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Who Are My Members of Congress?

Effective advocacy is a complicated effort that is improved with information. Having a position and communicating it to a Member of Congress is important, but knowing what your Members of Congress care about can make your message infinitely more effective. To be an even more effective advocate for undergraduate research, you should try to understand the priorities of those elected to represent you and your neighbors and connect them to undergraduate research on your campus.

The first step in getting to know your Members' priorities is reviewing each Member's committee assignments in the House and Senate. (Remember, you have three Members of Congress representing you—one in the House of Representatives and two Senators). Committee assignments determine what policy topics your Members will be able to directly affect and are working on regularly. The assignments also give you an idea of what policy areas particularly interest the Member.

Lawmakers request committee assignments and generally seek seats on powerful panels—such as those that deal with taxes and spending, committees that affect their district or state profoundly for particular reasons, or assignments that reflect a certain interest or expertise of the lawmaker. For example, Members who represent districts with large military bases generally try to serve on panels that deal with the Department of Defense. Or one-time teachers might try to sit on the committees that make decisions about education policy.

To become familiar with your Members, read press releases from their offices, which will be available on their websites. In addition, you should read their biographies to understand their work and personal experiences before coming to Washington, their current legislative initiatives, and how they spend their time when they are at home in their district or state.

Once you have a cogent understanding of the Members' priorities, it is time to analyze how undergraduate research experiences on your campus fit into their federal agendas. For example, if your Senator sits on a committee that oversees federal energy policies, review which undergraduate research projects on your campus directly or tangentially relate to energy issues. This information would create a path to building and increasing the interest in undergraduate research of that Senator and his or her staff. While the topics of interest will vary from Member to Member, be resourceful in relating and aligning undergraduate research projects with Members' interests.

You should try to meet with your elected representatives in person; schedule meetings with them when they are in your district and bring the students researchers to meet with them. This is one of the most powerful strategies for garnering your lawmakers' interest in an issue, and, as we saw at this year's Posters on the Hill event in Washington, D.C., students are the best messengers—by far.

Undergraduate research spans the spectrum of issues the federal government deliberates daily. Using publicly available information and connecting it to ongoing undergraduate research on your campus will put you in a stronger position to win allies in Congress and will increase the profile and understanding of undergraduate research on Capitol Hill.

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