

It's All About Relationships

A conversation with U.S. higher education government relations professionals on navigating the halls of local, state, and federal government in the current political climate

BY THERESA WALKER

Five U.S. higher education government relations professionals joined *Currents* staff and Brian Flahaven, CASE's senior director for advocacy, in Washington, D.C., for a roundtable discussion on the challenges and opportunities of their work today. During the two-hour conversation, the group agreed on a few important points: (1) Government relations should be a direct report or have direct access to the campus executive, (2) other advancement or communications functions cannot usurp the mission of government relations, and (3) internal and external partnerships are necessary for success. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Your offices are all set up differently, in some cases with government relations integrated with advancement. What do you think the appropriate structure should be?

Karen Zamarripa: I've gone through several different iterations. At one point, I was an advocate for integrating this role within the advancement operation, but I've since changed my position on that. Nobody really understands the role of government relations. There's still an academic perception that it's not important. I've had presidents say, "That's not my job—that's your job." I believe that government relations has to report directly to the president. You need to know what the president wants, you need to know

where the institution's going, and you need to be in the room when those conversations are going on.

Dan Holsenbeck: I was hired at UCF as an associate vice president, but I reported directly, through a dotted-line relationship, to the president because the president wanted me to be responsible for government relations. I sat in on the president's staff meetings as an equal member with other VPs, including my own, who was 100 percent in favor of that.

Justin Lonon: Structurally, I like having local government, community relations, social media, and communications wrapped together for messaging purposes. We have a standalone foundation, and I work closely with its leadership. We're able to tap into donor support for advocacy purposes. Leadership



JUSTIN LONON

Executive Vice
Chancellor,
Dallas County
Community
College District,
Texas

Time on job: 12 years

Focus: State and local
government relations

Office setup: He leads the
Office of Public and Gov-
ernmental Affairs, which
encompasses government
relations, communications
and marketing, and policy
compliance.



KAREN ZAMARRIPA

Former Assistant
Vice Chancellor for
Advocacy and State
Relations,
The California State
University

Time on job: Retired in
2016 after 25 years at CSU.
She's currently a princi-
pal at Karen Zamarripa
Consulting.

Focus: State relations

Office setup: Initially, she
reported to the chancellor
but most recently reported
to the vice chancellor
of advancement. She
coordinated government
relations for the system's
23 campuses.



ANDY CLARK

Assistant Vice
Chancellor for
Government
Relations,
University System
of Maryland

Time on job: 9 years

Focus: State relations

Office setup: He reports
to the vice chancellor for
government relations.
Together they work with
the government rela-
tions staff members who
represent each of the 12
campuses that make up
the university system.



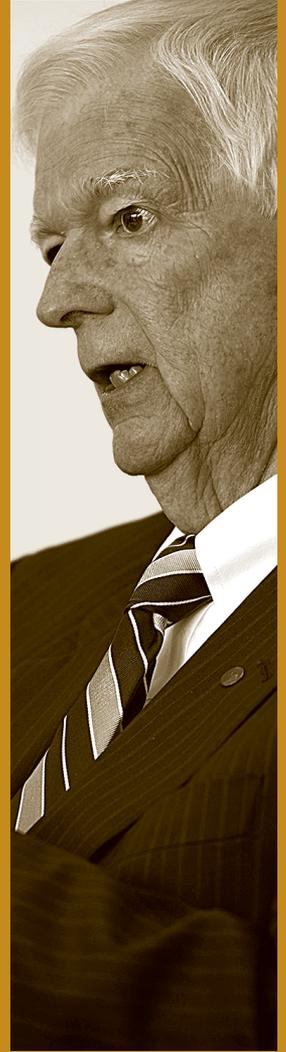
CHRISTINA WEST

Assistant Vice
Chancellor for
Federal Relations,
Vanderbilt University,
Tennessee

Time on job: 11 years

Focus: Federal relations

Office setup: She leads
the federal relations
office in Washington, D.C.
It's part of the Division
of Public Affairs, which
consists of federal, state,
and local government rela-
tions as well as community
relations.



