

2013 UCEDD Directors Retreat Salon Discussion Notes University-based Centers' Efforts in Legislative Advocacy

The 2013 UCEDD Directors Retreat salon discussion focused on a key topic facing many UCEDDs: University-based Centers' efforts in legislative advocacy. This has been increasingly a critical issue as states economies tighten and Universities fight to increase their state funding allocations. 2013 brings more budget concerns with both the sequester and health reform's impact on people with disabilities; budgets will tighten again at a time where increased effort is needed to advocate for people with disabilities as ACA is implemented across the country.

Speakers for this salon discussion include:

- **Michael Gamel-McCormick**, Education Policy Advisor; Senate Health Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee
 - Past UCEDD Director, past University Dean, currently on the receiving end of advocacy efforts
- **Donna Gilles**, Director, Partnership for People with Disabilities, VA
 - UCEDD is housed in a public institution that is supportive of UCEDD advocacy efforts
- **Elise McMillan**, Co-Director, Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, TN
 - UCEDD is housed in a private institution that is supportive of UCEDD advocacy efforts
- **David Deere**, Director, Partners for Inclusive Communities, AR
 - UCEDD is housed in a public institution that was not supportive of UCEDD advocacy efforts (note that the level of support changed when changing the admin home of the UCEDD)

Legislative education is referenced in four areas of the DD Act relevant to UCEDDs:

- **Purpose and scope of activities for UCEDDs (Sec. 153(a)(1)):** To provide leadership in, advise Federal, State, and community policymakers about, and promote opportunities for individuals with developmental disabilities to exercise self-determination, be independent, be productive, and be integrated and included in all facets of community life.
- **Core functions for UCEDDs (Sec. 153(a)(2)(b)):** Provision of community services that provide training or technical assistance for individuals with developmental disabilities, their families, professionals, paraprofessionals, policymakers, students, and other members of the community
- **Purpose and scope of activities for TA contractor (Sec. 153(c)(5)):** Serve as a research-based resource for Federal and State policymakers on information concerning and issues impacting individuals with developmental disabilities and entities that assist or serve those individuals
- **Assurances in core grant applications (Sec. 154(a)(3)(H)):** The application shall be approved by the Secretary only if the application contains or is supported by reasonable assurances that the entity designated as the Center will educate, and disseminate information related to the purpose of this title to, the legislature of the State in which the Center is located, and to Members of Congress from such State.

Salon speakers responded to questions that were formulated to prompt dialogue on successes, barriers, and strategies in legislative advocacy efforts. The conversation also addressed relationships within the university that are important to allow development of external relationships with state & federal legislators, and the UCEDD Director's role in encouraging staff, trainees, self-advocates, or other organizations to advocate for important legislative and fiscally-related disability policies, and yet remain within University guidelines. Strategies and recommendations discussed are outlined below.

Mission Match

- Identify areas of match UCEDD priorities to legislative needs. Make your Center useful, reliable, needed.
- Identify areas where the mission of the UCEDD matches the mission of the University and capitalize on areas in common. “Mission match” makes it easier to support each other.

Develop a variety of avenues for access to legislators

- When advocating to State/Federal legislators, many UCEDDs cannot represent the University, and cannot distribute flyers on letterhead that represents their university.
 - Find out what is allowable and what is not at your University. Where is the line drawn?
 - Utilize phrases such as, “Although I am a professor at...” and “I am submitting this testimony as a private citizen” to avoid complications with your University. Your relationships and partnerships should be strong enough that folks know where you work and respect that affiliation, while understanding why you present information in this way.
- Be very judicious about where the UCEDD’s name goes. Signing on to every letter or petition that comes along can decrease the effectiveness of the Center.
- Who is the UCEDD’s representative on the State DD Council? Consider advocating in the role of DD Council member, rather than UCEDD member, if the Council has better entry into legislative sessions.
- Identify who else at the University has success in obtaining significant funding. They likely have lobbyists. Build a relationship and partner with them when possible – you can help spread each other’s messages

Identify natural opportunities to educate legislators

- Take advantage of any scheduled Disability Day or University Day on the State Capitol.
- Use the annual [Disability Policy Seminar](#) in Washington, DC as interdisciplinary pre-service preparation activities for trainees. As a training activity, this often buys legitimate access from the University perspective.

