



POLICY & ADVOCACY

Advocacy Toolkit

CONTACT US

General Inquiries
govrel@aascu.org

Luis Maldonado, Vice President of Government Relations and Policy Analysis
MaldonadoL@aascu.org

John Patrick Walsh, Director of Federal Relations and Policy Analysis
WalshJ@aascu.org

Kiersten Wills, Coordinator of Government Relations
WillsK@aascu.org

1717 Rhode Island Avenue NW, Suite 700
Washington, DC 20036

aascu.org



Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Meetings on Capitol Hill.....	4
Know Before You Go	4
Capitol Hill 101: Tips for Effective Meetings.....	6
After the Meeting: Maintaining Relationships	7
What Is a Regional Comprehensive University?	10
Tell Your Story: Tips for Effective Communication	11
Verbal Communication	11
Written Communication	12
Social Media	13
Making It Personal: Using Student Experiences to Amplify Your Message.....	14
What Are Some Ways to Engage?.....	14
Student Tips for Effective Storytelling	14
Possible Prompts to Develop Your Story	14
Working With Federal Agencies	16
Tips to Consider	16
Additional Resources.....	17

Introduction

Now, more than ever, the leadership, students, and faculty of our nation's 517 regional comprehensive universities need an advocate in Washington, D.C. In the fallout of a global pandemic, breakdown of the traditional state-federal partnership, and imperiled affordability and access, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) is that advocate; but it will be much more successful with your participation and engagement as the voice of the constituent.

Members of Congress and federal decision-makers need and want to hear from you and those who live these challenges every day. AASCU on the Hill represents a unique opportunity to share your institution's story with those capable of providing resources for change through the implementation of new public policies. Share your successes and challenges, build strategic relationships, and make your needs personal to your elected representatives; but remember, one meeting does not a relationship make—that work must also continue at home.

As you prepare for your trip to the Capitol, the Government Relations Division of AASCU stands ready with tips, tools, and training to better acclimate you with effective advocacy at the federal level. In the email containing this toolkit, you will also find issue briefs that have been prepared to help familiarize you with AASCU's 2024 Policy Priorities. The toolkit, issue briefs, corresponding advocacy training webinars, and additional resources found on [AASCU.org](https://aascu.org) are all meant to act as a starting point for your own outreach to federal officials and decision-makers. We know your visit will be a success and look forward to making it so together.

Meetings on Capitol Hill

Know Before You Go

1. **Scheduling Your Meetings:** For the purposes of AASCU on the Hill, you will be scheduling your own meetings with elected officials. AASCU Government Relations staff are ready to assist if needed. We encourage you to schedule a meeting, based on your institution's physical address, with your member of the U.S. House of Representatives. Additionally, make sure to schedule meetings with each of your U.S. senators. While individual meetings are preferred, it is not uncommon for offices to request a joint meeting when contacted by multiple constituents addressing similar issues; AASCU recommends flexibility to obtain a meeting.

Once you have scheduled a meeting with a congressional office for AASCU on the Hill, we ask that you share your plans with the AASCU Government Relations team at govrel@aascu.org so we can track which members of Congress have interacted with a regional comprehensive university (RCU). As you schedule your meetings, make sure to note that you are a constituent or highlight the impact your constitution has on the elected official's district, it is often difficult to secure a congressional meeting if you are not a constituent.

2. **Do Your Homework!** According to **a report** from the Congressional Management Foundation, most of the congressional staff surveyed said constituent visits to the Washington office (97%) have "some" or "a lot" of influence on an undecided legislator, "more than any other strategy for communicating with a member of Congress." This is especially true when constituents are prepared to be persuasive! Meeting preparation is key to successful relationship building with an office as well as producing positive policy outcomes.

Successful meetings can be attributed to the following.

- Researching the member's background and connection to the issue. This includes knowing their personal background. Almost every member of the 118th Congress **holds a college degree.**

Did you know that more than 70 members of the U.S. House of Representatives have attended and/or graduated from RCUs? Around 20 senators have also attended or graduated from RCUs!

