



AACC ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

A Practical Guide to Federal Advocacy for
Community Colleges

American Association of Community Colleges
Office of Public Purpose and National Advocacy

About This Toolkit

Effective advocacy by community college leaders depends on active engagement and participation at the local, state, and national levels. AACC's government relations efforts in Washington, DC, are exhaustive in support of the sector and its collective weight. However, ultimately, all politics is local, and community college advocacy messaging needs to be transmitted at that level—from the college CEO to the legislator. The community college voice needs to be loud and persistent.

Cultivating good relationships with members of Congress helps to ensure that these legislators recognize the importance of community colleges and champions measures that will benefit them and their students.

The AACC Advocacy Toolkit is a practical starting point for community college leaders, trustees, government relations professionals, and other campus advocates who engage with the federal government. It is designed to support future AACC advocacy trainings—both in person and virtually—and to serve as an evergreen reference for members who have questions about effective federal advocacy and lobbying.

The toolkit is intentionally written at two levels. For those new to federal advocacy, it provides a primer on the basic mechanics of congressional engagement, federal funding, rulemaking, media relations, and testimony. For experienced advocates, it provides checklists, sample language, worksheets, and reminders that can be adapted to a particular issue, member of Congress, agency, or advocacy campaign.

The guidance builds on AACC's longstanding approach: community college advocacy is strongest when national policy priorities are connected to local evidence—both data and stories. Members of Congress and federal officials need to understand not only what a proposal would do in the abstract, but what it means for students, employers, faculty and staff, taxpayers, and the communities that community colleges serve.

This edition includes sections on congressional meetings, correspondence, campus visits, media, social media, and federal agencies. It also adds practical guidance on appropriations requests, Congressionally Directed Spending and Community Project Funding, congressional testimony, federal lobbying rules, the federal budget and appropriations process, budget reconciliation, and federal rulemaking.

This toolkit is designed to be an evergreen resource, relevant throughout the congressional calendar and from Congress to Congress. To accomplish this, it generally avoids relying on names, committee assignments, or bill numbers that can become obsolete. Before using any sample document or scheduling a meeting, confirm the current member, committee assignment, staff contact, appropriations guidance, and applicable deadlines.

AACC members should also coordinate advocacy activity with their institution's government relations, legal, communications, finance, and grants staff as appropriate. This toolkit is educational and does not constitute legal or tax advice. Institutions should consult counsel or their tax adviser regarding questions about lobbying limits, campaign activity, federal grant requirements, ethics rules, or other legal obligations.

Working With AACC

AACC is here to support community colleges in their federal advocacy efforts. The Office of Public Purpose and National Advocacy represents the interests of community colleges and their students before Congress and federal agencies, but AACC's advocacy work is most effective when it is reinforced by the voices and experiences of colleges themselves. AACC's role is not simply to tell colleges what to advocate for; it is to serve as a resource, partner, and source of expertise as colleges develop and carry out their own advocacy strategies.

As you use this toolkit, please consider AACC a resource at every stage of the process. Whether you are preparing for a meeting with a member of Congress, responding to a proposed regulation, planning a campus visit, considering an appropriations request, preparing testimony, working with the media, or determining how best to respond to an emerging policy issue, AACC can help. Colleges should feel free to contact AACC with questions, requests for information, assistance developing an advocacy strategy, or questions about how a particular college-level effort fits within broader community college priorities.

AACC also encourages colleges to coordinate with AACC on advocacy priorities and strategy as situations develop. In many cases, the most effective advocacy combines a college's firsthand knowledge and local relationships with AACC's national perspective, policy expertise, relationships with congressional and federal agency staff, and understanding of the broader community college landscape. AACC can help colleges identify the most effective message, determine the appropriate audience, provide policy background information and talking points, and coordinate individual advocacy efforts with broader efforts on behalf of the sector.

At the same time, individual colleges have an important and distinct voice. Members of Congress and their staffs want to hear directly from constituents about how federal policies and programs affect students, employers, communities, and institutions in their districts and states. AACC's role is to help make those college voices as informed, timely, and effective as possible.

Stay Connected to AACC Advocacy

College leaders and advocacy staff should make a regular practice of using AACC's advocacy resources and participating in AACC advocacy activities. These resources can help colleges stay current on federal developments and understand when and how to engage.

1. **Visit AACC's Advocacy page** regularly for current legislative priorities, policy updates, action alerts, issue information, and other advocacy resources. AACC's advocacy agenda currently includes higher education and student aid policy, workforce development, budget and appropriations, tax policy, and regulatory actions.
2. **Register for AACC's monthly advocacy and federal policy webinars.** These webinars provide an opportunity to hear directly from AACC staff about developments in Congress, the Administration, federal agencies, and other issues affecting community colleges.
3. **Attend and participate in AACC's annual advocacy events in Washington, DC.** These include *Advocates in Action* in September and the *Community College National Legislative Summit* in February. These events provide opportunities to learn about federal policy, hear directly from policymakers and congressional staff, develop advocacy skills, and engage with colleagues from across the country. *Advocates in Action*, for example, is specifically designed to give community college leaders an inside view of how Washington develops higher education policy and to provide opportunities to advocate for federal programs.
4. **Subscribe to AACC's weekly advocacy newsletter, *Washington Watch Weekly*.** The newsletter provides timely updates on federal legislation, regulations, appropriations, and other developments relevant to community colleges.
5. **Subscribe to the *Community College Daily*.** The publication provides regular coverage of federal policy and other issues affecting community colleges and can help leaders stay informed about developments that may require advocacy.
6. **Contact the Office of Public Purpose and National Advocacy directly.** If you are unsure whether an issue warrants advocacy, need help preparing for a meeting, want additional information about an AACC priority, are considering an appropriations or earmark request, or simply have a question about how to proceed, please reach out to us at ogr@aacc.nche.edu.

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1. Building an Institutional Advocacy Program

Effective federal advocacy is a sustained institutional function, not an activity reserved for the weeks immediately before a lobby day or a live issue. Community college leaders should communicate at the local level and cultivate relationships with members and staff over time. The most effective advocacy programs make federal engagement part of the college's normal external relations work.

