

## Steps Toward Effective Communication with Congressional Offices

First, a basic principle: The best communication with our elected policy makers requires an ongoing process -- not just something you dust off and put into operation in a crisis. Here are some steps you can take to build a stronger information program.

**Get to know your Representatives and Senators and their key aides.** It is easier to approach your legislators or their aides if you have already established relationship with them.

**Make use of your legislator's local office.** Staff members are there to listen to and ascertain the needs and opinions of the legislator's constituents. You will want to be sure that they are aware of the positive, important role that Space Grant fulfills in their own Congressional district or state. Give particulars.

**Invite your legislator and his/her staff to visit your institution or one of your major projects.** In this way you can educate them about the value of the program in their Congressional district or state.

### Tips on Visiting Your Legislator's Office

Perhaps the most effective way of getting your views across to your legislator is through a personal visit. Legislators are usually glad to meet with constituents, but you should call ahead for an appointment. You could visit with them in Washington, DC, or you could meet with him/her during one of their frequent trips back to their district.

**Be on time.** Most legislators have tight schedules, and you will start off on the wrong foot if you are late. You may even forfeit your appointment!

**Be brief.** Outline your request, and the rationale that supports the position you wish your legislator to take. Don't prolong the visit or overstay your welcome unless your legislator takes the initiative.

**Follow up with a letter (in email form)** thanking him/her for his/her time and reviewing your arguments regarding your position.

**If your legislator is not available, meet with an aide.** Staff play an important role in the legislative process, and if you can win them over to your side, then you stand a better chance with the legislator.

## **Tips on Making Telephone Calls**

Sometimes, particularly when time is short, you will find it more effective and timely to call your legislator's office. All Congressional Offices (House and Senate) in Washington, D.C. can be reached by calling the Capitol switchboard at (202) 224-3121. (You will then be connected with your Representative/Senator's office.) Or, you may wish to call your Representative/Senator's local office.

Here are several tips that apply to telephone calls:

**Ask to speak to the staffer handling Science/Space issues.**

They have the Representative/Senator's ear and are often more knowledgeable about the details of the issue you are calling about. Be sure to take down the name of the aide you talked to.

**Know what you want to say.** It is a good idea to have notes or other information in front of you, as this will help you to be brief and to the point. Ask if you can schedule a brief 15-minute meeting in Washington, DC office with them. Don't stay on the phone more than five or ten minutes unless the legislator or aide prolongs the conversation.

**Leave your name, address and telephone number** so that they can get back to you with the legislator's position. Let them know (nicely) that you expect a reply.

**Follow up** with a brief note/email thanking them for their time, summarizing your position if time allows, or additional information if requested.

**Don't bluff.** If they ask a question that you can't answer, say that you will get back to them, and then do follow up.

## When to Write Letters

An important part of an effective advocacy program is frequent communication with Members of Congress. This includes not just requests for funding but also, when appropriate, acknowledgment of the legislator's support.

**Follow-up letters/emails to Members of Congress or aides you met with during the Space Grant meeting week** help keep your request in their minds and remind them of the substance of your visit.

**Letters to representatives and senators asking them to contact their colleagues who chair appropriations or authorizing subcommittees** are a useful way of doubling your message. The information you provide the Members of Congress must be precise and concise. In some cases, it is helpful to provide the member with a model letter.

**Letters of thanks for support** are extremely important and increase the chances of your being heard next year. It is also important that the Member of Congress occasionally receive a letter whose only purpose is to say thanks, without going on to make another request.