Do they have a connection to your institution? A background in education? Are they first-generation students? What are their policy concerns related to issues in higher education? Do those relate to their political leanings? Do they have any sway on these issues based on their committee assignments? If you come prepared with this background knowledge, it may help you craft your policy asks more easily.

There are many resources to learn about your elected officials before your meeting. One of the most informative ones is probably the member's congressional website, which contains their biography, recent press releases and the office's legislative accomplishments, as well as

committee assignments and policy areas of interest.

You can also easily find and access your institution's House member's website through the [house.gov website](#) by typing in the zip code and clicking on their linked name, which takes you to their website.

A simple web search may also yield the most recent and relevant news about the member.

[Congress.gov](#) remains a helpful tool for viewing which bills a member has sponsored or co-sponsored.

Also feel free to check out your member office's social media pages for timely statements, sometimes directly from the member.

- Having persuasive and specific data.
Before you go, it is ideal to gather relevant information on the impact federal programs have on your campus, your students, and your community. Regional comprehensive universities, with the deep connection to place and the surrounding communities they serve, remain crucial educational, economic, and social hubs. Your institutions are intertwined with your communities, and as public servants, your members want to know how! Be ready to discuss the broader needs of your communities and how your institution is adapting and responding to those needs and working to benefit the broader public.

Regardless of political leanings, offices will want to have specific, institutional, and local information on hand. Have information specific to your campus, including student demographics, enrollment trends, and breakdown of student aid (Pell Grants, work-study, loans). It's also important that you know and can explain the impact of federal funds on your campus, including Higher Education Emergency Relief Funding (HEERF I, II, III), institutional aid, and any "earmarks" your institution might've applied for or received (Community Project Funding, Congressionally Directed Spending).

- Sharing personal and relevant stories.
You'll want to back up your policy asks with relevant stories. Make it personal, but strength-based. How have different policies made your campus stronger? How has your institution adapted to community changes or challenges? What does student success look like on your campus? Stories will stick in your legislator's mind and may be some of the most memorable and compelling parts of the meeting. Keep reading for more tips on how to use student stories to amplify your advocacy efforts!
- Structuring the meeting and coordinating with others where needed.
Your institution will likely be the only one in your House meetings, but for Senate meetings, it is important that you collaborate with professionals from other institutions on strategizing your meetings. We encourage you to take some time, virtually or in person, before the event to connect on meeting structure and talking points!

Coordinate with others before the meeting to determine who will start the meeting, lead

introductions, share stories and talking points, close out the meeting, and so on. Be sure to designate someone in your group to take notes to ensure adequate follow-up. You may also want to delegate certain topics to each attendee and decide what order to share. Remember to be collaborative and share meeting time equally, but most importantly—stay as succinct as possible as staff and your member may need time for questions!

- Offering a clear action step.
You've made your policy asks—but what else can you do to keep your member engaged in your issues? If your member of Congress is a seasoned legislator, when was the last time they visited your campus? Consider inviting them to your campus for an event or during their summer recess (August). Keep reading for more tips on how to stay engaged until then.

Capitol Hill 101: Tips for Effective Meetings

You did the hard part with all the prep work, but what can you expect for the meeting?

- Be professional, but comfortable: You'll be doing a lot of walking around Capitol Hill; comfortable shoes that don't pinch are key. You should prepare to dress business professional for the meeting as well as bring a pen and notebook to take detailed notes. Make sure your phone is on silent. If your meeting is part of an AASCU sponsored event, we encourage you to wear any AASCU apparel or lanyards so that you can easily identify your colleagues on the Hill.
- Arrive early and stay flexible: If you have a meeting with a staffer and arrive early, you may be able to get more time with them, or the member might have the opportunity to pop in. Arriving early also gives you more time to practice, go over meeting roles, and then take a minute to relax in the office before the meeting. If you are running late, send a quick email to your point of contact in the office to make them aware of your estimated arrival. As you leave a meeting and go to the next, give yourself enough time for the commute. The House and Senate side buildings are at least a 10- to 12-minute walk apart! Then you will have to go through security and find the correct office. AASCU will assist in the coordination of your meetings and needed time cushions to the best of our ability.
- Don't underestimate the staff's influence: Meeting with staff can be as effective as seeing the member personally! They know their member best and have a direct line of communication with them. Staffers are friendly, knowledgeable, and want to hear from constituents; so taking some time before and during the meeting to listen and engage with them can be crucial. Maintaining relationships with your congressional offices always includes staff as well.
- Be prepared to be on the move: If you do get a member-level meeting, there's a possibility your member may have to leave to go vote or sit in committee and ask you to keep talking with them

along the way. It's also possible the congressional office may email the day of the meeting and ask to move the meeting to a more convenient location for the member. A surprising number of meetings take place on the Capitol steps!