Start with an advocacy plan

1. Identify two to five federal priorities for the cycle. Priorities should be specific enough to generate a clear request and broad enough to matter to the college. These should align with AACC's lobbying priorities (available at www.aacc.nche.edu/advocacy-v2) but also can be specific to your campus.
2. Assign ownership. Identify the president/CEO, government relations lead, communications or external affairs lead, financial aid or student services lead, grants staff, and other subject-matter experts who should participate.
3. Build a relationship map. Know your two senators, House member(s), and key staff contacts. Know their committee assignments, backgrounds, and top interests. Take stock of who has relationships with your members, including local lawmakers, local employers, board members, etc.
4. Maintain a federal-impact file. Track federal grants, student aid, workforce programs, research funding, tax or regulatory changes, and other federal policies that materially affect the college.
5. Develop stories before you need them. Maintain a small, consented bank of student, faculty, employer, and community examples that illustrate federal policy impacts.
6. Track commitments and follow-up. Record meetings, asks, staff responses, promised materials, deadlines, and next steps.

What makes a strong advocacy message?

Weak approach	Stronger approach
"Please support community colleges."	"Support a \$10 million increase for [program] because our college used these funds to [specific outcome]."
Long list of every college priority.	One or two priority asks, with supporting context.
National statistics only.	A national point plus local data and a human example.
General concern about a proposal.	Specific explanation of what changes, who is affected, and what should be done.
Assuming an answer based on the lawmaker's political affiliation.	State the ask and impact; offer to follow up on anything uncertain.

2. Federal Lobbying Rules: A Quick Primer

Community colleges should understand the distinction between lobbying, nonpartisan educational activity, and prohibited political campaign activity. For 501(c)(3) organizations, federal lobbying is regulated; the IRS generally defines lobbying as attempting to influence legislation by contacting legislators or urging the public to contact them regarding legislation. Educational activities concerning public policy are not automatically lobbying.

This section is a starting point, not a substitute for institution-specific legal or tax advice. Colleges should coordinate with counsel and finance staff on applicable federal, state, and local requirements and on their own tax status.

Direct lobbying vs. grassroots lobbying

1. Direct lobbying generally involves communicating with legislators or legislative staff about specific legislation and expressing a view on that legislation.
2. Grassroots lobbying generally involves encouraging members of the public to contact legislators about specific legislation.
3. Nonpartisan analysis, research, educational programming, and communications that do not ask the audience to act on specific legislation may be treated differently under applicable rules.

4. While 501(c)(3) organizations can engage in direct lobbying, grassroots lobbying, and policy research and programming activities, each activity carries different rules and is subject to different financial limits.
5. Political campaign intervention is distinct from lobbying. A 501(c)(3) organization is prohibited from participating or intervening in a political campaign for or against a candidate for public office.

Institutional safeguards

1. Maintain records of lobbying-related staff time and expenditures as required by the institution's compliance practices.
2. Coordinate public advocacy with the college's government relations and communications staff.
3. Keep institutional advocacy distinctly separate from campaign activity and personal political activity.
4. Use institutional resources consistently with college policies and applicable law.
5. When in doubt about whether a communication is lobbying, ask counsel or the appropriate compliance officer.

3. Meetings with Members of Congress and Staff

Federal legislators crave knowledge about how federal actions impact their constituents. They recognize that they cannot begin to appreciate the concrete significance of proposed or implemented federal policies without hearing from those who are touched by them; the national government is just too big and complicated. This means that, even outside of advancing their institution's interests, community college leaders have an essential responsibility to communicate to policymakers about their actions.

AACC recommends that community college leaders periodically travel to Washington, DC, to share with legislators information about the impact of federal student aid, job training, institutional aid and other programs, and to talk about proposed legislation concerning their institutions. College leaders should also make it a common practice to meet with legislators or their staff in their district offices. And nothing is as effective as arranging for a campus visit, as described below.

In all this work, developing a trusting relationship is essential. If a community college leader can be routinely relied upon to provide useful and relevant information to a legislator or their staff, they are an invaluable resource. If they provide misleading or untimely information, their stock is quickly diminished. Others will be there to fill the void.

While members of Congress often strive to meet in person with constituents during lobby days and other advocacy visits to Washington, DC, meetings with congressional staff can be just as productive. In meetings with congressional offices, advocates should be brief, specific, accurate, and friendly. Be sure to be mindful of time and don't overstay your welcome.

Before the meeting

1. Identify the objective. Write the one-sentence "ask" before requesting the meeting.
2. Identify the right people. Email or call any staff members with whom you have a relationship to schedule a meeting. If you do not have such a contact, call the congressional office's main number and ask which staff person handles higher education issues and obtain their contact information. AACC staff can help you make these arrangements. For general scheduling, work through the scheduler or district-office contact.
3. Request the meeting early. Offer several dates and times and note whether you are willing to meet with staff if the member is unavailable.
4. Prepare a one-page briefing. Include the ask, three supporting points, local data, one story, and a clear follow-up contact.
5. Know the member. Review committee assignments, district/state interests, public statements, and relevant priorities. This includes knowing his or her personal background, policy concerns and priorities, and general political leanings. Knowing these things will help you craft your message, and, more importantly, allow you to forge the relationship on which your "ask" will often hinge.
6. Assign roles. If applicable, decide who will introduce the group, deliver the ask, provide technical details, tell the local story, take notes, and own the follow-up.

