

STUDENT LOBBYISTS' BEHAVIOR AND ITS PERCEIVED INFLUENCE ON STATE-
LEVEL PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION LEGISLATION:

A CASE STUDY

Elizabeth A. Tankersley-Bankhead

Dr. Barbara Townsend, Dissertation Supervisor

Dr. Joe F. Donaldson, Dissertation Co-Supervisor

ABSTRACT

As state budgets have tightened and a college education has more frequently come to be viewed as a private good, public higher education has become increasingly politicized, particularly at the state level and over the past 15 years. This fact has made it necessary for public colleges and universities to actively engage in the state legislative arena. Generally, full-time professional lobbyists represent public colleges and universities. Students have been largely overlooked as potential partners in lobbying despite assertions that they may be among the best advocates for their institutions.

This study examined student involvement in state-level legislative lobbying activity. Specifically, this study explored the lobbying behavior of Associated Students of the University of Missouri (ASUM) student lobbyists and its influence on state-level higher education legislation during the 2009 Missouri Legislative Session. ASUM student lobbyists are registered legislative lobbyists with the state of Missouri. This study sought to do three things. First, it examined ASUM student lobbyists' lobbying behavior. Second, it compared ASUM student lobbyists' lobbying behavior with that of lobbyists from the same multi-campus public four-year institutional system. Third, it examined four participant groups' perceptions about ASUM student lobbyists' influence.

A qualitative case study methodology was used with pluralist theory and interest group theory as theoretical frameworks. The 37 participants included 10 ASUM student lobbying team members (eight student lobbyists, the Legislative Director, and the Assistant Legislative Director), 14 state legislators, seven legislative staff members, and six University of Missouri System lobbyists. ASUM student lobbying team members, legislators, and legislative staff members were individually interviewed; ASUM student lobbyists and UM System lobbyists participated in two separate focus group interviews; over 260 hours of observation was conducted at the Missouri State Capitol during the legislative session; and over 200 documents were collected for analysis.

The findings revealed that student lobbyists used many of the same lobbying behaviors used by higher education lobbyists as well as some unique ones. The findings also showed that student lobbyists were able to present a unique perspective, one not presented by other higher education lobbyists. The findings also demonstrated that participants perceived ASUM student lobbyists had substantial influence, specifically on issues that directly affected them and on which they mobilized other university students.

This study added to what is known about public higher education sector lobbying at the state level as well as what little is known about student involvement in it. This study has important implications for practice and future research. First, students can be effective partners in postsecondary institutional state-level lobbying activity. Second, this study's results may be informative to public higher education institutions in general as they seek to bolster state-level influence. Third, further research about how public colleges and universities can include students in institutional state-level lobbying efforts would be informative.