Having the Conversation:
Interacting with Congressional Staff

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Microsoft Tech and Civic Engagement
Topics/Timeline for this Session

Topics
• Interacting with Congressional Staff
  – Preparing, Talking and Listening, Following-Up
  – Thinking about what to say
• Congressional Testimony

Schedule
• Today: Presentation/Discussion
• Tonight: Practice Practice Practice
• Tomorrow: Sample Interactions, with Feedback

Caveats
Policy is a complex interdependent system – causality is very hard to define
• Lots of factors beyond your control (environment, timing, competing issues)
• Going it alone less effective than having allies

Doing good comes in a lot of different guises
• Preventing a bad outcome, softening the blow
• Piling on (adding your voice to a chorus)
• Making sure the opposition isn’t unopposed
• Nuanced policy adjustments
• Raising awareness, applying pressure
Interacting with Congressional Staff

• Preparing
• How to Handle Yourself
• What to Say

Know Your Audience
(Do Your Homework on Them)

• Committee staff vs. personal staff
• Time of year, current issues/bills
• Staff’s portfolio
• Member’s positions/philosophy, Committee assignments, interests/priorities
• Committee’s priorities, agenda, jurisdiction
• Geography
Know Your Purpose
(Do Your Homework on Your Message)

• Why are you there?
• What do you hope to accomplish (know your audience)?
  – Set realistic goals: a specific ask (support or sponsor a bill or certain language), give supporters praise and additional info, raise awareness in non-supporters
• Prepare what to say ahead of time
• In a group, agree on priorities and points, and assign roles and responsibilities
• Have short handouts (for reference)

Interacting with Congressional Staff

• Preparing

• How to Handle Yourself

• What to Say
Know What to Say/Do (Part I)

- Real Words
- Real Worlds
- Anecdotes, Factoids, Myth vs. Reality
- Position yourself and the community as a resource

Know What to Say/Do (Part II)

- Be specific (what agencies, what programs, what policies, what issues, what bills, what ACTIONS)
- Be responsive to the questions that are asked whenever possible (see future slide)
  - Show you heard, bring it back to your topics/points
- Be to the point
  - Teasers are possible, i.e. in answering questions, can offer related topics/issues, but don’t go into them without being encouraged
Know What to Say/Do (Part III)

- Ask how you can help, ask for others to speak to (sometimes)
- Be respectful of their time/positions, say thank you!
- Dress appropriately
- Be consistent

Know What NOT to Say/Do

- Don’t guess
  - If they ask a question (policy or fact-based) that you don’t know the answer to, say that you or a colleague will follow up (and do so)
- Don’t answer questions that are outside your scope, expertise, or are designed to throw others under a bus
  - Practice doing this politely
- Don’t talk politics
- Don’t get distracted
Afterwards

• Thank you email, especially if there were follow-ups (information, introductions, action items)
• Lessons learned
  – Did you get to make your points? Were they heard?
  – What questions were asked? How were your answers? (If the same questions appear over and over, should you incorporate the issue into your messaging/intro?)
• Information sharing -- Did you learn anything that others should know?

A Special Case: Congressional Testimony (1)

• Same basic rules apply (know your audience and message)
• Some questions extra-important:
  – WHY are they having the hearing (e.g. legislation, oversight, education)
  – WHY you as witness, and WHO else is invited
  – Is CONFLICT expected/desired (among witnesses, with the Committee, between Committee and agencies)
A Special Case: Congressional Testimony (2)

• Testimony:
  – Make recommendations
  – Provide rationales/illustrations/consequences

• Key Differences
  – Public forum (testimony for the record, potential media attention)
  – Time management is critical in statements and answers

Interacting with Congressional Staff

• Preparing

• How to Handle Yourself

• What to Say
Sample Introduction

We are ________. We represent __________. We are here to tell you about _______ and ask you for ______________. We’d like to start by briefly [see below], and then we can answer questions, or go into more depth about this or _______ / __________.

Examples

• …telling you about our research to illustrate why these agencies/programs are important
• … describing why we are concerned about proposed policy X, and discussing potential consequences and alternative approaches
• … summarizing how research discoveries get translated into commercial applications and what could help going forward
• … outlining the situation in computing education and how and why it could be improved

Include an example/scenario and a number, if possible! TIME THIS (3-4 minutes at most)

Examples of Topics of Interest

• Jobs, economic impact
• Societal impact
• Local factors (“my” state)
• Education and workforce

Be able to talk sensitively about:
– pressures on government funding
– “basic” research
– role of universities, government, industry
– privacy, security
– foreign students, immigration, workforce
– women/URM in computer science
Sample Challenging Questions (1)

• Why should the federal government fund computer science research? (E.g. aren’t companies working on security, or robotics, or IT for health and energy?)
• In tight budget times, should NSF move funds from social science or environmental science to areas like computer science?
• What could the government (NSF, DARPA, NIH, NITRD, …) do better (in security, or economic impact, or education)?
• What should the government stop doing?

Sample Challenging Questions (2)

• How should research agencies ensure that what the government is funding is important and useful?
• How does peer review work and is it effective?
• Do you work with companies? What makes that work well?
• What role do patents and intellectual property play in your research?
• What do we need to do/spend to make our IT systems secure?
• How can computer science help balance national security and individual rights? [And related questions about surveillance and encryption.]
Sample Challenging Questions (3)

• Why are so many of your students foreign? Why don’t American students (women, minorities) go into computer science?
• Won’t IT (robotics, autonomous vehicles) eliminate jobs?
• Is there a shortage of computer science graduates?
• Are universities teaching the right things to prepare students for today’s jobs?
• What is the role of technology in education?

Sample Challenging Questions (4)

• Is the U.S. falling behind other countries in innovation? What should we do about it?
• How can we get industry to support more research?
• Is innovation still occurring in information technology? [A possible reference to the R&D tax credit]
• Did you get any stimulus funding? What difference did it make?
• Why do government employees need to go to conferences?
Practice Practice Practice

• Pick a task (design an intro, respond to certain difficult questions) and an audience
• Discuss/sketch out your spiel/answers
• Practice out loud/time it
• Get feedback/suggestions from colleagues

• When we reconvene tomorrow, people will try out their statements and receive group feedback

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