



CCPH SPECIAL SECTION

Legislative Advocacy for Health Professions Educators

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ABSTRACT *Because much of health professions education in the US is publicly financed, the actions of politicians have profound effects on the organization of health professions education. The success of health professions education programs, therefore, depends in part on the ability of educators to advocate for change in the legislature. Successful legislative advocacy requires a general understanding of the legislative process and the needs of politicians combined with effective communications strategy. The tools of individual legislative advocacy include position papers, letter writing, politician meetings and visits, and using the media. Professional associations advocate on behalf of their members through coalitions, key contact programs, grassroots campaigns, and lobbyists. Successful legislative advocacy depends on credibility and the development of long-term relationships with members of the legislature. The process of legislative advocacy is straightforward and should be viewed as an integral part of health professions education.*

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Introduction

As in every modern democracy, the actions of US national (federal) and state legislatures have profound effects on the organization and financing of community health programs, including health professions education. The

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advancement of health professions education not infrequently requires that politicians adopt new laws that either provide additional resources or remove statutory barriers. The success of health professions education programs, therefore, depends in part on the ability of educators to influence the actions of politicians.

Although derived from particular experience with the US system of government, in this paper I describe general principles of legislative advocacy, which may have application in other democratic countries. The specific example of health professions education is used throughout this paper, but the principles of legislative advocacy discussed herein are no less applicable to community health programs.

Successful legislative advocacy is based on two overriding concepts:

- *strategic thinking*—the ability of health professions educators to achieve their goals is frequently tied to supportive legislation. Influencing politicians to adopt supportive legislation (i.e. legislative advocacy) is necessary if these goals are to be achieved; and
- *building relationships*—successfully implementing a legislative strategy is predicated on building and maintaining productive relationships with local, state and federal politicians.

Legislative advocacy is important because every level of government, from local to state to national, takes actions that either directly or indirectly affect health professions education. Three concurrent trends in the US make the involvement of health professions educators in legislative advocacy more important than ever:

- federal spending for domestic programs has not kept pace with the growth in the economy or the need for health-related programs;
- domestic programs of all kinds have fallen into disfavor. In the US, politicians in both of the major political parties support a less active role for government in many domestic programs, including health professions education; and
- government funding for health professions education has been pooled with other related domestic programs, placing health professions educators in the position of having to compete for public funds.

The net effect of these three trends is more political competition for fewer dollars. As a general rule, politicians support the programs they feel are of the greatest value to their constituents, and they cannot know the value of community-based health professions education relative to other programs unless its advocates are able to make a compelling case.

The last two decades have witnessed a peculiarly American experiment in health care delivery. The competitive model that dominates most areas of the

US economy has been applied to the health care sector. The mechanism by which health care services are financed has shifted from reimbursing health care providers for services rendered (fee-for-service) to paying providers a single annual fee for each person enrolled under their care. In the first instance, providers must compete to enroll individuals under their care, and, in the second instance, providers must strive to provide care at an average cost below the per-individual fee. Whether or not health care can be distributed appropriately within a competitive market and with what burden of regulation remains a subject of much good-faith debate. But it is the nature of competitive markets that some participants will do better than others. Competition creates winners and losers. Not surprisingly, those parties who feel most threatened by changes in the health care system are mobilizing aggressively to protect their interests.

Politicians are rarely health care professionals and do not usually understand health professions education at the community level. Politicians, therefore, depend on the advice of those who have legitimate expertise. They cannot be expected to appreciate the merits of the case for community-based health professions education unless its advocates take responsibility for making that case. Because the decisions that legislatures make have such a powerful effect on health professions education, legislative advocacy can be viewed as a direct extension of the education process itself.

Legislative Process

Successful legislative advocacy does not require a detailed knowledge of the legislative process. The rationale and timing of advocacy efforts are derived from a few overriding principles of the legislative process, as employed in the typical US legislature.

Only a small proportion of the laws proposed in any year are enacted. Each proposed law goes through a complex process with many decision points. The failure to clear any of these decision points derails a proposed law for that annual legislative session.

