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## Original Article

# Teaching public policy advocacy by combining academic knowledge and professional wisdom

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**Abstract** Lobbying is a well-established occupation and has attained a professional status in the United States and other democracies in the world that can be taught in the university setting. This article discusses what lobbying skills can be learned in a university setting, and second what subjects are and should be included in the curriculum of public affairs and lobbying courses. From over 20 years' experience at American University's Public Affairs and Advocacy Institute (PAAI) in Washington DC and for the last 12 years in the European Public Affairs and Advocacy Institute (EPAAI) in Brussels, we know ethical lobbying skills and knowledge can be taught effectively in a university setting. With the help of professional lobbyists, we have taught technical skills, professional norms and ethics, and strategies and tactics of advocacy to over 1000 students, since the founding of PAAI in 1992. Effective lobbying strategies, tactics and ethics can be taught and learned with a combination of rigorous academic research and applied/practical wisdom from professional advocates. From our program we have launched hundreds of PAAI graduates into successful advocacy careers. The underlying approach in PAAI is 'The Campaign Mindset', an operational theory of change in advocacy and the policy process. Our curriculum instructionally mirrors the content and process that a comprehensive advocacy campaign would embrace, from conception through implementation, to conclusion. Specifically, our curriculum content is organized into six general interrelated and at times overlapping modules. The modules reflect the conceptual building blocks that are typically used in a major advocacy campaign. However, many important topics and tools critical to advocacy action plans are also discussed within each module. The PAAI Modules are: Political Environment Assessment for Strategy and Action Plan Development and Management; Direct Lobbying; Communications Strategy, Message Development and Execution; Coalition Building; Building and Using Grassroots and Grassstops Support; and Understanding and Operating Within the Ethical Laws, Rules and Norms Pertaining to all Aspects of Advocacy. We have integrated professional lobbyist



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mentors into PAAI who have helped keep the curriculum up-to-date (for example, especially social media) and essential in placing our students in the advocacy profession.

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This article answers several questions that are often discussed between academics and lobbyists: first, can effective lobbying skills be learned in a university setting ... are good lobbyists born or taught (Goldman, 2012)?; and second, what subjects are and should be included in the curriculum of public affairs and lobbying courses? Lobbying is a well-established occupation and has attained a professional status in the United States and other democracies in the world (McGrath, 2005, 2006). Almost 40 years have passed since interest group scholar Berry (1977, p. 92) wrote, 'No one has interviewed the people who actually hire staff lobbyists and lobbyist entrepreneurs to ask them what qualities they look for. It is entirely possible that employers have no clear idea either of what qualifies a person to be a lobbyist'. Maybe 30 years ago the statement had some validity, but in modern day lobbying in Washington DC it is wrong and at best, dated. We know the art and craft of lobbying can be taught effectively and we have been doing it for over 20 years at American University in the Public Affairs and Advocacy Institute (PAAI) in Washington DC and for the last 12 years in the European Public Affairs and Advocacy Institute (EPAAI) in Brussels. With the help of professional lobbyists and scholars, we have taught technical skills, professional norms and ethics, and strategies and tactics of advocacy to over 1000 students, since the founding of PAAI in 1992.<sup>1</sup> Effective lobbying strategies, tactics and ethics can be taught and learned with a combination of rigorous academic research and applied/practical wisdom from professional advocates (Fleisher, 2001, 2003, 2007). From our program we have launched hundreds of PAAI graduates into successful advocacy careers.<sup>2</sup> We have had positive reactions and feedback from dozens of employers throughout the United States and in Brussels in the advocacy profession that our students are some of the best young professionals they have hired. We constantly update and improve our curriculum using evaluations from prospective employers.

We describe the approach we take in PAAI, EPAAI and our applied workshops (for example, Ethics and Lobbying Workshop, Social Media Workshop and Issue Campaign Management). All of these offerings have changed, often rapidly, over the years as the advocacy profession has modernized. We teach our lobbying institutes within a school of public affairs, but similar courses could be taught in business schools, communications programs and public relations curriculum (Fleisher and Blair, 1999).



