Congressional Visit Toolkit

INVITING MEMBERS OF CONGRESS TO TOUR COMMUNITY COLLEGE CAMPUSES

ACCT
ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEES
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Overview

Inviting your United States Senators or Representatives to visit your community college campus is an excellent way to build relationships, as well as to demonstrate the importance of your college to their state or congressional district. Through a tour or visit, you can highlight certain programs or activities occurring on campus, and talk to your member of Congress about the college’s federal priorities. This type of engagement will help make you an informational resource on higher education policy, and create stronger ties with your elected officials.

As a trustee, you help set the mission of the college, and you are an ideal advocate for the college. Trustees have a range of expertise, from academic programs and system planning to access and affordability. Advocacy on behalf of your students and college is a primary role for serving as a trustee. To be an effective advocate, you must become familiar with your members of Congress—who they are, the committees on which they serve, and their positions and voting records on higher education. You can identify all of your federal representatives and access their home districts and Washington, D.C. office contact information through ACCT’s website. Once you identify your congressional representatives, use this toolkit as a resource to help you structure your invitation and message, prepare for your visit, and follow up after the meeting is over.

If you need additional guidance on contacting your members of Congress, or structuring your talking points and materials, contact us at publicpolicy@acct.org.
Guide to Crafting a Congressional Invitation

‘What should the invitation to my Member of Congress say?’

• Make sure your request is specific, relevant, timely, and that it appeals to the interests of your members of Congress. If you know your Senator or Representative has a specific interest (for example, STEM) then consider tying the invitation to their priorities.

**Tip:** A tour or event is a time-consuming request, and you may be competing against other invitations. Make sure to clearly outline why your request is relevant.

‘What details should I include?’

• Congressional offices want to know basic information. We’ve already talked about the ‘why.’ Your invitation should also address the ‘who,’ ‘what,’ ‘when,’ and ‘where.’ Ensure that other key campus leaders know about your invitation, and note in the invitation if they or other faculty, staff, or students may be present. Provide a basic description of what will occur during the tour or event, and how long it should take. Also, if you have multiple campuses, state the specific location at which you would like to meet.

**Tip:** Keep in mind that it may be more difficult to schedule an invitation that requires a significant time commitment from the member of Congress.

‘Where should I send the invitation?’

• In most instances, a request for a campus visit or meeting in the congressional district will go through the scheduler. Simply call any office and request contact information for the individual who handles scheduling requests.

• Congressional offices receive a large number of scheduling requests, so they prefer to receive them in writing. Save yourself a stamp. Email is your best bet when requesting a meeting unless otherwise stated by the congressional office.

• If you have previously met with other staffers in the D.C. or district office, consider including them on the request and tying it back to prior conversations about your college.

**Tip:** Make sure you follow up. If you placed a request but haven’t heard back, call or email the scheduler.

‘How much advance notice do they need?’

• Probably not as much time as you may think. Congressional schedules are constantly in flux, but generally begin to shape up two or three weeks in advance.

• Offer a few different options for meeting dates. Three to six weeks in advance of your first proposed date is sufficient time.

• Don’t pick a date when Congress is scheduled to be in Washington, D.C. for a vote. The legislative calendar can be found via the websites [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) and [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov).

**Tip (mixed cases):** As an alternative to planning and coordinating a special campus visit, consider giving your elected officials the VIP treatment at a regular on-campus event. This will give them a sense of what your college does and an opportunity to interact with students and other constituents.
Sample Invitation Request

To: [In-District Scheduler]
CC: [Education Legislative Assistant]

RE: Scheduling Request – Tour of Community College Campus

Dear Mr./Ms. District Office Scheduler,

I am writing to invite the Senator to visit our community college campus to tour our renewable energy certificate program within the coming month or so. Each year, this program graduates more than 75 students, and we have been extremely successful in placing them in jobs within this high-demand field. We would like to showcase this program because we believe it would be of interest to the Senator and relevant to her work on the Energy and Natural Resources Committee. Additionally, when we met with the Senator's legislative assistant last year, he mentioned the Senator's interest in growing economic opportunities in green energy within the state.

