An Intentional Approach to Advocacy

COORDINATION AMONG ALL STAKEHOLDERS IS A KEY TO SUCCESSFUL OUTREACH.

BY LEROY W. MITCHELL

IF YOU HAVE ONLY ONE OR TWO POLICY PRIORITIES AND A handful of elected officials that should hear your message, a few glossy newsletters and an annual trip to Washington, D.C., for the ACCT National Legislative Summit (NLS) should have you covered. You and your president can get the face time you need to advocate for your community. If you’re like most of us, however, you’re working with a complex policy agenda across multiple levels of government in coordination with your state system and multiple local constituents that each has a slightly different take on your priorities. This calls for an intentional strategy.
The key is strong coordination — and not necessarily full control — of your message so that elected officials and their staffs get a clear picture of the issues that are important. Without it, individual appeals are lost while elected officials are inundated with requests for support from hundreds or thousands of constituents. Here are tips for an effective strategy.

**Identify the issues that are most important to your college.**

Each year, ACCT and the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) announce federal legislative priorities that can help your board identify its top priorities. For example, Pell Grants, loans, risk sharing, transparency, mental health, and food and housing insecurity are top issues. Identify what is most important to your college and community. Develop a statement that includes specific information on how the issues affect you in terms like number of students served, impact on the local economy, preparing a workforce for high-demand occupations, and college affordability. When we all share similar stories, we shouldn’t underestimate our collective influence on policy in D.C.

Similarly, your state system may set legislative priorities. Start with these and their impact on your college. The most effective strategy will present a united statewide message. It can be a balancing act when an issue has varying impact across multiple institutions. Some boards may be tempted to publicize one message but convey a different one behind closed doors. It’s a risk that can ultimately undermine the whole effort. Work with your president to develop a strategy on how to approach these issues.

**Get input from those who are most affected by policy.**

Listening to others is a strong way to develop ideas for advocacy, and engaging with others also helps those with whom you are speaking to advocates for themselves. At Westchester Community College, a cooperative effort among the college board and student government association has led to collaboration with our county government on improvements in transportation, changing bus routes to better serve students around their class schedules.

**Deliver a clear ask.**

Identifying an issue is not enough. Lawmakers are busy and may not have enough staff resources to analyze the issue and develop a solution. It is important to include specifics: what action is needed and what it will cost.

**Know who needs to hear your message and how you will convey it.**

Keep an updated list of who represents your area and the committees or commissions on which they serve. Include their staffs because they are the ones who are writing policy briefs or legislative language — or even deciding which issues make it to the elected official. Know how you will send your message, paying attention to timing around budget cycles and when legislative bodies are in session. Occasional legislative breakfast or lunch meetings can show off your campus and foster dialogue on important issues. Internally, engage more than government or community relations staff — include those in finance, operations, facilities, human resources, information technology, and others to work with their counterparts or decision makers in their functional areas. At Westchester Community College, finance staff has frequent interaction with county budget officials, which keeps lines of communication open and eliminates surprises.

**Openly share your strategy and engage your community.**

Most campuses will have faculty, staff, and student constituency organizations that engage in advocacy on their own behalf. It will be most helpful if they have access to your agenda and messages. Be sure to distinguish among your federal, state, and local priorities. Even if your campus constituents don’t stick to your script exactly, there is a good chance they will share some of the same information, which will strengthen your college’s advocacy overall.

**Remember that all politics is local.**

This comes naturally when relating to city or county government and local voters. It’s becoming more important when working on statewide and federal issues. We hear more and more that a visit to a state or federal official’s home district office is highly effective. Nothing can be more persuasive than a student eye-to-eye with an elected official sharing her life-changing experience and asking for support.

**Is someone new entering office? Throw out your plan and start over.**

Whenever there is a transition of power at any level, you should reassess your agenda and messages and realign your strategy according to the priorities and expectations of your new government leaders. You shouldn’t assume newly elected officials are familiar with the open access mission of community colleges, your institution in particular, the programs and services you provide, or your impact in the community. Also, you shouldn’t assume that their educational or economic development priorities are the same as the prior administration’s regardless of political affiliation. Start by listening more and explaining less, and after a firm understanding of the leader’s priorities emerges, develop your new approach.

Like every other aspect of our work, policy advocacy is increasingly complex and ever changing, but can be effective and rewarding with the right plan in place.

---

Dr. LeRoy W. Mitchell is a trustee at Westchester Community College and a former chair of the ACCT Board of Directors. He is also a professor emeritus of accounting at Iona College.