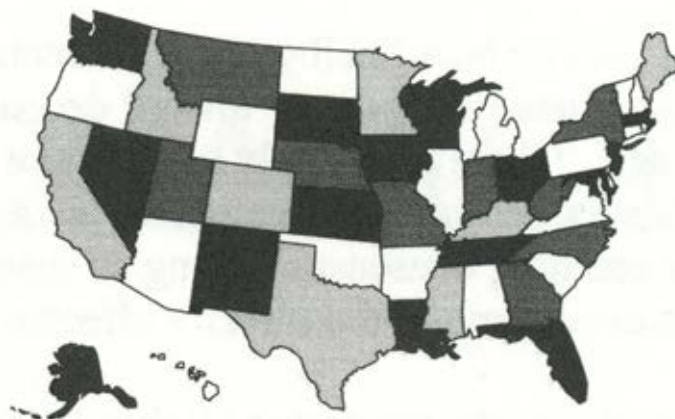


# Washington Hotline



Carol C. Henderson  
Deputy Director, ALA Washington Office

(202) 547-4440; (ALA0025)

“I know of no other single American institution that would have easier access to members of Congress than would higher education administrators and faculty.” That’s Rep. Pat Williams (D-MT), quoted in *Education Record: The Magazine of Higher Education*, published by the American Council on Education. The summer 1990 (vol. 71, no. 3) issue features higher education and Capitol Hill. In “How the Hill Sees Higher Education,” conversations with several legislators lead to the conclusion that college and university presidents possess far more clout with Congress than they use effectively.

The hot topics on the Hill are “spiraling higher education costs and the related issues of student access and research funding.” Sen. Tim Wirth (D-CO) is also concerned about the nation’s research facilities base: “The federal government has taken for granted this wonderful research establishment that is higher education. What we have to do is make sure that we are providing the research dollars necessary to continue that.”

Rep. Williams went on to say that “higher education is perhaps the single thing America does best of all the nations of the world.” However, recent criticisms of higher education have stuck. Williams urged higher education leaders to turn these perceptions around by inviting legislators to visit their campuses. Rep. Vin Weber (R-MN) said campus witnesses at hearings should focus less on the dollar amounts and more on how the programs really work, which even members of education subcommittees often don’t understand. Others interviewed feel that colleges and universities must be more proactive in helping Congress structure budget priorities.

In a separate article, Sen. Terry Sanford (D-NC), a former governor of North Carolina and president of Duke University, writes about the positive atmosphere higher education enjoys. Higher education issues “do not pit competing interests against one another in the same way environmental issues do . . . higher education advocates need not come to Capitol Hill to argue against any other ‘side.’” Among tips for working the Hill, Michigan State University president John DiBiaggio includes knowing how your institution can serve the legislative and personal interests of those you visit, “be it by providing research on food toxicology, access to rare books in your library, or a phone call from a demographics expert on your faculty.”

From the Capitol Hill perspective, Rep. William Ford’s (D-MI) tips are blunt and eminently practical—“Don’t just come to Capitol Hill with your problems; try to bring some solutions, as well.” Legislators, he said, “must rely on the national associations to represent the opinions and interests of higher education, or at least substantial segments of it. You can help make this process of representation effective by actively participating in these associations, making sure that their positions reflect your positions. You can also be responsive to their calls for letters, telephone contacts, visits, and background data. Not everyone has to be a skilled lobbyist working on Capitol Hill to get higher education’s message across, but everyone can make a significant contribution to the political effectiveness and strength of the associations that represent your institution.”

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## Washington Hotline (cont'd)

In her article, Nan Shelby Wells, Director of Princeton University's Office of Governmental Affairs, noted a tendency toward decentralization and fragmentation of the higher education message: "There are simply many more groups and individuals involved in policy development than ever before. The inertia that always favors the status quo is now encouraged by the difficulty of reaching consensus among so many players." Legislators have a natural tendency to wait for consensus among the directly affected groups before acting on large programs or issues.

An article on the upcoming Higher Education Act reauthorization focused on student aid programs, but Senate and House subcommittee staff directors David Evans and Richard Jerue had other observations as well. Evans was concerned about the government's role in enhancing courses of study and research. Acknowledging that in recent years the subcommittee has held that the primary federal role is to provide student aid, Evans concluded: "The time has come to explore what the federal government can do to assure that students are, in fact, getting the best postsecondary education possible." Jerue said other issues include tuition costs, admissions policies, retention and graduation rates, teacher training and recruitment, and infrastructure concerns: "are our research and academic facilities adequate to meet the demands that will be placed on them in the next ten years?"

This brief summary is no substitute for a careful reading of the whole *Educational Record* feature. The observations and advice are useful and realistic, if not always consistent, and transfer well to library relations with Capitol Hill. The library field also has an increasing number of players who want to be heard directly; we do not always speak with one voice. Because of the increasing government relations activity at the institutional level, librarians should lobby the campus government relations officer and make sure that person is aware of the range of federal programs which benefit libraries. On national academic and research library issues, ACRL and ALA must, and do, work with higher education organizations as well as library groups.

The challenge is to achieve consensus among all these players, thus presenting a reasonably united front to Congress, while avoiding what Rick Jerue calls "lowest common denominator" recommendations in which nobody loses, but which are not that substantive or useful to Congress. The further challenge for the library community is to have library needs included among the priorities of higher education groups and Congress. We will be more successful in this if we define the federal role regarding academic and research libraries in terms of how libraries can contribute to national priorities.

