

From the AACT Knowledge Base

# Make Your Case

Former lawmakers discuss effective advocacy

“If you’re going to talk about affecting legislation at any level—federal, state, or local—the first thing you’ve got to understand is that you are in a very competitive league,” as former U.S. Congressman Jack Quinn, now president of Erie Community College in Buffalo, New York.

“When we experience tough economic times in particular, legislators are deluged every day with well-intended citizens and groups who think that if you cut funding for their cause, you are going to do irreparable harm for the rest of their life.”

As a congressman, Quinn heard pleas from a variety of special interests—each with its own powerful, oftentimes emotional, story to tell. There were advocates for the handicapped and disadvantaged. Seniors. Fire and police. Local churches and community groups. Schools. Universities.

“To think that everybody understands your cause is naïve,” explains Quinn. “These legislators are going to see some very compelling messages. And every single one of these groups is going to have a powerful story to tell.”

With so many competing interests vying for a slice of the same shrinking budget pie, he says, the question for arts groups shouldn’t be how to get their story out, but how to ensure that legislators identify with and understand your plight—to do what is necessary to emerge from the pack.

## **New Perspective**

So how can you set yourself apart? Rather than attempt to convince elected officials of the importance of your cause, experts suggest you pitch your cause as part of the solution to a broader legislative priority—economic development, for example. Will your initiative create new jobs in the community—or bring in more business that will bring in those new jobs? If so, that’s a selling point worth highlighting.

“There is a distinction between getting a legislator to cast a vote that you want, versus a legislator who will be a champion for your cause,” says Don Snyder, former Congressman from Pennsylvania. “You want to make sure that you understand the political environment that the legislator is involved with, and provide that person with the justification for moving this issue—in spite of any opposition.”

Think about the interests of your elected leader, and advocate for your cause in the context of those interests, Snyder says. How can your program improve the lives of the citizens to whom your local, state, or federal representatives are accountable?

Quinn, too, is a proponent of pitching ideas from the lawmaker's point of view. "As yourself: How is this going to affect this legislator's life with his or her constituents?" he adds.

### **Forge Relationships**

Equally important is the need to establish open and lasting relationships with legislators, says Quinn—and not just when times are tough.

"From a legislator's perspective, you always look a little differently at those folks with whom you've had a relationship," he says. "You cannot only go to these legislators when you want a handout. You've got to maintain those relationships before the panic strikes."

Snyder says that such relationships should be multilevel, across all sectors of the government that are appropriate to the situation—local, state, and federal. Having a politician on board at the local level may be enough. On the other hand, if there *is* a state or federal component, the local person will only get a proposal or initiative so far, Snyder says. "That's why you need to have a voice at every seat at the table."

### **Be Truthful**

No matter what level of government you're working with, Quinn and Snyder agree, elected leaders are likely to place a premium on those advocates and organizations that do their homework—and have the factual evidence on hand to support their cause.

Few things have a greater cooling effect on the advocate-legislator relationship than fuzzy math, says Quinn. Legislators and their aides rely on the information they receive to make very public statements—declarations that can come back to haunt them politically if they're proven unreliable. That's why it's important to perform due diligence when promoting your agenda, whether it's at town hall, the state house, or on Capitol Hill.

"This gets down and dirty. It gets personal. It gets emotional," Quinn says of the funding process. "You need to have your facts and figures straight to be presented in a logical, helpful way." Remember: "Yours is not going to be the only cause out there."