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## **The Interface between Politics and Higher Education**

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Honors Undergraduate Thesis:

**The Interface between Politics and Higher Education**

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**Research Topic:** Common communication practices with state legislators among public institutions of higher education during budget cuts

### **Literature Review**

For higher education to fulfill its mission, communication of its value is crucial (Eldridge & Mason, 2010). Scholars and practitioners alike agree that having a communication plan in a public institution aids in efficiency and effectiveness and provides guidance for the future. “A strong communication plan keeps stakeholders focused on strategic messages and minimizes the risk of collateral damage from tough decisions that need to be made to get the institution through fiscal challenges” (Eldridge & Mason, 2010, p. 43). Eldridge and Mason asserted that the lack of a plan means expending resources on “putting out fires” instead of spending precious time and energy on important issues. Higdon (2010) agreed that “communication and outreach are essential in difficult financial times.”

There is a clear differentiation between internal and external communication in previous studies concerning the higher education lobby. “As we make these decisions, it is important that we continue to communicate proactively inside and outside the institution” (Higdon, 2010). The majority of existing research focuses on internal communication, which occurs between an institution’s administration, faculty, staff, students, etc. These studies tend to emphasize the impact of layoffs and transparency on morale and support. Few cases delve into external communication, which takes place between either an institution’s Governmental Relations officer or an indirect entity (i.e., alumni) and state legislators and other public leaders. Fain (2008, 2009) and MacTaggart (1994) argued that external communication is more effective and influential than internal communication. There are different models in higher education

when dealing with the communication of budget cuts, including political, bureaucratic, collegiate, and rational. Hardy (1987) and MacTaggart agreed that the political model is the most advantageous. One such model is known as the “shadow plan,” referring to ideas that administrators may have discussed but have never publicized nor enacted. However, if the opportune time presents itself, administrators may implement these sometimes-radical plans (Claggett, 1993). In difficult economic times, for example, administrators may have a shadow plan on how to deal with various budget cut scenarios. These plans, unlike glossy, PR documents, are not shared with the public; in fact, probably very few individuals are aware and involved. In essence, a shadow plan is a framework for “worst-case scenarios.” In the example of budget cuts, it could include hot-button issues and decisions like massive lay-offs, drastic restructuring, or significant tuition hikes.

Hardy contended that, while strategic plans are important, in the end it is the ability to communicate and persuade that matters most. That being said, many universities did not have communication plans prior to the national fiscal crisis and many more do not have a written communication plan today. At the beginning in 2008, college leaders relied on one another to determine messages and contact frequency. Many pointed out that other colleges were worse off (Masterson, 2009).

There is a considerable amount of research on guiding concepts of higher education communication, specifically principles and message development. Eldridge and Mason (p. 44) proposed six major areas of a comprehensive communication strategy: (1) institutional mission and planning; (2) campus culture and context; (3) available resources; (4) available communication tools; (5) audiences’ different needs; and (6) gaming out opposing messages.

Understanding and using available resources refer to less tangible but integral resources in communicating effectively with stakeholders – informal campus leadership, institutional data, and institutional processes. Understanding and using available communication tools is a bit different in that it deals with which medium is the most effective in a given context.

Storytelling is a strategy at the core of effective general message development (Ganz, “Public narrative”). Nationally renowned community organizer and Harvard professor Marshall Ganz teaches the importance of “public narrative” in advocacy and “turning values into action.” In this three-part storytelling method, Ganz emphasized the power of pathos and creating a shared vision in organizing a movement or in winning an election. Three elements comprise public narrative – story of self, story of us, and story of now. These three components essentially endeavor to mobilize action by identifying with an audience and establishing a shared vision. The story of self describes the purpose and values of the narrator; the story of us involves the narrative of a community; and the story of now is the call to action.

In the context of shrinking state budgets and, therefore, greater competition among state entities, higher education has recently confronted increasing opposition and challenges to its once-assumed mission and role in society. Wellman (2010) described one realm of the opposing claims for which Eldridge and Mason advised to prepare – what he dubs the higher education “cost disease.” The general public holds paradoxical views when it comes to the value and cost of higher education, which, Wellman (2010) held, are in fact related: “The public holds strong, consistent, and simultaneously contrary views about higher education: high positives for the importance of a college education and trust in the institutional leadership, juxtaposed with strong negatives about spending and cost management.” According to its

latest report on the worth of a college degree, the College Board found that over the course of a 40-year career, the average college graduate earns about 66 percent more than the typical high-school graduate, and those with advanced degrees earn two to three times as much as a high-school graduate (College Board, 2010). For the most part, the public is in agreement. People regard a degree to be important and helpful, but they also believe tuition has increased because of institutions' increased spending. Moreover, the public does not see the improvements in quality that institutions trumpet as resulting from increased investment. Hence, the public finds its own paradox in the higher education "cost disease" – rising tuition but shrinking access. This perplexing combination leads to a question of priorities and values of higher education and its leaders.

Masterson established that consistency, avoidance of crisis fatigue, straight talk, unified voice, mission, and redundancy are all core elements in higher education communication (2009). Some scholars disagree on which communication styles and strategies are most valuable. Kelderman (2008) discussed hardball tactics, namely in the case of Nebraska's outspoken chancellor, while Murray (1976) noted the advantages of passive orientation, or working within the system. James Rogers, the former chancellor of the Nevada System of Higher Education, took a very different, aggressive approach in communicating his institution's budgetary situation, repeatedly butting heads with the governor and the board that appointed him. Rogers donated his entire salary to the system. He resigned the following year. Murray also presented the advantages and disadvantages of two different strategies in respect to cooperation with other universities – "go-it-alone" v. coalition building. Murray and MacTaggart concurred that higher education politics is all local. During Louisiana's last



legislative session for example, an editorial in *The Advocate* captured the consequences of political regionalism: “Legislators were indulging in pure parochial politics on behalf of their local campuses” (2010 July 29). The “austerity in higher education” crowd has a way of becoming the “cut somebody else” crowd in the legislature (*The Advocate*, 2010).

Regarding message development, Eldridge and Mason (2010) touched on three major themes -- “how we got here,” “what we are doing,” and “where we are headed.” Also, Eldridge and Mason (p. 58) offered specific messages that are important to communicate: (1) provide context; (2) recognize the feedback procedure; (3) empathize with losses and hardships; (4) repeat over and over again that decisions have not been easy; (5) share next steps; (6) disclose the results of budget reduction strategies. Echoing Eldridge and Mason on providing context, Higdon (2010) emphasized the importance of answering the “why” amidst the decision-making process: “Communicating what we're doing is critical; communicating why we're doing it is even more important.”

In agreement with Eldridge and Mason, Cavanaugh (2010) stressed the necessity in communicating with an eye always to the future. “So what should higher education leaders do in the midst of the crisis? First, know what your values are (where you are going) and how these values will create the future vision of your institution. Second, ensure that this future vision drives the decisions regarding budget cuts in the present” (Cavanaugh, 2010). Higdon suggested educators employ the visionary message of striving to provide the best education and moving institutions forward within the limits of resources (Higdon, 2010). Sweet (2010) went one step further in encouraging that various aspects of the community come together in

adopting and fostering a “shared vision.” Citing a professional urban planner and the mayor of Cleveland, Sweet focused on the opportunities that community crises can inspire:

All cities confront daily challenges -- the trials and tribulations of modern urban America. However, for a city to redevelop and prosper, at some point civic leaders must step back and look to the future and develop a comprehensive plan for the city's future, a vision of the city's future. Leaders must then demonstrate the will to implement the plan.

Sweet held up Cleveland as an example of such alliances that flourish because of the intertwined futures of the city and higher education. A shared vision allows the diverse components of a community to come together for and work toward one common, constructive set of goals and values. “By building an image of the possible, we leap over a lot of roadblocks that would defeat us, we also generate a whole new constituency of people who want to see that image realized” (Sweet, 2010).

Overall, an insufficient level of research exists on higher education in the political arena (Murray, 1976). There are even fewer studies on state lobbying at the public institution level (Gove & Carpenter, 1977). The research that does exist focuses on strategies to deal with actual cuts, not communication strategies, and most of the information is dated. Research focuses on internal communication – with staff, faculty, administrators – not external communication, i.e., with legislators. In one of the most recent studies, Varlotta and Jones (2010) analyzed the role of twelve governmental affairs officers in difficult budgetary environments. The researchers sought a heterogeneous sample, which included private and public, small and large colleges. They chose four schools in each size category they established and considered selection by

region as well. Only colleges whose state appropriations had been cut 3 to 4 percent annually from 1999 to 2004 were included. Phone interviews with the officers of these institutions were conducted first in 2005 and then again in 2009 to revisit the budget situation. While the methodology of Varlotta and Jones' research will be similar to that of this study, the strategies that they analyzed dealt mostly with strategies for budget reduction, not communication. When they did study communication, internal communication was the focal point.

