Prospering on the Political Front

By William A. Sederburg

t's a big challenge to be a successful college president. An AASCU president in 2012 is called to be both an academic and political leader. To many academics, the role of "political leader" is indeed a heavy burden.

This burden is particularly challenging given current state appropriations and economic change. AASCU's "Red Balloon Project" defines current circumstances as campuses having to respond to two pressures—lack of funding and rising expectations. Some call it the "new normal."

After spending 12 years in the Michigan Senate, 14 years as a college president and four years as a commissioner, I offer what I consider "unusual" suggestions for presidents to prosper politically.

As an AASCU president, you are an intelligent, articulate spokesperson for your institution. You are, after all, a highly paid (perhaps too highly paid, in the eyes of the legislature) professional who knows the institution well. Nevertheless, when it comes to advocacy, local business leaders, trustees, students, alumni or sports heroes are probably more effective. Give some thought to letting others speak for "their"—not "your"—institution.

Do, however, make sure the spokesperson is prepared. In Michigan, a student recruited by a college to testify told the committee that he was given a financial aid award that "didn't really matter much" to him. We had another student say that her school wasted a lot of money! Neither comment was helpful to the school.

Second, you know from watching Congress that rational decision-making does not apply in politics. As a leader in the academy, you have considerable experience in building a rational argument. But in politics, it is the perception of reality—and not fact or logic—that drives behavior. If a fact or outcome doesn't fit a politician's intuitive sense of usefulness, it will be discounted (take global warming as addressed in the political arena as a case in point).

Remember, too, that the facts themselves may be in dispute. A sign I once saw displayed in a legislator's office read, "In politics, all facts are negotiable." Your training in rational decision-making models might not be useful. Realize that often times the script of the political drama being played out in your state is written by economic and political circumstances you don't control. As Shakespeare wrote in *As you Like It*, "All the world is a stage, And all the men and women merely players."

The truism of this statement is difficult for powerful individuals (used to directing things to happen at an institutional level) to accept. The best outcome presidents can hope for politically is often a minor shift within the state budget or policy. It is more important to rewrite the play than rewrite your part. Rewriting the play takes a longer term focus in partnership with political actors who set the agenda: your governor and legislative leaders.

inally, expect the unexpected. You never know what is on the mind of the legislator. Play the role of a cool, logical and consistent academic leader. Sometimes working the legislature is fun!

During this time of the "new normal," being both an academic and political leader is tough. If you let others speak for your school, realize political decision-making is not always "rational;" if work to build a larger strategy, and expect the unexpected, you are more likely to be successful in the political arena.

P.S: Take a play from a lobbyist's playbook. Regardless of outcome, declare victory!

William A. Sederburg is the commissioner of the Utah System of Higher Education.