

Guidelines for Hosting Campus Visits from Congressmen and Staffs

We offer these guidelines, which have been collected from various sources and by our experiences, to help you organize a visit by a U.S. Senator or Representative and their staffs to your local university and department.

- Work in concert with the government affairs staff at your university to issue any invitations and arrange any visits. Your university government affairs staff must be involved!
- Send a written invitation on university letterhead approximately two months (if possible) in advance of the hoped-for visit. The highest-ranking officer of the university who will be involved should sign the invitation. Plan the visit for a block of time when Congress is in recess. (Congress is in recess during August and selected other days. The congressional calendar is available on the Web¹ or through CRA Government Affairs.) The invitation should be issued far in advance to Members because their schedules fill quickly, and far in advance to staffers because they need to get clearance to travel. You may need to pay for any staffer's travel if they aren't already scheduled to visit your district. (This applies more to committee staffers rather than those in personal offices.)
- Address the invitation directly to the Member or staffer. Members should be addressed as "The Honorable Jane Doe." In the salutation, use "Dear Representative Doe:" or "Dear Senator Doe:". Do not mail the invitation by U.S. mail, since the mail procedures that were put into place after the anthrax incidents add significant and unpredictable delays. Instead, FAX your letter to the attention of the scheduler in the Congressman's Washington office. Personalize the cover sheet with the scheduler's name (which CRA can provide if you don't have it). If you are inviting a Member, FAX an additional copy of the invitation to any staff person in the Member's office with whom you may be working. Ask them to help facilitate the request with the scheduler and put it high on the priority list. At the end of the letter, name someone who will follow up with the scheduler by phone. Make sure that that person calls within a few days and continues to call periodically to keep this invitation at the top of the stack.
- In the invitation, outline the reasons why you want the Member or staffer to visit campus and outline what the person will see and with whom they will meet. This does not have to be terribly detailed, but you want to make it interesting and substantive enough (and drop enough names and titles) to warrant attention. As part of the invitation and visit, consider arranging an opportunity for the Member to address a significant gathering of faculty members and administrators—something to give the Member some visibility with his or her constituents. A photo op can be helpful publicity for the Member.

¹ House calendar: http://www.house.gov/house/2004_House_Calendar.shtml

Senate calendar: http://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/legislative/one_item_and_teasers/2005_schedule.htm

- You are likely to be referred to the district office at some point to work with the local scheduler. Be sure you learn eventually what staffer will accompany the Member and whether he or she will drive the Member to campus. Make SURE to send maps and clear directions (including where to park—hopefully in a convenient location!), and send the final visit agenda a few days in advance.
- Every campus and every visit is unique. The players should be selected according to the objectives for the visit. One constant in the case of a visit from a Member is to have at least one very high university official involved substantively at some point during the day. The other constant is to have at least one knowledgeable person (possibly from the government affairs office) be the “guide” for the Member throughout the visit. This person has to stick around for the entire visit and should not be dropping the Member off for meetings and then coming back to retrieve him or her. Also, consider involving students in the visit. Undergraduate students who are passionate about their studies or their research are often very effective how they communicate their infectious enthusiasm for their work.
- Give everyone who is on the agenda (and anyone who is sure to meet the Member or staffer) the visitor’s biography. Make sure each person knows if the visitor has performed good works on behalf of the university. Make absolutely sure that participants understand that they should make no partisan statements and that they understand their role in reaching the objectives of the visit. If the visitor is an alum, make sure all the participants know it in advance.
- Do NOT powerpoint the visitor to death. Build an agenda that includes moving from lab to lab or office to office and that intersperses powerpoint presentations with the viewing of equipment, buildings, labs, etc. Whenever possible, explain programs with props rather than powerpoints. Involve bright, active, talky students. Members always like to have real discussions with students, possibly over coffee or lunch so that the setting is relaxed. At some propitious moment, give the visitor an inexpensive memento of the visit like a university ball cap, key chain, framed photo, etc. But do not overload him or her with material. For points and programs that you want to make sure they remember, have a one-pager that includes some white space and color. CRA can provide material tailored to your event. Unless the visitor has detailed background in science or about the topic of discussion, plan the presentations at a lay level.
- If this is a Member’s first visit to campus and the main purpose is to get acquainted, give a general overview highlighting the programs that make your institution stand out from the crowd and serve the Member’s constituents. If you plan to ask for help with something (this is an excellent opportunity), have that conversation behind closed doors with the proper university officials.
- Be sure to follow up with a FAXed thank you note from the president or other high official. Make sure to follow up with the staffer, preferably with a personal visit to DC, regarding whatever help you have requested.
- Always serve good food and take breaks.