Federal Relations: Representing Mason’s Interests in Washington, D.C.

By Buzz McClain

Earlier this year a bill was proposed in Congress called the Grant Act. Among other things, it would require principal investigators at research institutions to publish their successful proposals on a central website operated by the U.S. government. Peer reviewers would also be identified.

This proposed act was a problem, says Kerry Bolognese. “Peer reviewers don’t always want to have their names published when they have to make sensitive decisions about grants,” he says. “And putting full proposals on the Internet may release proprietary information.”

Bolognese is the director of federal relations in the Office of Government and Community Relations for George Mason University; it fell to him to let Virginia’s representatives on Capitol Hill know how potentially damaging the Grant Act could be to George Mason’s research programs, as well as those of other commonwealth institutions. “We were able to work with Congressman [Gerry] Connolly’s staff, and in the end he proposed an amendment to the bill,” Bolognese says. “The House committee said they’d work with Rep. Connolly to see if they could address his concern, which is a very good thing.”

That was all in a day’s work for the federal liaison.

Bolognese represents the university not only to lawmakers in the Capitol but also to the many and varied federal agencies that have the power to influence higher education and research policy and funding in the country.

“I closely follow what’s going on up on the Hill, and if I see something that’s percolating that might not be in our interests, we make sure that our congressional delegation is aware of that,” Bolognese says. “Similarly, if there’s something that comes down the pike that’s really helpful to us, we make sure they know that, and we work with them to give them reasons why it’s important. And we may share with them what we’d like to see happen. It’s an important thing to do.”

Mason, of course, is in competition for limited resources with other research universities in the state and elsewhere, and while Bolognese often goes it alone when meeting with representatives and their staff members, he explains that “we’re networked with the other higher education associations so as to infringe our interests into a larger community.”
Virginia has 13 members in Congress, including the two senators. That number “is not unmanageable,” Kerry says. “The important thing is to know who the key staff is on whatever issue you’re addressing.”

Because Mason’s interests are so numerous and varied, Bolognese needs to know as much as he can about a wide range of disciplines, from hard sciences to current events. “You have to know a little bit about a lot because if you go to talk to a member of a congressional staff, you can’t sound stupid,” he says. “You’ll be viewed as an imposter.”

He also has to stay ahead of the news and “find out where the direction of programs is going, and what the priorities are,” particularly when it comes to representing research. Earlier this year he attended a briefing at the Department of Energy to learn about the agency’s five-year plan.

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Those are the kinds of things I can share so that we know where the money’s going to be; that’s important, and then you can start cultivating relationships with the program officers,” he says.

“You find out who they are, and you can start to build up a rapport and say, ‘OK, what are you thinking of, what should I be prepared to do?’ Plus you find out the appropriations — where the money’s going.”

Bolognese relies on support from the university’s senior leadership and key faculty members, who are often enlisted to help bolster the school’s positions on various issues in the Capitol. He’s also open to having alumni who have found positions in the federal government help out on occasion.

“You would want to have key people with a broad picture and have experience in federal government so that they could give you some direction, plus they can serve to open up doors for you,” he says. “They could give insight as to how something should travel through Congress or a federal agency; and they’d be someone you could discuss ideas with. And since Washington is all about relationships — I always say, all politics is personal — they would be able to make phone calls that can help reach a goal.”