### **Contribution**

The national economic crisis that began in 2008 has forced universities and colleges across the United States to scale back or completely reorganize their operating budgets. For public institutions, many of which depend heavily on state appropriations, the fiscal situation is especially difficult. As these institutions fight more fiercely than ever for an ever-shrinking pie, state governmental relations officers in these institutions must find ways to get their institutions to stand out. For this reason, it is pertinent to better understand the relationship between governmental affairs officers in higher education and state legislators during budget reductions. An effective communication plan is crucial to maintaining a steady stream of information to state legislators and others. This study delved into the relationships between these critical parties and the communication strategies of higher education governmental relations officers in developing these political relationships. Also, the governmental affairs offices of award-winning institutions were juxtaposed and analyzed based on their scope, size, and self-identified best practices.

## Methodology

Eight public institutions in the United States were selected for study during this climate of budget reductions for higher education. Seven of the eight institutions were chosen by selecting the winners of the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) State Governmental Relations Service Awards from 2003 to 2009. The recipients of the 2010 awards will not be known until December 2010. Because I attend Louisiana State University (LSU), it was chosen as the eighth college in the comparison, even though it has not won a CASE State Governmental Relations Service Award. Though the awards date back to 2000 and 2001, LSU began its Flagship Agenda of Excellence in 2003; hence, institutions that received the CASE award prior to 2003 were excluded from the study. Also, award winners that were university or college systems were excluded from the study as well. The selected institutions are public two- and four-year universities and colleges across the United States. The institutions vary in function, size, scope, and location; yet, except for LSU, they share one key characteristic– they all have demonstrated award-winning state governmental relations practices.

Each year, CASE recognizes best practices in advancement and outstanding people in the state governmental relations at the postsecondary level. There are two CASE State Governmental Relations Service Awards – Marvin D. “Swede” Johnson Achievement Award and Edwin Crawford Award for Innovation. The former award recognizes significant accomplishments among officers with ten or more years in the field; the latter recognizes new officers who have made significant accomplishments or efforts with fewer than ten years in the field. The awards are sponsored by CASE, American Association of State College and

Universities, the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, and the American Association of Community Colleges.

The eight public institutions include: Auburn University (Auburn), University of Virginia (UVA), Missouri State University (MSU), Arizona State University (ASU), Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C), Seminole State College of Florida (Seminole State), City College of San Francisco (CCSF), and Louisiana State University (LSU). Over the course of three weeks September, in-depth phone interviews were conducted with the respective state governmental relations officers of these institutions. The interviews focused on strategies when communicating with state legislators, the actual makeup of the state governmental relations offices, an overview of the most recent session, and other aspects of a typical communication plan.

Questions in the interview guide pertained to the classic components of a communication plan and advocating techniques. While many are general, specific questions refer to the FY 2009-10 state legislative session and what, if any, changes will be made for the upcoming FY 2010-11 state legislative session. Below are the questions from the interview guide that were asked and in this order:

- Describe your state and institution's budgetary situations.
- Briefly describe ethics laws and advocacy laws in your state.
- Do you have a written communication plan?
- Who are your audiences?
- Do you conduct research on your audiences (i.e, polling, student and alumni surveys, focus groups)?
- What was your message last session? Will it change?

- How often do you communicate with legislators during session? Outside session?
- What role, if any, does your athletics program have in communicating with legislators?
- What role, if any, does your alumni network have in communicating with legislators?
- What role, if any, do the media play in communicating with legislators?
- What role, if any, do students have in communicating with legislators? How do you engage/mobilize students?
- Does a PAC that advocates for your institution exist? Is it affiliated with your institution?
- Do you have the support of faculty and staff? Organized? Contribute to PAC?
- Do you collaborate with other universities and colleges in communicating with legislators? Or do you find it more advantageous to “go it alone?”

## Analysis

The qualitative data gathered from the phone interviews was compiled and compared to one another based on the research questions and themes – common lobbying components as well as different elements of a communication plan. These common themes include Context, Office/Operations, Communication Plan, Tools, Mobilizing Constituents, and Strategy. There are two supplementary tables to aid in expanded analysis. **Table 1** is composed of general institutional data for the 8 public institutions. The information from the interviews was paraphrased and organized into a second table (**Table 2**) in which the information is easily compared. The data was measured and truncated, in most variables, to one of three pre-

determined responses. Regarding the role of various constituents in indirectly communicating with state legislators, institutions were assigned one of the following labels – “active,” “limited,” or “no action.” The table includes a glossary that further explains the differences in the labels. In an effort to ensure quality and depth of information, the names of Governmental Relations officers are not included in the thesis.

## Context

### Legal Constraints

According to one Governmental Relations (GR) officer, the purpose of ethics laws is “to control the activities of the rule makers themselves and their relationships to state agencies and people seeking business or business contracts with the state, by and large.” The role of the legal context in which these public institutions operate varies. Most of the institutions in this sample are located in states with self-described strict lobbying and/or ethics laws. UVA is an exception in that, while the state legislature has ethics panels and standards of conduct for its members, these do not extend to other agencies or lobbyists. State officials must report gifts or entertainment valued at more than \$50, but the burden is on members and officials, not on lobbyists. There are no laws that prohibit institutions from communicating with legislators or state officials.

In the majority of institutions that operate under strict ethics laws, the GR officers said the laws do not affect their communications. Several years ago, Florida passed a very rigid ethics act. “I can’t even buy a legislator a stick of gum,” Seminole State’s GR officer joked. What has not been affected by the state ethics law is the ability of other organizations and lobbyists to raise significant amounts of PAC funds for campaign contributions. While Seminole

State feels it is at a disadvantage to the extent that some of its competitors are able to do that, institution leaders do not think the legal constraints impede its communication with state legislators.

On the other end of the spectrum is LSU with stringent state ethics laws and, hence, constrictive implications for communication between its leaders and state legislators. In Louisiana, state law does indicate that state employees cannot participate in political action, or as a function of their position, they cannot advocate for political action. Put simply, LSU cannot tell people to call their legislators or to vote. Also, LSU cannot present a legislator with any sort of gift of economic value, whether it is from a state source or a foundation source. LSU can provide gifts of non-economic value, which are generally considered meals or promotional items. Also, the university can provide a meal using funds from the LSU Foundation, the fundraising arm of the university and a 501c3. The university does not make campaign contributions because (1) the state does not permit it, and (2) the Foundation has elected to not participate in political activity as a matter of its IRS tax status. That leaves LSU with the ability to provide information. According to LSU, these legal constraints do inhibit its communication with legislators.

### The “L” Word

For the majority of the public institutions in this study, the concept of lobbying is neither new nor contestable. In fact, only two institutions – LSU and UVA – do not employ registered lobbyists. MSU employs three registered lobbyists. UVA does not employ lobbyists because it is prohibited by state law, but it does have an employee of the university who carries out similar responsibilities and represents the university’s interest in Richmond. In Louisiana, GR



officers in public institutions do not refer to themselves as lobbyists, and, in fact, they rarely use the word. They are “information providers.” This is an indication of the hesitancy LSU and the rest of higher education in the state have in diving into the political arena. This tiptoeing of remaining “on higher ground” versus participating in state politics is reminiscent of higher education’s historical struggle and its exacerbation with the sluggish economy and impending cuts.

At ASU, representatives of individual public institutions register as “Advocates.” Others who wish to speak on behalf of their respective institutions must register to do so. ASU has one Advocate and others registered to speak for the university. For Auburn, another Southern institution, this is not the case. Not only does Auburn employ “lobbyists,” but its student body also elects students to do the same (see *Mobilizing Constituents: Students*).

### Budgetary Constraints

All of the public institutions in this sample have endured and continue to face budgetary challenges. Some institutions find themselves in more difficult economic straits than others. Though the actual numbers differ, all of these institutions are confronting budgetary constraints and it is evident in their communication with state legislators and other external audiences (see *Message*). It is important to note that, though all of these institutions are public and are, therefore, supported by the state by definition, not all share the same dependency on state funding. Many community colleges, like Tri-C, receive significant funding at the local level. In Florida, however, community colleges have no local taxing authority and, hence, no local tax funding. Revenues for Seminole State, which just changed its name from Seminole Community College, come from roughly equal parts state funding and student tuition and fees. Also, state

funding for some of the four-year institutions make up less than 50 percent of their revenues. LSU is very dependent on the state (for the first time, state support dipped below 50 percent of its budget this semester).

## The Office

### Size

Most GR offices in the studied public institutions are small with the sample mean being 4.6 staff/administrators involved in state GR per office. LSU has a small office but its GR office linked sophistication to size: “The larger the office, the more sophisticated it is. Like MSU, which has a couple people who do state GR. This allows its director to focus on federal affairs. It really gives you great depth.”

MSU and CCSF are the exceptions with nine and ten individuals, respectively. At MSU, this includes the contract lobbyist, the state GR officer, the president, and a rotation of six administrators. In part, this large number is due to the fact that the campus is not located near the Capitol in Jefferson City. However, UVA (Charlottesville) is a two-hour drive from its Capitol (Richmond), so this is not the sole factor. The rotation of administrators is unique to Missouri State. This group, which knows the issues and talking points, takes turns making weekly trips to the Capitol to lobby for the university. “Our thinking is that collectively we can touch more people and have deeper relationships with a greater number of people than just depending on one or two people,” Missouri State said. The operation is student-drive at City College of San Francisco, in which seven of the ten individuals involved in state GR are students. The other members include a registered lobbyist, the state GR officer, and an assistant.