The tour should take no more than an hour. We will be visiting the students in the lab, providing an overview of the program, and conducting a brief question and answer session. Our college board members, president and the director of the program will also be present.

We can be flexible regarding a date, but have identified a few possible weeks for your consideration. If this is something that is amenable to the Senator, we have availability the weeks of August 23rd, August 30th, or September 22nd. If none of these dates works, please call us at (555) 333-2999 or email boardchair@commcoll.edu, and we can determine a date that will work for all parties.

Of course, we could also coordinate with your press office if you wish to promote the tour. We are excited by the prospect of the Senator's visit to see our campus's innovative new program and meet our students first hand. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Community College Trustee & President
While it may not be as high profile of a visit, meeting with a staffer is well worth your board’s and president’s time. It helps to build your relationship with that office, and also will relay information about your college and its interests to the member of Congress. It’s great if you create an office champion. Staffers often have the influence to convince their bosses to go to a particular event or prioritize a certain meeting that they feel would be worth their time, so it is important to build in-roads when the opportunity arises.

When you do end up meeting with or hosting staffers, treat them with the same level of respect and gratitude that you would give to your members of Congress—remember that they are taking time from their very busy schedules, as well, and that they can have a tremendous amount of influence on advancing your message. A strong relationship with congressional staffers is the best way to turn today’s “no” into tomorrow’s “yes.”

‘What if they say no?!’

It can be a disappointment when an invitation is rejected. In most instances, the office will propose sending one of its staffers in place of the Representative or Senator. If this option is not presented, you should ask if it’s a possibility.
Preparing for and Planning Your Meeting

Know Your College

• College leaders should be able to briefly articulate to members of Congress their institution’s mission, key programs offered, facts about the student population, the business community served by the college and the economic impact of college programs.

• If you are touring a program on campus or attending an event, know the connection to the federal government. Does this program receive federal support, and if so, how much? Thank them for their role in providing that support.

Know Your Community

• You represent the same people your Representatives and Senators do. Be able to discuss the needs of the community, how your community is changing, and how the college is responding to these changes.

Know Which Federal Programs are Significant to Your College

• Community college students receive substantial assistance from federal student aid programs, especially the Pell Grant program. Additionally, many colleges benefit from grant programs, such as funding for Minority Serving Institutions, TRIO programs, the Carl D. Perkins Act and federal job training programs.

• Sharing the impact of these programs on your colleges demonstrates to members and their staff the importance of the federal investment in education and training programs.

Know Your Legislators

• Knowing your Representatives’ and Senators’ backgrounds helps you make a connection and helps you communicate with them in a way that makes your point come across most effectively.

• Do your research. Know their backgrounds and priority issues. Do they have connections to your college?

Preparing Materials

• Members of Congress and their staffs appreciate brevity; a brief but substantive summary about your college is more likely to be saved in a file and referred to than a bulky packet with the college catalog, numerous program brochures, and financial reports. Include relevant data when possible.

• ACCT’s federal funds worksheet (located on page 8 of the toolkit) is a great resource to share with your member of Congress. Ask your financial aid office to assist in filling it out, and provide a copy to your guests during the meeting.
Preparing for and Planning Your Meeting

Your Meeting Agenda

• Develop a plan of action, and stick to a timetable.
• Plan to formally welcome and introduce your Representative or Senator.
• Share why your college or program is so important to the community.
• Make sure to incorporate your talking points and federal priorities.
• Be sure to thank them for prior votes or legislation that aligns with your priorities.

Ask About Your Member’s Priorities

• As with any good relationship, it is important to have give and take. During the meeting, ask your member what his or her priorities are—doing so presents an excellent opportunity to find out more about his or her interests and agenda. This discussion also may yield other opportunities to work together on additional issues.