During the meeting

1. Be on time, flexible, friendly, and brief. When Congress is in session, members' schedules get rearranged at a moment's notice. Ask the scheduler how much time you have and manage it efficiently.
2. Don't be offended if a staff member meets with you instead of the member. Staff have a large influence in most offices and ultimately the member is dependent on them for information and, often, counsel.
3. Start with who you are and why the issue matters locally.
4. Make the ask early. Do not wait until the last minute to say what you want the member to do.
5. Use three points or fewer. A focused conversation is more memorable than a laundry list.
6. Connect policy to local impact: students served, dollars received, jobs supported, employers helped, credentials earned, or outcomes achieved.
7. Ask what the member of Congress or their staff thinks and what their priorities are. Advocacy is a two-way relationship.
8. Ask for a position or next step when appropriate: support, opposition, co-sponsorship, a letter to an agency, a meeting with another office, a question at a hearing, or another concrete action.
9. Answer questions to the best of your ability, but do not overstate. If you do not know an answer, say you will follow up.
10. Keep leave-behinds to a minimum, but always bring something. A one- or two-page fact sheet that summarizes your talking points is more likely to be read than a longer document.
11. Collect business cards. Ask for business cards of any staff members you talk with for easy reference when following up on the visit. Remember to leave behind your business card and college information (especially a brief overview of your college) when you are visiting a member's office.

After the meeting

1. Send a brief thank-you within 24–48 hours. Copy every congressional staff member who was present at the meeting, even if they were not on the original invitation.
2. Provide promised materials promptly.
3. Record the office's response and any follow-up date.
4. Consider posting about the visit on social media, publicly thanking the member for taking the time to meet and tagging them in the posts.
5. Send occasional useful information—not only requests. This can and should include updates on projects or initiatives discussed during the meeting, information on new projects, initiatives, and developments, and, most importantly, words of thanks for support or action taken by the member.

Meeting agenda example

Time	Activity
0–3 minutes	Introductions; identify college, district/state, and purpose.
3–8 minutes	Local impact: one data point and one student/community example.
8–15 minutes	Priority ask and supporting arguments.
15–20 minutes	Discussion; questions; member/staff priorities.
20–22 minutes	Restate requested action and agree on follow-up.
22–25 minutes	Thank you and close.

Sample meeting request template

Community colleges should request a meeting by emailing a staffer or the scheduler with a letter from the college president as an attachment.

[Month] [Date], [Year]

The Honorable [first name] [Last Name]

United States [Senate/House of Representatives]

Washington, DC 20510

Dear [Senator/Congressman/Congresswoman] [last name]:

As president of [name of college] in [City], [State], I am interested in meeting with you to discuss our top federal priorities, including [2-3 timely priorities]. [Other staff members, board members, employers, students, etc.] will be joining me in Washington, DC, from [Date range] and we would like to schedule a short meeting with you while we are in town.

We look forward to seeing you and hope you will have some availability in your schedule to meet with us. [I/my scheduler] can be reached at [email] and/or [phone].

Sincerely,

[Signature]

President

[Name of college]

4. Letters and Email Outreach

When members of Congress are deliberating about policy issues, correspondence from constituents often plays a significant role. Letters and email from the public can influence a policymaker's decision, especially if the letters are timely and provide relevant input. Community college letterhead is politically potent, given a college's place in the community. A letter from a community college president can also open the door to more direct communications between the member and president on a particular issue. Letters should be sent as attachments via email to the congressional staffer working on the relevant issue. The staffer will ensure that the letter is seen by their boss and other relevant staff members.

Official letters carry the most weight in an advocacy setting, but can also be the most time-consuming to get approved. In a time-sensitive situation or on an issue where outreach from a government relations professional is more appropriate than from the president, an email to staff is also appropriate and effective.

Telephone calls may be the best option when a vote is imminent on an issue. Calls are most effective when a relationship has already been established between the president and the member or their staff. All communications—letters, emails, or phone calls—should include a way for the member to contact you by both email and phone.

Both telephone calls and emails are appropriate ways to follow up after an official letter has been sent.

As with all advocacy, congressional correspondence is most useful when it is timely, concise, specific, and grounded in constituent experience. Letters and emails should focus on one or two issues, use a descriptive subject line, include contact information, and supplement national talking points with college-specific information.

Tips for effective advocacy letters

1. Use the correct title, address, and salutation for the member of Congress. To find the contact information, visit the www.House.gov or www.Senate.gov websites to look up your legislator's office contact information or visit AACC's advocacy site, which has links to the congressional offices.

2. Use your college's letterhead, include a signature from the president or chancellor, and send the file as a PDF document.
3. Be brief and to the point. Generally, letters should focus on only one or two issues.
4. Include appropriate contact information in the letter. Let your legislator know that you are available for follow-up questions or discussions. This will often include contact information for the president and for their chief government relations staff member. Importantly, this should be an email and/or a phone number that is checked regularly by the listed contact. A member may have only 5 minutes to discuss a topic. You don't want the response to get lost in a general inbox.
5. Send the letter via email to the staffer handling the issue. Summarize the topic and identify the college in the email subject line. Do not be afraid to copy more than one staffer if you are unsure of who is handling a topic.
6. Coordinate with AACC before and after you send your communication. AACC can provide letter templates, talking points, and other advice as you craft your letter. After you send the letter, you can and should forward both the letter and any response you receive to AACC staff. Working closely with AACC will ensure your letter has maximum impact and will better leverage sector-wide collective action in support of the policy.

Five-part advocacy letter/email checklist

Subject: State the action and issue.

Identity: Identify yourself, your college, and your connection to the district/state.

Context: Explain why the issue matters now.

Ask: State exactly what you want the member to do.

Offer further conversation and close: Offer to continue the conversation, provide direct contact information, and request follow-up.

Sample issue letter template

[Month, Date, Year]

The Honorable [First Name], [Last Name]
United States [Senate/House of Representatives]
Washington, D.C. 20510

Re: [College Name] Letter of Support for [Program/Provision] in FY 2027 Appropriations

Dear Senator/Representative [Last Name]:

I am writing on behalf of [College], which serves approximately [number] students in [community/region], to urge you to support [specific program/provision] as Congress considers Fiscal Year 2027 funding.

[Program] has a direct impact on our students and community. During [most recent year], [College] used [program/funding] to [specific activity]. As a result, [local outcome—students served, credentials earned, employers supported, facilities improved, etc.].

