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Title

Influencing Science Policy through Effective Advocacy

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1zt7t5fq>

Journal

International Journal of Comparative Psychology, 20(1)

ISSN

0889-3675

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Publication Date

2007-12-31

DOI

10.46867/ijcp.2007.20.01.09

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Influencing Science Policy through Effective Advocacy

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There is an ongoing need for scientists to engage in advocacy efforts to protect the federal research infrastructure and funding sources for research. This article explains how researchers can join the American Psychological Association in advocating on behalf of psychological science.

Why Effective Communications Matters

It is increasingly important to communicate not only amongst our fellow psychological scientists, but across disciplines and with the general public. Another critical audience driving the need for more communication is federal policymakers, some of whom have recently taken more skeptical views of many avenues of scientific inquiry. Advocating for psychology within the political context is so critical that one of the top priorities of the American Psychological Association's Science Government Relations office is to enhance the ability of psychological scientists to advocate for their discipline. As an organization, APA relies on the participation of its members in governance groups such as the Committee on Animal Research and Ethics (CARE), which was created to safeguard the ethical use of nonhumans in research and teaching in psychology. CARE regularly reviews the ethics of such research and recommends guidelines for its ethical conduct, disseminates accurate information about research with animals other than humans in psychology, and monitors federal legislation and regulations governing the use of such animals in research. Recognizing the importance of public communication, CARE also seeks to improve public understanding of the value of behavioral research with such animals, and enhance the public's support for behavioral research with animals other than humans. While these formal communication efforts are important, additional advocacy efforts are needed at the individual level.

Even though APA is the largest organization advocating for psychological science on Capitol Hill, there is still a tremendous need for individual scientists to participate in advocacy to ensure a healthy future for psychological science. For scientists who receive federal funds to support your research and trainees, it is imperative that you view this as a responsibility that comes with receiving federal support for your research. While most scientists have some contact with program officers within a federal funding agency, Congress has the ultimate responsibility for oversight of both the programs and appropriations for those agencies and can alter the missions and funding levels at those agencies with or without input from the scientific community. It is our role, as advocates for psychological science, to make sure that the interests of behavioral scientists are represented in those debates.

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Discovering Your Inner Advocate

Becoming an effective advocate begins with understanding a few concepts about how Congress works. While there are 435 Members of the House of Representatives and 100 Senators, only three of them represent you and are your primary audience. As your Congressional delegation, their role is to represent you and your concerns, and you have a supportive and captive audience when communicating your priorities with them or their staff. In addition, those policymakers that serve on Committees with jurisdiction over the budgets or missions of the agencies that support scientific research should be a secondary audience and interested in your contributions to the greater scientific enterprise.

Of course, scientists should recognize that policymakers may support scientific research, but are faced with many competing priorities. Therefore, the need for your research will often be viewed in comparison to the local and national needs for transportation, national security, Medicare funding, education, or the desire to lower taxes. Moreover, basic scientists may find themselves at a disadvantage, if their goal is to increase federal support for basic behavioral research that has few clear connections to public health outcomes that may be important for Members of Congress or their constituents.

In addition to recognizing the needs of your audience, it is helpful to keep the legislative calendar in mind. Each year, Congress may introduce thousands of pieces of legislation, but will pass fewer than four percent of them. Congress is also tasked with funding the federal government through a set of annual appropriations bills that often remain incomplete even as the fiscal year draws to a close on September 30th. APA's Government Relations staff monitor a variety of bills as they make their way from draft form, to introduction, to Committee mark-up and full Congressional approval, to conference committee and back to the House and Senate for final Congressional approval, before being signed by the President. Within that process, there are many opportunities for scientists to comment on these pieces of legislation and by working with the policy staff in Washington, you can be prepared to take action when these opportunities arise.

Your method of communication may take the form of a simple phone call, email or fax to your Congressional delegation. Knowing your delegation and their Committee assignments ahead of time will also improve your ability to be a successful advocate, as many of our advocacy efforts are focused on Committee members, rather than the entire House or Senate at any given time. There are times, however, when personal visits in Washington or the district office are needed to address the issue at hand.

Advocacy in Action: Protecting the Peer Review Process

In the Summer of 2005, there was an amendment that was included on the bill that funds the National Institutes of Health (NIH) that would have rescinded funding for two, peer-reviewed grants. One of these grants belonged to Dr. Ed Wasserman of the University of Iowa and focused on the abilities of pigeons to visually perceive complex objects, remember them, and categorize them into coherent classes. According to Representative Randy Neugebauer of Texas (R-

TX), the grant simply did not seem to fit in with the mission of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and he would have preferred the money fund research focused on a specific disease such as schizophrenia or autism. He argued that the money could have been better spent, regardless of the actual mission of the NIMH or the scientific merit of the project.