A course applying academic and professional practical knowledge about lobbying should introduce the student to several distinct but integrated topics related to modern advocacy in the United States, although many elements of PAAI have been used in lobbying education in Asian and European countries.<sup>3</sup> It is advisable to do this through readings, academic presentations and practitioner speakers who have had many years of experience lobbying. By bringing in the best lobbyists to speak about recent developments in the advocacy field, we are assured that the institutes are relevant and realistic. Academic publications and evidence based research should be an integral part of a lobbying institute, workshop or seminar.<sup>4</sup> PAAI has also helped to generate research by the mentors, speakers and professors in the institute.<sup>5</sup>

The skill content required for effective professional advocacy is hardly a static body of knowledge. It has evolved, at times dramatically, over the last 35-plus years. Legislative reforms, such as the sunshine laws of the seventies, the introduction of TV in both chambers in the early eighties and rapid developments in technology to this day are but a few of the prominent forces that continually shape how lobbying is conducted today. PAAI remains current with all these developments and attempts to incorporate them in real time into each Institute. Two small examples of content that we have relatively recently included in our curriculum with special focus are the varying uses of social media platforms that affect multiple dimensions of advocacy and the increasingly changing and important role think tanks are having on all dimensions of the policy debate.

We have found that comprehensive advocacy efforts emerge either as a crisis response to an imminent policy threat or as a result of the vision, leadership and commitment of specific individuals or organizations to affect the direction of a public policy. The former is usually up and running within a short time, from a recognition of the problem, to commitment to act, to execution. The latter effort could take many months or years to mature from a compelling idea to a full-blown advocacy campaign. Whether the time frame from a commitment to act is condensed or lengthy, the fundamental elements necessary for launching and managing an effective advocacy campaign remain the same.

Often, many individuals who recognize that their personal or institutional objectives may require an advocacy agenda have limited or no knowledge as to how to professionally organize and implement such an effort.

As we cover in our Institute and later in this article, there are a myriad of factors that need to be considered, when organizing and managing substantial advocacy campaigns. Some are obviously and intricately related to the specific objectives of the effort, while others may appear external to the effort but are nevertheless relevant to how the project needs to be organized and managed

Those initiating or actually leading advocacy efforts that recognize the need for specific advocacy expertise early and move to integrate it into the formative thinking of what they want to accomplish are likely to increase the chances of overall



effectiveness and efficiency of their efforts. Those who wait longer or simply ignore the complex demands of advocacy are more likely to jeopardize their success and will certainly, at a minimum, increase their costs in terms of time, money and manpower spent on their efforts.

The theory of policy change in major advocacy campaigns recognizes the multi-dimensional dynamics of policymaking in Washington. We have dubbed it ‘The Campaign Mindset’. Its application requires detailed knowledge of the targeted policy, the institutional process that needs to be engaged to affect it, the key players, in and outside of government, with a stake in the issue, as well as the underlying political dynamics that might affect the outcome of the lobbying campaign. It also requires the leadership to build an organizational commitment to manage and fund the effort, as well as a strategic framework and action plan to guide its efforts.

The Campaign Mindset as operational theory of change is the underlying pedagogical principle of PAAI. Our curriculum instructionally mirrors the content and process that a comprehensive advocacy campaign would embrace, from conception through implementation, to conclusion.

Specifically, our curriculum content is organized into six general interrelated and at times overlapping modules. The modules reflect the conceptual building blocks that are typically used in a major advocacy campaign. However, many important topics and tools critical to advocacy action plans are also discussed within each module. The PAAI Modules are: (i) Political Environment Assessment for Strategy and Action Plan Development and Management; (ii) Direct Lobbying; (iii) Communications Strategy, Message Development and Execution; (iv) Coalition Building; (v) Building and Using Grassroots and Grass Tops Support; and (vi) Understanding and Operating Within the Ethical Laws, Rules and Norms Pertaining to all Aspects of Advocacy. Each of these modules is described in detail below.

