



## Tips for Communicating with Members of Congress

### IN GENERAL...

As a GEAR UP grantee, you are permitted to meet with members of Congress and congressional staff to inform them, subject to certain guidelines, about the impact your GEAR UP program is having in their district and/or state. It is important that you ensure that:

1. Federal funds do not subsidize your travel to their local offices; and
2. Your discussion with congressional representatives and staff are factual.

**GEAR UP grantees are prohibited from using federal funds to engage in lobbying. GEAR UP grantees may not use federal funds to attempt to influence elected officials or their staff with regard to the introduction, enactment, or modification of any legislation.**

This prohibition extends to any discussion about increased funding or appropriate for related programs.

To ensure compliance with all applicable restrictions on federal education grantees, GEAR UP's national advocacy organization, the National Council for Community Education Partnerships (NCCEP) has consulted the U.S. Department of Education. The Department has confirmed that GEAR UP grantees are permitted to meet with their members of Congress or congressional staff for informational briefings, provided that grantees adhere to the rules described herein.

If you decide to meet with your representative or his/her staff, you must do so on your own time, and you may not use federal funds to do so. You must not use any federal funds for transportation to or from meetings with your elected officials, or staff. You may use your own vehicle or take public transportation, provided you pay for it with funds other than federal grant monies.

The following list of Dos and Don'ts was developed to assist you in communicating effectively with members of Congress and congressional staff without violating any applicable federal lobbying restrictions.

### DO...

- **Plan your meeting.** Choose a facilitator who will be the primary spokesperson and assign other speaking roles to share information.

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- **Be prepared to spend only 15 minutes with your member or staffer** and plan accordingly. There is no time for long introductions. Remember to allow time to respond to questions.
- **Talk about the number of families and students served by your program** and the impact your efforts are having on student performance, college aspirations, parent involvement, etc.
- **Provide statistical evidence of your program's impact and share personal stories** of students for whom GEAR UP has made a difference, e.g., "We've doubled the number of eighth graders enrolled in algebra. Alison Benton, one of those students, now hopes to be the first in her family to go to college."
- **Discuss state, local, and private involvement in your program.** As appropriate, describe the role of community and discuss partners in helping you achieve your program's objectives.
- **To the best of your ability, factually answer any questions** the representative, senator, or staffer asks. If you don't know the answer, it's perfectly acceptable to tell them you will follow-up with more information.
- **Be prepared to answer questions like, "How can we help you?"** The member or staffer may want you to leave them with a specific ask. Be specific. Ask them to continue to support the program, as them to visit your school, or ask them to record a short video message for your students. Be creative and get them involved!
- **Use this opportunity to build a relationship with your member of Congress and their staffers.** Invite the members and staff to visit your program site and to use you as a resource. Be sure to thank the member and staffers (including the receptionist) as you conclude your visit. A follow-up thank you note, email, or Tweet can be another memorable touch.

## **DON'T...**

- **Request increases (specific amounts or otherwise) in GEAR UP funding.** As noted above, federal law and regulations prohibit using federal funds to attempt to influence specific legislation, including legislation that has not yet been introduced and federal appropriations, or spending, bills.
- **Be intimidated by the legislative process or jargon.** Your expertise as a practitioner who works with students every day is of value to your member of Congress and staff. They have much to learn from you!
- **Attempt to answer questions if you are unsure of the facts.** Offer to find the correct information and/or suggest Nevada GEAR UP as a resource.
- **Feel slighted if you meet with a staff rather than the member of Congress.** This is normal and should not be interpreted as a sign of disrespect. Staff members often are as knowledgeable (and sometimes more so!) about programs as their bosses.
- **Do their jobs for them.** Members of Congress and staff may ask "What should we cut to fund your program?" They were elected to make those decisions. Besides, you are prohibited from discussing program funding levels.
- **Overstay your welcome.** Members of Congress and staff keep hectic schedules – be considerate of their time.