Ask for Their Support

• Your Representative, Senator, or their staff should be able to give you an indication of the member’s level of support for community college priorities. It is appropriate and important for you to ask their position.
Keep the Momentum Going After the Meeting is Over

Send Thank-You Notes or Emails

- A thank-you note is not only polite, but also provides an opportunity to follow up on key topics discussed during the meeting. Send a note to both the member of Congress and to participating staff. It can be a useful reminder for your congressional offices to follow up on further conversations, research, or commitments made during your meeting.

Promoting the Visit

- Utilize social media or a press release to publicize information and photos from the visit. When quoting members of Congress, work with their press office to first gain approval.

Make Sure Information Has Made its Way to Washington, D.C.

- Physical distance often stifles communication between district office staff and D.C. staff. It’s OK to ask the district staff for the name and contact information of an individual in the federal office with whom you should follow up on federal funding or legislative priorities; in fact, maintaining proper contacts can and should be part of your continuing communication with your local office. In almost all instances, the staff assigned to federal legislation will be housed in the Washington, D.C. office—so make sure you have contacts in Washington. Forward your materials to these people, noting who you met with in the home office.

Maintaining Contact

- Often the communication ends when the meeting is over. Keep the relationships going by engaging with staff regarding campus activities. This could include forwarding a campus newsletter or newspaper article to a relevant staff member.

- Consider offering space on campus for events. Members of Congress often hold public forums or events, but cannot pay for an expensive venue. A town hall meeting at your campus would be a great opportunity for your college, your members of Congress, and your mutually beneficial relationship.

- Make sure they know you are an informational resource. You now have a staff contact in that office. Make good use of it!
Impact of Federal Education Dollars on Your Campus

When completed, this form will demonstrate how federal student aid funds and other federal funds are currently at work on your campus. Members of Congress, state legislators, local government officials and members of the press find this information valuable as they analyze the impact of the many policy changes currently being considered by Congress. Contact your college’s student financial aid or business office to assist you in completing this form.

Even if you are unable to complete all the categories listed on this form, members of Congress and their staffs will find any information you are able to provide them useful when considering the impact of program funding on their districts.

Name of college: __________________________

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<tr>
<th>Federal Pell Grant Summary</th>
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<tr>
<td>Award Year</td>
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<tr>
<td>2014-2015</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
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Other Federal Programs

1. Number of Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (SEOG) recipients
2. Federal SEOG funds awarded
3. Number of students participating in Federal Work-Study program
4. Federal Work-Study program funds awarded
5. Number of Federal Direct loan recipients
6. Average loan amount per recipient
7. Total Federal Direct loan funds disbursed (subsidized and unsubsidized)
8. Number of Federal Perkins loan recipients (if applicable)
9. Average Federal Perkins loan award per student (if applicable)
10. TRIO funds (if applicable)
11. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act funds received in current budget
12. Title III-A (Strengthening Institutions) Grants funds (if applicable)
13. Minority Serving Institutions and HBCU Grants funds (if applicable)

Federal Dollars Assisting Students and the Institution (sum of lines 2, 4, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, and total Pell Grant dollars disbursed for current award year)
Congressional Visit Checklist

☐ Work with your college to develop an invitation that is specific, relevant, timely, and appealing to the interests of your member of Congress.

☐ Email the invitation to the district office scheduler at least three weeks prior to your proposed visit. Be sure to offer a preferred date and time as well as alternatives.

☐ If you haven’t heard back from the office within a week of sending the invitation, follow up to ensure the invitation was received. Also offer to answer any questions regarding the scheduling request.

☐ Finalize your meeting agenda, talking points, and materials as soon as the Congressional visit is confirmed.

☐ Work with your communications and press offices to prepare press releases, photo ops, and social media strategies when agreeable to the Congressional office.

☐ Follow up again a few days prior to your meeting to let the office know that you look forward to hosting the your member of Congressional, to reconfirm his or her availability, and to check for any last-minute special requests (such as parking passes).

☐ Send thank-you notes to the member of Congress and staff following the visit.