Advocacy efforts are timed to coincide with key legislative decision points. For example, in US legislatures, proposed laws are considered by committees that are composed of politicians and that have jurisdiction over specific issues. Legislation relevant to health professions education is referred to committees that consider health-related matters. Typically, if a proposed law lacks support in committee, it is dead. If a committee regards a proposed law favorably, it has a good chance of being enacted.

Legislative advocacy efforts are targeted to the members of the key health committees. Because committee consideration of a proposed law is so crucial to its ultimate success, advocacy efforts are focused on the members of the key health committees.

A long-term perspective is essential. Not infrequently, it takes two or more legislative sessions for a proposed law to receive serious consideration. Patience, persistence, and realistic expectations about the number of years that it takes to get a proposed law passed are essential assets in legislative advocacy.

The Needs of Politicians

A key component of legislative advocacy is understanding and meeting the needs of politicians.

Politicians are always candidates. Except perhaps for US Senators, who have 6-year terms, elected officials in the US are campaigning for office continually. An essential screen through which politicians put all issues before deciding on their positions is the impact their positions will have on their chances for re-election.

Successful candidates for elected office need to achieve solid name recognition in their districts. Because of the high cost of advertising, which is a key component of all US political campaigns, candidates seek as many opportunities as possible to generate free publicity through the news media.

Beyond name recognition, candidates must distinguish themselves through their individual campaign messages, which collectively make up a platform. Each candidate seeks to be identified with a few clear, broad campaign themes, or “planks,” that resonate with voters. Not infrequently candidates use poll results to determine the concerns of voters, but more often they rely on the expressed views of their own constituents who take the time to share their concerns. Successful legislative advocacy involves the communication of issues in a way that literally gives the politician the messages he or she needs in developing a campaign platform.

Politicians are risk-averse. Most are loath to take a stand that can be used against them in an election, and they are reluctant to even consider taking a stand until they are able to assess with certainty the impact on voters of any particular proposed law. Politicians rely on vocal constituents to communicate the diverse views within their communities, and they use this information to avoid positions that might negatively impact their re-election. Notwithstanding their aversion to risk, politicians will occasionally take an unpopular but principled stand. Knowing that there are opinion leaders in their community who will back them up is very important.

Communication Strategy

Successful legislative advocacy requires adherence to a few general principles of political communication.

The language of US politics is designed to reach people on an emotional level. Even though politicians may fully appreciate the intellectual merits of a position, they must be able to communicate their messages in a way that resonates with the values of their constituents.

Communications to politicians should reflect a knowledge of his or her past record related to the issue at hand. They should be factually accurate and supportable. Covering both sides of an issue equips a politician in refuting opposing arguments. Long-run success in legislative advocacy hinges entirely on credibility.

Communications should employ simple terms and describe how an issue affects a politician's constituents. While health professions educators place a high value on research findings, it is personal anecdotes that drive the political process. Communications should be concise, typically one page in length. Supporting documentation can be included as an attachment.

Communications to a politician should include some recognition of his or her roles and accomplishments and should convey that he or she is especially able to address your issue. Politicians need to be viewed by voters as someone who can make a difference.

Position Papers

Position papers are important tools in the legislative advocacy process. They can communicate priority issues for health professions educators. Position papers are drafted in simple, easily grasped and straightforward language of the sort used in political campaigns and by the print and broadcast media.

Typically, a position paper lays out an issue in one or two pages. It starts with the bottom line—a concise statement of the position or a legislative request. The next paragraph or two provides background information. Briefly stated, what is the problem to be addressed? Why is the problem important? The next paragraph proposes a solution. The concluding paragraph reiterates the request.

Position papers lend themselves to several specific applications. Sharing position papers with politicians helps establish the authors as a resource on health care issues while informing the politician and his or her staff of the priority issues for health professions education.

Prior to election, political candidates seek information with which to formulate their platforms. The response of a candidate to a position paper is a barometer by which advocates can measure the sensitivity of a politician to health professions education issues.

Position papers can be used to prepare a politician for his or her appearance at a meeting or conference of health professions educators. Politicians wish to appear conversant with the issues of concern to the audience.

