



Bonner Curriculum

# Advocacy 201: Meeting with An Elected Representative

## Overview:

Students may be moving into forms of political engagement, including lobbying an elected official. If students have begun to take on advocacy as a key part of their work, refining skills in effectively representing a point of view and persuading a congress representative or other official on an issue is important. This training exercise prepares participants for meeting with a member of congress or their aide. Through interactive activities, it covers a range of dimensions in order to ensure that this approach to advocacy can be effective. *This is a good follow-up to the Advocacy 101 workshop.*

## Category:

Advocacy; citizenship; leadership skills; organizational skills

## Level:

Suitable for intermediate to advanced levels

## Recommended

### Bonner Sequence:

Sequencing after Advocacy 101, this activity can further develop students' abilities to utilize various strategies for effective civic engagement and citizen involvement. It introduces key ideas about meeting with an elected official. It is probably best for sophomore or junior year, or as late as senior year.

expectation	explore	experience	example	expertise
VALUES: social justice, civic engagement				

## Type:

Structured activity suitable for workshop (e.g. retreat or training). Also it can be used during regular meeting structure.

## Focus or Goals of this Guide:

- To help student leaders, activists, and other citizens know how they can better advocate for their concerns to a Congressperson or elected official in person.

- Provide participants with a range of tips and best practices for meeting with congressperson.
- Provide participants with direct training in an area of civic engagement that can expand citizens' involvement into the political realm.

### **Materials:**

- Flip Chart
- Desk
- Pen/paper

### **How to Prepare:**

Know the material you expect participants to learn. If possible, determine a few examples from your own experience to utilize when presenting material. You may want to ask participants to bring ideas of political issue they can work with during the training.

Create flip chart pages to better explain your points and objectives.

### **How to Do/Brief Outline:**

In this activity you will be asking participants to think of political issues they are either dealing with or feel strongly about. They will use these issues to argue them in a role-playing activity that challenges them to make the best presentation possible to a congressperson.

The outline has the following parts:

- |                    |                           |
|--------------------|---------------------------|
| 1) Warm-up         | suggested time 10 Minutes |
| 2) Briefing        | suggested time 10 Minutes |
| 3) Issue Selection | suggested time 5 Minutes  |
| 4) Explanation     | suggested time 15 Minutes |
| 5) Role Play       | suggested time 30 Minutes |
| 6) Debriefing      | suggested time 5 Minutes  |

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### **Part 1) Warm-up**

Suggested time: 10 Minutes

Participants must be relaxed and comfortable with each other for this exercise. Do a name game or another icebreaker of your choosing that can create this atmosphere.

### **Part 2) Briefing**

Suggested time: 10 Minutes

Participants are assumed to know a little about advocacy and the issues of which they argue on a regular basis. Ask each participant to shortly explain what they believe is the most

important social issue to them at this time and why. Tell your group that you want a short, but specific explanation. Roughly time each person. When everyone has presented, ask volunteers to tell the group how they could have been more concise in their presentation.

Go through the issues, using the Meeting a Member of Congress Briefing packet. Hand out the packet if you think it will help the group. The goal of this part of the training is to help your participants with learning the tips to improve their presentations to members of congress and their aides.

### **Part 3) Issue Selection**

Suggested time: 5 Minutes

Each person should spend 5 minutes thinking of political issue that they wish to talk about which they are either dealing with or can picture themselves dealing with. Each subject should be a political topic that can be argued for/against/about to a congressperson.

Subjects can be anything. Here are a couple examples:

- 1) You want your congressperson to vote on a bill on the floor dealing with gay marriages.
- 2) Your organization sends you to talk to the congressperson that is head of health care Committee, to advocate for health care for all.
- 3) You find out that your new representative is about to vote against school lunches in public schools.

### **Part 4) Explanation**

Suggested time: 15 Minutes

Hand out the Meeting a Member of Congress Briefing packet to participants and go over each section. Describe how someone would go about using these as tips when preparing to meet with a congressperson. Try to pepper presentation with examples and questions.

Here's an example from the handout:

“Before you make the appointment to go in and see your congressperson, make sure you really need the appointment. If you can accomplish the same goal by making a phone call into the office, then do that. It'll be easier on both you and the staff.”

### **Part 5) Role Play**

Suggested time: 30 Minutes

Explain to your participants that they will be using the briefing packet as tips in their role plays. You want them to plan and create the best possible meeting, using as many of the tips as they can fit into the time. Here's how each step should go:

- 1) Explain to everyone how they will be using the packet for the role-plays.
- 2) Point out the summary items and review them. Explain to your group that each person should focus upon the key points in that section. In their short role-plays, they should hit upon most of the tips, but in the actual presentation, each should answer to each item of the summary.

