

New Member Orientation
UNC School of Government
January 7, 2015

Panel Discussion: What I Know Now That I Wish I Had Known Then—Advice from Sophomores

Returning members of the sophomore class will offer some reflections and advice for the new members on subjects such as building relationships, working with legislative staff, the role of lobbyists and the media, and managing constituent requests.

- Senator **Valerie Foushee**
- Representative **Donny Lambeth**
- Representative **Graig Meyer**
- Senator **Trudy Wade**
- Moderated by David Brown, UNC School of Government

Note: Although there was substantial agreement throughout the discussion, each statement does not necessarily reflect the consensus of all members of the panel. We took great care to reproduce the discussion but any errors should be attributed to the transcription and summarization process, not to the panelists.

Things that surprised you during your first session

- Things move slowly, then suddenly very quickly. The amount of information coming at you can be overwhelming. You may be on a large number of committees before you even know your way around the legislative buildings. There is a large volume of emails that competes with your ability to meet with constituents. There is little time for office work, so you have to catch up late at night.
- The first time you get a 500-page budget, you're hit with the huge responsibility of the job.
- Finding time for meals can be challenging. Try to eat something before committee meetings because they can run long and you need to be able to concentrate.
- You need to prepare for the maneuvering of bills and the fact that some ideas may be folded into the budget rather than advanced as individual bills. At times you will like parts of a bill but not all of it, but you will have to make a decision on how to vote. This can be especially tough for local bills that you may not like but that have no real effect on your district.
- Pay attention to the effect your service is having on your family.

Relationships with lobbyists and the media

- You may have to rethink the notion of who a lobbyist is and what they do. You can go to them for details on bills you are working on, just remember to talk to people from all sides of the issue for the full picture. This can be an efficient way to gather information, but you will have to learn whom to trust and whom not to trust.
- Lobbyists can provide a good signal that there are items in a bill that will cause problems or face heavy opposition. You will learn about the bill in committee, but you're not in all of them, so lobbyists are a good way to find out more about what's in a bill.
- I have never found the media to be a problem. As freshman you are okay—the Raleigh media are more likely to want to talk to leadership and chairs. Your local media are more likely to call you, especially for your opinion on local bills.

Bill amendment process and reaching consensus

- Your first bill will rarely go through without changes. Sometimes the changes will strengthen the bill.
- It is open season after a bill's first reading. You may not recognize the bill when it comes back for third reading. Anything can be added in committee but you do have more control over the bill on the floor.
- If your bill comes back from the other chamber with changes that you don't support, you can say you don't concur and then it will go to a committee to work on the bill. Most of the time, the person in the other chamber will call and say they want to attach something to your bill before they do it. However, this may not happen when things are moving rapidly near the end of session. On rare occasions you may even find yourself voting against your own bill!
- As a freshman you won't have many of your own bills to worry about—the concern is more for bills you might co-sponsor. At first I co-sponsored everything that I thought was a good idea. Eventually I was pulled aside by a senior member who said that it's reasonable to tell your constituents you supported a bill by way of your vote without having to co-sponsor every bill that you like.
- The IT division is wonderful and nights are a useful time for using IT resources to track bills.
- You can go to your mentor and ask if they see anything in the bill that concerns them. Other resources are the President Pro Tem, Rules Chair, caucus chair, or committee chair. Ask questions of the Research Division—they are very helpful. If a bill like yours has been introduced before, ask what happened to it.
- The process is fun and it's transparent. In fact, it is shocking how much transparency there is in committee and on the floor. The lobbyists, the media, everyone knows about the bill.

- There are members in the elected body who may have expertise on the issues at the heart of your bill. Go see them to help you understand those issues better and consider asking them to co-sponsor your bill. Go see the chair and the leadership to talk it through before you submit your bill.

Finding time for relationship-building and mentors

- I would sit in committee and half of my fellow members wouldn't be there. Eventually I realized that there were few bills on the agenda, I did not have much to say on them, they were already moving ahead, and my time was better used working on my own bill. But that was hard to get used to.
- You get to know each other during meals, at night, and out of session. I am getting to know people better in the interim.
- Talk with people while you're eating. You will have time for this until right at the end. You will love these opportunities to get to know your colleagues.
- There are events almost every morning and afternoon, usually in the cafeteria. These gatherings are opportunities—take advantage of them. But you have to pick and choose what you have time for.
- You will work late at night. If you go into it saying you want to read every draft of every bill, you are starting out with an impossible task. You need to rely on your caucus. You may get calls asking why you voted a particular way and then realize that something you weren't aware of is in the bill. Respond that you will need time to look into it and then do so.
- In talking to others, you will learn whom you can trust.
- In the Senate, most votes are bi-partisan. There are not many bills that are high profile. The Senate gets along well, and often we all vote together.
- When picking a mentor, see who is in your caucus and has been there a long time, whom people look up to, and whom you will click with.
- When you go to present a bill, after presenting it to your party's caucus go to the other party and have them look so you know what the questions will be. Try to come to a compromise before you present the bill.

