



TEXAS COMMUNITY COLLEGE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION

GUIDE TO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

2011-2012

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AFTERWORD

The basic point of departure for realizing political goals is a commitment to becoming actively involved in the political process. The effectiveness of TCCTA's political efforts at the state level depends finally upon the establishment and maintenance of relationships among faculty members, the local community and technical college, and their respective legislators. While it is true that members of the Texas Legislature do indeed listen to the views of TCCTA and its representatives, the larger truth is that those same legislators will listen even more attentively when constituents from back home call or visit.

Observers of Texas politics agree that the most important contacts between representatives and constituents take place, not while the Legislature is meeting in Austin, but during the interim period when members are residing and working in their local districts. It is then that legislators have the opportunity to study difficult policy issues and the time to discuss those issues with interested groups and individuals. And it is then that faculty members and local faculty organizations can establish credible working relationships with their local legislators.

The structure of our two-year college system in Texas offers a natural opportunity for grassroots political activity in every legislative district in the state. Every two-year college has, in its faculty, a group of well-educated, articulate, civic-minded individuals who, if provided with sufficient information and motivation, can contribute substantially to the resolution of issues concerning both local campuses and community and technical colleges across the state. In the final analysis, **participation** is the most effective influence on the political process. Successful political influence can only follow from active political involvement.

To many, the legislative process is a baffling system of arcane rules and protocols—a maze of parliamentary procedures and legal maneuverings. Add to that images of smoke-filled chambers and back-room deals, and it's no wonder folks so often choose to “opt out” of the political process.

But we who have devoted ourselves to public higher education retreat from civic engagement at our own peril. The work of our schools—and the future of our students—depend upon wise and informed decisions of legislators. *They need our perspective on the important issues we face!*

State funding is the single largest source of revenue for our colleges—greater than local tax revenues, student tuition and fees, or federal funds. Your salary and health insurance, contributions to the Teacher Retirement System and the Optional Retirement Program all depend on the priority given them by our legislators in Austin.

And no one can present the case as well as an educator that the work of educators should be a high priority for the State of Texas. So contact your legislators this semester. Introduce yourself, make your state senator and representative aware of the ways in which your school benefits your district and the state. Most importantly, share with them ways they can support the mission of two-year colleges.

Don't wait for a legislative session to begin communicating with your elected officials. Meetings with legislators in their home districts—between sessions—are generally less harried and often more productive than conversations held in their Austin offices.

Information in this booklet can help get you started, whether you're a veteran in Texas politics or simply a teacher wanting to support the interests of the profession. Whatever your background, the political process benefits from the responsible involvement of citizens. And our profession is enhanced as teachers add their voices to proclaim the value we bring to the people of Texas.

PLAN OF ACTION

(Local leaders should choose those activities which are appropriate to the unique circumstances in which they function.)

Fall Semester, Even-numbered Years

1. Remind faculty to update their voter registration prior to the November elections. (See information on voter registration on page 11.)

2. Consider sponsoring a Candidates' Forum to allow individuals who are running for office (especially legislative candidates) to meet the public and answer questions. (See the suggestions for such a forum on page 12.)

3. Encourage your professional colleagues to vote.

4. Attend the Fall Conference for Faculty Leaders sponsored by TCCTA in late September or early October. The conference program traditionally includes information about the upcoming legislative session.

5. Send official letters of congratulations in mid-November to those who win the general election for those legislative districts which serve your college. Notes of condolence to the defeated candidates are appropriate, even if the defeated candidates were not popular on your campus. Many successful candidates have risen from the ashes of defeat, and even unsuccessful candidates remember those who befriended and supported them.

6. A formal meeting with newly-elected or reelected legislators should be scheduled before the end of the fall semester in mid-December. This meeting will provide you and other faculty leaders with an important opportunity to discuss the details of the upcoming legislative session. The TCCTA Executive Committee usually adopts and publishes the official legislative program of the Association before the Legislature convenes. Identify

mirror the ethnic diversity of Texas, making these schools crucial to the success of the Closing the Gaps initiative.