## **Module One: Assessing the Political Environment for Developing a Strategy and Action Plan**

Before any serious action is taken in any major advocacy campaign, an exhaustive and comprehensive analysis is conducted of the critical elements of policy-making at the Federal level. Although there may be a number of legitimate frameworks for undertaking this exercise, we believe all essential activity and understandings necessary to fully inform a comprehensive advocacy campaign could be organized from the analysis of the four general categories of Policy, Process, Players and Politics.

The *Policy* section, among other things, would require a thorough analysis of the goals and objectives of the campaign and the problems they attempt to address, along with the justification for doing so. These goals will be assessed for internal consistency with the stated problem as well as with the intended legislative



objectives. It would also examine the scope of the policy, its budgetary cost, beneficiary impact and legality.

The *Process* analysis basically asks the question, where will the debate and decisions regarding the policy objective be joined institutionally? What official actions need to be taken to promote or defeat the initiative? Is this policy a Presidential initiative that would require interagency or regulatory review, or is it in some stage of Congressional oversight or formal action? The analysis would also include an explanation of the formal rules and customary behaviors associated with the actions of each of these institutions that may impact the policy's final disposition.

The *Players* analysis identifies and profiles all essential individuals and entities both in and outside of the Congress that would have a stake in whether this policy campaign succeeds or fails. We require students to do an extensive 'network analysis' or 'map' of the key stakeholders and champions for and against a policy or program.<sup>6</sup> It is essential to understand the motivations and relationships among the champions and those in support and opposition of a policy. At a minimum, it would include public officials in the executive or congressional branches of government and their staff that will be required or want to promote or defeat this policy initiative. The analysis would additionally examine individuals and organizations outside of government who may seek to shape the outcome of the campaign directly or indirectly. This might include individual thought leaders, think tanks, industry representatives, NGO's, various sectors of the media, including those that are issue or audience specific, as well those designed for mass consumption.

With respect to public officials, the analysis would begin to determine their current knowledge of the issue and their ability to develop full command of the topic, their motivation for participation and their ability to influence others and drive the debate. Outside non-media government players might be examined in terms of their ability to shape the substantive parameters of the issue, their effectiveness in influencing decision makers by opinion or grassroots mobilization. Media players would be evaluated primarily from a historical perspective in terms of how they might have covered this policy before, if at all, and their disposition and motivations for covering it in the prospective debate.

The *Politics* section requires a dynamic assessment, in that politics is an aspect of Washington policy-making, which is permanently in flux and must be monitored continually. It is an element of policy-making that has many dimensions, some more predictable than others, but all requiring careful review as they relate to the goals and actions of the campaign. Some of the more prominent dimensions are often straightforward, but essential to understand. For example, ideological association of the policy and correlation to the institutional power distribution in the Congress or partisan control of the White House is necessary to understand. Is the policy proposal a partisan issue? Is there or have there been strong public sentiments associated with this issue? Are its proponents, institutionally and individually, held in a high regard? Is there an apparent timely rationale for pursuing the issue? Are there prominent



distractions currently or on the horizon that would shift the public or decision maker's attention from fully addressing this policy?

There are virtually a limitless number of politically oriented questions that this analysis might pursue at both the macro and micro political level that could inform a campaign's strategy and game plan. Limited time and resources often constrain the inquiry in any given moment but it should never prevent this type of inquiry from continuing throughout the campaign. There is always more information to uncover. Once accurate data you may have collected in the past is just as likely to have changed or need to be refreshed. The intent of this module is to encourage an exhaustive examination of each of these categories individually as well as how they interact with one another at critical moments and continually over time as needed. Changes in any one of the four categories could significantly affect the overall interaction or substantive impact of any of the other categories.