DAN HOLSENBECK

Senior Vice President
for University
Relations and
Senior Counsel to
the President,
University of
Central Florida

Time on job: 24 years

Focus: Local government,
state, and federal relations

Office setup: He reports
to the president and rep-
resents the CEO in politi-
cal and governmental matters.
Holsenbeck oversees staff
members in Washington,
D.C., and those who man-
age relationships with city
and county governments
in Florida.

really does make a difference. Having leaders who understand the value and importance of the work we do and give us the latitude to do it is important.

Christina West: More important than the organizational structure is the relationship with campus leadership. At the federal level, I have the luxury of being able to focus on that alone, which is enough these days. It's not necessarily my job to be the expert on every issue that comes across my desk, but it is my job to know who the expert is on campus. Just as our success externally is dependent on our relationships, our success internally is also dependent on relationships. Regardless of structure, government relations needs to have an advocate in the room with the president or chancellor. Whether or not that person also has communications or advancement as part of her portfolio, it's important that she defend and speak up for the government relations perspective.

How do you address the challenge of having faculty and others question the need for government relations?

Zamarripa: It's a slow process for higher education overall to really understand that they need this kind of function. When I started at CSU, there was this attitude of "What do you mean they don't know we're important? We save the world every day." Up to that point, CSU received 87 percent of its money from the state of California without much effort. Most of what higher education did was reactive before the early 1990s. Now higher education is being pushed to change.

Lonon: Our community college faculty are pretty appreciative. But there is a misperception about our work. People think we're hobnobbing with folks with fancy titles. But the hardest benches anywhere are those in the state capitol. That's

where we spend a lot of time trying to get a few minutes with a legislator or sitting in a committee hearing until our issues come up. It's not as glamorous as people think.

Andy Clark: During the legislative session, I send a weekly recap about what happened in the general assembly. I also have an open conference call on Monday mornings. Don't wait to be appreciated. Push out information to faculty, staff, students, and as many groups as possible, but don't write anything that you wouldn't mind seeing on the front page of *The Washington Post*.

West: Plenty of people aren't aware that Vanderbilt has had a D.C. office for more than two decades. I make the case to many, including advancement colleagues, that the federal government is the university's single-largest donor, especially in terms of research funding. Just as development offices invest resources in cultivating relationships with donors, we do the same thing. I educate people on campus about what we're doing and why it's important. The response I get these days is more along the lines of "It's an interesting job that you have, and thank God you're doing it, because I wouldn't want to."

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What are your thoughts on the current political climate? What are your institution's top legislative issues?

West: On campus in July, I held an open forum, "Interpreting Washington." It was a packed room. At the federal level, there's been dramatic change. But I try to remind people that as much as things have changed at the White House, they pretty much stayed the same at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue. It's the same cast of characters, same champions for our issues, same people we have opportunities to better educate. And Congress is going to do what it's going to do. The biggest issue for

us was the president's 2018 budget request. I could hear the screams from 500 miles away. Proposals to cut the National Institutes of Health's funding by 20 percent or eliminate or halve federal student aid programs would be draconian and devastating. But what we've seen so far from Capitol Hill is almost a complete rejection of those cuts. It's our job to manage expectations on campus.

Lonon: Texas is a very conservative state. But there are different degrees of that, so we've had to shift our messaging. The business community's influence on policymakers has declined. As community colleges, we talk about our industry partners, workforce, and jobs. Those messages still resonate, but they are viewed more skeptically by policymakers. We've tried to carve out a niche for ourselves on the workforce side. The majority of our funding is through our local tax base by tax assessment. We're down to about 20 percent of funding coming from the state level, so our No. 1 issue is local control.

Zamarripa: From the higher ed perspective, the whole discussion about workforce is shifting in California. Do graduates' four-year degrees or certificates align with the workforce's needs? That is going to overwhelm the policy discussion in the next couple of years.

A Pew Research Center survey found that the majority of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents say that colleges and universities have a negative effect on the country. Republican governors lead most states, and the GOP holds the majority of state legislatures. How does this affect the way you approach your work?

Clark: The cost keeps higher education out of reach for a number of people. We have to be better at explaining the cost of college to lawmakers and other constituencies.