## Responsibilities

Being that the offices are relatively small in size, it is important to examine the scope of responsibilities of GR officers in public institutions. No matter the institution, the GR officer's responsibilities are relatively the same.

### Year-long:

The legislative session only lasts 45-105 days, depending on the state; however, for most GR officers, their duties span the entire year. ASU compared the work of GR officers during session to that of pro-sports. The first three months are pre-season, the time of preparation and conditioning. The six months of the legislative session are the actual season, when all the action takes place. The three months following the end of session signify post-season, when GR officers analyze and evaluate successes and failures of session. Outside session, work hours are more regular. Unless there is an event in the evening, GR officers often leave the office around 5:30 p.m. They have a much greater presence in the office as well. While communication with various audiences never ceases, it certainly slows. GR officers typically take on more of an administrative, federal or fundraising role at this point.

### Jacks-of-All-Trades:

Most of the GR officers have multiple responsibilities in addition to their duties in state GR. Most are responsible for federal relations as well. Others spearhead internal relations or serve as a liaison to the president of the institution. At MSU, the GR officer has three responsibilities – UR, GR (state and federal), and chief of staff to the president. Fundraising and media relations are other realms that GR officers' jobs sometimes encompass.

### Long Hours and Tight Schedules:

During session, the days begin early, end late, and rarely is there downtime in between. In fact, Seminole State's GR lives near the Capitol in Tallahassee in four months out of the year plus several weeks in the fall because of (1) the distance between the Capitol and campus and (2) the amount of time spent communicating with legislators at the Capitol. On the night the tuition bill was on the floor last legislative session, LSU's GR officer did not leave the Capitol until after 9:30 p.m. Workdays in the GR office at MSU often last until 11 p.m. During session the days may be long, but they are also strategically planned and time-managed. Depending on the scope of responsibilities, here is what a typical schedule may look like for a higher education GR officer:

### Sample Schedule of State GR Officer

7-8 a.m.	<b>Media Recap:</b> Review media coverage of the previous and current day.
8-8:30 a.m.	<b>Bill Recap:</b> Get legislators the vote count so they can determine whether their votes are needed. Go over the minutiae of legislation.
8:30-10 a.m.	<b>Communicate:</b> Meet with legislators one-on-one. Inform them. Catch legislators in between meetings.
10-12 p.m.	<b>Committee meetings:</b> Texting is the most effective tool to ensure action.
12-12:45 p.m.	<b>Lunch:</b> Go to lunch with a legislator, lobbyist or staffer.
12:45-3:30 p.m.	<b>Floor:</b> If bills are up, have notes ready. Keep count of votes. Help legislators will bills.

3:30-5 p.m.	<b>Committee meetings</b>
5-7 p.m.	<b>Administrative:</b> Bill briefings, office tasks, answering information requests

For institutions that employ registered lobbyists and where the state GR officer serves more as a campus liaison and strategist, the schedule of their state GR officers are less Capitol-oriented and more centered on mobilizing constituents, analyzing and tracking legislation, and developing communication strategy. This scenario is more typical for institutions that are located farther away from their state capitols. Such is the case for some of the institutions in this study, including UVA and Seminole State.

### Communication Plan

#### Written

Seminole State is the only public institution in this study with a written communication plan. Drafted eight years ago and not updated in the last four years, this general legislative strategy plan focuses on how the state GR office works with various internal audiences, such as Faculty Senate, Student Government, etc. Also eight years ago, Seminole State created a Legislative Action Team, a group of business and community leaders whom the public institution can mobilize on a moment's notice when an issue arises. This list identifies the individuals' strongest political contacts. Therefore, when a special touch on a legislator is necessary, the GR office can reference the list to determine who needs to be "called into the game." Communication with individuals is by phone or, when the whole group is needed, communication is via e-mail. The Legislative Action Team contact list is updated annually.

UVA and MSU have general communications objectives and strategies they employ, and LSU keeps a calendar and schedule of events, speaking opportunities, and meetings, in which the university conveys the same message consistently. LSU's GR office referred to this as more of the public relations part of the job rather than governmental relations.

### Audiences

#### MVP's:

GR officers in higher education communicate with a number of people of different backgrounds and perspectives in a given day. Identifying those groups with whom GR offices communicate the most frequently or deem the most integral in their legislative success is important, because it should reflect not only priorities but also where and with whom messages are most salient. There is simply not enough time to communicate with every potential member or player, especially because messages are often tailored to individual audience members or groups. Communication is strategic and, therefore, the recipients and participants are as well.

The key decision makers in state policy – state legislators and the governor – dominate the list. “By and large, my responsibility is 145 people,” the LSU GR officer put simply. “One hundred forty-five legislators and the governor are my primary concern.” All of the institutions agreed that legislators are their number-one priority when communicating their messages. The governor's office and the staffers follow close behind. In most of the identified states, legislators are part-time; therefore, their full-time legislative staffs are considerably influential. Seminole State ranked the governor's office third – after legislators and their staffers – because

his/her role, though major, comes into play more at the start and end. The governor is not a “major player during the regular grind of session.”

Besides the decision makers, the institution’s major constituents were identified as key audiences as well. At this point, though, the nature of the job changes because institutions switch from direct communication with the key political players to indirect communication with those people via alumni, donors, students, faculty, and staff. LSU, Auburn, and MSU noted the importance of targeting alumni. For smaller colleges like Tri-C and Seminole, alumni are not as influential or easily targeted. Students are more integral to community colleges’ indirect communication with legislators. In practice, however, indirect communication with constituents poses an overall problem for institutions (see Mobilizing Constituents).

### Research:

In business and politics, understanding the values, beliefs, and concerns of a company’s customers and a politician’s voter base is fundamental to effective communication. Before any message is pushed, it is tested internally and externally through polling, focus groups, and other instruments. This allows industry and political leaders to determine the saliency of their messages with various audiences before actually doing so. Because of the diverse composition and challenging contexts, understanding the values and concerns of key groups like legislators and alumni would help higher education leaders formulate and then tailor their messages to their numerous audiences. This could allow institutions to preempt any opposing claims or misconceptions instead of finding themselves on the more uncomfortable side of defense in the heat of the battle (aka session).

Five of the eight institutions conduct or gather research on their various audiences. Most of these institutions rely on data gathered by others. MSU conducts some of its own research, as in its alumni surveys; however, the institution relies primarily on existing research. MSU uses a considerable amount of the market research conducted by its recruiting department. Likewise, Tri-C receives information from its marketing department. While LSU does not conduct its own political polling due to the potential appearance of breaching some ethical line, it does utilize existing surveys and instruments to try to understand general public opinion.

### Message

### Development:

Overall, all of the institutions call for protection and continued funding for higher education. One GR officer half-joked, “The message is simple – no more budget cuts, right?”

### Two Schools of Thought

### To Concede or Not, That Is the Question

Two very different schools of thought exist regarding the message institutions convey to its various audiences. Some GR officers said that, in an effort to be realistic, they have tweaked their message to one of “mitigating cuts.” The logic here is that, by conceding a little, public institutions will be able to identify and establish ethos with legislators and, in turn, minimize cuts. In Missouri, some institutions will request unrealistic increases in state funding to save face with their constituents amidst budget cuts. This, however, undermines the trust legislators have for these institutions. “One school is asking for a \$231-million increase in state funding in a time where the more likely scenario is a 10-15 percent cut. In exchange legislators get mad or



laugh because it is so disconnected from reality,” MSU said. It is a hard balance to strike and a difficult lesson to learn, but one that MSU has tried to remember.

Conversely, the other school of thought is to stick to the message -- in this case, no budget cuts -- in an effort to be consistent and not lose ground on the issue. LSU is one such institution that has refused to acknowledge any necessary or satisfactory cuts to its budget on the grounds that (1) LSU is comparatively underfunded and should be a top priority of the state and (2) higher education in Louisiana is cut disproportionately in the state budget.

There are advantages and disadvantages to both strategies. Concession could make an institution appear more rational and cooperative, but it could also provide legislators with the political cover to unduly slash higher education’s budget. Refusal to accept any cuts equips an institution with an unwavering message; however, it could also be perceived as irrational or greedy if other areas of the budget are taking equal or greater hits.

### **To Scare v. To Inspire**

Amidst the budgetary obstacles, higher education has been split on the tone it should strike in its message. Is it more effective to be positive or negative? Should an institution motivate fear or inspire a vision? CCSF tried both. In the recent past, it implemented a campaign that showed the public the negative consequences of no higher education on the lives of California. Complete with dark colors and fear-provoking images and rhetoric, the institution sought to shock and to scare the public and state leaders in its campaign. And it worked, according to CCSF. In fact, it was for this negative campaign that the college won the CASE Award. This year, however, CCSF has reversed its tone to a more positive one. “Instead of focusing on the costs, we are focusing on the positive impact of higher education,” said its

GR office. Real success stories complete with bright imagery and smiling faces of the lives that have been changed for the better, the positive campaign has greatly improved the college's public perception. This leads to the next major tenet of message development that many of these public institutions have adopted -- personalization.