- **Keep it brief:** Most meetings with congressional offices may last 15 to 20 minutes on average. That may be cut even shorter if it's a meeting with the members themselves. Members of Congress and their staff appreciate brevity, given the packed and changing nature of their schedules. Have your "elevator pitch" ready and be prepared to offer succinct talking points. Stick to the issues and facts and don't get too caught up in pleasantries and the milieu. You're here to make the asks; try to do that in the first 10 minutes.
- **Be honest:** Your member may have a particular interest in a certain program or policy issue, and it's possible you might not have all the information readily available! It's better to thank them for their question and promise to follow up later, rather than scramble to come up with an answer of which you're not totally sure.
- **Don't have physical handouts:** AASCU is providing our issue one-pagers digitally, which we encourage attendees to print and carry for themselves if needed. Distributing physical handouts to offices, however, can be a distraction during the meeting. The staffer or member may be reading through the one-pager rather than fully listening to your pitch. All relevant information can be shared before and after the meeting as a follow-up. You want their full and undivided attention during! Issue briefs for the AASCU 2024 Policy Priorities can be found on [AASCU.org](https://www.aascu.org) and will be emailed to you.
- **Ask questions:** Try to leave space in your pitch or after for your members' thoughts on the issues. Ask them what they think the biggest challenges or hurdles are and what actions, if any, their office is taking on the topics. Ask them about their priorities. It's important to have a back and forth in the meeting to ensure you're just as interested in their priorities as they could be in yours.
- **Take photos:** Another question you could ask before the meeting concludes is if they would be open to a quick photo. Do not take any without the office's consent. Promise to share the photos for their reference and distribution. We recommend that you take a group picture at the conclusion, not the start, of the meeting.
- **Thank them and promise to follow up:** Thank the office for their time and consideration on the way out. Remember to get the contact information for their education staffer as well as exchange your business cards to ensure you can both stay in contact.

After the Meeting: Maintaining Relationships

Achieving successful advocacy outcomes in Congress is a process closer to a marathon than a sprint. With sustained communications, however, you can create a mutually beneficial relationship for both your member and your institution. By keeping in touch with the office, it can lead to even

AASCU Advocacy Toolkit

more substantive and influential meetings in the future, allowing for the conversation to continue beyond that short meeting window.

- Where do you start? You can begin by crafting your follow-up message to the office. You should follow up with the staff with whom you met, and they will forward your information on to more senior staff with education policy issues in their portfolio. If you met with the member directly, you should still follow up with their staff. If you're not sure who the education staff is, please contact AASCU and we will assist you. Much like scheduling and initially making contact, email communications are the most effective way to follow up. You'll want to address a few things in your message:
 - Reiterate the thank you.
 - Remind them of your main talking points and policy ask(s).
 - Attach your digital policy one-pagers.
 - Attach relevant supplemental policy or data materials (if applicable).
 - Be specific and to the point in your follow-up message.
 - Answer any lingering questions the office might have had during the meeting or after, using your meeting notes as a guide.
 - Offer your expertise. The office may want to reach out with questions about student experiences, institutional information, or specific legislative or regulatory matters. As a campus leader, offer to be a subject matter expert where applicable.
 - Congress on your campus. Invite them to your campus! Consider inviting the member to a campuswide event or holding space on campus for a forum or town hall. With back-to-school season and congressional recess both being in August, this may also be a great time to invite your member for a campus tour.
- Using social media as a follow-up tool. Another way to engage with your member of Congress is through social media networks. Message them and thank them for the meeting and attach the photo if you took one (again you'll want to ask for consent to take the photo and mention to the office in your follow-up that you'd like to post it). When posting, don't forget to do the following:
 - Correctly tag your member of Congress and be sure to use their government account rather than personal or campaign account.
 - Tag AASCU (@AASCU and @AASCUPolicy) so we can repost you and amplify your campus's advocacy!
 - Include the event hashtag #AASCUontheHill.
 - Check out more of our social media tips on page 13!
- Follow up with a physical thank you card. The office may appreciate it, but do not let it be the only method of follow-up communication, as snail mail, especially to Congress, can take a long time to be delivered due to safety procedures.
- Complete AASCU's after-meeting survey. This will be sent via email, so be on the lookout for that. AASCU's Government Relations team is also here to support your institution in your follow-up and sustaining relationships with your members. When we know the outcomes of your meetings, our collective advocacy is made stronger. We hope you will continue to use AASCU

