



# Having the Conversation: Interacting with Congressional Staff

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**The Microsoft Cities Team –  
Civic Engagement works  
with local and national  
partners in cities in the U.S.  
to strengthen metropolitan  
communities and regions  
and contribute to local  
opportunities and economic  
growth.**



# Topics/Timeline for this Session

## Topics

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

**Please  
Interrupt**

## 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)

- Time of year, current issues/bills
- Committee vs. personal staff, staff member's portfolio
- Committee's priorities, agenda, jurisdiction
- Member's positions/philosophy, Committee assignments, interests/priorities
- Geography
- Why did they say "yes" to meeting with you



# 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

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# 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), ask if there is context you should know
- **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?



# 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)**



# Topics of Interest/Areas of Sensitivity: Technology's Intersection with ...

## Topics of Interest

- Innovation, economic impact
- Jobs, education, and workforce
- Societal benefits
- Local factors (“my” state)

## Areas of Sensitivity

- Taxes/Spending
- Immigration
- Societal costs

## 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
- implications of AI





# Sample Challenging Questions – Funding Research

- Why should the federal government fund computer science research?
  - Aren't companies working on security, or robotics, or IT for health and transportation?
  - What is the benefit to the government, or society?
- How should research agencies ensure that what the government is funding is important and useful?
- How does peer review work and is it effective?



# Sample Challenging Questions – Spending Pressures

- What could the government (NSF, DARPA, NIH, NITRD, ...) do better (in security, or economic impact, or education)?
- What should the government stop doing?
- In tight budget times, should NSF move funds from social science or environmental science to areas like computer science?



# Sample Challenging Questions – Education & Immigration

- Why are so many of your students foreign? Why don't American students (women, minorities) go into computer science?
- 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 – Innovation & Competitiveness

- 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?
- What can we do to create the next (Google, Microsoft, Facebook, Amazon, ...)?
- Do you work with companies? What makes that work well?
- What role do patents and intellectual property play in your research?



# Sample Challenging Questions – Societal Concerns

- How can we better prevent technology from contributing to inequality, filter bubbles, sex trafficking, ...?
- How can computer science help balance national security and individual rights? *[And related questions about surveillance and encryption.]*
- What do we need to do/spend to make government and private IT systems secure?



# Sample Challenging Questions – AI

- What is Artificial Intelligence? How does it work?
- (When) is AI going to take over the world?
- (When) are AI and robots going to take our jobs?
- Does AI make societal challenges (inequality, discrimination, political campaigns) worse?
- How can we make sure the US is the world leader in AI? How can we reap the benefits?



# Practice Practice Practice

- Pick a topic and 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
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- When we reconvene tomorrow, people will try out their statements and receive group feedback



