A Day at the Capitol can be a valuable experience for all involved. Attendees are able to share their views and concerns with their elected officials, who in turn learn which issues are resonating with constituents. Traditionally, a day at the Capitol, with busloads of students and staff fanning out for member meetings in matching t-shirts, has been a hallmark of higher education advocacy.

However, today organizations are sometimes rethinking the efficacy of these events. When legislators are under pressure to conform to their party’s positions, quieter, less public forms of advocacy can be more effective. So, rather than assuming that a Day at the Capitol is a must-do each legislative session, the first step should be to pause, assess the political situation, and determine whether holding such an event will help your organization meet its legislative goals.

If you decide to organize a Day at the Capitol, a number of factors can impact whether the visit is a success. As you plan, don’t overlook the following key elements:

**Choosing the Best Date for your Event**

Your first task is to choose the best time to go. To maximize your impact, you will want to visit when the probability is highest that legislators will be in their offices but not overwhelmed with legislative business. In most cases, that means scheduling your visit when the legislature is in session but avoiding the busiest times, such as the date when legislation must “cross over” from one house to the other and the end of the legislative session when members are rushing to pass bills.

**Securing Space**

When legislatures are in session, meeting space is at a premium and you must reserve space well in advance. There is typically a hierarchy favoring legislators and their staff over outside groups, so ask the office of a legislator with whom you work regularly to help you secure needed space.

**Scheduling Meetings**

Scheduling meetings with elected officials is a simple process, but a complicated endeavor. You should email the scheduler in each legislator’s office at least four weeks in advance and provide a range of possible meeting times. Copy staff in the legislator’s office who cover education so they are aware of your request. Be prepared for meetings to be rescheduled or even canceled. When that happens, offer to conduct a virtual meeting after your in-person Day at the Capitol.

**Establish Meeting Teams**

Depending on the size of the event, attendees may break into teams to meet with legislators and staff. Typically, these teams are organized by district, since legislators want to meet with their own constituents. Teams should include a mix of administrators, faculty, staff and students. If possible, each team should include someone active in the organization who can report back to organization leadership about outcomes of the meeting, send a post-meeting thank you note, and plan any follow-up activities.

**Prepare Your Team**

Meetings with legislators or their staff are typically 30 minutes, so it is important to use that time wisely. Prior to the Day at the Capitol, all participants should participate in a training session that prepares them to:

* Understand and clearly articulate the advocacy goals for the visit. Legislators and their staff are busy people. They will want to know what your organization seeks to accomplish legislatively. In short, they will expect an “ask” and may be offended if there is not a clear purpose to the meeting. Further, it is important to emphasize that the Day at the Capitol is not a time for addressing one’s own personal political or policy interests. Participants need to understand that they are representing a larger organization and that they will only be effective if they work together to advance the organization’s policy agenda.
* Research the background and key positions of the people with whom they will meet. Having this information helps attendees forge a personal connection (“we went to the same high school!”) and demonstrates that they know who they are meeting with and their positions (“thank you for sponsoring legislation on teacher pay”).
* Appreciate the importance of staff. Day at the Capitol participants can be disappointed to learn that they will be meeting with staff instead of a legislator. Make sure participants understand the vital role these professionals play.
* Establish an agenda for the meeting, with members of the team assigned to handle each item. Designate someone to lead the meeting and someone to take notes. Thirty minutes goes quickly, so it’s important to be organized. See the sample agenda below.
* Share anecdotes that make the policy issue(s) real and compelling. One of the most important reasons for holding a Day at the Capitol is so that legislators and staff can put a human face on policy issues. Participants should be prepared to share one or two compelling personal stories that illustrate the importance of the issue(s) being discussed.
* Plan for follow up. Determine in advance who will send a thank you note after the meeting and follow up on any questions or requests that come up during the meeting. Be sure that the note taker records all follow-up items.

**Sample Agenda for 30-Minute Legislative Visit**

I. Introduce organization and participants

II. Briefly describe the issue or issues you have come to discuss

III. Acknowledge and thank legislator for past work

III. Make your ask – what is the specific action you would like the legislator to take?

IV. Tell personal stories that demonstrate the impact of the requested action

V. Recap and offer to follow-up

**Create a Leave-Behind**

At the conclusion of each meeting, you will want to leave something behind about your organization and the reasons for your meeting. Refer to Creating an Advocacy One-Pager for more information.

**Amplify Your Impact with Social Media**

Most legislators – or their staff – are active on social media; they will appreciate that you have posted about your visit. In politics, X (formerly Twitter) is most common, but Instagram and Facebook are also used. Determine in advance which platforms you will use and establish a hashtag for the event. To ensure that your messages have a consistent look and feel, it can be helpful to designate one or more social media captains who will post on behalf of the group. Encourage all participants to take pictures and to share posts with their networks.

**Follow Up to Build a Relationship**

Leaders of the organization should hold a debrief session with at least one attendee from each meeting to learn what occurred and make a plan for follow-up. Activities may include smaller meetings with key legislators, invitations to visit campuses or speak at an organization conference, or even an award to a legislator for their contribution to education in your state. A Day at the Capitol shouldn’t be a one-off event. It should be the beginning – or continuation – of a relationship that is cultivated over time.