AASCU Advocacy Toolkit

as a resource!

- Utilize AASCU's new Advocacy Center to stay in touch with your member. This tool is quick and efficient to help you engage in timely Action Alert campaigns and share your campus's story and impact on certain issues.
- To recap—why relationship building with an office is important:
 - Establishes continued trust and rapport.
 - Office/member views you as a stakeholder and may consult you/your institution on relevant issues.

What Is a Regional Comprehensive University?

There are 517 regional comprehensive universities (RCUs) in the United States across 49 states (Wyoming has one high-intensive research university in the state), the District of Columbia, and the U.S. territories. They collectively educate 4.9 million increasingly diverse undergraduate students. They enroll a disproportionately higher percentage of the “new majority” in public four-year higher education, students who may be low income, first generation, of color, working adults, and/or veterans.

RCUs mainly confer bachelor's and master's degrees but also some doctorates. An estimated 53% of bachelor's-degree-seeking students at public four-year institutions attend one of the 517 RCUs. These institutions emphasize teaching over research, but their research work is mainly focused on applied research over primary research. They are recognized as “stewards of place” for their commitment to service and focus on the communities around their institutions and thus serve as academic, economic, and cultural centers. RCUs are true engines of upper economic mobility for their students and regions.

The word “comprehensive,” in RCUs, is a direct result of the evolution of these colleges and universities that began as teacher schools, or normal schools, in many communities across the country. They have over time evolved to meet the distinctive education and workforce needs of each of their regions.

Thirty-eight percent of students at RCUs receive a Pell Grant and carry a slightly lower amount of debt at completion of their degrees. This is illustrative of the high percentage of less-resourced students that depend on RCUs for access to a bachelor's degree. These institutions also enroll a slightly smaller proportion of full-time students and have a higher average of incoming transfers, mostly from community colleges, when compared to other public four-year institutions. More than 80 percent of students at RCUs originate from a 50-mile radius of the institution and often stay within these regions upon graduation. RCUs generate many community professionals and workers, including teachers, nurses, engineers, counselors, and accountants.

One hundred seventy-seven RCUs are minority-serving institutions; this includes historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-serving institutions (AANAPISIs), Native American-serving non-Tribal institutions (NASNTIs), a Native Hawaiian-serving institution, and predominantly Black institutions (PBIs).

Tell Your Story: Tips for Effective Communication

Elected officials, and their staff, work long hours with days often filled by back-to-back meetings on a variety of topics. Grabbing their attention is a necessary challenge when soliciting support or advocating a specific action. This section focuses on effective communication outside of a meeting setting. Whether you choose to communicate that message verbally, in writing, or on social media, below you will find proven tips to make your chosen method more effective. Here are a few general considerations to aid your decision on which method to use:

- Communications to Congress should be concise and specific. Congressional staff have little time to listen to or read lengthy messages. Advocates should treat all communications as if they carried the enforced time/length limits of a voicemail or social media post.
- Communications are tallied, summarized, and usually discarded. Most offices will sort communications by issue, tally those in favor or against, and send a quick report to the member of Congress before disposing of the originals. Only the most unique messages are printed or passed along for review or reply.
- Expect attribution. Offices track individuals and organizations that send them correspondence; it should be expected that communications and positions taken will be attributed back to you.
- Most replies are form letters. With the staggering amount of correspondence congressional offices receive daily, constituents should not expect a personalized response to most communications.
- Letters = Time + Security. Physical letters take extra time to reach elected officials due to the increased security physical correspondence must clear before being delivered. If your request is time sensitive, an email or other form of correspondence might be best.
- Determine which office to contact. Members of Congress often have multiple offices you can contact for assistance or to register an opinion. The Washington, D.C., office is home to the policy staff who focus on legislation, while staff in the district and state offices focus on constituent concerns and assistance with federal agencies.

