective form of communication. In fact, the best way to get the attention of a member of Congress (or his/her staff) is to contact the office personally by letter or phone call or to visit the office.

Some Guidelines for Meeting with Legislators

1. Know your legislator. Be familiar with pertinent background information, your district’s composition, groups, or interests which lent support in past elections, the legislator’s committee assignments, and legislative interests. Know his or her voting record on educational issues.

2. Introduce your concerns clearly. Do not assume that your legislator is well-informed about the issues. Provide a clear, brief overview for your legislator.

3. Know your case and use more than moral persuasion. Organize your facts and use sound examples. Put your presentation in writing, but DO NOT READ IT to your legislator. Leave a copy of your written statement with your legislator for later study.

4. Know the case for the other side. Learn their claims and determine their weaknesses. However, do not fail to admit the opposition’s strength even when you claim that, on balance, your argument is more compelling.
5. Be brief and don’t overstay your welcome.
6. Be realistic. Not everyone will agree with you nor will those who agree with you do everything you want. Know in advance what you’re willing to compromise and what you cannot.
7. Be friendly. Social affability is often more important than cold logic in accomplishing political goals. It is important to build rapport with your legislator.
8. Be courteous. It is better for a legislator to remain neutral rather than actively oppose you.
9. After your meeting, follow-up with a letter of appreciation, thanking the legislator for meeting with you and succinctly re-stating your position on the issues of interest. Include any requested information in this letter.
10. Coordinate your efforts with colleagues.

IN A NUTSHELL
Introduce yourself. Present your case. Answer any questions. Say you are available for further discussions and leave.

Check out your state government’s web site. Much pertinent information can be obtained about elected officials and the day-to-day operations of your state government. Important addresses, phone numbers and email addresses are also available.

Recommendations for Letters

1. Write as an individual. Do not claim to speak for your college or the organizations to which you belong. Do not use college or association stationery or your college’s postage meter.
2. Know your legislator’s committee assignments, interests and areas of expertise. Indicate your familiarity with the legislator’s past actions on an issue, especially if you want to change her/his mind.
3. Include your full name and return address on the letter. (Envelopes are often discarded.)
5. Come to the point quickly. Mention bills or resolutions by number.
6. Confine your letter to a single issue.
7. Make your specific request as clear as possible and explain what you want your legislator to do (or not to do).
8. Clarify that you vote and that you are a taxpayer.
9. Be reasonable. State your request with reasons.
10. Be constructive. Do not threat or insult.
11. Use your own words and your own stationery. Use personal pronouns like “I” and “you.” Your letter should not sound like a newspaper editorial.
12. Personal testimony – your experiences with specific students – is the best supporting evidence you can provide to your legislator.
13. Do not use postcards or form letters. Petitions have minimal impact.
14. Ask for your legislator to explain his/her position on the issue(s) in response to your letter.
15. Type your letter. Proofread for errors.
16. Always keep a copy of your letter(s).
17. Write your legislator when he/she does something of which you approve. A note of appreciation is
always appropriate.
18. Allow reasonable time for a reply.
19. Always use the proper form of address.
20. When the deadline is tight, fax your letter and send the original via snail mail.
21. In general, email is considered junk mail. However, there may be occasions when you and a staff member can exchange ideas via email.

[These ideas are taken, in part, from the Texas Community College Teachers’ Association Guide to Political Participation, 1998-2000.]

**Forms of Address**

**US GOVERNMENT**

Senator
The Honorable Jane Doe
United States Senate
Washington, DC  20510

Dear Senator Doe:

Representative
The Honorable John Doe
U. S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC  20515

Dear Representative Doe:

**STATE**

Governor:  The Honorable ________________
    Dear Governor ________________:

Lt. Governor:  The Honorable ________________
    Dear Governor ________________:

State Senator:  The Honorable ________________
    Dear Senator ________________:

Speaker of the House:  The Honorable ________________
    Dear Mr. Speaker or Dear Madam Speaker:
State Representative: The Honorable ____________________  
    Dear Representative ___________________:  

Your state government may print a state directory with pertinent and useful information. For example, in Texas, the Texas State Directory is published yearly and sells for $27.95 from the Texas State Directory, Inc., P. O. Box 12186, Austin, TX  78711, (512) 477-5698.  

If you get a non-committal response –  

If the reply you receive is non-committal, don’t be surprised. Many times legislators will not take a stand on an issue until the last minute. Thus, your best strategy is to educate your member on the implications of the legislation and how it will affect you and other constituents.  

Write back if the reply does not answer your questions, was ambiguous, or evaded the issue (by claiming, for example, that the fate of the bill is in another’s hands). Even if your legislator is not on a particular committee dealing with a particular bill, s/he should be able to tell you where he or she stands on the bill.  

In your brief follow-up letter or phone call, make two or three good points and restate your position and request. Remind your legislator that you are following the issue.  

If you disagree with the position taken by your legislator –  

Your follow-up letter should:  

Express thanks for the response.  
Express your disagreement, refute your legislator’s arguments, and make a new point, if needed.  
Ask a question or two which will force your legislator to think about the issue and respond. Again, remind the legislator that you are following the issue.  

If you can visit your legislator’s office –  

Call for an appointment. Like you, legislators operate on a schedule. Set-up your appointment at least a week in advance, indicating the subject(s) you want to discuss.  

Time is valuable. Do not expect more than 15 minutes of your legislator’s time. Arrive on time and leave when your allotted time is up. (You might try to arrive early to visit with staff for a moment before
your meeting.) Always call to confirm appointments and do not be surprised if the meeting is cut short. There may be times when you must meet only with a staff member. Staff members are important and are responsible for much of the substantive work on issues. They can be important and effective advocates for your issues.

