

To: NASPAA members engaged in advocacy
Re: Semantics Matter: Academia and Advocacy
Date: October 2009 (*adapted from the AAUP*)

As academics, we become accustomed to certain styles of speaking and writing. When constantly surrounded by colleagues who share a communication style and discipline-specific jargon, it is easy to forget that language is just as specialized within fields as the actual knowledge that said fields encompass.

Bear in mind that while many of us have built careers on in-depth knowledge of particular topics, legislators are jacks-of-all trades. Particularly at the federal level, legislators are expected to bounce between topics constantly, so in a single morning a policymaker may have meetings about higher education funding, sanctions against North Korea, agricultural subsidies, and judicial nominations. This means that the ability to express your positions concisely is paramount to getting your point across.

Keep a relatively narrow focus. Some background information is helpful – for example, if you are discussing Federal internship reform and want to divulge a bit about the foundations of the PMF. However, stay focused on your main points. Even if you can explain the entire history of graduate public policy programs in the United States clearly and succinctly, a legislator or a reporter is listening more for sound bites/major points that are directly relevant to a current topic or bill: so focus on delivering your message in a bullet-point format. Too much detail and background information most likely will only lead to a lack of clarity about our main points and what you are asking them to do.

One point of caution is to choose words carefully. Semantics matter. A pet peeve of many policymakers and staffers is when constituents visit to “educate” them. Using this word can come across as condescending and patronizing, no matter how good your intentions. As deans, directors, and/or professors, you may think we should be able to use the term freely. After all, educating is our business. The answer is NO. Unless your representative is one of your students, you are not there to speak to him/her as you would speak to one of your students. You are looking to build a partnership, so choose your words accordingly. Rather than “educating”, strive to use words like “partnering” and “collaborating”. It will be very much appreciated.