Tips for Meeting Your Member of Congress

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It may seem intimidating to think about meeting with your member of Congress – but we’ve got tips to make it a breeze.

WHO SHOULD I CONTACT?
Googling your legislators will take you to their webpage, where you can find their Washington, D.C. and district office location and phone number.

The schedule of a legislator is hectic, especially during certain times of the year. Typically, you will meet with their staffer who advises them on a specific policy area. Call the office and ask for the name of the staffer who works on the issue you are concerned about. Once you have their name, send them an e-mail at the standard House and Senate e-mail addresses.

- House E-mail: jordan.doe@mail.house.gov
- Senate E-mail: jordan_doe@senatorlastname.senate.gov

WHEN SHOULD WE MEET?
Be aware of when your legislator is in DC or in the state or district, and what legislation they are considering and drafting.

Check the congressional calendar for when the House and Senate are in session (aka in DC). If you’re planning a district visit, you can always plan on members being home during the month of August.

REQUESTING A MEETING
When requesting a meeting, staff will always appreciate brevity. In your e-mail, be sure to touch on:

- Where you’re from (Tell them you’re a constituent!)
- What you work on
- What issue you’d like to discuss
- When you’d like to meet

Don’t be afraid to follow-up if the office doesn’t get back to you in a few days.
POWER IN NUMBERS
When thinking about scheduling a meeting with your legislator, it’s always a great idea to take others with you! Find other scientists from your area who will help strengthen your message.

THE “ASK”: THE PURPOSE OF YOUR MEETING
The “Ask” is DC lingo for the purpose of your visit and should be a call to action. This is the most important part of the meeting, and it is imperative that you are as clear as possible about what you’d like your legislator to do. A few common “Ask” topics are:

- Funding – includes rejecting cuts to science, robust funding of science agencies, or even specific funding level requests
- Legislation – a specific bill that you would like your legislator to introduce, change, support, or reject
- Relationship – requesting that your policymaker and their staff reach out to you as a resource, should they consider legislation or issues that are relevant to your work

When explaining your ask, make it clear and concise and discuss the relevance to the state or district. Remember – all politics is local.

DRIVING THE MESSAGE HOME
It’s important that you clearly explain to the member or staffer why your Ask should matter to them, and this is where your message comes in. How can you make them care?

- What impacts have your science or program had on the state or district?
- Did your program recently discover something? Have you been recognized or awarded recently? Does your university stimulate your area’s economy and bring in constituents?
- What are the congressperson’s top values? How can you connect that value to your science?
- What’s your personal story behind your science? Did your program bring you to the area? What sparked your interest in science?

The Structure of a Meeting
Here’s a sample of how a meeting might be structured:

1. Exchange business cards and briefly introduce yourself (<5 minutes) and others in the group
2. Thank the staffer for meeting with you, and for any positive actions the congressperson has taken recently that you’ve supported
3. State your Ask – what’s the explicit goal of the meeting?
4. Share your message – why do you want what you’re asking for? Why should they care?
5. Share your leave behind and thank them for their time.

MEETING POINTERS
- Attire: Be sure to dress either business or business casual. No jeans!
- Pick a group leader for each meeting to introduce the group, steer the agenda, and make the Ask.
- Jargon: The staffer you’re meeting with may not have a science degree – keep the jargon to a minimum.
- Make it Personal: Keep in mind that using stories and metaphors is the most effective way of communicating.
- Stay Neutral: Be sure to remain neutral, bi-partisan, and positive.
- Don’t Speculate if you are asked a question you don’t know how to answer. Tell the staffer you will get back to them. Use that question as a talking point for your follow-up.
- Keep the Dialogue: Be sure to ask questions and maintain a dialogue to keep staffers engaged. In an ideal meeting, the staffer will speak 50% of the time.

FOLLOWING THE MEETING:
Follow-Up in the Short Term: Send a thank you e-mail to the staffer shortly following the meeting. Be sure to respond to any questions you couldn’t answer in the meeting and provide any follow-up information you promised.

Follow-Up in the Long Term: Set a reminder on your calendar to check in with the offices every few months. Even better, if you see a piece of legislation or current event that concerns you – call or write the office to let them know! Keep the lines of communication fresh and open. The goal is for you to build trust and form a relationship.