Here are the items:

- Define your organizations
  - What has your organization done to date?
  - The issue/your point
  - Define your point
  - Voice your concern clearly
  - What do you hope to be accomplished
  - Be specific
  - Contact info
- 3) Ask people to get into pairs and give them time to talk over their topics and how they can use the tips and the summary items in their presentation. They should practice the presentations together and give each other advice before showing them off to the whole group. Urge your participants to help each other out when practicing their piece. You should be going around and answering questions and helping people out with their role-plays.
  - 4) Have each pair present their role-play. Their partner that they practiced with should play the member of congress, though they will not be able to respond during the role-play. Both people will play both activist and politician.
  - 5) After each person goes, you should stop the activity before the next person practices. Open up a discussion with a debrief of what worked and what could have been done better. Engage the group in a feedback session, where everyone has a chance to give constructive criticism (stress the constructive part) and has a chance to learn from the suggestions. By the time everyone has done their role- play, they should be experts at meeting a member of congress and being prepared.

Here are some suggestive questions to ask participants after each presentation:

- “Did they explain who they were?”
- “Was their point clear and specific? Could you understand why they asked to meet with the congressperson?”
- “Was the speaker brief in their presentation?”
- “What do they want the elected official to do?”
- “Were they organized/prepared?”
- “Were they pleasant enough in their presentation?”

## **Part 6) Debriefing**

Suggested time: 5 Minutes

After everyone has gone through and shared their piece, have a large discussion about what looked and sounded good and what didn't. Pass out any other handouts you may have and answer any questions from participants. Wrap-up the training with closing remarks, next steps, or suggestions to the whole group.

# Meeting a Member of Congress

## Briefing Packet

### Before you make an appointment, think about these:

- What is your thing? What does your organization do? Why?
- What do you want them to do? Most elected members of congress want to help you, but you must tell them what you want them to do.
- Do you need face time? Make sure you really need face-to-face time. If you can do just as well over the phone, then do it that way. Time is hard for Members of Congress.

### Who to see:

Representatives can see you more easily than senators can; both state and federal (smaller districts). Because if their smaller representation they have a little more time to help.

Visit officials' local offices in your area before going out to your capital or Washington DC. Talk with the staff there and find out how they may help you. Also, elected members are often back in their local offices, especially on 3-day weekends. Find out if there is a better time to meet him/her.

Clerks often know what is pending on the floor and have information about committee assignments. They can also find or help you find past information on your issue and bills.

See your congressperson from your district with issues (money in the district)

- If specific issue (AKA: healthcare, etc...): See both your congressperson and a person on that committee

### Be Prepared:

Have your material well-organized, well put-together, accurate, correct, well-written, etc. Have your what, where, why, when, how. Know your stuff. Know what has been done and what's trying to be passed. Have statistics and other information to back up your case.

### To remember during the meeting:

- Legislative Aides are generally really helpful and really good. They can answer your questions, be patient with you, and help you with your cause. Never underestimate heads of staff. They can help answer all your questions, when it's "When can I have a meeting" or "How can I go about telling the congressperson my problem?"
- Be courteous/pleasant. Don't attack, harass or be a pest. The office staff will respond much more nicely to courteous and nice people. Don't be soft, but try not to overload them. If you call everyday, they will be less likely to help you at all.
- Bare in mind that many people have important causes and that congressperson must attend to all of them. The member of congress works for you and every other concerned citizen. Always remember that you are important, but so are other people's causes.
- Be concise. 30-60 seconds for short overview of your issue and what you're looking for. Then with more time you should go into detail about your issues.
- Be prepared, especially for tough questions.

### **Process your group/organization should go through before going to meet a congressional figure**

- Meet with your organization/concerned citizens in your campus/neighborhood
- Talk through what you know/what you've done/concerns/interests
- Plan what you'll do/when/to whom
- Select a couple (2-3) people who know the whole story to meet the congressperson/groups

### **When meeting a member of congress or her/his staff, have prepared, a one-page summary that you can hand them. On this summary, you should have stated:**

- Define your group or organization. Who are you? What do you do?
- What has your organization done to date? Including this cause or otherwise.
- The issue/your point. Have a brief, but clear and specific paragraph that tells the reader what your point is.
- Define your point. How did your issue come about? History of why? (Political and personal).
- Voice your concerns clearly.
- What do you hope to be accomplished – What is it you wish for your member of congress to do about it?
- Be specific – Do the work for them, make it easy for the elected official to basically just copy your point, expand it and make it a bill.
- Contact info – You want to be in touch with the staff and the congressperson.

## **Ask questions—don't just tell them what to do**

While at times you want to make direct requests (for example, when stating how you want the representative to vote), you may want to use lots of questions throughout your conversation. Try to illicit the information that is guiding the representative's views, what information you can provide that will make your point, and what will persuade him/her. For example:

- “How and what can be done?”
- “Can you help?”
- “We hope to...”
- “Is there a way we could...?”
- Help them help you, don't go in acting like the expert on everything. Politics is illogical and therefore, the congressperson is probably the expert on getting it through the House or Senate, even if you know your issue better.