Finally, reporters often get ideas for stories from influential sources such as education leaders. Sharing position papers with the media educates reporters about key health-related issues emerging in a campaign and can help to keep these issues in front of politicians.

Letter Writing

Personal letters are the most basic tools for expressing views to politicians. Successful letters conform generally to the guidelines below.

- Letters should appear on personal stationery and be written legibly or typed.
- Letters should be kept to one page and the entire message should be summarized in the first paragraph. More detailed information can be included as an attachment.
- Letters should use simple, direct language. Requests for a response should be clearly stated.
- Letters should be uncluttered with extraneous, unrelated commentary.
- Letters should abide by the commonplace business conventions and include, if appropriate, a date by which a response is requested.
- Effective letters stand out as a personal communication from a concerned and active constituent. Politicians in the US receive hundreds, sometimes thousands, of pieces of mail each week. Many are form letters that garner little attention.
- Letters should always include a return address, phone number, and e-mail address.
- Politicians in the US will almost always respond.
- A copy of this letter should always be sent to the politician's staff member who deals with health professions education issues.

Meeting with Politicians

Meeting with a politician or his or her health aide is a tried-and-true tool of legislative advocacy. The guidelines below are intended to demystify this important event and make it both productive and enjoyable.

US politicians often maintain offices in both their home districts and the state or national capitol. Meeting with the politician can occur either in the home district office or in his or her capitol office. Meeting with the appropriate staff member may be as important as meeting with the politician. Meeting with the staff member in advance of scheduling a meeting with the politician is often advisable. By doing so, the staff member can be fully conversant with the issues, and he or she can brief the politician in advance.

Most meetings with politicians are very brief. The message should be well rehearsed by the participants in advance and should be summarized in a one-page position paper. Personal anecdotes relevant to the politician's constituents are very useful.

Immediately after meeting with a politician, a note of thanks should be sent along with a one-page summary. A copy of this letter should be sent to the appropriate staff member.

Candor has high value in political discourse. If there are arguments against a proposed position on an issue, those arguments should be stated up-front. Similarly, a candid admission of not knowing the answer to a question is far better than a contrived on-the-spot reply.

Meeting with a politician should be regarded as the initiation of an ongoing relationship. It is important to follow up with the health aide on a periodic basis. Successful advocates are familiar to their political representatives, and the politicians trust their advice.

Dealing with the Media

Because so much of political discourse in the US occurs in the media, advocates often employ the media to communicate a message. Politicians thrive on media coverage, and any free media coverage is greatly appreciated. In addition, politicians regularly follow the opinion pages of local media to get a sense of how constituents feel about key issues. Becoming a presence either through opinion-editorials or letters to the editor can help position health professions educators with the politician and the media as an expert in the community.

Legislative efforts and campaigns thrive on free media coverage. Earned media coverage gives politicians credibility that they cannot get through paid advertisements. Being a newsmaker is important to positioning a politician as someone who is worthy of holding public office. In any case, paid advertising is often beyond the means of many candidates.

There are several opportunities for health professions education advocates to work with a politician's office to help generate earned media coverage:

- developing a newsletter for colleagues or the community and distributing it to the media;
- announcing an endorsement of a position that a politician has taken;
- releasing a position paper to the media and arming a politician with the best responses;
- organizing a visit to a health professions training site and arranging media coverage; and
- writing an opinion column or letter to the editor on health care issues for a local newspaper.

Politician Visits

Visits by politicians to local training sites are an effective way to build ongoing relationships. Politician visits illustrate how a training program's ability to meet local health needs relates to legislative issues. Such visits also provide a powerful visual image of an educator's commitment to improving community health. A visit by a politician offers the opportunity to showcase a program's strengths and allows it to selectively highlight its challenges. Politician visits offer an opportunity to meet with staff and other involved community members who are the politician's constituents. A visit can establish an educator as a source of insightful and credible information to the politician.

The objectives for a politician visit must be determined in advance. The politician's particular interests should influence the objectives. The overall message should be kept simple.

The politician's visit should be announced to all staff members and promoted throughout the community.

