Hosting Your Legislator at Your Institution Toolkit

Inviting your member of Congress to visit your university campus, laboratory, or institution can seem a little intimidating. Where should you send the invitation? How will you craft your message? And does your voice matter?

Inviting your senators or representatives to tour your institution is one of the best ways to give your legislators a firsthand look at how your science impacts their state or district and positions you as a trusted resource on science policy for their office.

What are you waiting for? Check out our toolkit to help you prepare to host a successful legislative visit.

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Inviting Your Legislator

- **Who should I contact?**

Start by identifying the legislators in Congress who represent your institution. Googling your legislators or visiting [Find My Representative](https://www.house.gov) and the [Senate Website](https://www.senate.gov) will take you to their webpage, where you can find their nearest district office location and phone number. One of the easiest ways to get in touch with a congressional office is to simply call. Call the office and ask for the email address of the member’s scheduler. You can also ask for the name of the staffer who works on the issue you are concerned about. Explain that you would like to invite the member of Congress to tour your institution. Once you have the staffers’ names, you will be able to email them your invitation at the standard House and Senate e-mail addresses.

- **For Example:**
  - House E-mail: doe@mail.house.gov
  - Senate E-mail: jane_doe@senatorlastname.senate.gov

- **How do I choose a date for my visit?**

Check the [congressional calendar](https://www.congress.gov/) for when the House and Senate will be in their home districts (weeks when Congress is not in session). You can usually plan on members being home during the August recess. Members of Congress and their staff have hectic schedules, so your invitation should be sent several weeks in advance of your preferred date for the visit.

- **How do I write the invitation?**

Your invitation should be personalized; be sure to include specific information about your research and work being done at your institution. You should also suggest a window of time for the visit, such as the August recess period. Print the letter on your institution’s official letterhead and have it signed by the dean, president, or CEO. Copy and paste the letter into an email (include the PDF version as an attachment) and send it to the member’s scheduler and relevant staffer. See a [sample invitation letter](https://www.ama-assn.org/practice-management/advocacy/how-to-send-lege).  

- **Tip:** Establishing a relationship with your member of Congress before sending the invitation (e.g. by visiting their district office or meeting with them in DC) increases the
likelihood that 1) the member will accept your invitation and 2) that you, as the member’s “point person” at your institution, will be in the driver’s seat during the visit.

• **A Word of Caution:** You may have to negotiate with your institution’s administration about the focus of the meeting as they likely have other institutional priorities. If you are concerned about changes to the focus of the meeting, consider enlisting the help of your legislator’s staff. They may need to act as “gatekeepers” by confirming that the legislator is making this visit because they are interested in your science.

• **Should I follow up after sending the invitation?**

Yes! Members’ schedulers receive numerous requests every day; yours could easily get lost in the shuffle. Call the member’s scheduler within 24 hours of emailing the invitation to make sure they received it. The scheduler will work with you to identify a good time for the visit. If the legislator cannot make it during the window you suggested, be prepared to offer other times.

• **What if the scheduler does not respond, or if my invitation gets declined?**

Members of Congress have packed schedules; be prepared not to receive the response you hoped for (or even not to receive a response at all.) If this happens, keep trying! If the legislator’s scheduler or staffer makes it clear that a visit is off the table, ask to meet with the legislator at their district office. Meeting you in person may be enough to convince the member’s staff to reconsider your invitation for a later date.

• **After my invitation has been accepted, do I need to continue corresponding with legislative staffers?**

Absolutely! During the weeks leading up to the meeting, expect to continue coordinating with the legislator’s staff about everything from the subjects that will be discussed during the meeting and media coverage for the visit. It is critical that you provide them with all the information they request so they can plan for the visit and brief the member appropriately.
Formulating Your Talking Points

- **Research Your Member of Congress:**

  Member’s Website: You should know the committees on which she or he serves, their positions on various issues, and their recent voting record. Even if you disagree with most of what your member does, finding something they’ve done recently that you can thank them for is a great way to begin a meeting. On their website, pay particular attention to:

  - Member Biography
  - Committee and Caucus Membership
  - Issues Page
  - Press Releases

  Social Media: Check out your legislator’s social media feeds on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Their posts can be an immediate and more informal way of seeing how they view various issues.