## Type

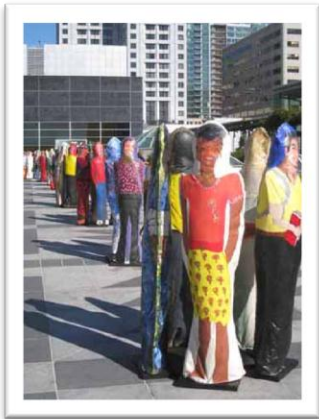
### It's Personal

Some of the institutions have found it effective to humanize the sometimes impersonal message "No more cuts!" In placing a personal story with a faceless entity like higher education, institutions attempt to make it easier for legislators to identify and create a bond with them (and of course, not slash their budgets). In other words, story-telling has become integral in the message to stop or minimize budget cuts.

Legislators are sometimes suspicious if students are advocating on the side of an issue that seems to be aligned with the institution's administrative interests. For example, Louisiana legislators became skeptical of students fighting for tuition increases last session even when that truly was view of some students. Legislators typically do listen to students when they are advocating for the side of an issue opposite from that of the administration. Hence, the student message can complicate lobbying efforts. In the case of LSU, the institution has found students are potentially beneficial when they tell their personal stories and share the opportunities the institution has had on their lives. In this way, the student message complements that of the institution. Seminole State agrees that the most compelling storylines by students are their own and that this supplements the institutional message. "The message they deliver best is, 'What has Seminole State College done for me? How has it changed my

life?’ Legislators love hearing that story. It provides the foundation for everything I do,”

Seminole State’s GR officer affirmed.



Life-size dummies line up for Community College Week at Yeurba Buena Gardens.

CCSF literally gives a face to the value of their institution. Its new positive campaign shares hundreds of personal stories of its students via colorful, life-size statues. The exhibit is mobile, and San Francisco has moved and will continue to transport the exhibit to the Capitol and around the state as visual reminders of the value of community colleges.

### Higher Ed Matters

Another related narrative institutions have been sharing is the value and general role of higher education to a community. This message may seem surprising because of the overwhelming public appreciation of a college degree and the greater success that society has come to expect and associate with its attainment. This may be an indication that higher education officials may not be able to blindly assume that the public and, hence, legislators will continue to place higher education on a pedestal. If public institutions find themselves having to persuade their audiences of this least common denominator -- that the mission of higher education, in general, is worthwhile -- this may support Wellman’s argument that, amidst the budget cuts and tuition increases, the public has begun to question public institutions’ mission and priorities. LSU, CCSF, Tri-C, and Missouri State have used this narrative to remind

legislators and the community of the long-term benefits of higher education against a backdrop of current fiscal and budgetary issues.

### **“It’s the Economy, Stupid”**

All of the institutions have communicated their economic impact on their communities. From number of graduates to total research grants and patents, institutions have attempted to provide their external audiences with measurable performance outcomes. At a time when graduation rates, funding formulas and tuition revenues dominate the public discourse on higher education, focusing on economic measures of output -- which can be tricky business in the realm of higher education -- has become an important narrative to communicate, especially to groups like the business community and state legislators. If done effectively, the economic development message could trump Wellman’s “cost disease.”

The majority of institutions have found it a powerful message to communicate how they give back and generate economic development and growth in their states, particularly as they work to balance budgets burdened with deficits and dedicated funds. These institutions have touted that, long-term, higher education is a powerful economic stimulus. “We can’t go about economic development and then cut higher education. We are trying to connect those two as closely as we feel they are. An investment in higher education is an investment in economic development,” MSU’s GR officer said. One challenge public institutions have and will continue to face, however, is how to define their economic impact and performance, which may differ from institution to institution. LSU, for example, has the highest graduation rate in Louisiana and is the flagship university, and yet, it had trouble making this narrative resonate with legislators, who have their own local institutions to protect.

### Message: Before and After

In order to greater understand these various conceptual strategies regarding message development, it is helpful to see how they were put in play last legislative session and whether or not they were effective. For all of the institutions, the message focused on economic development and the institution's role in the economic recovery and growth. Most of the institutions, however, have had to tweak their messages as the economic backdrop shows slight signs of improvement but is still, for the most part, difficult and dominant in the minds of the public and, in turn, legislators. "In terms of how the declining economy has affected our communication with legislators, I'd summarize by saying that the methods have not changed, but the message has been revised," UVA said.

Seven of the institutions' narratives heavily emphasized economic impact -- (1) of budget cuts on universities and (2) of universities on the future of their respective states. MSU equated higher education with economic stimulus in the long-term. In other words, the message was that an investment in higher education is an investment in economic development. "We can't go about economic development and stimulating the economy and then cut higher education. We are trying to connect those two as closely as we feel they are." MSU will be communicating the same message next session as well with an even greater focus on the long-term. By focusing on the role of MSU in the community, the university will try to help people understand the importance of higher education and "not get caught up in the same short-term math problem." Likewise, last session Auburn and ASU focused on the effect of further cuts to their institutions and higher education. Both emphasized specific policy

messages, i.e., end to tuition cap, and ASU highlighted the generational impact of budget cuts. Neither will change their messages for the upcoming session.

Four other institutions similarly altered their messages in light of the national economic downturn; however, they tried a different angle. CCSF, Tri-C, and Seminole State, all of which primarily offer associate degrees, sang the same song but struck different chords. Instead of focusing on the impact of the state's cuts, the three institutions took a more positive, proactive angle and positioned themselves as the solutions to their states' budgetary problems. As the institution that has taken a more personal and visual angle in sharing their success stories (See Message Development: Make It Personal), CCSF understands the difficult economy and the silver lining for it and other community colleges. With the lowest cost for higher education in the state and its vow to keep fees low, CCSF has heralded access. In a state with significant skill gaps and unemployment, CCSF has positioned itself as the answer to recovery through retraining at the lowest possible cost.

Similarly, Seminole State's message last session -- "fund our growth" -- was one of cooperation and reason. For ten consecutive terms -- spring, summer, and fall -- the institution's enrollment had grown by double digits. "We realize you have to make cuts, and we are willing to make our cuts. All we ask is that before the state makes the cuts, fund the growth. Otherwise, it's really making disproportionate cuts." This year, however, the message will be couched differently. Seminole State has continued to grow but by a smaller degree. While Florida's once-declining economy has shown signs of slowing down, unemployment has not budged. Hence, Seminole State's GR officer said its message for the next session will shift to one that shows how the institution is the answer to Florida's unemployment problem.

"Basically, we're positioning ourselves to anticipate the recovery and to prepare people to work in it. We come to the same end but through a different message." Tri-C is an interesting case, because it has typically focused on economic development and, in fact, conducts an economic impact study every year. For the upcoming session, its GR office will tweak its message to resemble that of CCSF and Seminole State. "The message won't change much. But in this economy, we will focus on jobs and how critical Tri-C can be to honing the skills to secure those jobs." UVA was the only four-year public institution to alter its message so as to focus on the importance of higher education to the state's recovery and economic growth.

While economic development was a piece of the message pie for LSU last session, its overarching narrative was performance. As the Flagship and the institution with the highest graduation rate, LSU invoked the go-it-alone strategy and attempted to set itself apart from the rest of higher education in Louisiana (See Strategy: Stand Out v. Stand As One). What seemed like an easy case to make did not stick with legislators as other institutions worked to redefine the meaning and measure of performance. LSU's GR officer said, "Learning the performance lesson was really disheartening. It has pretty much made us give up the performance discussion because those who oppose have found other ways to frame performance." Its GR office also tried communicating the value of the university to the state. Regionalism, however, brought that message to a halt as legislators typically placed greater value in their local institutions regardless of their success or failure. In the upcoming session, LSU will focus on progress lost, or the reversal effect of further cutting its budget.

### Delivery:

In communicating these messages to legislators, there are multiple approaches and

media that institutions utilize. An obstacle GR offices face is identifying the most effective means of delivery. Legislators are continuously bombarded by information from constituents, lobbyists, other members, business leaders, etc. Moreover, they are saturated with these countless messages in all media channels. Therefore, GR offices of public institutions must cut through the clutter in order to make their voices heard. Which mode of communication is most effective, and hence used, depends on multiple factors: (1) whether the legislature is in session, (2) the message, and (3) its urgency.

#### **Phone: The Classic**

Communicating over the phone is always effective, especially if it is the legislator and not his/her aide on the other line. However, phone conversations become increasingly difficult when the legislature is in session, particularly toward the end. Talking over the phone is especially effective when the legislature is not in session, because it allows institutions to maintain their relationships with members even when they no longer see one another regularly at the Capitol. Also, many groups and individuals also use this channel in communicating with legislators. Next to direct communication, the telephone is the most personal means of communication. Besides being more intimate, phone conversations are also efficient and allows for immediate feedback and context. Phone conversations are essential for information requests, for example. Information requests are essential to the give-and-take relationship between legislator and GR officers. This allows for more personal communication that either party may not wish to disclose over public e-mail.

