

Taking Mason's Message to Richmond

By Buzz McClain

"In my line of work, sometimes it's the recognition of what didn't happen during the General Assembly more so than what did," says Mark Smith. "A colon that becomes a semicolon in a bill can be a little thing, but it might affect legislation that provides more flexibility to the university to operate more entrepreneurially. It doesn't generate big headlines, but those little things please me. I like to work behind the scenes."

Smith is the director of George Mason University's [Office of State Government Relations](#) in the Office of Government and Community Relations, which represents George Mason's interests to state lawmakers and other officials in Richmond and elsewhere. Senior leadership identifies Mason's future ambitions and immediate objectives, while Smith takes those goals to lawmakers to consider.

"I'm just the messenger," he says. "Senior leadership formulates what we need to do, and then I look for those opportunities with the rest of the team, because I can't do it alone."

The team includes, among others in senior leadership, Vice President of Government and Community Relations Paul Liberty and Associate Director Sabena Moretz. "If you compared staffing arrangements at a few other doctoral institutions, you would find that we are very lean," Smith says. The team interfaces with 140 lawmakers in Richmond who will tackle some 3,000 bills and resolutions in the 2014 session, which begins on Wednesday, Jan. 8.

Educating Legislators on Education

Smith has spent 30 years in Richmond representing higher education. Over that time he's come to appreciate the rhythms of Virginia's election cycle.

"You've got governors that come and go every four years, you've got legislators who are up for election either every two years or four years. So it's an ongoing process; there's a lot of education that has to go on on a regular basis."

Smith has also come to recognize that elected officials tend to have their own strong suits and pet interests. As it happens, Mason, with its impressive statewide economic impact and reputation for transactional research, "catches the attention of downstate legislators. But I have to assume they don't know a lot about certain issues because they have 400 other ones to deal with," Smith says.

"If you can figure out what's important to them — transportation or life sciences or jobs or whatever — I've got some things at Mason they can look at. If a governor wants to look at jobs creation, well, we're an economic engine. If a governor wants to talk about life sciences, I've got some things they can look at."

Working Independently, and with Others



Mark Smith. Photo courtesy of Mark Smith

Other universities and community college systems have liaisons in Richmond; Smith says, “Universities love to hate each other, but we do have a lot of collaborations across the faculty and administration lines, and the provosts all get together, and the presidents all get together and, yes, the lobbyists get together.”

Collaboration is crucial, Smith says, “on what I call overarching issues. For example, you might have a maintenance reserve fund that’s distributed to all the universities to maintain air conditioning and heating systems. When universities have hundreds of buildings, it’s a big expense, and it’s in our interest to make sure that that fund is there and available to all the institutions.

“When you’ve got financial aid needs, there’s a formula that drives how much each institution gets, but if the pot isn’t full, everybody gets less. And so you’ll find on those overarching issues that we will get together to meet with legislators individually or collectively, as the politics and relationships dictate, to advance the cause.”

Smith notes that some 90 percent of Virginia’s general fund budget of about \$18 billion is obligated before the legislative session even begins.

“So the governor and the statehouse really only have about 10 percent [of the budget] for competing issues. That can make things difficult. And then the cutbacks on the federal front have not helped out a whole lot because that’s had a domino effect in terms of how the state allocates its money.”

With funding so tight, it’s important to Smith that he knows the people who are considering the issues.

“Every elected official has his or her own personality,” he says. “I think understanding where they’ve come from and what is important to them is helpful to anybody that walks through their doors. Appreciating their past and their profession certainly helps with relations. And I think that that is probably most of what my job is: relationship-building. Being able to know the people, understand the people, relate to the people.”