Develop relationships with University’s government relations office

- Identify the entities at the University who manage legislative relationships
- Establish relationships with the University’s Government Relations Office
- Recognize that one task of the government relations office is to protect the University President, and advocate for state and federal funding according to the University President’s priorities, where possible and appropriate
- Consider establishing an annual meeting with the University’s government relations team.
- Make multiple connections and contacts within this office, to ensure continuity of partnerships if leadership in that office changes
- Learn the University’s priorities, and include those priorities in your advocacy
- Invite legislators to visit the UCEDD with University government relations team members
- While some UCEDDs have experienced success with reversing the direction of information when members of the legislature go to the University to request testimony from the UCEDD, others have found this approach to backfire. This can easily put the administration in an awkward position, and such a position may not encourage them to be friendly to your requests.

Connect with AUCD's Legislative Affairs Committee

- Committee members meet monthly by phone, review federal legislation for comment, and help develop AUCD's annual federal legislative goals.
- If interested, and if you have the time to serve on this committee, email [Kim Musheno](#), Director of Legislative Affairs at AUCD.
- Be a resource to AUCD's Legislative Affairs Committee in your particular area of expertise, even if unable to serve on the Committee.
- Connect the University lobbyist to the AUCD policy office and support this relationship where interests are shared.

Building relationships with legislators and their staff

- Increase contacts with your legislators, and legislators leading committees where key pieces of legislation impacting people with disabilities are being considered. Contacts should be about 4x annually – often enough that you are remembered, not so frequent that you are annoying.
- Be responsive and get information ASAP to legislative office when requested. A same-day response is good. Immediate or within-the-hour response is best.
- Find out the critical issues for your legislator, promote when able, find mission match
- When providing information to legislators or their staffers, recognize that they are incredibly busy with juggling communications, meetings, and information from numerous citizen advocates. Make sure the information you provide is in a usable format – absolutely no more than 1-2 pages of key points, preferably bulleted, easy to scan and obtain most pertinent details.
- It can become complicated to avoid pulling the University into the discussion with legislators, who may well ask, “What can your University do about this issue?” Be prepared to respond to such a question.

Build capacity within the UCEDD and community so others can advocate legislatively, if the UCEDD is blocked from doing so

- Work behind the scenes to help others get the skills and support needed to advocate
- Support a network of self-advocates and empower their legislative awareness and efforts
- Build relationships in your state within the DD network and across networks. This will enable you to increase responsiveness as needs vary throughout legislative sessions, as different members of your networks will have different levels of access to key Congressional members.
- Encourage CAC members to take active role in educating legislators
- Be sure to communicate well with DD Network Partners in your state (DD Council, P&A/Disability Rights, another UCEDD) if you experience restrictions on the role your University allows you to take regarding advocacy. This will help reduce frustration experienced by other partners, and allows the opportunity for partners to balance the gap.

Be a reliable partner and resource on campus and in the community

- Be part of the University family; serve on key committees on campus even if not directly related to UCEDD efforts. You may find yourself in a position to have an effect on decisions that benefit your Center.
- Build relationships in the University's fundraising/development office. If the UCEDDs work for and with people with disabilities can be maximized by the efforts of this office, then you have another means to give back to the University. Some UCEDD Directors note that it is best not to request more \$\$ from this office, but instead use this as a means to develop positive partnerships that increase mission match in various ways across the University, and braid the UCEDD into University efforts.

- Work to support legislation that has passed; i.e., work with DD and RSA state offices to implement legislation
- Tap into the community engagement mission of the University. The UCEDD can help the University shine in this area!
- Get UCEDD information (brochures, pamphlets, newsletters) into your University's government relations office. When this office is contacted by legislators, they will have access to UCEDD information and you for assistance with responding. Make it a priority to be helpful to this office
- Identify who in the University has an interest in disability, or has disability in their family. Build relationships with these people, share interests, explore mission match, cross-promote each other's messages.
- Write to legislators personally on issues that impact your particular areas of expertise in disability where policy is being considered.
- Ensure that information coming from your UCEDD is credible, objective, and research-based