#### **Fax: Oldie but Goodie**



Faxing is by far the most dated means of communication. In fact, some legislators may not have fax machines. Unlike other forms of communication, it is primarily a one-way channel. Additionally, faxing is tedious work, especially when there is a large quantity of messages to be pushed. Despite all this, as more and more people turn to more updated technologies, the under-utilization of this channel may be its greatest asset. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), the average age of a state legislator is 56 and has increased slightly in recent years. This demographic data also supports the concept that older communication channels can be effective. Unlike the telephone and Internet channels, faxing also provides the legislator with a hard copy of the message.

#### **Text: Pls Vote Tonite**

If a GR officer has a legislator's cell phone number, texting is a fast, direct, and effective way to communicate a message. Texting allows both parties to communicate quickly and discreetly in places and circumstances in which direct communication is not feasible. This form of communication, however, should not be over-used; GR officers, therefore, must be judicious in the frequency and types of messages they send. Messages should be clear and concise. Hence, more urgent messages are ideal. Texting is effective in committee meetings and on the floor when GR officers need to send talking points, suggestions, or reminders to vote.

#### **Direct Communication: The Old-Fashioned**

If possible, direct communication is still the most effective means of communication. This is not always feasible, though, especially when legislators return home or are in the heat of session. Also, legislators have demanding schedules and their own agendas, so GR officers often have little time. GR officers often try to catch a legislator in the halls between committee

hearings or meetings. Legislators also hear and handle a variety of issues and concerns and must seamlessly transition among them. For this reason, the most effective messages are clear, concise, simple, and compelling, and legislators appreciate and understand messages presented in this manner. This grows ever more important as a session comes to a close. As one GR officer said, “As the session goes on, they tend to tire. And they just want you to get right to the point and stop BS’ing.”

In order to know which messages are more likely to resonate, institutions must understand the individual value systems of the members. “Understanding what makes a legislator tick is essential so that I know how to best approach the issue,” another GR officer said. This also helps GR officers game out opposing arguments so that not only can they persuade individual members, but they can also equip these members with the necessary information to discuss the issue intelligently with other members when it matters most. LSU and Seminole State do exactly this. “So I decided a long time ago to be upfront and say, ‘this is our perspective. This is other perspective. Do with it as you will,’” LSU said. Seminole State said that providing legislators with both sides of an issue is integral to building and maintaining credibility. In fact, Seminole State named this as one of its best practices: “I’ve been doing this for the past thirty years as a lobbyist. It is my obligation to understand people and present both sides of the story on whatever legislation I am working on.”

The frequency of direct communication varies depending on (1) the institution, (2) the legislation and the surrounding circumstances, (3) and the time of the “season.” During session, LSU’s GR officer communicates with legislators hourly. However, the officer does not communicate with all legislators hourly. Auburn and MSU communicate with legislators weekly

in pre- and post-season and daily during the season. ASU contacts legislators on a need-to basis. Auburn does not communicate with all the members; instead, it reaches out to a core group of 60 legislators (out of 140). Twenty-five of the legislators are alumni of Auburn, but not all of them are in the core group. Likewise, MSU focuses on the leadership and local delegation in its communication.

According to the GR officers in this study, direct communication with legislators boils down to three steps: (1) the GR officer makes his/her case; (2) the legislator makes his/her case; and (3) the GR officer looks for common ground. “Not everyone is going to side with you. And you just have to accept that. This doesn’t mean you give up. Establish common ground and build from there,” one GR officer said.

### **Internet**

#### **E-mail: Quick and Painless**

E-mail is the most convenient communication channel. It is easy, quick, and because of smartphones, e-mails allow for communication virtually anywhere. Unlike the telephone, it allows for the inclusion of files and visuals like issue briefs, and there is unparalleled ease in communicating to a large audience. That being said, the expediency and accessibility of e-mail is also its downfall. E-mail is a primary communication channel today and, thus, incurs heavy traffic. For this reason legislative assistants handled most of the e-mail correspondence, in essence erecting a potential barrier between a GR officer and a legislator. This is also why it is important to know and be on good terms with the legislative staff. Moreover, most GR officers agree it is not wise to use public e-mail for confidential conversations. Invitations to events,

reminders, and general information that are not urgent are favorable content for e-mail communication.

### **New Media: Room to Grow**

This field of communication is still new territory. However, it does provide opportunities for growth. Most of this communication, however, is indirect or occurs among constituents (See Mobilizing Constituents). For example, the governor responded to the LSU student body's concerns via a discussion on Facebook.

### **Website: Data Arsenal**

All of the institutions have a GR website on which they include information about legislative issues and updates. This not only aids constituents but also gives GR officers something to point out to legislators. In this way, websites can act as an information bank. Last legislative session, LSU created a campaign called "LSU Impact" to demonstrate the reach and value of the institution in all



Click-through map of Louisiana on "LSU Impact" site

areas of the state. The campaign centered on a website. A click-through map of Louisiana broken into regions allowed individuals to see what LSU was doing in their backyards in terms of research, student and faculty achievements, etc. LSU found it effective, especially as a source of content to link to in e-mail communications with legislators, alumni, and donors. LSU will keep and expand its website in the upcoming legislative session.

Institutions are in agreement on the way in which constituents are allowed to communicate to lawmakers. Even the smallest of colleges and universities – take Tri-C, for example – are diverse in their constituents and audiences. By nature, the decentralization of

higher education can present GR officers with a considerable obstacle of numerous, sometimes contradicting, interests. Administration, faculty, students, alumni, and donors may all support the overarching goal of excellence of academics in their institution, but that does not mean they all support tuition and fee increases or program closures. For this reason, many institutions have some sort of policy or process in place where faculty, students, staff, alumni, etc., must first contact, get permission from, or coordinate with its GR officer before testifying or communicating with lawmakers on behalf of the institution.

UVA's approach, "Once Voice Richmond," is to have a GR officer present anytime anyone is speaking on its behalf. In this manner, UVA is able to control its message and ensure that nothing contradictory or off-message is communicated to state legislators. "We are much more effective and efficient in this manner, and it prevents a good deal of confusion and mind work on the part of legislators," UVA said. LSU, CCSF, ASU, and Seminole State have similar policies. At LSU, no one can represent the university without permission from and coordination with its GR officer. At ASU, no one speaks on behalf of the institution except for the registered advocate (aka lobbyist), state GR officer, provost, and other top-level administrators.

## Tools

### Legislator of the Year

No institution presented legislators with an award of recognition. MSU is part of a 13-member coalition in Springfield that awards retiring legislators with a book award. The coalition is local and includes entities like the Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce, the local library, the public school district, the local community college, and various nonprofit organizations in the area.

### Who's the Leader of the PAC?

The mingling of political action committees (PACs) and higher education has clear implications that higher education is trending more political. No institution in this sample had an affiliated political action committee that advocated on its behalf. Two of the eight institutions – LSU and MSU -- do have a PAC that advocates for the institution, indicating that a third-party group or individual runs the operation. In Virginia, there is a PAC that advocates for all of higher education. Seminole State has discussed creating a PAC for the entire system. This may demonstrate the (1) institutions' reluctance to "go all in" politically; (2) the limitations of state ethics/lobbying laws; and/or (3) the cultural or community disapproval of education mixing with politics and, hence, institutions' strategic decisions to balance the line to remain effective.

LSU's PAC was inactive until this year. It was shut down in years past when a member of the university's governing board vocalized disapproval of such a political entity being associated with LSU. The university's GR office described the university's conflict with whether or not to go political:

In many people's minds, institutions should be above such politics. And so that is a very noble thing. But I think that the administration has learned over time that LSU is susceptible to political whims just as much as anyone else. LSU also recognizes there are a number of organizations with self-interests that are not necessarily in our interests.

Tiger PAC is up and running again in preparation for what promises to be a very rough legislative session for higher education in Louisiana.

MSU also has a PAC, Friends of Missouri State PAC, which advocates in its interest. Like LSU, MSU's PAC is not large. In a given election cycle, the Friends of Missouri State PAC will raise approximately \$20,000; however, it does have some impact as one component of the university's communication plan. While there may not be a PAC affiliated with UVA specifically, there is the Virginia Higher Education Business Council, which advocates for higher education in general. VBHEC was founded in 1994 by Virginia business leaders on the principle that the prosperity of Virginia and the well-being of its citizens are fundamentally tied to access to a strong system of public colleges and universities. A nonprofit, nonpartisan partnership between Virginia's business community and higher education leadership, its mission is to enhance the performance of Virginia's public colleges, universities and community colleges and their funding by state government so they can produce the greatest possible positive impact on the state's economy.

A relatively new strategy in maintaining distance with their PACs is to have the institution's contract lobbyist (presuming there is one) nominally lead the PAC. Because the contract lobbyist is not connected to the institution, this adds an extra layer to the PAC operation. The complex relationship between public institutions and PACs reflects the higher education lobby's struggle with whether to go political.