West: I completely agree. This is a broader threat to higher education. This is where you need your communications and government relations people and all of your externally facing groups on campus to think together about how to message about this issue.

Lonon: The skepticism about what goes on at colleges and universities from a philosophical standpoint may differ from some of our policymakers' views. For us, focusing on the workforce message has been important to navigating those conversations.

Zamarripa: We are not very good at explaining our value added. We are still struggling with people not understanding that we are a public good. Even if you're a private institution, you're still a public good. We have not been able to get that across.

The Trump administration has announced potential changes to policies related to education, such as Title IX and affirmative action. How has your campus community received these announcements?

Lonon: When the first executive order on immigration came out in January, there was a lot of uncertainty and anxiety among our students. Our faculty are focused on helping and protecting those students. It's a challenge to figure out how to provide support and get the best intelligence when situations change quickly.

West: Things are moving so fast, and there have been so many hypotheticals this year. We don't want to comment until we have an executive order in hand or until a bill is proposed. It wouldn't be responsible to make assumptions and issue a statement when we don't have all the facts.

Lonon: We have to manage expectations, because there's pressure from internal groups that we should be out there jumping ahead on these

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issues and that our presidents and chancellors should be addressing them.

Protests about free speech, racial violence, and other incidents have affected some of your campuses. How are institutions handling these issues?

Clark: These are going to be big challenges for presidents, and there's not going to be one answer to any one thing. How do you not only reassure the community that you're doing everything you can to educate and to show compassion for those affected but also create a safe campus? There are lots of ideas, but responses will be specific to the community.

Lonon: The security issue is forefront in our minds. The 2016 Dallas shooting that killed five police officers

happened at our downtown campus. In May, we had a murder-suicide at one of our other colleges. We have to balance security with being an educational institution. We are not a place that people have to worry about metal detectors. A campus carry law [that allows licensed gun owners to bring concealed handguns into many campus buildings] went into effect [for Texas community colleges] in August. It creates a lot of anxiety on both sides of the issue. As an institution, we comply with state law, but we also manage community concerns, both internal and external.

Holsenbeck: When our president took office in 1995, he stated that he would stand firmly behind our diversity and inclusion goals. It's not just what presidents say or write—it's their actions as well. The first K-9 units on the scene of the June 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting came from UCF. The first counselors to speak with survivors came from

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UCF. The major effort to bring together the Orlando community was held on our campus. We held a Black Lives Matter student gathering, and the leadership participated. It's hard to come up with a prescription for what's going to work, but it has to do with the culture your leadership instills and what leaders do when opportunities arise to manifest those goals.

How can CASE better support the government relations profession?

Zamarripa: By having campus leadership training programs that emphasize how government relations supports the university's mission. Providing information on coordinating volunteer advocates and using social media in advocacy. Looking at best practices and campaign strategies.

Quantifying the value of government relations to help demonstrate our success.

Clark: I would like to see CASE and its peer associations approach organizations like the National Conference of State Legislatures and the National Governors Association about holding a higher ed panel at their summer meetings.

Lonon: It's about elevating the conversation about these issues and about the responsibility and value of the work of government relations professionals. CASE could be a leading voice in helping develop that, including adding government relations programming at CASE conferences. ■

THERESA WALKER is a *Currents* senior writer/editor.



The banner features a light blue background with a subtle pattern of overlapping circles. On the left, there is a stylized fan-like graphic composed of several overlapping, semi-circular segments in shades of yellow, pink, teal, and blue. To the right of this graphic, the text reads: "2018 / ASIA-PACIFIC Advancement Conference" in a mix of teal and pink fonts, followed by "16-19 APRIL • HONG KONG" in teal. In the top right corner, the CASE logo is displayed in a blue square. Below the main text, a list of conference components is shown: "Advancement Forum (Mandarin) • Schools Program • Road Map to Advancement Leadership Forum • Main Conference • Deep Dive Session". At the bottom center, the website "case.org/APAC18" is listed, along with the Twitter handle "@CASE_asia_pac" and the hashtag "#CASEAPAC". The bottom right corner of the banner features a large, colorful graphic element consisting of overlapping semi-circles in shades of teal, yellow, pink, and blue.

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Conference**
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