

Communicating with Policymakers

Understand the differences:

1. Immediately relevant to a decision vs. most important to knowledge
2. Concern over feasibility, constituency reaction, implementation, appearance, and values vs. concern over measurement, causal inference, impact, generalizability
3. Knowledge of what's been tried before, what's under their control, how people react vs. knowledge of policy variation, potential effects (including unintended), and uncertainty

What they want: immediate definitive answers about size of problems, effects of small changes from well-known and disinterested policy area experts

What we usually offer: given my latest research, here is what I would do if I were king for a day; let me show you this data (& by the way, we need more money in my area and more research)

Context:

State level: people from many walks of life, assisted by a couple of overworked recent grads

Local level: only 45% of leaders with college degrees

What you can do:

1. Develop a reputation for responsive, informed, and straight evidence, with examples
2. Come prepared: what can each decision maker in each level of government do? What success stories are there from other governments or actors?
3. Learn as well as teach: come with clear questions and make them think it was their idea
4. Have a plausible ask: Given the values, constituency, and priorities of the person you are talking to, what are realistic and impactful first steps?

Some advantages:

1. You're not a lobbyist; you're not asking for more money for the university
2. You're an expert; you have knowledge across a broader scope and longer time horizon
3. You have access to and can interpret relevant data and prior experience
4. You have a network of colleagues with related expertise

But know your perceived perspective:

1. Liberals: professors disproportionately Dems, not conservatives; "crazy leftist" campus
2. Elitists: university, technocrats, not like constituents, look down upon less educated

Exercise:

1. Groups of four, at least one person with research they would like to present to policymakers; one person give first try, others ask questions in character, then help
2. First pretend you are in a meeting with a rural conservative legislator from the UP who is interested in your topic (though it's not his top priority) and that you are too liberal

3. Then pretend you are in a meeting with a minority legislator from Detroit, who cares about your topic but thinks you are not attentive enough to how her constituents see things, what their priorities are, and how they would be affected