



New County Extension Directors Fact Sheet Proactive Accountability with Elected Officials

Introduction

A County Extension Director's role in building and maintaining relationships with the elected officials who represent their county is vital to the success of WSU Extension's overall Government Relations efforts. Without strong political relationships, WSU Extension's continued growth and survival is in jeopardy.

Guidelines

To understand the role that County Extension Directors play in the political process, it is important to understand the basic philosophy and state laws through which WSU's government relations program is conducted. Following are a synopsis of guidelines for working with elected officials in Washington State. For the complete text and to report your lobbying efforts please access the WSU Lobbying web site at <http://www.olympia.wsu.edu/Lobbying.stm>.

The university encourages employees to have good professional relationships with state and federal elected officials and to be responsive to their questions and requests for information. University faculty and staff who work in communities around the state are particularly encouraged to have contact with public officials, including local legislators, so they know the nature of the university programs located in their legislative district and the assistance WSU can provide in addressing local needs.

However, many contacts with elected officials are considered by state and federal law to be official "lobbying" on behalf of the university. In these instances, there are restrictions and reporting requirements on public employees who engage in these activities.

The university's Government Relations office is responsible, on behalf of the president, for assisting employees with any questions regarding contacts with state and federal officials or political activity, reporting official lobbying, and ensuring that information is provided to legislators accurately and timely.

Activities usually considered to be public lobbying under state law include most face-to-face meetings with legislators and their staff.

Federal lobbying contact is defined as "any oral or written communication to a ... legislative or ... executive branch official with regard to the formulation, modification or adoption" of federal legislation, rules, regulation, policies, programs, executive orders or the administration of a federal program (including federal contract, grant, license).

It is illegal for state employees to encourage other people and constituencies to contact state legislators for the purposes of supporting university positions on state legislation. Information on the status WSU issues and programs before the Legislature can and should be shared with grassroots constituencies. This is an appropriate role for The Friends of Extension that are located in each county. County Extension Directors have appointed supporters of WSU Extension program to this group and are asked to update the data base on an annual basis. These constituents should have regular updates regarding your county's Extension program, and are appraised of legislative goals of the university by the Dean of Extension. As private citizens, they may contact their legislators regarding extension's program accomplishments and through their own action.

Contacting Government Relations in advance of a state or federal lobbying activity is required, and it may be necessary to officially report salary, travel, and expense information, the length and nature of the conversation, and any legislation that is being influenced.

As a matter of policy, university employees are discouraged from hosting legislators for meals, drinks, gifts, or entertainment, especially when state appropriated funds are involved.

WSU employees are not permitted to use university time or resources to promote, or encourage others to promote, state or federal funding proposals that are not an official budget request of Washington State University.

WSU employees are not permitted to use university time or resources to lobby for or against legislation, unless authorized by the university to represent these issues. This policy applies to telephone calls, electronic mail, letters, face-to-face conversations, and other official forms of university communication with legislators. This policy does not apply to providing factual information to public officials or answering questions.

WSU employees cannot legally use university time or resources to engage in partisan political activity. Public employees are also forbidden from campaigning for or against a ballot measure, except to comment on direct impacts to university programs.

Answering Questions from Legislators

It is the responsibility of university employees to furnish timely answers to lawmakers and share with them the benefits of faculty education and research programs. To assure completeness and accuracy of the answer from a university perspective, employees are strongly encouraged to check with Government Relations before completing the response to elected officials and their staff.

Employees should recognize that their answers to questions might be regarded as "lobbying," particularly if the answer is framed to persuasively affect legislation. If it is lobbying, it must be reported through the dean, Government Relations, and possibly to the state Public Disclosure Commission or federal authorities.

Conferring with Government Relations on legislative concerns is always advisable. Many of these contacts, by law, need to be reported to the state Public Disclosure Commission. The dean or administrator must be aware of such contacts in advance. The answers must be non-partisan. Factual information should be provided to all who request it. Information shared with advocates of point of view should be shared with advocates of apparently opposing views. The motives of elected officials or their staff should never be questioned.

Contacting the WSU Government Relations Office

1. Larry Ganders is available by e-mail at ganders@wsu.edu or by phone in Olympia at (360) 956-2165.
2. Laurel le Noble is available by e-mail at lenoblel@energy.wsu.edu or by phone in Olympia at (360) 956-2025.
3. For all federal matters, contact Kristi Growdon by e-mail at growdonk@energy.wsu.edu or by phone in Seattle at (206) 219-2424, or page by sending and email to growdon@my2way.com

Adapted from WSU Guidelines for Working with Elected Officials website.