- For every dollar a student invests in community college education, he or she will receive \$9.05 in higher future earnings over the next 30 years. The state benefits from improved health and reduced welfare, unemployment and crime, saving the public \$276 million per year.
- A Coordinating Board study confirms that transfer students from community colleges are as successful as those who begin their studies at universities.
- The instructional formula funds appropriation of \$1.73 billion represents 36.6 percent of the "full formula" and 49.5 percent of the Coordinating Board's formula recommendation.
- For the next biennium, no funds were provided for the unprecedented growth of community colleges.
- The annual appropriation per contact hour for 2012-13 is \$2.78 compared to a \$3.56 ratio in 2010-11, a 21.8 percent decrease.
- According to the Legislative Budget Board, the level of funding to community colleges for group health insurance is 41.7 percent of cost. The funding level traditionally has always been near 90 percent.
- For the TRS and ORP retirement plans, the Legislature for the first time applied a new standard to community colleges, reducing appropriations by almost \$98 million. Previously community college educators were treated like other state employees.

FACT SHEET

Reminders to Legislators

Sources: Texas Association of Community Colleges, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and Texas Community College Teachers Association

- There are 50 community college districts in Texas.
- Community colleges now enroll over 70 percent of new students under the Closing the Gaps initiative. They now enroll over 75 percent of the state's freshmen and sophomores.
- Community college faculty salaries during the last decade have consistently lagged behind the cost of living, as measured by the Consumer Price Index.
- Community college faculty teaching academic transfer courses are required to possess the same minimum credentials as university faculty in order to be certified by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Teachers in workforce disciplines must also meet rigorous standards of accrediting agencies.
- The gap between the cost of instruction and the funds provided by the state results in deferred maintenance of infrastructure, increased local taxes, and increased tuition and fees.
- The average age of community college students is 25. The vast majority of students in Texas attend part time. Fifty-eight percent are female.
- Seventy-eight percent of minority freshmen and sophomores attending public institutions of higher education attend Texas public community colleges. These students almost exactly

any local concerns that require legislative action. Present these concerns **in writing** with a rationale and documentation for the consideration of your legislators. This meeting is crucial and will set the tone for college-legislative relations during the legislative session. (Note: Be sure to advise TCCTA of local concerns so that the Association can reinforce them when appropriate.)

Spring Semester, Odd-numbered Years

1. Give the legislative session a prominent place on the agenda of the first meeting of your faculty organization. Summarize the TCCTA legislative program, note any local goals pursued by your college, and review the meeting with local legislators held in the previous December.

2. Watch for legislative committee assignments which will be made early in the session, before the end of January. The key committees for community and technical colleges in the House of Representatives are Higher Education and Appropriations; the key Senate committees are Education and Finance. The members of these committees are in an excellent position to help the two-year colleges of the state.

3. Meet with your legislators in their local district offices sometime early in February and plan two follow-up visits for later in the session. It is often more effective to visit your legislators in their local offices when they return home for the weekend. Visits scheduled during these periods offer a more relaxed setting with less likelihood of interruption or distraction as you discuss the issues of concern to your colleagues.

4. Attend the annual TCCTA State Convention, held in February or early March. When the convention meets during a legislative session, special emphasis is given to legislative issues. During the convention, local faculty leaders have an excellent opportunity for discussion with their counterparts from two-year colleges all across the state.

5. Develop a system of communication at your college which will permit you to disseminate information quickly. During the legislative session, the TCCTA Legislative Committee will distribute periodically a *Legislative Update*, which will highlight issues of interest to two-year colleges. This informa-

tion, along with emergency appeals for grassroots action, must be disseminated on your campus in a timely fashion.

6. Encourage your colleagues to write individual letters to their legislators on issues of interest to your college and to our profession. Provide colleagues with substantive information about the issues and encourage them to correspond with their legislators at least once or twice during the session. (See the guidelines for an effective letter to a legislator, on pages 8-9.)

7. Send letters of thanks to your legislators after the session ends and address specific ways in which their representation was appreciated.

8. Review and evaluate your legislative efforts at the final meeting of your faculty organization in the Spring. Begin making plans for the coming biennium.

Fall Semester, Odd-numbered Years

1. Provide your faculty colleagues with information concerning their legislators. At the first meeting of the faculty organization, report on the actions of the recent session of the Legislature with regard to two-year colleges and professional concerns. The TCCTA *Messenger* and *Legislative Update* will be useful in presenting summaries of important legislative action. Provide your colleagues with a roster of legislators who represent your college district containing the addresses and phone numbers of their local legislative offices.

2. Participate in the Fall Conference for Faculty Leaders sponsored by TCCTA in late September or early October. The conference program traditionally includes information about legislative sessions, past and future.