  Congress.gov: Look them up on Congress.gov to see their voting record and bills they’ve introduced (sponsored or co-sponsored).

- **Map Out Your “Ask”:**

  So, what is an “ask”? The Ask is DC lingo for the purpose of the invitation. Why did you invite your legislator to your institution? It can be anything from having an opportunity to emphasize how your research contributes to the district or furthers a particular interest of your legislator, or to simply request that the legislator vote a particular way on a bill. When explaining your ask, make it clear and concise and discuss the relevance to the state or district.

- **Craft Your Message:**

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

  AGU often talks about the importance of science in relation to the economy, national security, public health and safety, and the strength of the scientific enterprise.
Some questions to ask yourself when crafting your message:

- What impacts does your research or institution have on the state or district?
- Did researchers at your institution recently discover something? Have you been recognized or awarded recently? Does your institution stimulate your area’s economy and bring in constituents?
- What are the congressperson’s top values (i.e. sustainable agriculture, national security, a strong economy, public health)? How can you connect that value to the work you do at your institution?
  - For example, if your member of Congress is passionate about STEM education, you could discuss programs your lab hosts at local elementary schools to get kids interested in STEM, therefore making them more likely to eventually pursue a STEM career.
- What’s your personal story behind your science? Did your program bring you to the area?

At the end of the day, your message should convey why an audience should care about what you’re asking for. For additional help in creating a message, check out AGU Sharing Science’s Message Worksheet, and for some additional science communication tips, check out this General Science Communication Tips handout.

- Create a One-Pager:

Your goal in creating a leave behind, or “one-pager,” is to have a single document that includes your contact information and most important points. The document serves as a reminder to the person you meet with your main points, your area of expertise, and your contact information if they have questions later. It should be clear enough that it could be handed to someone with no prior knowledge of the topic, and they would understand your main points. For additional instructions on how to create a one-pager, click here.

See a sample one-pager.

In addition to the one-pager, it is helpful to have other handouts about your department, program, research, and institution ready. Consider handing out a “by the numbers” sheet about your department or lab.
Making the Schedule

After scheduling the meeting and mapping out your ask, it’s time to create a schedule for your legislator’s visit. Remember: this is your chance to show your science in action!

If your institution has the resources, consider hanging a “Welcome Representative/Senator [Name]” banner in an area where the member will see it when they arrive. If the legislator has agreed to media coverage, invite a photographer from a local paper along for the tour. If your institution has a photographer, make sure they are on the tour as well. Even with professional photographers there, make sure your camera is ready at all times—you never know when a photo opportunity will pop up!

See sample visit schedule.

Schedule Overview:

- Greet the Member: You and the president or dean of your institution should be ready to greet the member upon their arrival. Following brief introductions, begin the tour immediately.
  - Power in Numbers: When meeting with a legislator, it’s always a great idea to have others with you! Invite other scientists from your research area or institution to accompany you on the tour.
- The Tour: Your tour should focus on showing off your science! Start in your laboratory; if possible, be prepared to let your member get “up close” with your work. If the tour is at a university campus, swing by a classroom where faculty and students can demonstrate active learning.
  - You will likely get the best photos during the tour, so be ready! If it makes sense for your field, equip your legislator with safety goggles or a lab coat.
- Meet-and-Greet Reception (optional): After the tour, hold an open luncheon or reception to give the member the chance to chat with employees, faculty, students, and staff. Be sure the reception is well-advertised!
- Goodbyes: Finish the visit with a round of thank-yous to your legislator and their staff. You may elect to present the legislator with a small gift (rules require it to be under $50). Don’t forget to give your member of Congress and their staffers any takeaway materials you prepared, including the one-pager!
Handling Media and Communications

Having a media presence on the tour gives you a chance to amplify the impact of the visit. However, it is important to check in with the member’s communications team about any and all press involvement on the tour.

