



Executive Summary for *Sharing Your Story and Partnering with Legislators*

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Facilitators: Antoinette Magee and Lauren K. B. Matlach

Introduction

Sharing Your Story and Partnering with Legislators focused on how to effectively communicate with legislators to build awareness of grant-funded work and the needs of the field. In this one-hour session, speakers gave examples of prior efforts and shared their processes and tips for meeting and connecting with legislators at the state and national levels. This practical session focused on sharing ideas and an action items checklist that grantees can apply in their own contexts when partnering with legislators.

Discussion Summary

Ms. Lauren Matlach and Ms. Antoinette Magee facilitated a discussion with Dr. Tanée Hudgens, Mr. Sam Jordan, and Dr. A.Deer Williams on strategies to connect and partner with legislators through identifying key players, tailoring compelling storytelling, strategizing creative outreach, and building long-term relationships. Additional grantees shared their own strategies, successes, and struggles when contacting legislators.

Featured Guests



Dr. Tanée Hudgens

Vice President of Research and Evaluation
National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET)

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Sam Jordan

Grant Director
Alaska Council of School Administrators (ACSA)

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Dr. A. Dee Williams

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Discussion

Discussion 1: How have you connected with legislators in the past? Who did you talk to and what were the outcomes? What is the value of partnering with legislators?

Dr. Williams opened with a personal anecdote on how he invited a key legislator to their residency by “looking through the Education Committee Members’ list and finding a high school connection”. The legislator visited Dr. Williams’ program but wanted to talk about a different topic. However, the legislator “did remember that they had a residency, program, and that was key.” In 2019, California allocated millions of dollars to teacher residency programs, building on work NIET has been doing since 2009. This proves that “when you are purposeful in connecting with [legislators], you can show them your work is valuable and worth investing in.”

Mr. Jordan dived into the importance of providing context to legislators, since “it’s amazing how folks don’t know how public education works and what’s at play.” Legislators often are faced with an absence of detail, a gap that grantees can fill by providing their first-hand stories. Context setting is “tremendously valuable because it shapes how legislators understand what impacts individual groups” and “stories can become impetus for new projects.”

Dr. Hudgens noted the value in bringing superintendents, principals, and teacher leaders to directly talk to legislators because of their firsthand experience of grant work. She added that

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proper preparation work is needed to leave a lasting impression. She shared how she worked with various partners to create a one page “leave behind” worksheet with contact information and drafted follow up email templates for meetings with legislators. In this way, not only are grantees leaving an impression, but grantees are also making it easier to be remembered.

During open discussion, Ms. Kristan Van Hook (NIET) advised not overlooking the legislator’s education staff member, since they often have more stake in and knowledge about the conversation. These individuals are often former teachers and so it may be easier to find a connection. Mr. David Roof shared a personal anecdote of pitching a civic seal for students’ diplomas, which was then included in legislation and Mr. Roof testified in support. Collaborating on a separate project with a legislator helped build a long-term, meaningful relationship. Ms. Magee summarized the discussion with the importance of taking action to research and do outreach, no matter intimidating it may be.

Discussion 2: How do you initiate conversation with your legislator? How do you prepare for talking with your legislator?

Mr. Jordan answered, “it’s simply a matter of calling them and setting something up”. He noted practicing your elevator pitch is crucial, since sometimes “all you have are 2-5 minutes.” If grantees come away with an assignment, they should always make sure to circle back with a thank you message and whatever additional information that was requested. Finding ways to differentiate the pitch or thank you message also keeps grantees at the top of their minds later.

Ms. Van Hook added that grantees should ensure the call to action is tailored to the legislator’s goals and abilities and appreciation is always shown after an interaction. Even if legislators do not visit, they appreciate being invited to visit a school or program.

Dr. Williams shared the importance of winning over staff, since they are often the people grantees will interface the most with. He recommended knowing “all the things that are in play”, such as relevant policies and trends, so grantees can tailor the pitch. He recommended sharing both salient statistics and a compelling story of someone doing or impacted by the work so that legislators can “make your story their story.”

Question 3: You talked about things you expected and didn’t expect. What else might grantees anticipate when interacting with legislators.

Ms. Matlach noted that all the guests have highlighted things that were unexpected---a legislator only having a few minutes, meeting with a staff member instead of the legislator, and a legislator interested in talking about something other than your work. She asked speakers if there are other things that grantees might anticipate.

Ms. Van Hook cautioned that legislators will often push back with budget questions and that

grantees need to be ready ahead of time to answer them.

Mr. Jordan suggested that grantees should be prepared to redirect the conversation if the legislator has a different agenda.

Dr. Williams closed the discussion with encouragement that each project has an impact, and it is a matter of understanding and communicating what separates your program from the others.

During open discussion, Dr. Denise Davis-Cotton shared that she feels discouraged by “Day on the Hill” events. Dr. Williams noted that, since she has already had initial interactions and seems more comfortable, it may be worth it to prioritize more intimate conversations instead. Ms. Van Hook noted that, once you build relationships, you may have opportunities to help shape the agenda for events like “Day on the Hill” and build a coalition. “You can be the agenda driver to find the common message.”

Partnering with Legislators Checklist

Before Meeting with Legislators

1. **Research legislators:** Identify legislators, their staff members, and their interests. Review bills they support and issues they identify on their websites. Look through committee member lists and find connections.
2. **Schedule a meeting:** Call to schedule a meeting. Be ready to meet with staff members if the legislator is unavailable.
3. **Prepare materials:** Create a one-page “leave behind” worksheet with contact information and follow-up email templates.
4. **Practice your pitch:** Develop and rehearse a concise elevator pitch. Tailor your message to the legislator’s goals and abilities. Anticipate you may have only 3-5 minutes with a legislator or staffer.

Meeting with Legislators

1. **Identify the correct people:** Bring the right people to the meeting. For example, it can be helpful to bring someone directly impacted by the work to share their story.
2. **Provide context:** Share first-hand stories and relevant statistics to illustrate the impact of your work.
3. **Engage effectively:** Be prepared to answer questions (especially budget questions) and redirect the conversation if needed. Show appreciation and invite them to visit your program.

Following Up after the Meeting

1. **Follow up:** Send a thank you message and any additional information requested. Differentiate your follow-up to stay memorable, such as by sending a handwritten note.
2. **Build relationships:** Continue engaging with legislators and their staff. Look for opportunities to collaborate on projects and shape future agendas.