This overall assessment is intended to provide the advocacy campaign its strategic foundation from which overall goals are clarified, strategy is formed, benchmarked objectives are identified, and lobbying tactics are designed and deployed. The completed process should provide a very rich snapshot of how to launch the effort, but is just the beginning of a longer campaign that demands continual engagement, review and adjustment as the lobbying battle unfolds. The campaign should be research driven, including an analysis of the political landscape analysis, definition of the policy problem, legal and policy analysis, plus justification of the policy goals.

## **Strategy and action plan development and management**

The comprehensive assessment suggested in the first module, should generate the information and insights necessary to develop an effective overall campaign strategy and action plan. It would do this by crystallizing the operational goals, assessing opportunities and obstacles to engagement, identifying essential resources and by providing political insights to help map a road to success. The purpose of translating an assessment into a clearly defined strategy and action plan is at least twofold. It defines and holds the four dimensions of the campaign together. The strategy reaffirms and delineates the general goals of what we are trying to accomplish. The action plan takes into account the campaign's available resources and timeline, as well as other factors not necessarily controllable and specifically describes how, when and where to execute the campaign. The action plan will identify the targets critical to making the campaign a success in terms of the decisions that have to be made throughout the entire process. It would then define the actions necessary to affect that outcome. These actions will utilize the latest tools (described later) that are most commonly used in major advocacy campaigns. The second reason why having a carefully delineated strategy and action plan is critical is that it becomes the primary management tool of the issue campaign. It not only defines the specific direction and



actions of the effort but as importantly, it provides the underlying structure for assigning those actions, coordinating their implementation, assessing their impact and adjusting their applications in real time whenever necessary.

The orchestration of these efforts is usually quite elaborate, requiring a comprehensive and sophisticated skill set. It usually requires an individual that will likely have an expertise in one of the conventional tools of advocacy, but is also able to simultaneously see how all the moving parts of these efforts must be arrayed, managed and harmonized among the participants, the targets of the effort, the media and those that are financing it and invested in the ultimate outcome for months and even years. Regardless of a specific task within the campaign, understanding the importance of having a strategy driven effort as well as the role and responsibilities of the campaign manager in driving the overall campaign, is essential for success.

## **Module Two: Communications Strategy, Message and Development and Tactics**

Developing and using research tested concepts in paid and ‘earned’ media as well as on line and off line is essential in complex large issues campaigns. While every tool used in an advocacy campaign is a tactic of the larger strategy, every tool should have a strategy framework of its own for all the same reasons the larger campaign does. Message development and communication activities must be bound and guided by a strategy and action plan. As a broad tool, the communications activities of a campaign are generally viewed as first among equals. A campaign should not knock on the first door of Congress or write the first press release without knowing how it wants to characterize its efforts. The strategic foundation of all communications activities usually sits on the answers to the following questions: what is the best way to describe the campaign goals and actions; what is the best way to describe the intentions and actions of opponents; how might opponents want to characterize themselves and how might they want to characterize us; and the plan should delineate the audiences critical to this debate and how to reach the audiences with the most effective message.

There are a myriad of activities that would constitute the tactics or tools of a communication strategy. Once the strategic messages are developed and the offensive and defensive directions are determined, the campaign decides which communication tools are most effective and which can it afford to use. This module specifically explores the most prominent and commonly used tools and activities. It includes the role of survey research and focus groups to refine the message, the use of paid media in all platforms like Internet (social media), cable, radio and broadcast; exploiting targeted earned media activities at the national and maybe state and local levels. Modern advocacy campaigns embrace the rapidly emerging role of social media. Although the term is used loosely, this module explores how the Internet uses various communication platforms like Facebook, tweeting, blogging, web sites and



other social media to promote, persuade or call to act to increasingly narrowly drawn audiences.