Sources of tension in the legislative process

- There can be tension between the chambers at times, but you do so many events together that you build relationships. The governor also has ideas we might not necessarily agree with and that can create tension.
- Most people get along with each other on a personal basis. There can be tension at the end on what will pass. As freshmen, go talk to committee members in the other

chamber and get to know some of them. Talk to the chair and to the members before presenting a bill, don't go in there cold.

Protocols and the chain of command

- There is a strong chain of command. You need to respect leadership. If you have a strong opinion on something, go talk to the leadership in private. As a freshman you are on the low end of the chain and you need to work your way up. Caucus is the time to speak up.
- In the minority party you obviously have fewer members, so you have to share the workload more. You may be given leadership roles in your areas of expertise early in your term.
- If you give your word on a vote, don't change it without telling the sponsor. You need to go back to that person privately if you have a problem—don't surprise them on the floor. You need to stick with what you say. Typically your caucus will give you the information that you need to make your decision.
- Your caucus will encourage you in certain directions but they will not tell you "how" to vote. Stick to what you told your Whip when you vote.
- Don't text out the details of what your caucus is doing.

Working with legislative staff

- The staff divisions here are great. You need to know whom to go to, but they are always accommodating. They have to work at an unbelievable pace. Get to know them early and get your LA to learn who they are.
- Staff is very knowledgeable. Be courteous—don't go to them the last week of session and ask for new work.
- Staff can do a lot of the heaving lifting for you, especially for constituent questions.

How to handle local bills

- Be sure everyone in your local delegation is on board. These bills usually move pretty quickly.
- In the Senate, you will vote for most local bills. You generally take the sponsor's word that it is needed back in their district.
- If the bill really is local, have someone in the other chamber who will work with you.

Challenges for those transitioning from local government to the legislature

- If you served on a governing board back home, you may have been serving with a group of people who already agreed with you. It's different at the state level: On some issues

there is an east/west divide in the legislature and on other issues there is an urban/rural divide—sometimes it feels like it's hard to find something that everyone can agree on.

- Compared to the local government process, it takes longer to turn an idea into a law and the bill will go through more changes along the way.
- Whether you're in the majority or minority, you have to remember you were elected to serve your constituents—it's not about you, it's about the people you represent.

Other sources of assistance

- Get to know the Rules Chair, they will help you get things done. There is always a way to get something done if it really needs to happen.
- If a constituent has a problem you can go to the leadership's office and ask for help on resolving it. You can usually fix a problem without a bill. In some cases you can convince agencies to fix problems in order to avoid new legislation.
- Learn how to connect your constituents with the agencies that are there to serve them.
- Make a wise choice when hiring an LA. The people you serve are what it's all about. Your LA will be the one seeking help for constituents. They also handle your appointments. This is a very important hire.

Tending to your personal life: housing, health, and family

- Housing is all across the board; it depends on how far away you live. Some people buy and other people rent. You could split the cost with another legislator and become roommates. You could also stay in a hotel, but then you have to pack up every week. In intense weeks, it is more accommodating to have your own bed and a place to relax.
- Having a fitness center is important. You will also see people doing a lot of walking.
- Even if you don't eat a lot of food, your metabolism is not as high with all of the sitting. Consider using a Fitbit to remind you to get up and walk – you need that exercise.
- In the LOB, I use the stairs: it keeps me healthy and allows me to have a private walk. You can also walk on the roof of the legislative building.
- At first I tried to do all of the events and it just about wrecked my ability to be present for my family. You have to be selective, and you need to go home to see your family.
- I had to realize that I can't always accommodate everyone back home because I need some down time. I tried to keep Friday to myself and my family.
- Fasten your seatbelts! Be ready for the pace and enjoy it. Not everyone gets to do this. You may not get what you want all of the time, but you will get to do many good things.