

Dr. Smith Goes to Washington

Gone are the times when those of us in Washington can effectively make the case for more science funding by ourselves. It is time to rally the troops, to activate our



grassroots, to transform bench scientists into Science Advocates. Fortunately, scientists, whether you realize it or not, are already excellent marketers of the significance of your own research – you do it all the time in grant applications and journal articles. It is not a far stretch to convincing members of Congress that what you do is critical and worthy of funding.

So how can you, the working scientist, help convince policymakers that science funding should be their top priority? Here are a few pointers to get you started:

1. **All politics is local.** Advocating for science or getting involved in science policy does not require a trip to Washington. All members of Congress have local offices in their Districts. Give them a call, ask to talk or meet with them to discuss issues important to scientists. Better yet, invite them to your lab for a visit. This may take persistence, or even a little help from your university or institution, but there's a major "gee whiz!" factor associated with seeing how science is done. A brief tour of your lab can transform your Representative into a champion for science, or at least give them an understanding of how basic research works, how scientists are trained or how animals are used humanely in research. Elected officials are interested in hearing what their constituents care about. It's OK to just call their local or Washington office, or send them an email, letting them know that science and science funding is of great concern to you. They do pay attention to those sorts of appeals, particularly if they get them from multiple scientists.
2. **So, you want to come to Washington?** There are advantages to coming to visit lawmakers in our nation's capitol. Not only do you get a sense of how science policy fits into the bigger picture of federal law, but you can visit your entire state's delegation in one fell swoop. Plus, you impress upon those you meet with that science funding is so important you are willing to abandon your critical research for a few days to come talk about it.
3. **Blessed are the staff, for they shall inherit.** Congressional staff do the bulk of the work that gets done on Capitol Hill. Members of Congress are busy people, they may not be able to squeeze you into their schedule or will get called away at the last minute. Thus, you might find yourself meeting with a member of his or her staff. There's nothing wrong with this; staff are often the people best positioned to make sure your issue gets on the radar screen of the member of Congress. Treat them as you would your Congressmen or Senator. Something else to keep in mind is that Hill staffers are often very young. Don't be insulted to find

yourself sitting across the table from a fresh faced twenty year old; for all you know, he or she wrote the very legislation that you are there to talk about.

4. **Talk about what you know and speak the language.** It is important to have message points for what you're advocating for: more money for the National Institutes for Health; less visa restrictions; more embryonic stem cell lines; or whatever. However, you are there first and foremost as a scientist, and telling the story of the research that you do to advance our understanding and improve our lives is just as compelling. There is very little understanding on Capitol Hill for just how science works - i.e., how do we design experiments, what's basic research, what the heck is a postdoc, why do we need to publish or travel to meetings. As a scientist, you can explain the culture of science first hand. That being said, you must remember that not everyone is a scientist. Politicians like acronyms as much as scientists do, but they have their own set and speak with a very different vocabulary. It is important to explain your research in the simplest terms possible terms and in ways that relate to the real world. Sure, it's great that secretory phospholipase A2 increases our understanding of the cellular mechanisms involved in inflammation, but you need to convey how ultimately that knowledge can help patients with sickle cell disease. If you need to, bring visual aids. It's the exact same way you explain what you do for a living to Uncle Joe over Thanksgiving dinner – we've all done it.
5. **Don't forget to say thank you.** Winston Churchill once said, "In science, you don't need to be polite, you only have to be right." That's not entirely true. There is a perception in Washington that scientists are very good at asking for what they want, but not so great at showing gratitude for those who help them. It is absolutely imperative to thank those lawmakers who champion science, even if they fail in getting whatever they are advocating for. When you meet them, or their staff, praise their past actions in support of science. Drop them a quick email or fax them a note to say thank you for fighting for science. Let them know you pay attention and that their efforts are appreciated. A more public method is writing a letter to the local newspaper praising your Senator or Representative for their actions on behalf of science. Trust me, politicians pay attention to what's published about them in the papers back home!
6. **Spread the joy.** Individual action is wonderful and important, but think how much more effective you could be if you recruited others to the gospel of science. If you find out about a piece of legislation about to be voted on that is important to you, it is not enough to contact your legislator. Talk to your colleagues, tell them to contact their legislator, too. Organize a departmental seminar on science policy or advocacy, let your fellow scientists know how they can become involved. Write a letter or an OpEd piece on the importance of science or an issue related to science for your local paper; often your institution's media office can help you to get it published. And don't forget that there are many more non-scientists out there than there are researchers. The public can be a valuable ally in

advocating for federal funding of science. Participate in outreach, talk about science and how science is funded at community events, schools or the local Rotary club. The public has been incredibly supportive of scientific research, it is critical to maintain that patronage. Increasing science literacy and knowledge of how research is done benefits us all.

7. **Scientific societies: not just for meetings!** Most scientific societies now have government affairs or policy shops of some kind. They can be invaluable resources for information on issues, talking points or advice on approaching key legislators. Policy professionals can brief you or provide you with advocacy materials. However, keep in mind that as a constituent you have as much of, if not a greater, ability to gain access to your own member of Congress as a professional lobbyist does. Below, you'll find a list of resources from FASEB and its member societies that can aid you in your science advocacy efforts.
8. **Train the next generation.** Impress upon your graduate students and postdocs that advocating for science is part of their civic duty as scientists, as important as serving on study sections, reviewing papers or presenting at meetings. Allow them, every once in a while, to escape the lab to participate in a visit to Capitol Hill. Young scientists are passionate and compelling spokespersons for science, and training them to be Science Advocates will ensure federal support for research for future generations. Many scientific societies, such as ASBMB, sponsor "Hill Days" for graduate students and postdocs – encourage your trainees to get involved.

There you have it, troops! You are now prepared to go out and fight the good fight for science. With a minimal amount of effort you can make a tremendous difference in how policymakers view investment in scientific research. You know and I know that science is key to meeting the challenges of the 21st century and improving our quality of life. Now you just need to tell the rest of the world.

Resources:

FASEB's Legislative Action Center (<http://capwiz.com/faseb/home/>) – Here you can find out about legislation of interest, connect to your legislators and media outlets and sign up for FASEB Action E-List so you can be alerted when issues arise.

FASEB Office of Public Affairs: (<http://opa.faseb.org>) – Get informed about the issues, learn what FASEB is doing to represent the working scientist in Washington.

FASEB Member Society Resources
(<http://www.faseb.org/faseb/societies.html>) – Find out about the issues related to

**your scientific discipline, explore society public or governmental affairs
program, get involved with society activities.**

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