Start by asking your staff contacts in the member’s office to put you in touch with the communications team. If they are open to media presence at the event (and they most likely will be), ask their permission to invite local reporters. Make sure the communications team knows which media outlets will be present (even if it’s just a writer from your institution’s internal newspaper) so they are prepared to amplify coverage through the member’s social media accounts and communication channels. Learn more about engaging with your member of Congress on social media.

Ideally, you want the visit to be covered from multiple angles. For example, the local newspaper could run an article about the visit while the student magazine could arrange for students who met the legislator to blog about the experience.

If you’re up for it, ask your legislator’s communications team for permission to draft a media advisory and a press release for their approval. Also, ask if they will approve a photo release following the visit. Media advisories, press releases, and photo releases are not 100% necessary, but they can be a key resource for maximizing press coverage of the visit.

**Media Advisory**: A media advisory is a brief notice to the press about an upcoming event. Media advisories are short and concise announcements that list the date, time, location, purpose of the event, participants, and their contact information. If you write a media advisory, send it to local press outlets five business days prior to the legislator’s visit.

See a sample media advisory.

**Press Release**: A press release is a written communication announcing news that is sent to the press. In this case, it would be appropriate to draft a quote for the member of Congress and your institution’s dean, president, or CEO (make sure you have everyone’s approval of their quotes!) The release should be on letterhead and be approved by the legislator’s office prior to distribution. Circulate the press release via a national newswire service, such as PR Newswire or Business Wire, and send it to local press contacts immediately following the visit.
See a sample press release.

**Photo Release:** A photo release is similar to a press release. It consists of photos taken during the visit (and therefore is released after the visit ends) that have been approved by the legislator’s office for distribution. All photos should have accompanying credits and captions to identify participants. You can circulate photo release through the news wire services listed above in addition to the local press.

Lastly, don’t forget to tell AGU about the visit! Once you have a confirmed date, send an email to sciencepolicy@agu.org to make us aware of the tour.
Last Minute Preparations

You’re on the home stretch! Here are the last-minute tasks you need to take care of before your legislator’s arrival.

- **Confirm with the Scheduler:**

Send the scheduler an email to confirm the meeting date, time, and attendees list. Make sure you have the contact information for any staff who will be attending the visit. At this time, you should also provide the member’s office with the following important information to ensure the visit runs smoothly:

- The final version of the minute-by-minute schedule
- List of visit participants (include short bios) from your institution
- Address for GPS navigation, a map, directions, and parking instructions
- Contact information (including phone number) for you and at least one other person who is working on the event, along with the contact information for your institution’s security office (e.g. campus security)
- Your one-pager and your institution’s flyer or brochure

Sometimes, legislative staff like to do walk-throughs 24 hours in advance of the visit. Ask if staff would like to do a walk-through and, if the answer is yes, coordinate logistics of the walk-through.

- **Give Everyone a Heads-Up:**

Try to make sure everyone at your institution is aware of the legislator’s visit and inform them of opportunities to engage with the legislator at the meet-and-greet reception or luncheon.

- Science Policy Crash Course: Give everyone participating in the tour a “crash course” a few days before. Make sure everyone has a copy of the schedule, is aware of their role, and understands your ask. It might be a good idea to do some training with participants to make them feel more comfortable about the visit. For example, if science funding is part of your ask, make sure everyone has some understanding of how the appropriations process works. Also, make sure they are comfortable describing their coursework in a succinct “elevator pitch.”
- **The Walk-Through:**
Perform a walk-through with tour participants, and (if requested) the member’s staff. Make sure everyone who will be assisting on the tour feels comfortable with their roles.
During the Tour

Now is the time to put that minute-by-minute schedule into action! That being said, while it is important that your schedule be detailed and well-rehearsed, be prepared to be flexible. Your member of Congress may arrive late or need to leave early.

