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ASUO lobbying efforts lauded

Legislators on the state and federal levels find the ASUO well-prepared

By David Ryan

Oregon Daily Emerald

In the rough and tumble of pushing political interests through the Oregon Legislature and the U.S. Congress, Democratic lawmakers say the ASUO has what it takes to survive as a lobbying group, while Republican lawmakers either remain silent or refuse to comment on the issue.

There are lobbies for most every political interest: the gun lobby, the anti-tobacco lobby, the environmental lobby, the school prayer lobby. You name it, there's probably a lobby for it.

Wright Andrews, a Washington, D.C., lawyer/lobbyist and former president of the American League of Lobbyists, said lobbying is right under the U.S. Constitution.

"[Lobbyists] need to provide information to legislators," he said. "Normal citizens don't have the time or the expertise to lobby. They often hire a lobbyist, say a lawyer like me. Your lobbyist is your advocate."

Jerry Medler, an associate professor of political science at the University, said good lobbyists get what their clients want.

"That [boils down] to two separate questions: Does the client know what they want? Can you tell whether or not you got it?" he said.

"These may sound silly but they are often tough questions to answer because clients are unclear about the details of their desires and legislation is confusing — even to the legislators — often producing unintended consequences."

The ASUO lobbies Salem and Washington in conjunction with two student lobbying organizations.

It's a member of the Oregon Student Association, which comprises students from colleges throughout Oregon with an interest in student issues such as tuition freezes and child care for students.

The United States Student Association represents higher education students nationwide and lobbies lawmakers in Washington.

Ed Dennis, executive director of the OSA, said the problems of being a student lobbyist are not unique.

"I think they're the same obstacles everyone else faces — having access to top lawmakers, establishing credibility with those lawmakers and establishing a relationship of trust," he said.

Dennis said money makes a difference as well.

"Another thing is where that [lobbyist's] power comes from," he said. "You've got these huge [professional] advocacy organizations that do a lot of work."

"And so [student lobbyists]

can have a nice conversation [with a legislator], but the legislator knows you're going to be leaving that day as opposed to a [professional] lobbyist who is there every week."

Matt Swanson, ASUO legislative affairs coordinator, said the ASUO's main legislative goals are getting a tuition freeze and increasing the number of student families who can get child care.

C.J. Gabbe, ASUO federal affairs coordinator, said the ASUO's congressional goals were to increase financial aid to students and allow students to have more control over student fees.

Swanson said there were problems surfacing with the fight for a tuition freeze.

"Word around is that other groups are after the money [that would be used for a tuition freeze]," he said. "The budget is always tight in the state, and higher education takes the cuts. It's really hard to change the mindset of the Legislature."

Sometimes this mindset forces the ASUO to fight interest groups it does not want to fight.

"We are oftentimes pitted against [kindergarten through twelfth-grade education]," Swanson said. "We feel that education is a continuum. We don't want to fight against education at any level, but sometimes we're almost forced to."

Swanson said students also have tight schedules which hamper their lobbying efforts.

The true determination of the ASUO's lobbying success will come at the end of the 1999 Oregon legislative session, when a tuition freeze and increased child care is either a reality or not. However, lawmakers who work with the ASUO say ASUO lobbyists are making their case.

U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.) gave the ASUO a clean bill of health as a lobbyist.

"Well, actually I was just over at the campus February and met with the ASUO," he said. "I meet with them usually a couple times a year."

DeFazio said he met with the ASUO once in Oregon and once in Washington. He said he thinks good lobbyists are people who are well-informed, to-the-point and able to put their issues to Congress.

"The [ASUO] was able to do that," he said. "I think generally I find they're articulate and outspoken and they have an impact because of the success of their efforts."

State Rep. Floyd Prozanski (D-Eugene) was also impressed with the ASUO.

"I would say I have had significant contact with the ASUO, both [during legislative] sessions and in the interim [between legislative sessions]," he said.

"I'd say in the past two months I've had contact with them half a dozen times. The people that have met me have been prepared with the questions they come to

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Peter DeFazio
U.S. Representative

ask me."

Prozanski said information was important to him.

"[The ASUO lobbyists] provide me with the information as to what [a particular issue] means to students," he said. "For me as a representative, to do my job I need to be informed. I need to know if organizations are impacted [by a certain bill] how it will affect them."

Danny Santos, higher education advisor to Gov. Kitzhaber, had more compliments for the ASUO.

"I think it's very fair to say that the ASUO has dealt with a lot of issues that have brought understanding to student problems," he said.

State Sen. Susan Castillo (D-Eugene), a member of the Oregon Senate's Education Committee, said she thought the ASUO spent more time with other lawmakers.

"I am very supportive of the student agenda," she said. "Because of that, I don't think they spend as much time with me as they do with people who don't necessarily support the student agenda."

The office of Oregon House Speaker Lynn Snodgrass (R-Portland), a conservative, said she refused to comment.

The Emerald was unable to contact Rep. Ron Sunseri (R-Portland), chair of the Oregon House Education Committee.

Aides at the office of Rep. Lynn Lundquist (R-Baker) said they believed Lundquist had contact with the ASUO. Sen. Tom Hartung (R-Portland), chairman of the Senate Education Committee, said he could not recall meeting with a representative of the ASUO.

"Today I had contact with a group from the [OSA], but that was the first formal meeting [this session]," he said.

Regardless of who claims to have talked to the ASUO or not, Dennis said, Swanson was doing a good job with lawmakers he has contacted.

"Matt Swanson is the one person whose job it is to be in Salem and talk to legislators," he said. "And he does. There are several legislators who trust Matt. He can walk into an office and they will listen."

David Ryan covers University issues for the Emerald. Please contact him at ragnor@gladstone.uoregon.edu with any comments, criticisms or ideas. He will thank you.

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