We respectfully ask you to [specific action: support a funding level, sign a letter, support report language, oppose a proposed reduction, etc.]. We would be pleased to provide additional information, arrange a briefing with our faculty, students, employers, or program leaders, or to arrange a campus visit.

Please contact me directly at [email] or [phone number] with any questions or opportunities to work together on this issue.

Thank you for your consideration and for your service to [state/district].

Sincerely,

[Signature]

[Name]

[Title]

[College]

[Contact information, again]

5. Hosting a Congressional Campus Visit

A campus visit can turn an abstract policy issue into a compelling visible local story. Members of Congress keep very busy schedules and their presence is constantly being requested. But they are usually eager to visit their local community college(s) if they can. If you plan ahead and arrange for a campus tour or event, you can showcase certain programs and/or partnerships of interest to your member of Congress and engage him or her in a discussion about your college's importance to the community. This is a great way to engage administrators, students, faculty, trustees, and others in building ties with your legislators.

Tips for Planning and Hosting Successful Campus Visits

1. Determine what your goals are for the visit. Do you want to showcase a specific workforce development program? Do you want to focus on a new initiative or a topic of special interest to your congressional delegation, such as STEM education, cybersecurity, or allied health? Has a TRIO-funded program been exceptionally effective in addressing the needs of special student populations? These are some of the questions you should be asking. You may well want to ask the legislator to speak at commencement or another special event. This guarantees the press coverage that members desire.
2. Develop a draft agenda. Consider what programs, classes, facilities, and personnel will be featured in the tour or event. Be conscious of time constraints. Will classes be in session? Will students be on campus?
3. Timing is important. You should be aware of when the member is likely to be in their district or state. The legislative calendar for each chamber is available on the respective House and Senate websites. Congress has scheduled district work periods throughout the year when they are often home for several days and many return to their districts nearly every weekend.
4. Invite the member of Congress. Draft a brief letter or email inviting your legislator at least 3-4 weeks prior to the event. Describe the event, who will be present, and explain why you would like the member to visit your campus to participate in this event.
5. Send the invitation to the appropriate staffers. Generally, invitations go to the scheduler in the member's Washington, DC, office. You can identify this individual and his/her email address by calling the congressional office. If you have established contacts in the office, such as with the education staff, send the invitation to the scheduler but copy the staffer. Over time, you may also develop a close relationship with the district office and learn of their ability and interest in facilitating visits.
6. Follow up. After sending the invitation, if you don't receive a response, call or email the scheduler or other staff contact in the office.
7. Be prepared for the meeting/event. Be ready to provide a brief overview of your college's mission, programs, economic impact on the community, and student demographics. A one- or two-page fact sheet about the college and a campus map are always helpful. Determine who will be presenting or speaking at the event.
8. Consider inviting local press. In your invitation to the legislator, offer to coordinate with his or her press office if he or she would like to promote the event. If quoting the member, check with his or her press staff to secure approval. Take a lot of photos.
9. Formally welcome your representative or senator. Provide the VIP treatment to your elected officials and staff. Arrange for the legislator to cut the ribbon, be the first to break ground, hand out the diploma, or participate actively in another capacity at the event.
10. Do not criticize other elected or public officials during these meetings.
11. Send a thank you note. Remember to thank not only the member but also the participating congressional staff.

Campus visit checklist

- Set one primary objective for the visit.
- Choose a program, facility, student story, employer partnership, or other features that illustrate the federal issue.
- Offer several dates, especially during district/state work periods like the August Recess.
- Coordinate with the scheduler and relevant policy/communications staff.
- Prepare a 45–60-minute agenda with built-in flexibility.
- Brief participants on the member's interests and the college's message.
- Prepare a one-page college profile and one-page issue brief.
- Coordinate security, parking, accessibility, photography, media, and student consent as appropriate.

Provide a clear role for the member: tour, roundtable, demonstration, announcement, ribbon cutting, or student conversation.

Send a thank-you and share approved photos or follow-up materials.

Sample campus visit invitation

Community colleges should request a meeting by emailing the office scheduler with a letter from the president as an attachment. You can and should copy district or Washington, DC, staff with whom you have a relationship, especially if the invitation is a follow-up from a prior conversation.

[Month] [Day], [Year]

The Honorable [First name] [Last Name]

United States [Senate/House of Representatives]

Washington, DC 20515

Re: Invitation to Visit [College] to See [Program/Facility]

Dear [Senator/Congressman/Congresswoman] [last name]:

On behalf of [College], I am pleased to invite you to visit our campus in [City] to see [program/facility] and meet the students, faculty, employers, and community partners who make it possible.

The visit would highlight [specific federal issue or program]. In [year], [College] used [federal program/funding] to [specific impact]. We believe the visit would provide a useful opportunity to see that impact firsthand and discuss how federal policy can continue to support students and the local economy.

We would propose a [45/60]-minute visit including [tour/roundtable/demonstration]. We can accommodate [two or three date options] and are happy to work with your scheduler and district staff to identify another time if needed. We would also be pleased to coordinate with your communications team if you would like to publicize the visit. Please contact [you/your team member] at [email] or [phone number] if you have any questions and to work out details.

Thank you for considering the invitation. We look forward to the opportunity to welcome you to campus.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

[Name]

[Title]

[College]

6. Media Outreach and Op-Eds

Media coverage should reinforce an advocacy objective rather than substitute for direct congressional engagement. AACC recommends building reporter relationships before an issue becomes urgent, distinguishing news from opinion, developing useful fact sheets, and being proactive about media advisories.

Build reporter relationships before you need them

1. Identify reporters covering higher education, workforce, business, local government, and the state/district.
2. Learn each reporter's beat and preferred method of contact.
3. Offer useful expertise even when you are not seeking coverage.
4. Invite local media professionals to your campus if relevant to a story.
5. Respond quickly, accurately, and transparently.
6. Never overstate and don't be afraid to say that you'll have to get back to them with more information.

