



Q&A: Finding Policy Engagement Opportunities

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On July 25th, we featured retired public affairs executive Marshall Cohen for a Q&A focused on how researchers can find policy engagement opportunities. Based on his 50 years of experience in strategic government relations, Cohen used his wealth of knowledge to answer questions about how to engage with stakeholders in a variety of contexts.

Marshall Cohen has over 50 years of experience in strategic government relations, public policy, advocacy and communications, as well as knowledge of the energy, healthcare, environmental, and numerous other public policy areas. He has served as a board member for a variety of organizations and government entities, including the Maine State Board of Education, the Foundation for State Legislatures of the National Conference of State Legislatures, and the Economic Development Corporation of Leah County, New Mexico.

Here are some highlights from the conversation:

On what researchers can offer to policymakers:

“You are all in a very interesting and potentially influential position because you're set up to become a resource for policymakers, and most especially the elected policymakers on the legislative side, which is where the policies start and are crafted.

They desperately need resources, they need information, facts, data, research, but they need to understand that in a legible fashion. And they need to have the right kind of relationship with the source of the information.

If you have a research paper that might be connected to an issue that's pending in a state legislature or in a state, the first thing you importantly want to do is establish a relationship. Coming from a university, you have great credibility right out of the box, then what's important is to maintain credibility and develop those relationships in a way that makes you become a resource of valuable data, information, advice, as these policies are being developed.”

How to make first contact with a policymaker or legislator:

“Show up where they show up. Meet them in different situations where they can begin to understand who you are and then set up an appointment to go talk with them. They're all going to have district offices where you

get to see them.

It's important to know what you want to see them about and to basically establish your objective, your issue, your aim, or whatever it is, and not necessarily walk in with a long, detailed research paper, but walk in to get acquainted.

This is the kind of research you're doing. We think it could be relevant to policies in state X or state Y or there's been some recent news coverage of the issue and you may be right on time with it. Their time is short. They're dealing with hundreds, thousands of issues. So the key point is for them to begin to understand who you are, know that you have this expertise, leave them with a one-page-something."

On the importance of follow up:

"One objective [to have] when you're sitting down with the policymaker, is know how to do the follow up and definitely do the follow up. You can send a thank you letter or note to the staff saying, we talked about this issue with Representative so-and-so, and would love to tell you a little bit more about what we're doing on the issue and so forth.

So you keep the relationship going and it's a balancing act because you don't want to nag, and you don't want to take all their time and you need to be very respectful. And it may be that what you're researching is not an issue that's top of mind for them. But if it's an issue in the public policy world, there's likely to be somebody else in the legislature, for example, for whom it is top of mind. And your legislator is the best way to open the door for that legislator."

On attending legislative sessions:

"If you're at the Statehouse and you have some time and they're in session, go watch the session.

I'd go up into the gallery and just sit and watch. And I would learn which legislators have influence, because you could see in the process of the debates and the votes, who's being listened to, who is ignored.

You can understand the process. A good legislative debate is like a novel because you get personal stories and you get professional things and you get off the record things and you get bad behavior and you get outstanding behavior and so forth—all coming out in a debate and a fight over this issue."

How to determine the best time to raise issues that are ongoing but not new:

"Any time. There are degrees of ongoing. A lot of lead issues are ongoing, they go on year after year after year in the policymaking process. If you compared the 2023 Pennsylvania legislature's legislative issues that were in front of them and [looked at] 2024, you'd find a lot of similar issues.

For those kinds of issues, there's never a lack of need for learning about them by the legislature, by policymakers. There's always some sort of relevance."

On how researchers can advocate for larger issue topics if that is something they don't have experience with:

"You can see write-ups online about bills being introduced, things taking place. I get newsletters from my state rep and my state senator. Every Friday I get a newsletter that talks about bills they're dealing with, what issues they're working on and so forth.

Now, it's geared to their interests and so forth, but still, I think they're good guys and they're involved in good issues. And so I learn about things that way. So it's just learning what's afoot, what's taking place, and so forth. And then develop an agenda from that to highlight within all those things where you think you have something to offer later.

If you can pinpoint from an array of issues, two or three that you want to be involved in, it's okay. If the same three professors or researchers want to go after something on taxes or something on environmental policy and something on healthcare, that's going to be hard because the place where all that takes place is going to be different until it gets to a central omnibus piece of legislation, which sometimes could happen, but most likely it's difficult. I would recommend singling [one issue] out."