### **Module Three: Direct Lobbying**

Personally promoting specific legislative actions directly with members of Congress, their staff, as well as officials of the Executive Branch, is the most commonly known form of lobbying. The direct lobbying of an advocacy campaign is probably the tool or tactic that is most closely aligned with the overall strategy and game plan of the campaign. Direct lobbying potentially touches or at least contemplates each of the players (outlined in the network analysis) whose specific behavior could have an immediate impact on the outcome of the Campaign. The strategy question of this tool asks what is the most effective way to generally approach the decision maker and her institution. For example, should we employ a full court press in Washington or just targeted visits in the home state or district or some combination? The answer to this may reflect an overall approach or one that is adjusted case by case. The module then turns to tactics to elaborate on how best to conduct each of the visits. Given the specific target, which message might be most motivating, who would be most persuasive in delivering that message, where should we seek to have the visit and when. Often, direct lobbying meetings are enhanced by the strength of the personal relationship the lobbyist or institutional entity might have with key staff or the member herself. These relationships are built in any number of ways, such as being a former member or staffer who has worked alongside players in the targeted office, helping in re-election efforts, having a long history of working together on any given set of issues. In all cases the quality of trust that may benefit a lobbyist in a current interaction is a function of competency, reliability and trust in the previous interactions. In any event, these activities need to be informed and aligned with the overall strategy, as well as the tools and activities discussed and dictated in each of the other modules.

### **Module Four: Strengthening Advocacy through Coalition Building**

Building and leading support from like-minded and sympathetic organizations, individuals and institutions, is an essential part of lobbying in Washington DC. All large and successful advocacy campaigns use coalition building as one of their lobbying tactics. The goal of this tactic is to provide evidence of the depth and breadth of support for the goals of the overall campaign. Churches, think tanks, NGOs, businesses, celebrities, academics and former public officials are all potential partners of coalitions. Each partner potentially adds their validation by bringing substantive credibility to the proposed position as well as possible evidence of broad voter support from a particular constituency. Often coalition member targets are





obvious allies whose support is welcomed but expected. Occasionally, respected organizational entities and individuals are recruited as coalition partners who have no obvious connection to the issue in question. However, given the ‘strange bedfellow’ perception, they add a more provocative and possibly compelling credibility to the overall effort.

## **Module Five: Energizing and Mobilizing Grassroots and Grasstops Support**

As building robust coalitions adds credibility and strength to an overall campaign, mobilizing community leaders and their followers, among others, strengthens and enhances the effectiveness of your locally targeted efforts as well. These activities are typically undertaken to demonstrate local support for an issue or position to an individual target identified in your overall strategy. Multiple activities, such as conducting local meetings, generating paid, earned and social media, sending direct mail, phone banking, and so on, are used to inform, motivate and facilitate this engagement. The strategy and action plan of the overall campaign requires activating people in a timely and targeted fashion with the goal of building and maintaining support for the effort, while executing key advocacy actions for the duration of the advocacy effort and beyond.

## **Module Six: Rules, Regulations, and Norms of Lobbying**

The tactics and strategies of lobbying discussed above are numerous and complex. Understanding what these activities are, how they relate, and how they are conducted is important to being an effective lobbyist. However, although these understandings comprise a necessary condition for successful advocacy, they are not sufficient. We emphasize in PAAI that an accomplished and respected lobbyist realizes that his or her career will succeed only if it is conducted according to both the letter and the spirit of the laws and regulations affecting the lobbying activities. This is especially true after the lobbying scandals and after the passage of major congressional lobbying and ethics reforms in 2007. Students are taught that ‘playing close to the edge’ or ‘crossing the line’ (like Jack Abramoff) are illegal or at least untenable attitudes and behaviors that are easily identified and aggressively admonished by the legal authorities, as well as their professional peers. The purpose of teaching the role of ethics and lobbying in a democratic and pluralistic society is essential to a successful career in advocacy. We embed the rules and regulations governing lobbying and related activities (including the House and Senate lobbying reforms and President Obama’s executive order related to lobbyists); the guidelines for conducting ‘best practices’ as a professional; the role and impact of campaign



contributions on the process and the profession; as well as perspectives about the norms of public advocacy from academics and lobbyists on Capitol Hill. We have focused on the importance of integrating a strong element of ethical lobbying in advocacy campaigns. We require students to build and use ethical strategies, tactics and relationships within the letter and spirit of the law.<sup>7</sup>