Be organized. Rehearse beforehand and have a mental agenda. This will keep the meeting on target. In your remarks, you should a) cover your position, b) acknowledge opposing views, and c) explain why your position is better, for education and the legislator’s constituents in the district he/she serves. Convey your knowledge of your profession. Do not present a lot of statistics. Do not overstate your case. Personal anecdotes can be very effective.

If you are going with a group, have a pre-meeting. Select a group spokesperson. Make sure everyone agrees on what will be said.

Be a good listener.

Ask for a commitment. Don’t be timid. Ask how the legislator will stand on the issue. Be tactful.

Do not be intimidated. Legislators are just people. Most of the time they are generalists and may shy away from specifics. They may not understand an issue as well as you do. Discuss the issues with them. Do not lecture or be defensive.

Leave a one-page fact sheet.

Let the legislator know how you will follow-up. Get the name and correct address for the staff member who is the contact person for the issue. Offer to provide supporting documentation to back your position.

After the meeting, send a thank you note. Thank both the legislator and the staff member.

When you telephone –

Generally, when you phone, follow the same tips as for writing a letter. Do your homework before you call. Be short and to the point. Know your position and, if possible, the opposing argument and why it is flawed. Most calls will be handled by legislative staff. It is just as important to express your view to staff as to the legislator.

Follow-up with a letter and write to convey your pleasure/displeasure with your legislator’s vote.

When you offer testimony –
Testifying before a committee is just another way to inform government about your views. Often, due to committee and sub-committee time constraints, individuals who cannot appear to offer oral testimony can submit written testimony to be included in the record.

Although the particulars can change depending on whether you offer testimony before a Congressional Committee or a legislative committee in your state government, generally you must sign in to testify. When you identify yourself, be sure to state that you are appearing as an individual, representing your views as an educator and concerned citizen.

Media Do’s and Don’t’s

DO

- Use your position as a professional educator (with credentials and experience) to lend credibility to your views.
- Talk about your issue(s) in terms that the average person can understand. Eliminate jargon. Focus on how the issue affects all of education, businesses, students, parents, the economy and your entire community.
- Alter your message – but not your main theme – to fit different audiences.
- Localize and personalize your story.
- Keep your message simple, newsworthy and clear.
- Cultivate relationships with reporters and editors and keep a list of their names, addresses and phone numbers at hand.
- Design/produce a press kit with a fact sheet.

DON'T

- Preach or ramble.
- Use jargon that the average person can’t understand.
- Be demanding or hostile toward reporters or editors. Don’t threaten or try to intimidate them.
- Assume that everything your organization does or says is newsworthy.

Some of these ideas are taken from the Grassroots Handbook prepared by the U. S. Chamber of Commerce.

Glossary of Terms

Act – A bill after it becomes law (by being passed by both houses of congress or state government and signed by the President or the Governor, or after the President’s or Governor’s veto is overridden).
Proposed laws are often referred to as “act” because this is the name given if it becomes law.

Amendment – A proposal by a member of Congress (or state government) to alter the language of a bill, act or other amendment, or the Constitution.

Appropriation – The setting aside of funds from the Treasury for a specific government expenditure.

Authorization Bill – A law creating or sustaining a program and outlining its funding. Following authorization, an appropriation approves withdrawal of funds from the Treasury.

Bill – A proposed law. Identical bills in both Houses are called companion bills.

Budget – An annual proposal outlining expenditures and revenues for the coming fiscal year, beginning October 1, 1999 (national).

Budget Authority – Allows federal agencies to incur financial liability. The basic types of budget authority are appropriations, contract authority, and borrowing money.

Budget Outlays – House and Senate passed guidelines – and later caps – on budget authority and outlays.

Calendar – Schedule of bills awaiting action by each House.

Caucus – A group of legislators who promote issues of common interest.

Cloture – Closing off debate.

Committee of the Whole – A parliamentary device employed by the House to simplify its operations while debating pending legislation.

Conference Committee – Selected members of the House and Senate, assigned to resolve differences between similar bills passed independently by the House and Senate.

Congress – The U. S. Senate and House of Representatives are the two Houses of Congress.

Congressional Record -- A daily record of congressional happenings and, except for executive sessions, a more-or-less verbatim record of floor debate.

Continuing Resolution – A joint appropriations measure providing interim funding for agencies whose regular appropriations bills have not yet been passed.

Executive Session – A meeting closed to the public.
Field Hearing – Committee or subcommittee hearing held away from the Capitol.

Filibuster – Delaying tactics to prevent action on a bill.

Fiscal Year – For the federal government, October 1 through September 30.

Floor – Forum in each house where members introduce, debate and vote on legislation.

Gallery – A seating area for the press and public to watch floor action.

Germane – Relevant to pending legislation.

Lame Duck – A member who has lost re-election or has declined to run again for office.

Majority Leader – In the Senate, the head of the majority party. In the House, the second in command after the Speaker.

Minority Leader – The head of the minority party in the House or Senate.

Motion – A request by a member to institute any one of a wide array of parliamentary actions. The outcome of a motion is decided by vote.

Point of Order – An objection by a member that the pending matter or proceeding is in violation of the rules.

Political Action Committee (PAC) – Groups representing particular interests that raise money from their members or employees and give it to political candidates who support their positions.

Public Law – A bill after it has passed both Houses of Congress and been either signed by the President or passed after a veto.

Quorum – A majority of the members. A quorum is necessary to conduct business.

Rider – An unrelated item attached to a bill so the item may “ride” to approval.

Suspension of the Rules – A time-saving procedure for considering legislation.

Tabling Motion – A proposal to remove a bill from immediate consideration; often used to kill a measure.
Unanimous Consent – By unanimous consent almost any rule can be waived for specific purposes.