Turning a campus story into an advocacy story

1. Policymakers are incredibly tuned into local media, especially if local news is covering a federal issue.
2. Determine what your goals are for media coverage. Do you want to showcase a specific campus program or college initiative? Do you want to highlight a program's importance? What is the hook and how much time do you have to make an impact?
3. Recognize the differences between news and opinion. Editorials and op-eds are one way to gain support for a specific initiative, whether local or national, but they may appear self-serving or biased compared to a local news story.
4. Coordinate with the college's press office to develop a media kit. Consider developing a series of one-pagers on key programs and college initiatives. Develop a fact sheet with demographics about the college's student population. Compile lists of media contacts, key campus officials, board members, and business leaders in the community that can be resources for getting the message out.
5. Be proactive. Develop a media advisory that can be sent out in advance of an event. This media advisory should provide the necessary information about the event as well as background information about why it's taking place.
6. Think about messenger. Depending on the story you want to tell, the president may not be the only effective messenger. Consider using students, faculty, staff, and local employers as validators. Make sure these individuals sign appropriate releases and follow lobbying rules. In most cases, it is most appropriate for the student to tell their story, rather than asking them to make a specific ask via the media.

Op-ed structure checklist

Opening: A local observation, student story, or timely policy development.

Thesis: State the policy problem and your position.

Evidence: Use two or three strong facts and one local example.

Policy: Explain the specific congressional or federal action needed.

Why now: Tie the issue to the current legislative or budget calendar.

Close: Return to the local stakes and make the public-interest case.

Sample op-ed pitch

Subject: Op-ed pitch — What [Federal Policy] Means for [State/District] Community College Students

Dear [Reporter/Editor]:

As Congress considers [issue], I would like to offer a 650-word op-ed from [President/CEO] of [College] explaining how the policy would affect students and employers in [community/state].

The piece would focus on [local fact], [student/community example], and the specific action Congress should take: [ask]. We can provide supporting data and connect you with a student, faculty member, employer, or program leader who can illustrate the issue.

Please let me know if this topic would be of interest. We can provide the completed piece by [date].

Best,

[Name]

[Title]

[Contact information]

7. Social Media for Advocacy

Social media can reinforce a broader advocacy campaign by putting a human face on federal policy, amplifying meetings and campus visits, and directing audiences to credible information. Members of Congress and their staff receive and send brief messages about key issues daily using Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), LinkedIn, and other social media. Successful advocacy campaigns use social media to raise awareness of issues and to strengthen relationships with members of Congress.

1. Stick to the facts. Maintaining credibility is essential.
2. Focus on the issue's impact. Share a short personal story that is relevant.

3. Consider using a hashtag for the specific topic or event.
4. Utilize a blog and/or other social media.
5. Develop a short video about a project, event, or program.
6. Find your legislators' official social media contacts. Some are available on their office websites. Others may be found by searching social media platforms.

Best practices

1. Lead with impact, not jargon.
2. Be positive. Refrain from posting negative comments or attacking members.
3. Stick to the facts. Even on social media, credibility and accuracy are essential. If a post is inaccurate, post a follow-up with a correction.
4. Use specific statistics, images, videos, quotes, or short stories whenever possible.
5. Tag official congressional accounts when appropriate and use accurate handles. Ensure, for example, that you are tagging a member's official government account and not their campaign account.
6. Coordinate posts with the college's communications office and any event/media plan.
7. Do not post confidential student information or identifiable images without appropriate permission.
8. Keep institutional advocacy distinct from candidate endorsements or campaign activity.
9. Use social media to reinforce an ask already communicated through more direct channels.
10. Ensure that campus leaders, faculty, and staff know what constitutes lobbying through social media and follow reporting requirements. Also remind staff of college expectations regarding social media posts when their affiliation with the college is known.

Sample advocacy posts

Meeting: "Today, [College] met with [Member/office] to discuss how [program/policy] affects students in [district/state]. Our message: [one-sentence ask]. [Local statistic]. We appreciate the office's time and look forward to continuing the conversation."

Campus visit: "We were pleased to welcome [Member] to [College] today to see [program]. Students and faculty demonstrated how [program/federal investment] supports [local outcome]. Thank you for seeing the impact firsthand."

Appropriations: "[College] urges Congress to protect/increase [program] in FY 2027. At [College], [program] supported [number] students and [outcome] in [year]. Federal investment in community colleges is an investment in local students, employers, and communities."

8. Congressional Testimony

Congressional testimony gives a community college an opportunity to put expertise and local evidence into the formal legislative record. It should be treated as both an advocacy document and a public policy document: concise, credible, specific, and responsive to the committee's purpose. Typically, the chair or ranking member of a committee will solicit a college's participation in a hearing directly. The outreach is typically the result of a relationship with the chair or ranking member, a relationship with a key committee member, or the reputation of the college or president. Colleges will often not have significant notice before they are asked to appear. AACC can provide support for college presidents who need assistance with testimony, preparing for questions, or staffing on the day.

Preparing testimony

1. Read the hearing notice and understand the committee's stated purpose.
2. Determine whether the witness is representing the college, the sector, institutions in the state, a specific type of program, or another stakeholder type.
3. Write a clear opening statement and a short list of takeaways.
4. Use local data but explain why it illustrates a broader policy issue.
5. Answer the question the committee is asking—not only the question you wish it were asking.
6. Be mindful of time. Hearings limit the amount of speaking time for both testimony and answers to questions.

7. Prepare for questions from both supportive and skeptical legislators.
8. Coordinate testimony and supporting materials with the institution's communications and legal teams as appropriate.
9. Confirm formatting, submission, witness, security, and deadline requirements with the committee.

Sample written testimony

Statement of [Name]
[Title], [College]
Before the [Committee/Subcommittee]
Hearing on [Topic]
[Date]

Chair [Last Name], Ranking Member [Last Name], and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding [topic]. I am [Name], [title] at [College], a community college serving approximately [number] students in [location]. Our college prepares students for transfer, careers, and civic and economic participation across [region].

Today I will focus on three points. First, [point one]. Second, [point two]. Third, [point three].