## **PAAI Assignments**

The content of our institute on lobbying is conveyed through academic literature and the writings of professionals in the field of advocacy. Our lectures structure the class as well as presentations by distinguished advocacy professionals and thought leaders in the Washington DC area.<sup>8</sup> In addition, before the class commencing, a major legislative policy issue facing the United States (recently cap and trade, immigration reform, social security reform, regulation of chemicals, trade policy) is selected as a case study for student advocacy campaigns. The class divides into groups, half of which are assigned the pro-position while the other half, the con, related to the issue campaign. Each group is then responsible for developing a comprehensive and well-managed advocacy campaign utilizing the Campaign Mindset to promote their position. Each group is also assigned a lobbyist mentor who has considerable professional experience in advocacy to work with them in developing all aspects of their plans. They are expected to work collaboratively as if they were a full service lobbying organization, which could be hired to assist in executing a lobbying plan. On their last day of class, each group presents their plan to a hypothetical client that is looking for their services. Their presentations typically include a 30-page written report, PowerPoint slides and an organized oral presentation. They are evaluated and critiqued by us and by a panel of professionals who have acted as mentors. Each plan, a written report, is reviewed subsequent to the oral presentations, along with an individual essay on various assigned topics to be submitted several weeks after class is completed.

## **Conclusion**

The profession of lobbying and advocacy can be taught in a university setting as we have shown over the last 20-plus years at American University. We have demystified the lobbying profession for students by disaggregating the skills and knowledge that are necessary to be an effective and ethical practitioner while also showing the complexity and holistic perspective required to fully understand and engage in the advocacy process. We have found that an advanced applied lobbying course needs creative pedagogy using professionals and academics. Learning about lobbying should not be simply an occupational trade course. Students need to learn that the



substance and practice of lobbying is part art. Lobbying skills require the blending of practitioner wisdom, combined with theory and guided by practice. Historically the feeder profession into lobbying was first-hand experience in government and politics or the mythical relationship with the law profession. Others entered the lobbying profession through public relations firms. All of these are important, but not essential. Modern lobbying skills require more than on the job training and government experience. We have placed hundreds of young professionals in the advocacy/lobbying profession after graduating from our Public Affairs and Advocacy Institute and the European Public Affairs and Advocacy Institute. The sheer demand for well-trained professionals requires a systematic learning environment that universities provide to meet the current changes and challenges of the lobbying profession.

## Notes

- 1 For each institute we have two to three prominent professional lobbyists as mentors for the students. Student teams develop lobbying plans with the guidance of the mentors and the mentors evaluate the plans at the end of the institute.
- 2 Over 1200 students and young professionals have taken PAAI since its inception in 1992. PAAI is based upon the Campaign Management Institute (CMI) started in 1985 at the Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies.
- 3 Graduates of PAAI have recently started lobbying institutes in Ukraine, Hungary and Croatia. Educators from Asian nations have applied some lessons learned in PAAI to lobbying classes in their countries.
- 4 In the most recent PAAI, we have had the students read the following works: Ainsworth (2002); Andres (2009); Baumgartner *et al* (2009); Berry (1997); Levine (2009); and Luneburg *et al* (2009).
- 5 Andres *et al* (2000); Thurber (1996, 2002, 2006, 2011a, 2011b, 2012); Ingle (2007).
- 6 See Thurber (1996) for a description of mapping the stakeholders. Also see Browne (1990).
- 7 We also teach a special workshop on 'Lobbying and Ethics' for students and lobbyists each year.
- 8 See our website at [www.american.edu/spa/ccps](http://www.american.edu/spa/ccps) for videos of speeches by numerous speakers we have used in PAAI.

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