
Working with Elected Officials – Top 12 Tips*

1. **Develop positive working relationships with elected officials and their staff.** Contact them on a consistent basis, not just during budget time. Develop and nurture relationships all year. Get to know staffers and aides, and offer to be a resource with regard to specific issues. They are valuable contacts and have a great deal of influence on decisions made.
2. **No surprises.** Communicate good or bad news directly to elected officials before they read it in the newspapers. They want to know ahead of time and will appreciate not being blind sided.
3. **Face-to-face meetings with elected officials.** After discussing the major issues, be sure to ask if the elected official can support your proposal. Each response will require a specific strategy.

If the response is “no,” determine if their negative response is fixed or adjustable. If there is room for influence, create a strategy that may sway their decision. If their negative response is firm, it may be best to focus on people you may influence, but never close the door completely. The elected official may eventually come around on another issue at another time.

If the response is, “I don’t know at this time,” follow up with a question that provides more information to positively impact their decision. For example, “Do you need more data on participants or a particular program?” Please provide the information that they need in a timely fashion. Finally, if their response is “yes,” thank them and ask them to: 1) help create a winning strategy that will influence their colleagues and 2) help determine which specific message points works best with the elected officials that need convincing.

4. **One-page fact sheet.** If possible, try to condense the materials into one page. Develop a simple explanation of the topic and attend the meeting prepared to deliver three simple message points. The elected official is juggling many issues and, in order to be successful, it is important to deliver a simple message in the beginning. After educating the elected official and he/she requests background information, you can provide more complex information. If you want them to take action, ask them specifically what they can do to help.
5. **Serve as a resource** for elected officials on local issues, backed by the UW System research base. This is invaluable to elected officials.

6. **Send them good news.** Place elected officials on mailing lists for newsletters, annual reports, special events, graduating students, etc. They do want to hear from UW Colleges/UW-Extension in good times and in bad. Make sure any materials are no longer than one page. Call them periodically and share positive outcomes.
7. **Invite them to events.** Designate elected officials as “honorary guests” at higher profile special events. Incorporate them in ceremonies, such as handing out awards, speaking, etc. Invite the media and inform officials that the media are invited.
8. Consider having **students, clients or “friends” interview local or state elected officials** about their political interests, thoughts about government, etc. This interview process could serve as a bridge to discuss other programs and services we provide in the community.
9. **Visit legislators.** Try to attend elected officials’ office hours or make an appointment. If possible, bring along stakeholders who are also their constituents.
10. **Ask clients and supporters to talk on our behalf.** Encourage our stakeholders and advocates to contact their elected officials. Our “friends,” clients and supporters can provide first-hand knowledge about the value of our work. Elected officials appreciate hearing from third-party advocates.
11. Consider the option of **letters to the editor from our friends and supporters.** Letters to the editor and op-ed pieces are a great way for our advocates to speak out on our behalf and reach a large audience at one time.
12. When legislators call for information, **return the call immediately**, if possible. They most likely need information in a timely manner.