3. Contact other two-year colleges in your area and coordinate your activities. It is not unusual, particularly in sparsely populated areas, for several colleges to be represented by the same state legislators. The exchange of information between faculty organizations is helpful. In urban areas, several colleges

SPONSORING A CANDIDATES' FORUM

A Candidates' Forum can be an excellent means of bringing legislators and potential legislators together with the local faculty and other citizens from the community. The involvement of as many faculty members as possible in such an event helps to heighten the legislators' awareness of the faculty as a political group to be considered. Additionally, hosting such a forum allows your faculty organization to perform an extremely valuable public service to the community.

A successful Candidates' Forum requires careful planning well ahead of time. Special care must be taken to insure that all candidates for offices under consideration receive the invitations. Ideally, invitations should be mailed to candidates' campaign organizations at least six weeks prior to the date of the forum to improve the chances of each candidate's acceptance. The actual timing of the forum itself can be a ticklish matter. It must be near enough to the election to take advantage of heightened public awareness and interest, yet not so near that many candidates will be unable to attend because of last-minute campaign commitments. Ideal times for such forums would be mid-February for primary elections and mid-October for general elections.

VOTER REGISTRATION

Voting is perhaps the most obvious means of involving oneself in the political process. According to Texas law, in order to vote in an election a voter must be registered 30 days prior to the election date. Practically, registration should be completed no later than the end of September to guarantee an opportunity to participate in the November general election, and no later than the end of January to guarantee an opportunity to participate in the March primaries.

Voter registration forms may be obtained at your county court house and various other locations, or by writing the Texas Secretary of State at the following address:

Secretary of State
Elections Division
P. O. Box 12060—Capitol Station
Austin, Texas 78711–2060

You may also request a postage-paid application. To fill out a form online, click on the “Secretary of State” link under “Legislative Resources” at the TCCTA Web site (www.tccta.org), or by calling the following toll-free number: 1-800-252-8683. You must mail the voter registration application to the voter registrar in your county of residence. You may also pick up a voter registration application at many post offices, libraries, Texas Department of Public Safety offices, and Texas Department of Human Services offices throughout the state.

might coordinate their efforts and approach an entire urban legislative delegation as a unified group.

4. Invite legislators to classes on your campus. Traditionally, legislators have been invited to government classes to talk about the Texas Legislature and the political process. Invitations should not be limited to classes in the social sciences; guest speakers ought to be invited to speak to classes in areas which relate to the legislators’ committee assignments or areas of personal expertise. For example, nursing students would benefit from a presentation by a member of the Senate Committee on Health and Human Services; criminal justice students would learn from a member of the House Committee on Criminal Jurisprudence or the House Committee on Corrections; or court reporting students might enjoy talking with a member of the House Committee on Judicial Affairs. Do not limit your consideration to official committee assignments. A legislator who has sponsored a drug-abuse bill would be a valuable resource for a social problems class. Or, a legislator who supported changes in licensing requirements for Realtors would offer interesting insights to a real estate class.

The primary reason for inviting a guest speaker is to offer students a valuable and unique learning experience. However, such invitations also provide visibility and good will for your college and our profession. Not only does the legislator have the chance to address constituents, but also you have the opportunity to demonstrate that state funds are invested in a worthwhile enterprise.

You might obtain lists of legislators and their House or Senate committee assignments from your college library, the local newspaper, or online, at www.capitol.state.tx.us. The TCCTA Web site has links to this and other sites, at www.tccta.org.

5. Your legislators usually have fewer distractions and more time during the fall semester in odd-numbered years than during any other period. Legislators have just completed a regular session and are not yet preoccupied with campaigns for reelection. Thus, contacts during this period may prove beneficial for the coming legislative session.

Spring Semester, Even-numbered Years

1. Invite your legislators to meet with your faculty organization at its meeting. If it is appropriate, invite them to say a few words.
2. Meet with your college administrators to discuss preliminary legislative goals. Besides adequate state funding, this is the time to identify important legislative issues.
3. Consider establishing a Candidates' Forum to allow individuals who are seeking party nominations (especially legislative candidates) to meet the public and answer questions. (See the guidelines for such a forum found on page 12.)
4. Encourage your professional colleagues to vote.

FORMS OF ADDRESS

(Names of incumbents and their e-mail addresses can be accessed from Texas Legislature Online via the TCCTA Web site at www.tccta.org under "Legislative Resources.")

