PREPARATION FOR MEETINGS WITH LAWMAKERS SHOULD BEGIN MONTHS BEFORE COMING TO WASHINGTON.

BY BERNIE RHINERSON
THIS YEAR AT ACCT’S COMMUNITY COLLEGE NATIONAL Legislative Summit (NLS), more than 1,000 trustees, presidents, and other community college leaders visited the hallways of Congress to advocate for their institutions and their students. These visits with our elected representatives are critical to our shared mission to provide our students access to affordable education that leads to successful jobs and careers.

Advance planning is essential for trustees to be effective advocates during their Congressional office visits at the NLS. Each year, the San Diego Community College District sends several trustees and staff to Washington to learn about effective board governance and federal legislative issues from ACCT presentations. We plan well in advance to meet our elected representatives and with staff at the U.S. Department of Education headquarters.

Here is our checklist that may help new trustees and other colleges and districts plan for next year’s NLS.

2-3 months before NLS
✓ Plan for meetings with all your representatives. It’s important that even those with opposing viewpoints hear from us.
✓ Contact Congressional office schedulers and arrange meeting times.
✓ Develop talking points, collateral materials, and other information, including reports and data about your college(s).
✓ Prepare stories about your students that demonstrate the work done by community colleges.

1 month before NLS
✓ Arrange a pre-trip meeting with your NLS participants to brief them on meetings, messages, and roles.
✓ Finalize schedule and materials. Be sure that office schedulers have a point of contact, including a mobile number while you’re in Washington for last-minute changes.

At NLS and In Meetings
✓ Participate in the ACCT legislative briefing at NLS and go to your state briefings.
✓ Remember that many representatives do not understand the community college mission, so it’s helpful to explain how we differ from four-year institutions.
✓ Arrive at meetings early and allow extra time in case of delays.
✓ Don’t be so focused on your own talking points that you miss what’s important to your representative. Ask what legislation they are working on and how you can help.
✓ Designate someone to take notes.
✓ Don’t be disappointed if your meeting ends up with a staff member. They are more familiar with the issues and can be more effective in helping advance our agenda.
✓ Enjoy sharing those compelling student stories.
✓ Find value in every meeting, even the difficult ones. Try to understand what your representative needs to understand our mission.
✓ Don’t forget to invite your representative to come tour your campus.
✓ Leave behind a memorable reminder of your college! Congressional offices are the perfect place for your college pennant.

Follow-up
✓ Report meeting results back to ACCT.
✓ Follow up on any action items from your briefings and send thank you notes.
✓ Update contact information to reflect any changes in congressional staff.
✓ Share photos and stories about your successful visits via social media and other channels.

Positive Results from NLS 2018
Thanks to this advance preparation, our 2018 Congressional meetings were very productive. We successfully educated our representatives about the impacts that proposed legislation like the PROSPER Act, the House proposal for reauthorization of the Higher Ed Act (HEA), would have on our students and colleges. More importantly, we strengthened our relationships and communication channels with our representatives and key staff so that we can stay informed about the issues moving forward.

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