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Illinois State Higher Ed Advocacy 101

Making phone calls to legislative offices

- 1) **Find out who your legislators are.** You can call any lawmakers you want, but they are usually most receptive to hearing from people who live in their district. You can find out who your legislators are by visiting the Illinois Board of Elections website, or by visiting OpenStates.org. Once you've identified your lawmakers, you'll find contact information for their district offices, as well as their legislative office in Springfield.
- 2) **Call their legislative office and speak with a staffer.** Tell them your name, and mention that you are a constituent who would like to leave a comment on an issue that matters to you.
- 3) **Briefly state your position on this issue.** If you are calling about a specific piece of legislation, specify the bill number and the purpose of the bill (i.e. "SB 2043, which would fund MAP grants at \$150 billion for the next year"). Have 2 or 3 sentences prepared when you introduce yourself and outline your position on the issue, so that you aren't scrambling to remember what you wanted to say. Provide some personal detail if you can, explaining how a certain policy or issue would affect you individually.
- 4) **Make a clear, strong ask.** Your ask might be as simple as "vote YES on SB 2043," or you might be asking your legislator to take on a leadership role on an issue by talking to leadership, co-sponsoring legislation, or making a speech on the House or Senate floor. Either way, make sure it's clear that you are asking your legislator to do something on your behalf, not just sharing information. If possible, phrase your ask as a "yes or no" question. The staffer you speak with may not be able to provide an answer to that question, but can follow up with you once they have more information.
- 5) **Thank the staffer for their time, and leave your contact information if they need to follow up with you.**
- 6) **Try to get a group of people to call on the same day.** When a legislator receives a large number of calls about a specific issue around the same time, it shows them that their constituents care about that issue, and creates more pressure for them to take action. Consider creating a phone banking event, where students or peers convene to make calls together.

Sample phone script

"Hi, my name is Jen. I am one of Rep. Guzzardi's constituents.

I am calling to thank him for co-sponsoring SB 2043, the bill that would fund MAP grants for this school year. As a low-income student, I don't get any money for college from my family, and even with my MAP grant, money is very tight. If I am responsible for paying

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that part of my tuition, I will have even less money left over for books, food, and all my other living expenses.

Because of this, I am very glad that Rep. Guzzardi is a co-sponsor of SB 2043.

However, I know there are a lot of legislators who are still on the fence. Would Rep. Guzzardi be willing to make a statement on SB 2043 to his colleagues on the house floor?"

Preparing for in-person meetings

- 1) **Try to schedule a meeting with your legislator ahead of time.** If you know when you'll be at the Capitol, call the lawmaker's legislative office and ask when they would be available to meet that day. Sometimes, their staffer will tell you to call back on the day-of and ask about their availability then, but if you can get a meeting scheduled, make sure you write down that information. Be prepared to be flexible on timing, as your legislator might not have many opportunities to meet with you throughout the day.
- 2) **Research your legislator ahead of time.** You don't have to be an expert, but you should have a general idea of how they stand on the issue and how they have voted in the past. Go to ILGA.gov or Open States and find your legislator's profile. You can view on which committees they serve, how they've voted on specific bills in the past, and which bills they've introduced or co-sponsored.
- 3) **Prepare what you'll say in your meeting.** In order to ensure your meeting goes as smoothly as possible, prepare some talking points and a strong ask to make of your legislator. If possible, come up with some rebuttals to questions you anticipate being asked. If you're holding a group meeting, make sure everyone is clear on the role they will play during the meeting – ensure that one person is prepared to make your hard ask, and that someone is prepared to keep the conversation on track if discussion starts to derail.
- 4) **Get your materials in order.** Bring business cards, either to leave with their office or to use to pull a legislator off the chamber floor. Create materials to leave behind after the visit outlining your main points and highlighting the ask you're making.
- 5) **Prepare to be flexible.** Know that it might be a challenge to meet your legislator in their office and hold an extensive conversation with them. However, this doesn't mean you should be discouraged – legislative staff will work with you to find time to meet, even if it is only for a few minutes. This might be by arranging a couple minutes for you to meet in between sessions and hearings, or by pulling your legislator "off the floor."

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Visiting the Capitol

- 1) **Call your legislator's office when you arrive.** If you weren't able to set up an appointment to meet with your legislator, call their office and say that you are a constituent in the Capitol hoping to find a time to talk. Their staffer might be able to give you a specific time they'd be available to sit down and meet. If they say that the legislator is busy or in between sessions all day, ask them where in the Capitol building they will be located. You can try to catch them as they're leaving or entering a hearing, or pull them off the House or Senate floor for a quick chat.
- 2) **Find your bearings.** Most legislator offices can be found by going down into the basement of the Capitol and heading into the legislative buildings through the tunnels. The House and Senate chambers are on the third floor, just above the Capitol. If you are unsure of where to go, security guards can point you in the right direction.
- 3) **If necessary, revisit your script or agenda for the meeting.** Make sure you feel prepared to convey your main points effectively and make an assertive ask. Don't be nervous! If you have to pull your legislator off the floor or set up an impromptu hallway meeting, think about how you'll condense your whole conversation into about 2 or 3 minutes.

Pulling legislators "off of the floor"

- 1) **Don't be intimidated.** It can feel overly "pushy" to pull a legislator off the floor in the middle of session, but be assured that this is a standard lobbyist practice.
- 2) **Write your name, school, and any other affiliation on a business card and bring it to the door clerk.** The clerk will go out on the chamber floor and hand your card over to the legislator. It is not guaranteed that they will come out if they are busy on the floor, but this is the best way to meet with a legislator during that time.

Crafting your message

- 1) **Be concise.** When speaking with legislators, you will not usually have more than about 15 minutes to speak with them. That means you should have a concise list of things you want to talk about so you can get your point across quickly. Bill number, context on what the bill is
- 2) **Introduce yourself.** It might seem obvious, but make sure the legislator knows who you are and where you go to school. If you are one of their constituents, be sure to mention this.
- 3) **Emphasize personal stories.** Keeping the conversation steered towards personal stories and experiences shows lawmakers that real people are impacted by the policies they pass. Speak to how this issue will affect you, either positively or negatively. If you

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don't feel you have a compelling personal story, talk about a friend or a family member instead.

4) **Make a strong ask.** Try to get a commitment from your legislator on what you've talked about. "Will you vote in favor of ___?" If you know a certain legislator is a support head of time, consider asking them to co-sponsor legislation, talk to their colleagues who are on the fence, or speak out in support for the legislation on the floor.

5) **Facts and data matter, but don't get bogged down in the details.** If you did a little research, that should be enough. Anyone can recite facts and figures, so focus on what makes your perspective unique – your personal story.

6) **Don't guess or estimate.** If a legislator asks you a question that you do not know the answer to, it is better to say that you don't know than try to make a guess. Tell them you can find out and get back to them; ask for a staffer's contact information so that you can follow up with their office once you have that information.

7) **Leave literature behind.** Make sure to leave some literature behind for the legislator or their staff so that they remember your conversation later on.

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