

# Navigating Advocacy in Academia: *Tips and Tools for Faculty and Staff*



College and university faculty are in unique positions to share research and non-partisan legislative/policy analyses with members of Congress and congressional staff. While university employees play an important role in evidence-based policymaking, there is often uncertainty surrounding to what extent faculty are able to engage with policymakers while still adhering to their institutions' policies.

The information herein is designed to help those in academia understand the nuances of **federal** advocacy and how to work most effectively with university federal affairs staff to elevate the importance of federally funded research.

## Back to Basics: Advocacy 101

*“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”—FIRST AMENDMENT OF THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION, PASSED BY CONGRESS SEPTEMBER 15, 1791, RATIFIED DECEMBER 15, 1791*

American citizens have a First Amendment right to lobby their government; they can engage in public activism, encourage or discourage government action, insist that the government respond to their concerns or issues, and unite with others in an attempt to incite change.

Due to federal tax regulations on lobbying, there is a legal difference between advocacy and lobbying:

- ▶ **Advocacy** is an umbrella term and is a process by which an individual or group champions an issue or a cause.
- ▶ **Lobbying** is a type of advocacy and is intended to influence specific legislation. (Asking lawmakers for more funding for any given federal agency should be considered lobbying.)

Some organizations also break lobbying out into two types: **direct lobbying**, when an individual or organization attempts to influence a piece of legislation by making the case to a legislator or government employee, and **grassroots lobbying**, when an organization asks members of the public to take action on specific legislation.

So, while all lobbying is advocacy, not all advocacy is lobbying.

## Putting it Into Context: Examples of Advocacy vs. Lobbying

ADVOCACY	LOBBYING
Meeting with members of Congress to share how dental research funding from NIDCR is making a difference in your community or state	Meeting with members of Congress and urging them to vote “yes” or “no” on a bill proposing a funding increase to NIDCR
Tweeting stories or statistics about how insurance coverage can make a difference in the lives of individuals with rare diseases	Tweeting to members of Congress asking them to vote for a piece of insurance legislation that could affect individuals with rare diseases
Calling your representative's office to discuss how budget cuts have affected—or are currently affecting—your research lab	Calling your representative's office and asking that member to vote in favor of specific budget legislation

## Understanding University Rules and Boundaries

It is important to note that colleges and universities do not want to infringe on their faculty and staff members' First Amendment rights. Furthermore, under the [Principles of Academic Freedom](#), colleges and universities recognize that professors, as members of a learned profession, have the right to speak or write as citizens free of institutional censorship.

However, universities are subject to federal lobbying laws with which they must comply. Universities must adhere to regulations contained in the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 2005 (LDA) and the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007 (HLOGA). These pieces of legislation provide specific thresholds and clear definitions of lobbying activities and contacts, and require the quarterly filing of lobbying disclosure and termination reports.

Due to these requirements, when it comes to university faculty and staff advocating, there are—generally speaking—two red flags for government or federal affairs staff. These are:

- ▶ **If the faculty member claims to be speaking on behalf of the university**  
Universities are required to report on efforts to influence federal issues and legislation, including engagement with members of Congress and congressional staff through emails, letters, phone calls, or meetings.
- ▶ **If the faculty member is using university time or resources to engage in a partisan activity**  
The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) prohibits universities from engaging directly or indirectly in any partisan political campaign activity or supporting such activities. While faculty or staff may support or participate in political campaigns independently, they should not use the school's name or logo in any communications, use any university resources on behalf of a campaign event or activity, perform any tasks related to a campaign during work hours, or claim to be speaking on behalf of a school when expressing support for or against a candidate.

## University Name and Branded Material: When is Using it OK?

At the outset, it's important to remember that every university has specific rules and policies related to advocacy and lobbying. Always review your university's policy manual and reach out to your government relations staff with questions to determine what is and is not permissible.