GOVERNOR:

The Honorable (name)
Governor of Texas
P. O. Box 12428—Capitol Station
Austin, Texas 78711
"Dear Governor (name) :"

LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR:

The Honorable (name)
Lieutenant Governor of Texas
P. O. Box 12068—Capitol Station
Austin, Texas 78711
"Dear Governor (name) :"

STATE SENATOR:

The Honorable (name)
The Senate of Texas
P. O. Box 12068—Capitol Station
Austin, Texas 78711
"Dear Senator (name) :"

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE:

The Honorable (name)
Texas House of Representatives
P. O. Box 2910
Austin, Texas 78711
"Dear Mr. Speaker:" or "Dear Madam Speaker:"

STATE REPRESENTATIVE:

The Honorable (name)
Texas House of Representatives
P. O. Box 2910
Austin, Texas 78711
"Dear Representative (name) :"

13. Write to your legislator when he or she does something of which you approve. A note of sincere appreciation is always appropriate.

14. Allow a reasonable time for a reply; two weeks should be sufficient in most cases. However, try to write prior to the last month of a legislative session. Letters received after May 1 during the session rarely are answered promptly.

15. Send a copy of your legislator's response to the TCCTA state office if you receive an answer or information which you think will be helpful to the Association.

16. Always use the proper form of address in writing to your legislator or other state officials. (See page 11.)

RECOMMENDED GUIDELINES FOR MEETING WITH YOUR LEGISLATOR

1. Know your legislator. Be familiar with pertinent background information, the district's composition, groups, or interests which lent support in past elections, the legislator's committee assignments and legislative interests, and his or her voting record on community and technical college issues in current or previous sessions.

2. Schedule an appointment, if possible. It would be wise to call to confirm the appointment the preceding day. Arrive on time, but be prepared to wait; legislators don't always control their own time.

3. Dress for the occasion. Neat, conservative—even modest—attire is always appropriate. You want your legislator to remember your visit by the substance of the discussion, *not* by unusual or unconventional clothing or hair style.

4. Introduce the issues and concerns clearly. Do not assume that your legislator is well-informed about your college. In initial meetings, provide a brief, clear overview for your legislator.

5. Know your case and use more than moral persuasion. Organize your facts and use sound examples. Put your presentation in writing, **but do not read it** to your legislator. Leave a copy of your written statement with your legislator for later study.

6. Know the case for the other side. Learn their claims and determine their weaknesses. However, do not fail to admit the opposition's strength even when you claim that, on balance, your argument is more compelling.

7. Be brief and don't overstay your welcome. Introduce yourself, present your case, answer any questions, say you are available for further discussion, and leave.

8. Be realistic. Not everyone will agree with you nor will those who agree with you do everything you want. Know in advance what you're willing to compromise and what you are not.

9. Be friendly. Social affability is often more important than cold logic in accomplishing political goals. It is important to build rapport and understanding with your legislator.

10. Be courteous. It is better to leave a legislator neutral rather than actively opposed to you.

9. Follow your meeting with a letter thanking the legislator for the meeting and succinctly restating your position on the issues of interest. Include any requested information in this letter.

10. Coordinate your efforts with your local administration and the TCCTA State Office. Consistent messages must be communicated to the Legislature regarding the needs and desires of the two-year colleges.

RECOMMENDED GUIDELINES FOR WRITING TO YOUR LEGISLATOR

1. Write as an individual. Remember, you do not and cannot speak for the Texas Community College Teachers Association or your college. Do **not** use college stationery, e-mail address, or the college postage meter.

2. Know your legislator's committee assignments, interests, and areas of expertise. Indicate your familiarity with the legislator's past actions on an issue, especially if you are trying to change his or her mind.

3. Include your full name and return address on the **letter**; envelopes are often discarded.

4. Be brief; a single-page, well-organized message is best.

5. Come to the point within the first sentence or two; mention bills or resolutions by number if possible.

6. Confine your message to a single issue, bill, resolution, or area of concern.

7. Make your specific request as clear as possible and explain exactly what you want your legislator to do.

8. Be reasonable. State your position or request, and always give reasons for your request.

9. Be constructive, and avoid insults and threats.

10. Use your own words and your own stationery. Use personal pronouns like "I" and "you." Your letter should **not** read like a newspaper editorial.

11. Do not use form letters, forwarded messages, or form postcards. Petitions generally have minimal impact.

12. Type your message. Check for errors in spelling, grammar, etc.