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- **Forget to let Nevada State GEAR UP staff know if we should follow up** by providing factual information or data requested during your meetings.

## VISITING CAPITAL HILL OR LOCAL STATE OFFICES

Meeting with a member of Congress or congressional staff is an effective way to convey a message about a specific legislative issue. Below are some suggestions for planning a visit to a congressional office.

1. **Plan your visit carefully.** Be clear about what it is you want to achieve. Determine in advance which member or committee staff you need to meet with to achieve your purpose.
2. **Make an appointment.** To schedule a meeting with a member, contact the Appointment Secretary/Scheduler. Explain your purpose and whom you represent. Congressional staff can more readily arrange a meeting if they know what you wish to discuss and your relationship to area or interests represented by the manner.
3. **Be prompt and be patient.** When it is time to meet with a member, be punctual and be patient. It is not uncommon for a congressman or congresswoman to be late or to have a meeting interrupted; their schedules are full. If interruptions do occur, be flexible. Continue your meeting with the member's staff if and when the opportunity presents itself.
4. **Be prepared.** Whenever possible, bring to the meeting information and materials that support your position. Members are required to take positions on many different issues but sometimes lack important details about the pros and cons of a particular one. For that reason, it is helpful to share information and examples that demonstrate clearly the impact of a particular issue or piece of legislation.
5. **Be compelling.** Members of Congress want to represent the best interests of their districts or states.
6. **Whenever possible, demonstrate the connection** between what you are requesting and the interests of the member's constituency. Describe how you or your group may be of assistance to the member. If it is appropriate to do so, as for a commitment.
7. **Be responsible.** Be prepared to provide additional information in the event the member expresses interest or asks questions. Follow up the discussion with a thank-you that outlines the different points addressed, and include any additional information and materials requested.

## TALKING POINTS FOR YOUR MEETING

Expect to visit for 15 to 20 minutes. If your meeting is with a senator or representative rather than his or her staff, the meeting likely will be even shorter. Do not feel slighted: They are very busy, and scheduling a meeting at all can be a challenge. Be aware that time runs out quickly, and do everything possible to make the most of the opportunity to share important information. If your meeting is with a staff person, be sure to leave materials that can be passed along to the senator or representative.

The following outline is intended to help you build relationship with your congressional leaders, but you know your group and your project best!

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1. **Designate a facilitator to briefly introduce everyone.** (2-3 minutes)
  - Names and program roles are sufficient.
  - This part can be lengthy, so politely move things along.
  - If you have more than eight (8) people in a meeting, introduce several in groups (These folks are parents, we have three teachers from the middle school,” etc.)
2. **Briefly describe your program.** (2-3 minutes)
  - What services/activities are provided?
  - How many students/families are served?
  - What are your program(s) demographics?
  - What problems is your program solving?
3. **Describe your program’s accomplishments.** (3-5 minutes)
  - Support your description with facts.
  - Demonstrate the impact of GEAR UP, e.g., your program receives \$450,000 annually but brings the program’s value to more than \$1 million per year as a result of the matching requirement.
4. **Share personal stories.** (3-5 minutes)
  - Share stories (one to three, depending on their length) about students and families that have benefited from your GEAR UP program.
  - Be sure to use success stories and not sob stories; the goal is to put a human face on all the education policy and jargon heard on Capitol Hill.
  - Be sure to make use of supporting materials – including photographs – particularly from students and parents.
5. **Describe your plans for the future of the program.**
  - What are your goals for student achievement?
  - What is your timeline for accomplishing those goals?
6. **Invite the member of Congress to visit the program.**
7. **Report back to Nevada State GEAR UP**

## **BY TELEPHONE**

To find your senator’s and representative’s phone numbers, use the searchable online congressional directories ([www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) and [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov)) or call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at (202)224-3121 and as for your senator’s and/or representative’s office(s).