- ▶ **Your Title/Affiliation:** Unless you are advocating on behalf of a university (with direction from your school's leadership), you should make every effort to convey that you are speaking with them in a personal capacity and that the views you are sharing are your own. However, you are permitted to share your affiliation and your profession; it is pertinent to your expertise and credibility.
- ▶ **University Email Addresses:** While not always clearly defined, universities will not necessarily limit the use of your university email address to exclude politically oriented communications, though partisan activity or extensive campaign activity should be conducted using a personal email address. If you use your university email address for emails of a political, non-partisan nature, such as for advocacy or lobbying, you should be clear when you are acting in a personal capacity and when you are acting on behalf of the university.
- ▶ **Collateral Materials:** You should not use university resources to develop new materials that you intend to use in your advocacy or lobbying efforts. If you would like to use an already-produced piece of collateral (e.g., a brief one pager providing an overview of your lab), consult the university government relations staff beforehand. You will likely be permitted to bring that document to Capitol Hill.

## Working Most Effectively with Your University's Government Relations Team

Many schools have designated federal government relations offices that are responsible for liaising between the school and members of government and their staff and for representing the interest of the school's faculty, students, and staff on legislative and regulatory matters. Government relations staff should be considered a resource and a partner as you engage in any type of advocacy effort.

While government relations staff are not always top of mind for university faculty and staff who are engaging in advocacy and lobbying, there are several reasons why they should be:

- ▶ When faculty members have meetings with congressional offices, the congressional staffers will often follow up on the conversation with the government relations team. If the government relations team was unaware of the meeting, they may run into difficulty answering clarifying questions or have to troubleshoot if the perspective raised is contrary to the university's priorities.
- ▶ If government relations staff members are aware of upcoming Hill visits, they can provide intelligence on the members with whom you're meeting as well as their priorities and voting records; review collateral materials and talking points; share valuable context and any pending developments on the issue; provide insight on any internal politics at the university related to the issue; and, importantly, inform staff if their meetings need to be reported in the university's lobbying disclosure reports.

- ▶ If a faculty member wants to invite a member of Congress to tour his or her lab, government relations staff can share whether that particular member has also been invited by another college or department at the university and can also coordinate the timing of the visit and work with the member's scheduler.
- ▶ For newer faculty or faculty who are going to be interacting with very liberal or very conservative members of Congress, government relations staff can provide valuable tips on how to conduct the meeting or can arrange to come along for the meeting.

## What This Means for You

Reach out to your government relations staff to begin building a relationship and regularly consult your university's government relations rules and guidelines. (These may be posted online or circulated to staff at the beginning of the school year.) If you are a dean, you may wish to consider inviting government relations staff to present or attend a brown bag lunch to talk with your team about the school's government affairs policies and procedures.

With the exception of personal outreach to your elected officials, when you are communicating with congressional staff or members of Congress—whether you're doing a Hill visit either on your own or with a professional association, testifying before a congressional committee, or inviting a member of Congress to tour your lab—assume the university's government relations team wants to know about it. **When in doubt, ask.** Even if your visit ultimately falls outside of the university's lobbying disclosure requirements, staff may be able to provide helpful insight, materials, and tips—and not to mention will be grateful for you taking the time to notify them.

## Engaging in Advocacy on Social Media

Social media channels have become attractive means of communication and can serve as important outlets for receiving and sharing information.

Today, virtually every member of Congress has both a Facebook and a Twitter profile to interact with their constituents and provide updates on their work. Since members have an online presence, Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking sites are convenient for sharing thoughts on policy priorities that are of personal interest. As such, many associations and organizations utilize digital advocacy campaigns that encourage their members to reach out to their elected officials about a given topic.

While faculty and staff should check to see whether their respective institutions have social media guidelines related to lobbying and advocacy, a few general concepts will likely apply across the board:

- ▶ University employees should adhere to the university's code of conduct on social media;
- ▶ Only express political opinions and engage in political activities in your individual capacity and avoid the appearance of speaking for the university;
- ▶ Be professional, transparent, and discerning in your posts.

## Universities Stand to Benefit from Advocacy Efforts

At the end of the day, do not forget that advocacy process can be advantageous for universities whose faculty members are applying for federal grants and contracts. By engaging in advocacy, university faculty members have the opportunity to educate policymakers about how federal research dollars are currently being spent and how increased funding could further the evidence base or enhance their area of research.



\*While this document is intended to serve as a helpful framework for university faculty on how to engage in advocacy efforts, it is not one size fits all. To learn more about your institution's exact advocacy and lobbying policies, contact your government or federal relations office.