### Take Me Out to the Ballgame

Among the public institutions in this sample, there is no middle ground regarding the role of athletics in legislative engagement. Five of the institutions utilize their athletics programs actively, while three do not use their athletic operations at all in entertaining legislators. The rationale is simple enough. Those that have the resources and legal leeway use

their athletic operations in engaging legislators. Community colleges like Tri-C have very small athletic programs, if at all, so they do not find this tool particularly useful.

LSU has an impressive athletic program and has found it effective in the past to use its program in creating a national reputation for itself. While it finds athletics to be a helpful tool in engaging legislators and takes advantage of its athletic reputation where it can, LSU is also limited by its state ethics law. LSU cannot give tickets to state legislators nor can it entertain public officials in its university box in Tiger Stadium. Many of the other SEC members, however, are not hindered by such laws, so they can entertain legislators and public officials in their university boxes at their stadiums. Federal legislators, however, can accept tickets to athletic games, because they operate under different ethics guidelines.

Conversely, UVA has a smaller program but also has no legal constraints. Hence, it can provide state legislators with more opportunities for engagement of its people and campus. Select legislators and officials are invited to various basketball and football games throughout the year. When the university hosts the Commonwealth Game every other year, the GR office have an expanded reach and invites all 140 state legislators and officials. Because athletic events are considered special events under state law, Arizona State can invite every legislator to attend. Before the start of the season, legislators request their game preferences, and ASU offers each legislator two tickets.

### Media – Darling or Dud?

#### Role of the Media:

The role of the media in state GR is not quite as prevalent as one might think. In six institutions, the role of the media is either nonexistent or limited. For four institutions, the



media have no active role in their state GR communications. The media have a limited role in two institutions and an active role in one institution. For Tri-C, the media role borders active and limited.

Auburn, MSU, ASU, and UVA do not use the media to create support of their message in communicating with legislators. While Auburn and UVA do respond to media inquiries or claims, the majority of that communication falls under their media relations departments, completely separate offices from state GR. When opposing or inaccurate claims arise, Auburn relies on a core group of legislators to help dispel the misconceptions. Auburn's GR office provides the media relations department with legislative context on a need-to-know basis. MSU tries not to use the media for GR because the university does not find it helps. The university finds the media to be (1) inaccurate; (2) slow; and (3) unaware of the backroom negotiation that is often critical in higher education's involvement with policy makers. MSU stopped using the media as its primary target ten years ago. Instead, it began using databases and going directly to alumni and other constituents. When MSU's GR office altered its communication strategy, it shifted away from media relations to public relations which is more bottom-line oriented. The university now focuses on direct instead of mediated communication. "I'm going to be real candid with you. We don't depend on them [the media] too much," MSU's GR officer said. "And I think people that do are making a mistake."

The role of the media in LSU's communication with lawmakers is limited. The media coverage of LSU tends to be positive and supportive for the most part. When the media cover higher education in Louisiana, they tend to put a local spin on the story which raises the interest of legislators in their districts. Articles on administrative salaries are not helpful in that

they do resonate with legislators. Overall though, legislators in Louisiana “despise the media and don’t care what happens as long as they are not beaten up.” In communicating with the media, it is important to think about the angle. While pushing institutional data or press releases may work, institutions have a much better shot of getting their messages and agenda published if they think about the local or state impact. Providing context aids journalists in doing their jobs. This goes back to the value of identifying with audiences. “Consider the media an audience and truly sell your pitch. Do their homework for them,” one GR officer advised.

#### GR v. UR:

The GR offices are mixed in terms of their involvement with their institutions’ media relations departments. All of the institutions have media relations or public relations departments, and some of the GR officers are also the heads of these departments. At MSU, University Relations (UR) is very distinct from GR, and the two have separate responsibilities and functions. There is a relationship between the two offices, but not a direct one. At LSU, UR and GR are two distinct offices as well, though they work together in communicating to audiences other than legislators.

It is not atypical to find the two offices combined or under one roof. Some institutions find that it fosters a greater relationship and understanding between the two departments. For others, like LSU, the two offices work better from their separate corners. Combining the two departments did not work at LSU, because the UR function is not the management of a direct relationship. That office’s function tends to focus on mass media and communication, in which it distributes information in hope that it is received and accepted. The UR office relies on the status and reputation of the university in conveying its message. “In governmental and donor

relations, you cannot hope. It is your responsibility to ensure that that message is accepted and carried,” LSU’s GR office said. For LSU, GR entails a specific outcome that is tangible and, hence, measurable. In that sense, a clash of cultures exists.

Conversely, at Seminole State and Tri-C, the media relations and the GR offices work very closely. At Tri-C, the functions of the two offices overlap, especially in planning large-scale events. At Seminole State, the two offices work closely together in developing messaging strategies and the messages themselves. MSU’s GR officer is also the vice chancellor for university relations; however, interestingly enough, there is no active media role (see Tools: Media – Darling or Dud?).

### **Mobilizing Constituents**

Mobilizing constituents is another means of communicating with state legislators. The advantage is that the institution can convey its message in different voices and from different perspectives while maintaining reasonable control. As with any organizing effort, mobilizing various groups takes time and resources. The institutions in this study have had varied success with mobilizing their constituents. While some are very proactive in engaging, other institutions are not as effective because of (1) their size, (2) the difficulty, or (3) legal limits. In most cases, an institution’s mobilizing efforts and effectiveness depend on the constituency group – students, faculty/staff, and alumni.

### **Students**

Of all of the institutions’ constituencies, students are the most active in communicating with state legislators. Seven of the eight institutions mobilize and utilize their student efforts actively, and one – MSU – find the student contribution is limited. None of the studied

institutions have inactive student bases. All of the community colleges cited a very active student base. At CCSF, the lobbying effort is wholly student-run (see The Office). The role of students in legislative communications at Tri-C is extensive as well. In fact, considering that faculty/staff, alumni, media, and athletics play little to no role and there is no PAC presence, students are the primary indirect means of communicating with legislators at Tri-C. At Seminole State, the GR office works with its four campuses' Student Government Associations regularly. In fact, the GR office brings students to the Capitol in Tallahassee several times during session, in which the institution alternates between two approaches – (1) bring legislators to talk to the students as a large group, and (2) have students meet with legislators one-on-one. Seminole State brings as few as two or three students and as many as thirty to the Capitol during session. Seminole State has found students are much more effective than its professional lobbyists in personalizing the college's message. At Auburn, the role of students in communicating with legislators is significant as well. To be on the student lobbying group, students vie for positions through an interview process and subsequent elections. Auburn's GR office trains and maintains regular communication with the student lobbying group on the issues and the talking points. At UVA, the Student Council Legislative Affairs Committee is an independent student-run organization, so it is separate from the administration's activities. Similar to Auburn, UVA's GR office maintains a good relationship with the group.

Students play a limited role in MSU's communication with state lawmakers. The university has found that the impact students have is not worth the time spent educating and engaging them. While student leaders are sometimes helpful, they are not integral to the regular lobbying effort. As mentioned previously, the university provides information to groups

and individuals, including students, interested in contacting their legislators. MSU, however, finds little use for students and utilizes them rarely in lobbying.

LSU is an interesting case, because the activity of its students has dramatically changed over the course of this study. For the last two years, the university has found the student effort to be lethargic at most. Part of this is due to the fact that LSU has not actively engaged students because of its legal constraints. While the GR office can provide information and answer questions at request, unlike Seminole State and many of these other institutions, state law prohibits LSU from mobilizing its students. Even so, like MSU, LSU has historically found students to be of limited use because of the difficulty in engaging them.

In the past couple months, however, students at LSU have significantly revved up their efforts. Student leaders have met with various state leaders, including legislators and the state treasurer, to share their concerns and to brainstorm solutions. When the students had no success in meeting with the governor, the student body president wrote him a critical letter and disseminated it to newspapers of states in which the governor had recently campaigned. The letter received national attention. LSU's GR officer said, "The content of the letter wasn't new. But students were able to echo similar concerns of legislators without the retribution." Soon after, the governor arranged for a meeting between the student government president and the chancellor of LSU. An involved marketing campaign for a secretive event called "What Now LSU?" sparked interest and resulted in the formation of a new student lobbying organization called Flagship Advocates. On the night of its unveiling, 400 students organized to discuss budget cuts, to write letters to the governor, and to e-mail the Speaker of the House. "This is the most sophisticated and active student activity I have witnessed in all my years here," LSU's

GR office said. What sets this student effort apart from others in the past and elsewhere is its ability to identify with and use leaders' values and future ambitions. This effort, in other words, focuses on the power and leverage of students in the interplay between state higher education and politics. In the past, campus efforts had used their status as the helpless students in appealing the aid of state leaders.

LSU is still uncertain about the effectiveness of student activity in its overall lobbying effort. While the student body president's letter certainly called out and aggravated the governor's office, LSU stressed that, in the end, it boils down to one question – what are the solutions? While such efforts contribute to holding leaders accountable, they can also be seen as a distraction. One GR officer noted, "Sometimes student activity is similar to a mosquito – annoying and merely adding to the stress of the situation."