[Point one paragraph: local evidence and policy implication.]

[Point two paragraph: student/community/employer example and policy implication.]

[Point three paragraph: specific recommendation to Congress.]

We respectfully recommend that Congress [specific action]. This would help [students/community/employers] by [impact].

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be pleased to answer your questions.

Sample oral testimony

"Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am [Name], [Title] at [College], where we serve [number] students in [location]. I want to make three points about [topic]. First, [point]. Second, [point]. Third, [point]. At our college, this issue is not theoretical: [one concrete example]. We urge Congress to [specific action]. That action would [specific benefit]. Thank you, and I welcome your questions."

Testimony prep: Likely questions

1. What is working or not working on your campus? How would a change support or cost your institution?
2. How many students would be affected by a change?
3. What evidence shows the program is working/not working?
4. What would happen if funding were reduced or eliminated? What would happen if funding were increased?
5. Could the goal be achieved with fewer federal resources? What goal is not being achieved now but could be with greater resources?
6. What implementation problems have you encountered?
7. What specific statutory or appropriations change do you recommend?
8. How would you measure success?

Members of Congress often see hearings as opportunities to plug their top legislative priorities. Witnesses should be briefed on the priorities of key committee members and be prepared to answer general questions on these bills or proposed changes. AACC can provide support in this area.

9. Working with Federal Agencies and the Rulemaking Process

Congress writes statutes, but federal agencies implement many of those laws through regulations, guidance, grant administration, oversight, and technical assistance. Developing good relationships with senior officials in the federal agencies can be immensely beneficial to a college. Policies, regulations, grant applications, and technical assistance as well as reporting requirements and audits are managed by various federal agency personnel, and at times their influence can be decisive.

AACC works with community college presidents, financial aid administrators, business officers, grants administrators, and other senior campus personnel on issues that range from individual inquiries to issues that impact large numbers of colleges and students. Some community college leaders familiar with the rulemaking process may wish to comment on proposed regulations; others may want to become involved with the negotiated rulemaking panels convened by the U.S. Department of Education.

Working with agencies

Community colleges interact with agency officials in myriad ways: as stewards of Title IV dollars, as federal grant recipients, and as institutions subject to federal regulations across agencies. Before engaging with Administration or agency officials, colleges should refine their asks to ensure that they are reaching the right office, the right type of official, and that they have maximum impact.

1. Identify the office responsible for the issue and learn its formal process for inquiries.
2. Provide concrete examples and supporting documentation.
3. Distinguish a request for clarification or more information from a request to change policy.
4. Ask for written confirmation when a matter has compliance implications.
5. Maintain professional relationships even when disagreeing with an agency position.
6. Use AACC and other sector organizations to identify patterns affecting multiple colleges, to coordinate responses, and to elevate issues when responses are not forthcoming.

Rulemaking: The basic sequence

One of the most consequential ways that community colleges engage with the Executive Branch is through the federal rulemaking process. While this process differs slightly depending on the type of regulation being issued, in general:

1. Congress enacts a statute establishing authority or requirements.
2. Federal agencies add implementation of the statute or updates to an interpretation of the statute to their regulatory agenda.
3. Depending on the agency and statute, the agency convenes a group of stakeholders to consider changes through a process called "Negotiated Rulemaking." Community college presidents often serve as negotiators during this process. Please reach out to AACC if you would like to learn more about serving as a negotiator.
4. The agency develops a proposed rule and publishes it in the Federal Register.
5. Stakeholders review the proposal and submit comments by the stated deadline, generally through Regulations.gov.
6. The agency reviews comments and develops a final rule, interim final rule, or other action as permitted.
7. Stakeholders continue to work with the agency on creating necessary subregulatory guidance, to include information on effective dates, compliance deadlines, definitions, procedures, and training.

Regulatory comment checklist

- Identify the exact regulatory provision or question at issue.
- Explain the effect on colleges and students.
- Use data and real examples.
- Recommend specific regulatory language or a concrete alternative where possible.
- Distinguish legal, policy, operational, and cost concerns.
- Address the agency's stated rationale rather than simply restating the desired outcome.

Submit by the deadline and retain a copy.

Depending on the issue, it may be appropriate to send a copy of the comment to your member of Congress.

For a rulemaking issue, AACC members should coordinate with AACC's Public Purpose and National Advocacy department when possible so that individual college comments can complement—rather than unintentionally conflict with—sector-wide advocacy. In almost all cases, AACC will be able to provide members with talking points or a comment template.

10. Federal Budget and Appropriations

Community colleges' biggest lobbying asks, year over year, will typically be around the annual budget and appropriations process. The appropriations process provides annual discretionary funding for many federal programs important to community colleges, including Pell Grants, TRIO, institutional aid, and other programs. In some years, this process may be relatively straightforward, but in other years, community colleges may be asked to fight off significant proposed cuts or to protect significant proposed increases.

By and large, the annual appropriations process involves deciding on funding levels for discretionary programs, alongside some program tweaks and statements of congressional intent. This distinguishes this activity from the authorization process. Authorizing legislation creates programs that are then funded through the annual appropriations process, as well as programs that are continuously funded, called mandatory programs. The Higher Education Act, for example, is the authorizing legislation for key student aid and higher education programs. Occasionally, authorizing language can sneak into an appropriations bill.

Outside of appropriating funding for specific authorized programs, appropriations bills also include report language to signal congressional intent for a program. This could include a new absolute priority for a grant program or limitations on how the Administration can spend the appropriated money. Appropriations bills can also contain direct funding, formerly called earmarks, for constituents' projects.