To get his language in the bill, Rep. Neugebauer worked with the Members of Congress who controlled the floor debate to have it offered without a recorded vote, so there was never an actual debate on the merits of the amendment or the merits of the research. The language was included in the House bill on June 24th. Because, in order to become law, the language would also have to be included in final conference report, it was critical that we meet with the Senate Committee staff to avoid the language being included in the final funding legislation. In response to previous attacks on research, APA reached out to the broader scientific and public health communities to make sure we had a coordinated message and that these attacks on the peer review system at NIH would not go unchallenged. To this end, APA co-founded the Coalition to Protect Research, a coalition of sixty other organizations in support of NIH and peer review and we gained power in numbers. However, while the entire scientific community opposed this amendment, there is sometimes more power in taking an abstract issue such as peer review and putting a human face on it.

In July 2005, APA's Government Relations staff arranged for Dr. Wasserman to meet with his Congressional delegation from Iowa, which included Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), the ranking member on the appropriations subcommittee that funds the NIH and a longtime supporter of science and the NIH. Given his important committee assignment, Senator Harkin would have a more direct role in the debate and final outcome of both the Senate version and the ultimate conference report for the funding bill. While we knew ahead of time that the Senator was supportive of NIH and peer review, during the meeting Senator Harkin himself assured Dr. Wasserman that he would do what he could to remove the House-approved language from the bill. Over the next few months, there would be no committee votes, floor debates, or other public discussion about the amendment language. However, in informal communications between Harkin's staff, Dr. Wasserman, and APA's Science Government Relations staff, we made sure this issue did not fall off his radar screen. And, in December 2005, when the conference report was finally approved, the language had been removed. In the current political environment, holding the line on protecting peer-reviewed research has become a marker of success.

Advocacy in Action: Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act

On most other policy issues, an individual scientist is not targeted directly, but a piece of legislation could impact an entire field of research or benefit science overall. A recent example is the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act (S. 3880). This legislation, sponsored by U.S. Senators Diane Feinstein (D-CA) and James Inhofe (R-OK), would increase penalties for animal rights activists who destroy scientific labs and stalk scientists. The bill protects the First Amendment rights of activists, while increasing the tools of the FBI and other agencies to track and thwart the segment of the animal rights community who resort to terrorist tactics to make

their point. This bill is supported by APA, the Society for Neuroscience, and other scientific organizations that support scientists conducting research with nonhuman animals. While there is bipartisan support for the bill, it is doubtful the House and Senate Judiciary Committees will move the bill to their priority list and take any action without advocacy from the scientific community. To increase the chances that the Committees would act, APA's Government Relations staff emailed "Action Alerts" on September 13, 2006 to members of the APA Public Policy Advocacy Network who live in states represented by members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. The purpose of the Action Alert was to encourage the targeted Senators to urge their colleague, Judiciary Committee Chairman Arlen Specter (R-PA), to schedule action on S. 3880. With the congressional session rapidly coming to a close, scientific organizations like APA are strongly urging Congress to take action on this bill.

Even if there are no pressing legislative issues at hand, there are still opportunities to communicate with policymakers and their staff. Individuals can attend town hall meetings held by your Representative or Senators when they are back in the district, send them a press release to let them know when you receive grant funding from federal agencies and always take opportunities to thank them for their support for both scientific integrity and funding for psychological research. You also can communicate with your Members through the local paper by writing letters to the editor or op-eds to highlight how psychological research is relevant to the discussion. Most importantly, pay attention to the world around you and the political context in which we operate, and send a message to Congress by voting.

Conclusion

While the ability to communicate with both scientific and lay audiences will always be an asset for researchers, there is also a continuing need for scientists to be able to advocate on behalf of their discipline or themselves in the political arena. Whether you know your congressional delegation personally or take no interest in politics, we hope that all scientists appreciate the importance of communicating effectively with this key audience and are willing to become advocates for psychological science.

The staff in the APA Science Government Relations office is available to assist you in becoming an effective advocate by improving your communications with Capitol Hill. Additional information about APA's policy activities and how to sign up for the Public Policy Advocacy Network at the APA Web site at: <http://www.apa.org/ppo/>.

You can stay current on science policy issues as well by subscribing to APA's monthly email newsletter, Science Policy Insider News at: <http://www.apa.org/ppo/spin/>.