Verbal Communication

Sometimes an issue is so time sensitive it requires you to pick up the phone and call. While not the preferred method of contact, congressional offices are no stranger to constituents making their views known by phone. Your opinion, phone number, and contact information will still be tallied, summarized, and reported out in their office. Here are a few tips to consider if you choose verbal communication:

- You may not reach a human. Congressional offices receive hundreds of calls a day and have limited staff to handle them. If a staff member is unavailable, you may be asked to leave a voicemail.
- Identify yourself as a constituent. At times of high call volume, some offices may not take phone calls from outside organizations or non-constituents. When calling, be prepared to identify

yourself as living/working within the district or state; you may be asked for an address or zip code to verify.

- Be prepared. You will have limited time to voice your opinion or ask questions of staff who answer the phone. Voicemails cut off after a short time. Prepare your remarks before calling to increase the chance of sharing your full opinion.
- Remain positive. If your member of Congress disagrees with your supported position, kindly ask them to reconsider. Focus on the impact the issue has on your institution and local community.
- Be polite; end calls with a thank you. Phones are often answered by interns or young staff dealing with impassioned callers; they will not be subject matter experts. Be respectful and patient with whomever you speak and end the call by thanking them for their time.

Written Communication

- Email is the preferred communication method for most congressional offices. Many offices now use online contact forms attached to their website to collect constituent opinions and requests. If writing a letter, remember that physical mail must go through timely security measures before it is delivered.
- Confirm the address. Congressional offices may change location every two years. Before sending a physical correspondence, confirm the current address on your elected official's website.
- Include relevant staff members on emails. If writing about a specific subject, include the relevant staff member on your email. Correct email addresses and staff contacts can be found by calling the member's office.
- Get to the point. The recipient of your correspondence should know the topic, your position, and any request within the first paragraph. Vague or rambling messages will most likely be ignored and passed over.
- Focus on one or two issues. It is best to focus on a single topic or issue for each communication. This will help you remain succinct in your comments, lends power to your message, and increases the chance of a response.
- Include relevant facts and figures. Statistics or data that inform your opinion can be a useful inclusion in your correspondence that will help differentiate it from others.
- Offer to provide additional information or be a future resource. In closing, thank the intended recipient for their consideration of your request and offer to provide additional information or be a subject matter expert.
- Include your contact information. If you desire a response to your communication, be sure to include an address or identifying contact information at which a reply can be received.

Social Media

Every office on Capitol Hill utilizes social media in some form. Most, if not all, have X (formerly Twitter) accounts but many have associated Instagram, Facebook, and Truth Social accounts. Whichever platform you use to engage your elected officials, remember the following tips:

- Confirm their identity. Fake accounts are an unfortunate reality of social media. Before engaging, do your best to confirm the account. Often there will be links to official social media accounts on the elected official's website. Make sure the account is correctly verified.
- Don't forget to tag the official. Tagging their office ensures they can see the post and reshare it, promoting both the visit and further engaging with your institution.
- Be brief. Limit your message to one post. Messages with multiple parts tend to be ignored or get lost on profiles.
- The truth and nothing but the truth. Social media is full of self-proclaimed "fact checkers"; stick to the truth in your messages and if necessary, link to documents, reports, or websites that provide additional information.
- Going viral cuts both ways. The goal is to be persuasive and thought provoking, not provocative. Edgy posts can have a boomerang effect on those who create them.
- Be polite, stay positive. Getting into online arguments or flooding an elected official's social media account with negative messages is not the goal. Stay positive and keep your access to their accounts.
- Utilize hashtags. Hashtags help build awareness and momentum for whichever event or topic they promote.
- The internet is forever. A final word of caution that anything put on the internet can be found, saved, and used for or against the creator.