- Remember that telephone calls usually are taken by a staff member, not the member of Congress. Ask to speak with the aide who handles education policy.
- After identifying yourself, tell the aide you would like to leave a brief message, such as: “Please tell Senator/Representative (Name) that GEAR UP is having a positive impact in our community and I hope that GEAR UP remains one of the (Senator’s/Representative’s legislative priorities.

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- You also will want to share with them examples/statistics that show how GEAR UP has had a positive impact in your community. Ask for your senator's or representative's position on the bill. You also may request a written response to your telephone call.

## IN WRITING

The letter is the most popular means of communication with a congressional office. Heeding the following suggestions will help maximize your letter's effectiveness:

- State your purpose for writing in the first paragraph. If your letter pertains to a specific piece of legislation, identify it accordingly, e.g., GEAR UP.
- Be courteous and explicit, and include key information, citing examples to support your position.
- Use the letter templates included in the Nevada GEAR UP handbook as a guide.

## LETTER-WRITING TIPS

Since 2001, postal mail has not been the preferred method of contacting Members of Congress due to increased security screening and delivery log times. However, all members of Congress utilize e-mail. Most often you will receive an automatic acknowledgment that your message has been received. At a later date, you will receive a personalized written response. E-mail correspondence should address the Member as "Representative" or "Senator" and should include your name, address, and district.

To maximize the effect of your letters, make them unique. The more your letters reflect your personal voice and experience, the more effective they will be.

- **Have a clear message.** Thank members of Congress for their previous support and request their continued support of GEAR UP.
- **Be Compelling,** but do not overstate your case. White House and congressional staff process volumes of correspondence every day. To have the greatest impact, keep your letter clear and concise.
- **Clearly explain why policy makers should continue to support GEAR UP.** You can do this in many ways, for example, by pointing out what a difference GEAR UP has made in your family, school, and/or community; demonstrating the effectiveness and value of the program using relevant statistics and/or examples; describing how GEAR UP emphasizes collaboration, cooperation, and coordination among partners that prior to GEAR UP, had a little opportunity to work together.
- **Emphasize the uniqueness of GEAR UP.** Some congressional and administrative leaders argue that GEAR UP is redundant: They seek either to eliminate it altogether or to fold it into other programs. In order to ensure the continued success of GEAR UP, it is important to highlight the uniqueness of GEAR UP programming as well as its emphasis on local control and flexibility.
- **Tell your story.** Remember that one of the advantages of involving as many people as possible in a letter-writing campaign is that everybody doesn't have to say everything. Speak from your experience, and keep your message simple.

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- **Put a human face on GEAR UP.** In sharing your program and experience, focus on the impact GEAR UP is having on the lives of students and their families. Remind your audience that GEAR UP helps real people.
- **Provide as many specific and detailed examples as possible.** Provide your audience with compelling examples that provide poignant insight into the impact of your work.
- **Enclose memorabilia and/or newspaper articles with your letters.** GEAR UP memorabilia (e.g., pens, posters, hats, t-shirts) can help make your program come alive to your audience. If you do choose to send memorabilia, please use good judgment: Extravagance is not appropriate when taxpayers' money is in use. Student art and letters are best. Newspaper articles let policy makers know that GEAR UP has widespread public support.
- **Be efficient.** With a few minor variations, your message can be tailored to each of several audiences: the White House, congressional leaders, and members of the appropriations subcommittees in the House and Senate. The idea is to flood Washington, DC, with letters of support of GEAR UP while taking into account individual programs' time and resource limitations.
- **Have fun, and do the right thing.** Know that your advocacy work on behalf of low-income students is your civic moral, and professional responsibility. Helping low-income families help their children get a college education is the right thing for all of us to do. This is democracy in action!

**Remember, please send Nevada GEAR UP duplicate copies of all correspondence you send to the White House or Congress so we can compile them and use them to support our program as we work with partners and policy makers in Nevada.**

Adopted from the National Council of Community Education Partnerships NCCCEP/GEAR UP Resource Guide & Effective Advocacy Toolkit by Washington State GEAR UP.

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