### Alumni

If students fall on the moderate-to-active side of the spectrum, alumni fall on the inactive to moderate side. This is interesting considering several institutions stressed the importance of alumni to the state lobbying effort (see Audiences: MVPs). All of the institutions have a difficult time mobilizing their alumni, especially for political means. In five institutions, alumni have a limited role in communicating with legislators. In two institutions, alumni have no active role, and one institution borders no action and limited action.

For community colleges and small state colleges like Tri-C and Seminole State, mobilizing alumni is especially difficult because they tend to associate with their four-year alma mater and because the pool is much smaller. In this respect, small and community colleges cannot compare to four-year colleges and universities. Alumni of ASU receive information and

updates but do not communicate with legislators. Auburn's GR office engages its alumni from time to time but finds the group "too diverse" to disseminate one message: "It's not that they (alumni) don't support the institution. It is that they may have different interests or occupations that can sometimes place them on the opposite side of an issue." UVA neither surveys its alumni nor does it have a mass alumni advocacy program. However, a report of politically influential alumni is maintained through analyzing publicly available information about political contributions to legislators and candidates. If needed, designated alumni are asked to contact legislators on behalf of UVA. Talking points are provided.

MSU and LSU are constrained by state law and the fact that their alumni associations are a part of their universities. All either university can do is provide their alumni with information, and it is a careful legal and political tightrope. According to LSU's GR office, LSU's alumni association technically could engage in political activity if it chose to do so; currently, it can expend no more than 10% of its staff/budget on political activities. The university's GR office implicated political reasons for the lack of alumni mobilization: "The alumni association has opted to not participate at all in fear of the inevitable wrath of some politician." It is possible this decision maker could then decide that the records of the alumni association should be open, and there are several anonymous donors who do not wish their identity to be revealed.

### Faculty/Staff

Just as underutilized as alumni are faculty and staff. In five institutions, the role of faculty and staff is limited in communicating with legislators. There are no responses for two institutions, Tri-C, and CCSF. Auburn's faculty/staff fall somewhere between limited and active.

Seminole State, LSU, and MSU all provide insight into the rationale for the lack of organization and utilization of faculty and staff. While Seminole State has the general support of faculty and staff, situations where they are necessary to mobilize are rare. The Faculty Senate has been helpful; however, the institution has found that legislators are more receptive to students and the business community. “To some degree the rest of us are seen as educational bureaucrats,” Seminole State said. LSU has found that faculty members do not participate by and large because they feel their share is fulfilled in their service to the university. Because LSU cannot issue a call to action because of legal constraints, the university has not been effective in telling the faculty what it can do. According to LSU, if they were given an outlet to speak collectively, the faculty might participate more. While there is general support of faculty and staff at MSU, they are not organized and the institution “is not sure we’d want them organized.” While a faculty member contacting his or her local legislator is beneficial, MSU has not had good experiences with faculty members at the Capitol.

### Strategy

#### Stand Out v. Stand as One

There are two schools of thought when it comes to the choice to work with other public institutions in communicating with state legislators – “going it alone” versus collaboration. No institution in this study has decided solely to “go it alone.” Four of the eight employ both strategies, depending on the legislation and issues at stake. In the last five years, MSU has shifted to a more collaborative orientation. While some scholars argue that increased competition for state funding will result from budget cuts, MSU argues that people try to surround themselves with as many friends as possible during shrinking budgets. Its



membership in the Springfield Coalition, a local group composed of thirteen local business and community agencies, has won MSU considerable praise because “legislators like the idea of people working together.” While the university does try to collaborate whenever possible, different perspectives and sometimes conflicting legislative interests make going it alone necessary at times. When MSU does compete, however, it is rarely with other universities or colleges; instead, the university finds itself pitted against other state agencies like prisons and k-12. The situation is similar at Auburn, where the highest level of competition takes place between higher education and k-12. Even so, there is a great deal of in-fighting in higher education in Alabama.

LSU’s GR office used to believe “going it alone” was more effective because of its Flagship status and unparalleled performance in the state; however, the institution has altered its outlook recently. “We are working now so that we can be in a position to go it alone later,” said LSU. Since last legislative session, LSU has joined collaborative partnerships with Baton Rouge Community College, Louisiana Tech, and Southern University.

The remaining four institutions only collaborate, which they find more effective because (1) it creates one voice for higher education and (2) legislators like seeing institutions of higher education working together. The three community colleges in the sample collaborate with other institutions; this supports existing research that finds typically only large, research universities choose the “go-it-alone” communication strategy. CCSF finds collaborating with other institutions to be much more effective. In the past, when a public institution would decide to go on its own at the expense of others, the California state legislature would punish it in retaliation.

Seminole State is one of 28 public institutions in the Florida College System. Most are state colleges, but there are also community colleges. Seminole State is one of the smaller state colleges. While individual local projects are sometimes worked on colleges individually, on most issues “we are pulling in the same direction, singing the same song.” This includes legislative issues that may only impact a few of the institutions at a time. Last Spring, Seminole State partnered with another institution, and they played on each other’s political strengths to get both of their individual projects funded in the budget. Seminole State’s strength was in the House, while the other institution’s was in the Senate. Even though there are always some universities going off in their own direction, Seminole State also collaborates with university lobbyists. “I have been on the receiving end of that kind of cooperation, with organized groups working against me when I was in Illinois. It is much better to be on this side,” Seminole State’s GR officer said. “I think our system has a high perception at the state legislature because of the unified voice.”

### **The Political Game: Three-Level Chess**

In this study, there was evidence that supported the existence of “shadow plans” in higher education. These hidden, often never discussed, radical ideas or strategies sometimes never surface. However, when drastic or unpopular changes are made, an institution's shadow plans are usually at work. As higher education continues to struggle with increased competition for decreasing budgets, institutions find themselves in need of enacting sweeping change on their campuses. However, whether it is faculty layoffs, program reductions, or tuition increases, these decisions run the danger of inciting panic, frustration, and anger among

faculty, staff, and students. These decisions are being made across the country. The question is how. Perhaps it is the shadow plans of these institutions at work.

Implementation of shadow plans often involves the hidden cooperation and collaboration of political and higher education leaders. This complex political "game" works because of the symbiotic relationships between the various players; each understands that it needs the other to be successful. One GR officer described the complexity involved: "It is a game. Imagine a chess game with three levels."

In the case of budget cuts, the following is an example of a hypothetical political game in play. The state announces cuts to higher education. Though institutions know cuts are inevitable, they are also accountable to their constituents who are not aware of the game. Thus, higher education leaders fight and mobilize their constituents to do the same. One GR officer said, "Our leverage lies in our alumni. When they get involved, we have increased the volume which state leaders don't like." When the noise level becomes bothersome, higher education leaders ask state leaders to expend political capital. In exchange, higher education turns down the volume. After showing both their cards, the plan, which includes solutions that will be unpopular to some, is put on the table.

Political games are a settlement for higher education and political leaders. Higher education agrees to make hard decisions, and state leaders agree to draft legislation to help. Another GR officer said, "What people don't understand is that the real decisions aren't made on the floor or in committee. The real decisions are hammered out in backroom negotiations. Things wouldn't get done otherwise."

### Best Practices

## Relationships:

### Legislators

Among these award-winning public institutions, the best practice they all named as fundamental to their success was relationships. For UVA, all of its best practices are rooted in “strong relationships.” Forming, building, and maintaining relationships with state legislators are at the heart of essentially every responsibility, goal, and strategy of these GR offices. At the core of these legislative relationships is the ability to recognize, understand, and then identify with legislators’ values, backgrounds, and concerns.

### Forming

In its study of relationships with legislators, LSU noted two sources of relationship formation – (1) shared experiences and (2) interest in wellbeing. Shared experiences refer to (1a) incidental relationships formed through outside, unconnected activities like “little league or church” as well as (1b) the common understanding that comes with the nature of the job -- facing the same issues and working in the same circles. An interest in legislators’ wellbeing recalls the importance of understanding audiences’ values and concerns. This requires research, experience, and strategic communication (see Message Development).

**Common Understanding:** In describing the general common understanding between legislators and GR officers, LSU’s GR officer compared legislators and GR officers to natives and chancellors to nomads. Chancellors typically have a short trajectory with institutions and are often from out-of-state. According to the GR officer, “Hence, legislators and GR officers tend to be suspicious of these outsiders, or nomads.” GR officers, conversely, are natives in that they are usually graduates of the institutions and/or have a much longer trajectory with the

institution. Legislators are typically natives to the state as well; hence, GR officers and legislators tend to naturally form relationships from their common understanding of the culture and nuances. This natural tendency, however, can be dashed by a lack of credibility or the inability to maintain the relationship.

