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NAGPS Legislative Action Days 3/4/09-03/05/09  
Synopsis

To begin with, the overall outcome of lobbying for post-higher education was very productive but left many questions unanswered towards this pressing subject matter in today's economy. In this overview I will detail the meetings and hill visits with the various Congressional offices and briefly explain answers that were given in regards to graduate education. Lastly, I will provide recommendations for any EIU and NAGPS representatives engaging in this trip in the future.

Thursday March 5, 2009

Thursday morning began with great excitement and productivity. At 8:30am I, along with two NAGPS representatives from the University of Miami, attended the "Illinois Constituent Coffee" in the Senate Hart Building, held by Senators Durbin and Burris and Congresswoman Biggert. At this open forum, attended by roughly 150 individuals, the Illinois delegation present addressed current concerns being discussed on the Hill and then opening the forum to a Q & A session. It was during this time that I was fortunate enough to be chosen to ask a question. The question I posed was specifically towards graduate education and the concerns for funding and lack of focus by the government. I precisely asked what were the initiatives the Senators were taking to further advance the promotion of post-higher education in the enormous dialogue of Higher Ed. on the hill. More specifically, I indicated in my question I was a graduate student at EIU and many public universities fear the risk of losing funding to attract the best and brightest students via assistantships and research grants. The question was first answered by Senator Durbin, in which his response was very direct and not surprising. It was a struggle to answer the question at first and then he followed by saying that he doesn't have a proper answer for the question because he does not know what is going on with the specifics of graduate education. Senator Burris's answer was somewhat similar. However, both Senators and the Congresswoman did address the point that they had passed a law that would freeze Illinois public state universities from raising the cost of tuition to further help students. They both also indicated that graduate education is of great importance and should be included in dialogues of Higher Ed. After the forum was over there was a photo opportunity with the Senators. I am expecting the picture to be e-mailed shortly ☺

The following meeting was the Legislative Aid to Senator Bayh of Indiana. The purpose of reaching out to his office was an attempt to cover as much of the Midwest area as possible to assist in our NAGPS region. Also, Senator Bayh is reportedly considered a moderate and might need some persuasion in specific areas. At this meeting, Julia Mortyakova, the NAGPS President and University of Miami NAGPS representative joined me. Here we discussed two main concerns addressed by NAGPS and the majority of the graduate student community. I specifically discussed the current issues that are taking place with federal loan funding for graduate students, explaining that many PhD students take 5-7 years, or more, to complete their

degree and federal loans may not cover the entire time it takes to complete the degree. Thus, we stressed to the aid to urge the Senator to support extended access time of federal loans to match the time a graduate student will obtain their degree. We also urged to reduce interest rates in federal loans as it was done for undergraduates via the Stafford loan. The other point we discussed was the pressing issue of International Students staying in the U.S. once they have obtained their graduate degree. We also strongly urged the aid to relay the message to the Senator that many international students are leaving the country after they have received their degree mainly due to the inefficiency of the immigration system. Many international students encounter stressful troubles to obtain extended access of their visa upon completion of their degree to find employment in the U.S. Again, we urged that the Senator support the retention of American trained international students.

The following appointments included a personal meeting with Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen from Miami, Legislative Correspondent to Assistant Majority Leader Senator Durbin, Carmen White and lastly, Director of Legislative Correspondence to Senate Majority Harry Reid, Jessica Satre. The meeting with Senate Majority Reid's office was an extended invitation by Julia Mortyakova. The offices of Senator Durbin and Reid were positively responsive and in sync with our feelings and issues towards graduate education. At the end of every meeting I personally asked to relay the message to the Senator along with a response to our questions. I also specifically asked to receive a response from the Senators as to where they stand on graduate education and if they are willing to bring forth and support the issues we discussed. I will wait for a response and submit an additional summation.

Friday, March 6, 2009

Friday morning began with a meeting with Senator Bill Nelson's office. I met with the education legislative aid, Gene Schlesinger. In this meeting I also discussed all the points previously discussed with other offices. In this meeting however, Gene did indicate that Senator Nelson is somewhat apprehensive on issues dealing with immigration but that he will specifically ask the Senator the issues I brought forth. The following meetings on Friday included, Senator Lamar Alexander's Legislative Correspondent, Ashley Smith, Representative Timothy Johnson's Aid, Jennifer Mascho, and with aides to Representative Ruben Hinojosa, [of Texas] Chairman of Subcommittee on Higher Education, in which Julia Mortyakova also joined me. We also had the great pleasure to briefly meet with the Chairman himself. During the meeting with the aides we discussed all the issues previously mentioned, but we also asked for a direct answer on what is currently being spoken about in the Subcommittee that deals specifically with graduate education. I also passed by Representative Mark Kirk's office from Illinois to drop off the EIU Congressional packet I created that contained all material in regards to the points of discussion brought up in all of my meetings. Because there was scheduling conflicts with the office and my availability I was unable to meet with an aid but still provided all the information necessary to promote post-higher education. All of the meetings that took place on Friday were very productive and seemed to be promising. However, a common trend amongst all the meetings was the uncertainty of how much focus is to be truly geared towards graduate education since the majority of the current debates in Congress are about higher education in regards to

undergraduate degrees. Nonetheless, awareness of graduate education was strongly reinforced on the hill and our presence was certainly not overlooked.

For future legislative action days I strongly encourage and stress more organization on behalf of NAGPS. Although it was left up to the individual to set up their own Congressional appointments, NAGPS as the organization hosting this event, should have their members better organized and mobilized while in D.C. Schedules should be submitted in advance so all those present are aware who has meetings with what office and the availability of everyone once the day is over to have a proper and efficient debriefing time at the end of the day. Issues sheets or any informational sheets to distribute to NAGPS representatives should also be given in advance so they have time to adequately prep for their meetings. Distributing pertinent information the night before meetings begin is not enough time to digest any new information that might need to be presented to the Congressional offices.

For any future EIU NAGPS representative I suggest that appointments be made at least 2 months in advance, not only to ensure a meeting that will reflect a time personally desired, but also to have the possibility of scoring a meeting with a Representative or Senator personally. I was able to secure about nine appointments by beginning to request them roughly around six weeks in advance. Also, always make sure to be as professional as possible when requesting meetings, either via e-mail or fax, to ensure a great first impression with the office. Also, never attend any meeting or Congressional offices empty handed or with loose sheets to give. Always go over-prepared in case you forget anything. I would highly suggest creating some kind of folder that would include a personalized letter briefly detailing the issues that affect graduate students and how you would like to see their support in the upcoming legislative season. Also, never forget to thank them in advance for their support. Please refer to the letter I have written to have an example to follow and the outline that demonstrated what my folder consisted of. Please note that my style is not one that has to be mirrored, it is simply a guideline that may help. Feel free to get creative and find new and innovative ways to target Congressional members in favor of our cause. Lastly, remember to follow up with a thank you e-mail to everyone you meet with as well as a follow up e-mail if your questions and issues have not been responded to.