- **Visit Tips & Etiquette:**
  - Attire: Be sure to dress either business or business casual. This means no jeans! Also, be ready with name tags.
  - Jargon: Your member of Congress and their staff may not have a science degree – so keep the jargon to a minimum! This Jargon Handout can help you spot vocabulary with double meanings to the public.
  - Make it Personal: In addition, while it’s tempting to use data and numbers in referencing your work, keep in mind that using stories and metaphors is the most effective way of communicating. It makes it more likely that your message will resonate with your legislator.
  - Be Prepared: Your legislator may ask for YOUR ideas on policy, so make sure you do your homework beforehand! Read up on any relevant legislation that Congress might have in the works.
  - Stay Neutral: Be sure to remain neutral, bi-partisan, and positive.
  - Don’t Speculate: Don’t worry if you are asked a question you don’t know how to answer. Tell the legislator you will get back to them and use that question as a talking point for your follow-up.
  - Keep the Dialogue: You’ll know how the visit is going by how the member reacts – are they asking questions and reacting to your stories, or are they losing interest? If they seem uninterested, don’t panic. Just keep asking questions to keep them engaged.
After the Tour

First, give yourself a pat on the back: you just pulled off a congressional visit! Next, take care of these last few action items:

- **Press Release and Photo Release:**
  - Circulate the press release and the photo release to local media outlets and newswire services.

- **Monitor and Amplify Media Coverage of the Visit:**
  - Coordinate with the member’s staff on the photo release (if you planned for one). Send around any articles that appeared in local newspapers and consider writing a post on your institution’s blog. Continue engaging with your member of Congress on social media.

- **Send a Thank You Letter:**
  - Email a thank you letter to the staffers who accompanied the member on the visit. Print it on your institution’s letterhead and have it signed by your institution’s dean, president, or CEO. Thank your legislator for the visit and let them know that you would be happy to answer any questions they may have about your science going forward. Attach PDFs of the one-pager and the other documents you gave the legislator during the visit.

- **Share What You Learned:**
  - A congressional visit is exciting and many people may want to participate. While you probably won’t be able to include everyone in the visit, you should take advantage of their interest and share what you know! Consider leading a brown bag or giving a talk on “Science Policy 101” to share your experience and tips.

- **Stay Engaged:**
  - Take advantage of the fact that you now have a relationship with your member of Congress by staying engaged with science policy. If a relevant bill comes up, reach out to your legislative staff contacts to tell them how you think the member should vote, and why. Offer to provide expertise for congressional hearings in your subject area. For example, you may be able to help congressional staff write questions for
your legislator to ask during relevant hearings. Check out our Staying Up-to-Date on Science Policy Issues toolkit for more tips!

- **Update AGU:**
  - Please email us at sciencepolicy@agu.org to let us know how the visit went!
Hosting Your Legislators Checklist

**Before (several weeks to months in advance)**

- Call your legislator’s office; ask for scheduler contact information
- Use the congressional calendar to identify potential dates for the visit
- Email an invitation to your legislator’s scheduler
- Follow up with the scheduler within 24 hours of sending the invitation
- Formulate your talking points
- Create a one-pager
- Make a schedule for the visit
- Coordinate with legislative staffers about media coverage of the visit
- Draft media advisory, press release, and photo release for legislative staff approval
- Email AGU (sciencepolicy@agu.org) about the upcoming visit

**Before (one week in advance)**

- Confirm details with your legislator’s scheduler
- Alert others at your institution about the visit
- Give all tour participants a science policy “crash course”

**Before (one day in advance)**

- Perform a walk-through with tour participants and the legislator’s staff (on their request)

**During**

- Follow your schedule but prepare to be flexible!

**After**

- Send photo release and press release to newswire services and the local press
- Monitor and amplify media coverage of the visit
- Send a thank you letter
- Share what you learned by hosting a “Science Policy 101” event
- Stay engaged with your legislator
Email an update about the visit to sciencepolicy@agu.org