Making It Personal: Using Student Experiences to Amplify Your Message

One of AASCU's priorities is promoting civic engagement on campus as a tool for student success. While the advocacy efforts of presidents, chancellors, and government relations professionals can influence members of Congress, students can truly make for their own best advocates. It's no secret that the state of higher education in this country is in turmoil, as today's generation faces growing student loan debt, a disinvestment of aid, as well as evolving health needs and economic concerns for today's young people. Now more than ever, it is imperative that we lift student voices, experiences, and outcomes. Every day, students step foot on your campus with ambitions and goals, but also serious concerns about their futures.

When young people are empowered to engage civically in their communities, it can lead to higher life satisfaction, overall increased civic participation, and educational attainment. By encouraging a generation of students to advocate, organize, and engage civically, it offers the opportunity to take action and become a leader in their communities and meet tomorrow's challenges. As members of Congress look to their constituents and public opinion to inform and influence their policy positions, student input can make a huge impact on their decisions.

What Are Some Ways to Engage?

- Have students write letters to your members of Congress.
- Have students lead campus tours or events with members in attendance.
- Have students moderate community panels or town halls on campus.
- Encourage students to connect with groups on campus or in the community that have student lobbying events.
- Invite students to your meetings with legislators at your state capitol and in Washington, D.C. (AASCU on the Hill).
- Encourage students to engage with the legislator's district or capitol staff on the work they're doing (e.g., career panels/Q&As).

Student Tips for Effective Storytelling

- Speak to your experience at hand truthfully and don't embellish. Don't speak on behalf of others' stories or experiences.
- Try to keep your story simple, easy to follow, and succinct (3–5 minutes).
- Describe what actions may be taken next, as it relates to your story.

Possible Prompts to Develop Your Story

- How can I best describe how my educational journey has shaped my path?
- What resources has my college or university provided to ensure my success after graduation?

AASCU Advocacy Toolkit

- What are my concerns for my academic and professional future? Similarly, what am I most excited about?

Working With Federal Agencies

While appropriations and legislation run through Congress, the regulations and guidance that drive much of the day-to-day work of postsecondary education is the purview of the executive agencies and departments. These agencies often start the conversation regarding funding levels, regulatory policy, and legislative agendas at the federal level.

Within each agency or department is an office tasked with outreach to external stakeholders; they often act as a liaison, listening to concerns while passing along communications and regulatory information. Campus leaders would be well served to connect with these offices and foster a relationship with the individuals within them, whether through direct meetings or invitations to visit campus.

Tips to Consider

- Federal employees are divided between temporary political appointees, who set the agenda and act in leadership capacities, and long-term career/professional staff, who remain unaffected by the results of elections or changes in administration.
- The external affairs office, or corresponding stakeholder liaison, can connect campus leaders with other offices and divisions within a federal agency including programmatic and grant leads.
- Federal employees are frequently prohibited from commenting on regulatory activities that are open, proposed, or under litigation (*this does not preclude them from listening to comments or concerns but meeting requests may be postponed or declined unless an agreement not to discuss the prohibitive matter is made*).
- Elected officials, and staff, can help put pressure on federal agencies and vice versa. A call from a member of Congress or a proposal from a federal agency can often jumpstart a legislative solution or regulatory action.
- Federal agencies and departments seek witnesses and empirical evidence in the same way as Congress. Offering yourself as a resource to a federal agency can lead to increased access and opportunity to weigh in on regulatory proposals and actions.

Additional Resources

Additional advocacy resources can be found on the newly redesigned AASCU website. There you will find advocacy training videos that correspond with many of the suggestions made in this toolkit, AASCU policy briefs, the current *Public Policy Agenda*, and the recently released *Recommitting to Stewardship of Place* report.

Thank you for your advocacy on behalf of regional comprehensive universities, the students they educate, and the communities they serve.

AASCU.org

- [Advocacy Training Webinars](#)
- [AASCU 2024 Public Policy Agenda](#)
- [AASCU Advocacy Center](#)
- [Recommitting to Stewardship of Place](#)