The annual appropriations cycle

1. Administration budget request: The president submits a budget request that signals priorities but does not itself fund programs.
2. Congressional budget framework: The House and Senate establish overall budget priorities, topline spending figures, and allocations independently. The biggest hurdles in the appropriations process often come from a gulf between the House and Senate over topline spending numbers, rather than individual program amounts.
3. Appropriations subcommittees: Subcommittees develop individual appropriations bills, hold hearings, receive member and stakeholder input, and mark-up legislation.
4. House and Senate action: Each chamber considers its bills; differences are resolved through negotiation or other procedures.
5. Enactment: Congress sends enacted appropriations to the president for signature or uses continuing appropriations (called Continuing Resolutions or CRs) when full-year bills are not completed.
6. If an appropriations bill or CR is not passed before the previous funding bill expires, it can trigger a full or partial government shutdown. This impacts government operations and programs funded through discretionary dollars.
7. Riders: Appropriations bills or CRs are oftentimes one of the few pieces of substantive legislation to move in a year. As a result, Congress may attach some authorizing measures to the appropriations package, called policy riders. For example, the FAFSA Simplification Act was enacted as a policy rider on the 2021 omnibus appropriations package.
8. Implementation: Agencies execute enacted funding and may issue guidance, grant notices, or other instructions.

Appropriations advocacy works best when it begins well before a bill reaches the floor. House FY 2027 guidance, for example, began soliciting member requests in February 2026, with programmatic, language, and Community Project Funding requests subject to chamber and subcommittee-specific deadlines.

Appropriations asks: three common forms

Request type	Purpose	Typical advocacy question
Programmatic	Support or increase funding for an existing federal program.	What funding level should Congress provide?
Report/language	Encourage Congress to direct an agency to prioritize, study, clarify, or implement something within an appropriations bill/report.	What specific instruction or priority should Congress communicate?
Project / CDS / CPF	Seek funding for an eligible, specific local project through a member's appropriations process.	What eligible project should the member consider requesting?

11. Appropriations Requests: Programmatic and Language Requests

A college does not submit a programmatic appropriations request directly to an appropriations committee as a matter of law; rather, colleges and associations typically communicate priorities to their members of Congress, who may submit requests under their chamber and committee procedures. Deadlines and eligibility requirements change from year to year and by subcommittee. Some legislators solicit programmatic requests via an online form, while others consider them via email. If you have questions about how to submit to your member of Congress, reach out to their office directly.

For programmatic and report language requests, it is important to compile your priorities and asks into one document, rather than sending multiple requests. If your college has a top priority, you should emphasize that in your outreach. Each year, AACC produces a list of community college appropriations priorities that your college can and should draw from.

Sample programmatic request

Subject: FY 2027 Appropriations Request — [Program]

Dear Senator/Representative [Last Name]:

On behalf of [College], I respectfully request that you support \$[amount] for [Program] in the FY 2027 appropriations process.

[Program] is important to [state/district] because [one-sentence explanation]. At [College], the program supported [number] students/participants and [specific outcome] during [year]. [One additional local fact.]

We recognize the difficult choices facing Congress. We believe this investment is justified because [brief return-on-investment or public-interest argument].

We would welcome the opportunity to provide additional information or participate in a briefing with your staff.

Sincerely,
[Name]
[Title]
[College]

Sample report-language request

Request: "The report accompanying the FY 2027 Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies appropriations bill should encourage the Department to [specific action]."

Rationale: "Community colleges report [specific problem]. [Data or example] demonstrates the effect on students and institutions. The requested report language would encourage the Department to [specific action] while preserving [agency authority/administrative flexibility]."

Appropriations request checklist

- One- or two-page request.
- Requested funding level or language.
- Two or three reasons the issue matters.
- Local data and one concrete example.
- Relevant national data or AACC position, if applicable.
- Contact for follow-up.
- Any required forms or certifications requested by the member's office.

12. Congressionally Directed Spending and Community Project Funding

Community Project Funding (CPF) in the House and Congressionally Directed Spending (CDS) in the Senate are mechanisms through which members of Congress may request funding for specific projects in appropriations legislation. Once called "earmarks," these processes are highly structured, and eligibility, documentation, deadlines, disclosure, and certification requirements can change each cycle. For FY 2027, the House Appropriations Committee published member-request guidance and project-request information; the Senate maintains its own CDS process and requirements.

Per House and Senate rules, not every appropriations subcommittee receives CPF or CDS funding and applicable committees can change from year to year. CPF and CDS projects are not typically included in a Continuing Resolution (CR), requiring a full-year appropriations bill to be passed and signed into law. Finally, funding is often limited, with significant privilege for more senior members of Congress. As a result, receiving CPF or CDS funding is often a multi-year process and relies heavily on relationship building and continued advocacy.

Is a project a good candidate?

1. It fits the current appropriations bill and the chamber's eligibility rules.
2. It has a clear public purpose and a strong connection to the member's district/state.
3. The applicant and project are eligible under the relevant guidance.
4. The requested amount is specific and defensible.
5. The project can be implemented within the required timeframe.
6. Non-federal funding, matching requirements, land ownership, environmental review, and other prerequisites are addressed.
7. The project has strong documentation and community support.
8. The college can comply with any transparency, certification, reporting, or disclosure requirements.

Earmark / CPF / CDS project profile — sample

Field	Example
Project title	Advanced Manufacturing Training Center Equipment Modernization
Applicant	[Community College]
Federal agency/program	[Agency and eligible account, per current guidance]
Amount requested	\$2,500,000
Project purpose	Purchase equipment and renovate instructional space for advanced manufacturing training.
Local impact	Serve approximately 350 students annually; support regional manufacturers with credentialed workers.
Readiness	Design complete; non-federal contribution identified; procurement plan prepared.
Partners	[Employers], [workforce board], [state/local partners].
Why federal support?	Project addresses a documented regional workforce need and fits the eligible federal account.
Other funding	\$1,000,000 state/local/private commitment; \$2,500,000 federal request.
Point of contact	[Name, title, email, phone]

13. Budget Reconciliation

Budget reconciliation is a congressional process designed to bring federal spending, revenue, and/or the debt limit into conformity with targets established in a budget resolution, which is not signed by the president. It can allow certain legislation to move under special Senate procedures and therefore can be especially consequential for higher education, student aid, taxes, workforce programs, and other policies with federal budgetary effects.