Local health care reporters should be invited to cover the politician's visit.

The politician should be provided information about the program prior to the visit.

A pre-planned tour schedule should emphasize the objectives set for the visit. The politician should be provided with an overview of important facts about the program, including the range of community needs being addressed, the programs that have been developed to meet those needs, the range of program collaborators, and the challenges of funding.

Time should be allowed for the politician to visit with staff and board members, and arrangements should be made to have photographs taken during the visit.

After the visit a written thank-you note should be sent to the politician reiterating the points discussed during the visit. Any photographs taken during the visit should be sent to the politician to use in his or her own publications. Also, photographs and information about the visit should be published in the program's newsletter. Stories about the visit that appeared in local newspapers and internal publications should be sent to the politician's office.

Advocacy Methods for Associations

In the US, professional associations play an important role in legislative advocacy. A well-organized and coordinated advocacy effort multiplies the impact of each member's efforts and makes efficient use of volunteer member time. The following are four standard components of association legislative strategy.

Legislative coalitions are essential to the success of many legislative efforts. They combine the strengths of various groups to create a team that

is stronger than the sum of the individuals involved. A successful coalition includes a wide array of groups, which bring a variety of perspectives to the effort. A coalition of health professions educators from all disciplines can be much more effective than each discipline advocating solely on its own behalf.

A key contact program ensures that at least one dedicated and dependable health professions educator is assigned to each elected official serving on the key health committees of the legislature. A legislative committee or the legislative staff coordinates the activities of key contacts. Besides maintaining an ongoing relationship with their politicians, key contacts respond to action alerts by contacting their politicians at crucial points in the legislative process.

Grassroots lobbying has become a widely used tool in the US legislative process. Electronic data and communications systems make it possible to quickly identify and communicate with constituents in a highly efficient and targeted fashion. Membership lists can now be sorted by legislative district, which makes it possible to individually target mailings to constituents of lawmakers serving on health committees. These targeted mailings typically provide a brief summary of a legislative issue and specific guidance on how to communicate with their politicians.

Professional lobbyists represent interests of members of the organization for whom they work. Typically they advise their organizations regarding the legislative process and legislative strategy, monitor developments related to legislation of interest to the organization, and promote the positions of their organization to politicians who sit on key legislative committees. Lobbyists work primarily on the basis of long-term relationships with the staff members of key politicians and committees.

A professional association may hire one or more lobbyists as full-time employees or it may contract with a lobbying firm for either part-time or full-time representation. In contracting with a lobbying firm, an association may receive a limited range of services such as information gathering and monitoring or it may contract for the full range of lobbying activities.

Conclusion

Translating the ideas and ideals of health professions educators into real programs unavoidably involves the legislative process. The task of advocating for a positive legislative climate in the US system of government falls directly upon the educators themselves. The process of legislative advocacy, however, is straightforward and should be viewed as an integral part of health professions education. Successful legislative advocacy depends on credibility and the development of long-term relationships with members of the legislature.

Resources

State Legislative Information

Most, if not all, states in the US maintain websites with a standardized URL: <[http://www.state\(state postal abbreviation\).us](http://www.state(state postal abbreviation).us)> (e.g.: <<http://www.state.NY.us>> for New York state). Links to the state legislature are readily identifiable. These legislative websites contain information on politicians, committee jurisdictions and assignments, current and past proposed laws, and the legislative history of current proposed laws.

Federal Legislative Information

Information on US representatives and senators, committee jurisdictions and assignments, current and past proposed laws, and the legislative history of current proposed laws can be obtained from the Library of Congress' website: <<http://thomas.loc.gov/>>. This website has many links to federal information resources.

Advocacy Handbooks

Many professional associations to which health professions educators typically belong (e.g. American Public Health Association) have produced excellent legislative advocacy handbooks.

Books

The following two books are standard reading for those who want to steep themselves in the US federal legislative process:

- Deering, C.F. & Smith, S.S. (1997). *Committees in Congress*. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Books.
- Redman, E. (1973). *Dance of legislation*. New York: Simon & Schuster.