**Know Your Legislator:** In order to ultimately communicate with legislators in a meaningful way, it is pertinent to understand their motivations and actions of legislators. Seminole State and MSU pride themselves on understanding and identifying with their members. According to Seminole State, is it crucial to never ask legislators to do something that will hurt them politically. "It is not worth burning a relationship over an issue," the institution said. UVA emphasized the importance of doing its homework when determining what makes a legislator tick. Similarly, a best practice of LSU's GR office is its role as a feedback loop for the chancellor, legislators, and other audiences. In acting as a survey instrument, the GR officer identifies the values and concerns of various groups in the community. That information is then relayed to the chancellor and legislators so they know how to communicate effectively.

### **Building**

LSU, UVA, and MSU emphasized the importance of establishing credibility with legislators. This is only acquired in (1) spending time with individual legislators on a frequent basis, (2) providing accurate information in a timely manner, and (3) upholding integrity. UVA places a premium on credibility, which balances on the ability of follow-through, honesty, and getting legislators the answers they need. One of UVA's GR officers quipped, "Credibility is all you've got." As mentioned previously, LSU and Seminole State present legislators with both

sides of an issue, not just their own, when communicating in order to maintain ethos. Missouri State works to balance its needs with the budgetary reality and political landscape.

Forming and building relationships with legislators will not be effective if done only in the confinement of the legislative session. Like any relationship, it must be maintained and developed throughout the year. Seminole State said, "I've always seen the legislative session as the time to reap the rewards of a relationship, not to build a relationship. You just can't do that, especially here in a 60-day session."

**Mutual:** These legislative relationships are not one-sided; instead, they require a symbiotic give-and-take between legislators and public institutions. MSU refers to these relationships as "mutual," and Auburn calls them "reciprocal" (see *The Political Game*). ASU and UVA both named "education" as best practices of their offices. ASU said its success in the legislative session was due to its dedication to continuously informing legislators of the issues and their implications. "If you go to a legislator's office and he says, 'No I can't help you with that,' you haven't lost the issue. You just failed to educate," ASU said. UVA echoed the importance of being precise on and knowledgeable of the issues. One of its GR officers said, "Legislators for the most part don't have an in-depth understanding of how higher education institutions operate." Comparatively, LSU identified expertise as one of its strengths. According to the university, most GR offices can be found on the spectrum between expertise and political interest. LSU's GR office leans heavily to expertise, which many have called an advantage.

- **Take it to the Streets:** As noted by Seminole State, the most effective lobbying is done at home, not at the Capitol. It is from developing relationships and working with the legislators in their districts that GR officers have the most success in the institution's

opinion. In agreement, LSU explained that fundraisers in legislators' districts are all for show. Though the university cannot contribute, the chancellor attends knowing that is a visual opportunity for the legislator to demonstrate he or she can deliver the LSU chancellor.

- **Legislators as Donors:** MSU named its treatment of legislators as one of the reasons for its success in building relationships. According to the university, GR officers would be considerably more successful if they treated legislators like donors. Instead of communicating with legislators as if it expects support and funding, MSU finds (1) educating, (2) cultivating, and (3) matching common interests and needs to work much better. Also key to relationships with donors, MSU also mentioned the power and necessity of thanking legislators for their continued support.

## Peers

### Working Together

Collaborating with in-state peers is the best practice among Seminole State, Tri-C, and CCSF. Working together has won these institutions legislative success and praise. On bigger issues, Seminole State has found it not only helpful but vital to find partners. Seminole State and Tri-C have won accolades for collaboration as well (see Stand Out v. Stand as One).

### Limitations of Study

This research provides further insight on the relationship between legislators and public institution governmental affairs officers and communication between various audiences that help maintain this relationship. By understanding other colleges and universities' communication techniques and strategies during these tough economic times for higher

education, public institutions can use this research as a tool in considering future communications strategies when dealing with budget cuts.

This study is not without its own limitations. While the sample size was small due to the criteria in which the institutions were chosen, three institutions were eliminated after the selection process. Two institutions, Clemson University and University of California at Davis, did not respond to the interview request. Another, City University of New York, was cut because it is in fact a university system, not an institution like the rest of the sample. Even among this smaller sample of institutions questions from the interview guide went unanswered. As is evident in Table 2, one response is missing from Tri-C and four responses are missing from CCSF. Nonetheless, these two institutions were not removed from the sample, because both have responded to the majority of questions. The sample in this study is too small to generalize findings for its population.

If one were to conduct a similar study in the future, there are multiple adjustments or related factors to consider. Increasing the sample size while maintaining depth would provide greater details in the picture of the relationships between legislators and public institutions. Moreover, analyzing the local environments of these institutions and the role of these various factors on communication would further add to the depth of understanding and comparison of a similar study. Surveying or interviewing state legislators, for example, would allow for the widening of the lens on relationships between public institutions and legislators. Because of the struggle in mobilizing their constituents, a greater focus on this area and the specific obstacles that handicap these institutions could help in identifying and then changing this unfortunate reality. This study was a comparison and pooling of common practices among



certain institutions; there was no effort to measure effectiveness. While difficult, studying the effectiveness of communication practices among public institutions during budget cuts would be a significant contribution for institutions of higher education as some of them find themselves navigating uncharted territory.

Despite its shortcomings, this compilation of research is nevertheless significant as it scratches the surface of communications in the higher education lobby in a relatively new manner. Furthermore, regardless of the sample, the fundamentals of effective communication remain relatively unchanged.

## **Conclusion**

Before conducting this study, I assumed politics played a role in higher education. I knew public institutions were dependent on state support, and that fact alone has implications for the necessity of strong relationships and, hence, communication with state leaders. I knew that in many cases the economic downturn, and therefore budget cuts, had put significant stress on these relationships that are essential to the continued progress of higher education. Aside from those general assumptions, my knowledge and understanding of the political context in which higher education operates was limited at best. I decided to focus on communication practices among public institutions during budgets cuts with a concentration on state legislators, and a simple comparison seemed feasible enough. However, after delving into the communications of eight different campuses across the country, I realized the puzzle I was tinkering with was 1,000 pieces instead of the 50 I had planned.

Nationwide, higher education is in a bind. Prior to WWI, the importance and support of higher education was simply assumed. Hence, public institutions were thought to transcend

typical lobbyists and politics in general, and this worked because up to this point state support was never contested. Now, however, the public and, hence, state leaders have begun to question the performance and value of public institutions. Tightening state budgets as a result of the national economic crisis exacerbated the problem as public institutions found themselves jockeying for funding not only with one another but also with other state agencies like health care. More than ever, effective communication is key in opposing these claims.

These budgetary and perception realities are at the heart of the current struggle among institutions in choosing the apolitical high ground, full-out political jockeying, or a murky area in between. While I had an inkling of the political dance that takes place, I was unaware of the extent of the theatrics that take place in order to reach settlements between higher education and state leaders. At the start of this study, I juxtaposed two opposite communication styles -- hardball and passive orientation. Now, it is clear that the reality is a fusion of the two. As was clear in the existence of political games and shadow plans, the style is more like a stove top in which the heat can be adjusted when necessary. This supports the give-and-take relationships between public institutions and state leaders.

The question is whether, when the economy recovers, higher education will revert to its apolitical pedestal. I predict that this is merely the beginning of a new normal for higher education, and that these political and budgetary contexts will continue to dictate the communication and actions of public institutions. In turn, I believe institutions will have no other choice but to grow increasingly sophisticated in their communication practices.

At the beginning of my research, I was told by one GR officer that he did not consider himself a communicator. Shocked and sure that I could prove to him otherwise, I listed the

various communication functions of his office. He listened patiently and then went on to explain that he viewed himself and his profession as more comparable to a recruiter. He considered the GR office to be more of a relationship maintenance function than one of communication. Both of us were right. The difference is the orientation or viewfinder of GR in public institutions. I saw communication as the foundation of the GR office. While communication obviously plays a significant part in his responsibilities, this specific GR officer viewed the bedrock of his role as forming and building relationships. Every other institution in my study was in agreement -- all were in the business of relationships. They all deemed communication important but its value originated from its essential role in relationship development.

Regarding message development, the majority of the institutions in this study effectively communicated "how we got here" and "where we are;" however, few demonstrated that they had shared with constituents and leaders "where we are going." The uncertain economic horizons augment the importance of inspiring a vision for the future role of higher education. This could be the answer to correcting the public's suspicion of higher education's values and priorities. I predict more and more institutions will begin to orient themselves as the solution to their respective states' economic recoveries, and a few of the institutions in this study have already begun to do so. In order for higher education to position itself as fundamental to the future of society, it will have to do more than implement a public relations campaign. It will truly take a collaboration of the state, higher education, business, and other key groups in the community. The mere appearance of cooperation may be successful in the short-term but probably will not work long-term. Institutions that pretend to cooperate for the sake of

positive public perception are not truly working together and, therefore, will probably revert to their competitive silos. This is the time for meaningful discussion and cooperation with those who are stuck in the same mire or have successfully navigated through it. For many institutions, perhaps it will mean the redefinition of their mission and drastic change on their campuses. In the end, however, the benefits will in all likelihood outweigh the costs, as higher education aligns its aspirations with the needs of society.

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