For advocates, the practical lesson is that reconciliation operates differently from the regular authorization and appropriations processes. Provisions generally must have a qualifying budgetary effect and comply with the rules governing reconciliation. Timing can be compressed, and the legislative text can change rapidly.

Unlike other authorizing and appropriations processes, budget reconciliation is almost always a partisan process. Laws enacted through budget reconciliation require only a simple majority in both the House and Senate. While this significantly decreases the influence of members of Congress in the minority party, it means that these pieces of legislation often pass the Senate by extremely thin margins. In this fast-moving, high-stakes environment, targeted advocacy by community colleges to convince one or two senators can make all the difference.

Advocacy during reconciliation

1. Identify whether your priority is a candidate for reconciliation.
2. Translate the policy into a concise explanation of its budgetary and student/institutional effects.
3. Coordinate with AACC early because negotiations may move quickly and stay in touch with AACC throughout the process.
4. Be prepared to respond to substitute amendments, manager's amendments, or revised legislative text quickly; stay ready to lobby throughout the process.
5. Use the same local evidence you would use in other advocacy but be ready to explain fiscal effects.

14. Advocacy Case Studies

These case studies are designed as training exercises rather than accounts of a particular college. AACC encourages community college leaders to build these out into real-world examples.

Case Study 1 — The One-Page Ask

Scenario: A community college wants Congress to increase funding for a federal program that supports student success. The college has strong local data but has historically sent long letters listing 10 priorities.

Effective approach: The college identifies one primary ask, provides two local data points, tells one student story, and asks for a specific action. The president requests meetings with the delegation and follows up with a one-page brief.

Training takeaway: Specificity and local evidence make an advocacy request easier for congressional staff to understand and act upon.

Case Study 2 — Turning a Campus Visit into Advocacy

Scenario: A member of Congress is interested in workforce development but has limited familiarity with community colleges. The college invites the member to tour a training center, meet employers, and speak with students.

Effective approach: The college connects every stop on the tour to a policy point, prepares participants in advance, provides a concise fact sheet, and uses the visit to establish a follow-up conversation about federal workforce funding.

Training takeaway: A campus visit is most valuable when it is designed around a policy objective rather than treated solely as a ceremonial event.

Case Study 3 — Regulatory Advocacy

Scenario: A proposed federal regulation would require colleges to change an administrative process and could impose significant implementation costs.

Effective approach: The college documents the current process, estimates the operational effect, provides a specific alternative, coordinates with AACC, and submits a timely comment.

Training takeaway: Agencies need concrete operational information and workable alternatives, not only statements that a proposal is burdensome.

Case Study 4 — A Potential Community Project

Scenario: A college has a shovel-ready facility project with local partners and believes federal funding could be appropriate.

Effective approach: Before approaching legislators, the college reviews the current House and Senate eligibility guidance, identifies the correct appropriations account, documents readiness and non-federal funding, and prepares a concise project profile.

Training takeaway: A compelling local project is not enough; eligibility, readiness, documentation, and timing are essential.

15. Advocacy Resources and Worksheets

A. Federal Funding Snapshot

Complete this worksheet annually with the most recent reliable data. Use it to prepare for congressional meetings, appropriations requests, campus visits, media inquiries, and board briefings.

Federal funding / program	Most recent year funding	Recipients / participants	Federal dollars	College impact / outcome
Pell Grants				
Federal Work-Study				
Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant				
Direct Loans				
TRIO / student support programs				
Titles III & V / institutional aid				
WIOA / workforce funding				
NSF / ATE or other federal research/training funding				
Other federal grants				

B. Advocacy Program or Policy Impact Worksheet

Question	College response
How many students are directly affected?	
What is the annual federal dollar impact?	
What programs, facilities, or staff depend on this funding/policy?	
What student outcome demonstrates impact?	
What employer/community outcome demonstrates impact?	
What happens if the policy changes?	
What is the one action Congress/agency should take?	
Who can tell the story most effectively?	
What supporting document or data should we provide?	

C. Congressional Meeting Prep Sheet

Item	Notes
Member / office	
Staff contact	
Date / time	
Committee assignments	
Member priorities / local interests	
Our primary ask	
Supporting point 1	
Supporting point 2	
Local data	
Student/community story	
Likely questions	
Materials to leave/send	
Follow-up commitments	

Closing: Advocacy Is a Relationship

The strongest federal advocacy programs are built over time. A community college that provides accurate information, responds promptly, brings members to campus, shares useful local stories, participates constructively in rulemaking, and makes clear, reasonable requests becomes a trusted resource to congressional and agency staff.

AACC's Office of Public Purpose and National Advocacy is available to help AACC members understand federal policy developments, coordinate sector-wide advocacy, and prepare for engagement with Congress and federal agencies. Members should think of AACC as a key member of their advocacy team.

Selected Official Resources

This edition was updated in August 2026. Current-cycle information was checked against official federal sources, including House and Senate Appropriations Committee materials and IRS guidance. Because congressional rules, deadlines, committee assignments, and appropriations guidance change, users should verify current information before acting.

1. IRS guidance on lobbying and 501(c)(3) organizations.
2. House Appropriations Committee guidance for FY 2027 Member requests and Community Project Funding.
3. Senate Appropriations Committee guidance for Congressionally Directed Spending.
4. Federal Register and Regulations.gov for federal rulemaking and public comments.
5. House.gov and Senate.gov for current member contact information and official congressional schedules.

IRS — Lobbying

<https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/lobbying>

House Appropriations — FY 2027 Member Requests

<https://appropriations.house.gov/fy27-information/fy27-member-requests-guidance>

House Appropriations — FY 2027 Community Project Funding

<https://appropriations.house.gov/fy27-information/fy27-community-project-funding>

Senate Appropriations — FY 2026 CDS (use current-cycle page when available)

<https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/fy-2026-congressionally-directed-spending>

Regulations.gov

<https://www.regulations.gov/>

Federal Register

<https://www.federalregister.gov/>

House.gov

<https://www.house.gov/>

Senate.gov

<https://www.senate.gov/>