

NC Association of Government Information Officers

(Thursday, November 30 at the Friday Center)

I want to ask you a question about whether you've had a particular experience. Someone asks you to do something that you think is a good idea, and they ask far in advance and you agree to do it.

As the date of the activity gets close, you ask yourself why you ever agreed to do it. You are busy and you don't have time.

Have you had that experience? I had that experience many times and I had it again with this presentation.

Here's how it was different this time?

Once I focused on the nature of your work for a few minutes my stress immediately disappeared.

It was so exciting to think about your role and to realize that government information officers have never been more critically important.

Now I say it everywhere. I say it to my family. I say it to people in line at the grocery store.

In preparing this presentation I have become more convinced about the importance of your role—almost in a foundational way.

Why?

This is where I turn to the Founding Fathers.

Our country was founded on a revolutionary idea—**the people must consent for the actions of their government to be considered legitimate.**

Here's the key to that idea.

For that consent to be meaningful, the public must be informed.

The Founding Fathers all talked about it—Washington, Jefferson, and Adams.

How else can citizens participate effectively in choosing their leaders? How can they hold their government accountable?

It all begins with access to objective and trusted information (1) about how government works, and (2) about the policy issues under consideration.

Everything flows from the assumption of an informed public—and you are the government information officers.

It doesn't get any more fundamental.

So now you understand why I feel this need to tell everyone about the importance of your work as the foundation of democracy.

That's a big responsibility, and it is harder than ever to do it effectively.

Let me say that this is not intended as a political statement about President Trump. I would have given the same talk two years ago.

Here's the real challenge.

It is incredibly hard to convince people that information is objective and reliable and that they should trust it in making decisions—especially information coming from the government.

Given the importance of your role . . .

What can you do to increase the chance that people will see your information as objective and trusted, and that they will use it in exercising their rights as citizens?

That is where we have something in common.

Our mission at the School of Government is related to your mission as government information officers.

We both are trying to get objective information to policymakers, the media, and citizens. And to have it be trusted and used.

I'm going to share a little about how we have tried to do that from our beginning in 1931, as the Institute of Government and now as the School of Government. I think it has served us well.

I'll do my best to connect our experience with the challenges you face as government information officers.

We focus incredibly hard on adhering closely to two values—non-partisanship and neutrality on policy issues—and that has never been more important for our effectiveness. I'm not saying that we do it perfectly.

First, a little about the School for those of you who may not be familiar with our mission and how we carry it out.

The School's mission is to improve the lives of North Carolinians by working with public officials to improve their government.

We focus on North Carolina.

We focus on serving public officials—they are our students.

We carry out the mission with public officials through teaching, research and publishing, and through advising.

Advising best illustrates how it can be challenging for us to share information that will be trusted and used.

Public officials can pick up the phone or send an email seeking information and advice—they do it thousands of times a year. It may be a legal question or it may be a budget question or it may be background for a policy decision.

We also are called in to work on longer-term projects—such as working with a local government on a strategic plan, advising them on community development issues, or working with a legislative commission.

Now back to the question facing us and facing you.

How do we get objective information to policymakers, the media, and citizens? And have it be trusted and used.

I'm going to focus on the two values I mentioned earlier—**non-partisanship and policy neutrality**. They apply to all of our work and have been crucial to our credibility with a wide spectrum of people.

The expertise of our faculty is fundamentally important to our credibility, but without those values their expertise would not necessarily be trusted across partisan and ideological lines.

Here's the premise.

If we are perceived as partisan, or as advocates for a particular policy outcome, people who identify with another party or hold a different policy position will not trust our ability to help them.

What matters is their perception of our neutrality as much as the reality.

Does the same premise apply to your work as government information officers?

I hope to leave plenty of time for questions, and I encourage you to challenge the premise—especially in thinking about whether it can be helpful in your work.

Non-Partisan Value

Faculty show no favoritism in their work based on anyone's party affiliation.

We want to work with everyone—it doesn't matter if they are Democrat, Republican, Independent, Libertarian, Green, Bull Moose or whatever.

We affirmatively want to work with everyone—it is more than just a willingness to work with everyone. It is a part of our mission.

This may seem obvious today, but keep in mind that we have been around since 1931—and for most of that time nearly everyone in North Carolina was a Democrat.

So it might have been easy to assume that we could be more partisan because it wouldn't really matter with most elected or appointed officials.

There were ideological variations among Democrats during that history—but the differences generally were not based on party affiliation.

It has always mattered to our faculty that we be non-partisan in all of our work, and also that we appear to be non-partisan. Because otherwise people in other parties, or no parties, may not be comfortable working with us.

Part of the reason is that they attribute policy values and positions to the parties, and they will attribute them to you if they believe you are aligned with one of the parties.

Let me give you an example.

Speaker Harold Brubaker. In 1995 Rep Harold Brubaker from Randolph Co was elected Speaker of the House in North Carolina. He was the first Republican Speaker since 1895. He had first been elected to the House in 1976 and for all of those years he was in the legislative minority.

The School had received planning money for the renovation and expansion of our building the session before he became Speaker, and we were back at the legislature seeking construction money.

Lots of people at Carolina told me there was no chance we would get capital funding from the House “now that the Republicans are in charge.”

In fact it was just the opposite. Speaker Brubaker was a strong supporter of funding for our building, partly because we worked with him all of those years when he was sitting on the last row and had no power. Just like we worked with any other legislator who asked for our help.

And it wasn't because we anticipated that one day he would become Speaker of the House and reward us.

It was because it is our job to work with everyone regardless of their political affiliation—that's our mission.

Here's another illustration of how far we will go to avoid appearing partisan—and not trusted by people of other parties or who are unaffiliated.

Individual Partisan Political Activities. Our individual partisan preferences should not be evident in our professional roles, but we also pay attention to activities in our private lives that might negatively affect our work for the School.

For example, posting partisan campaign signs on one's property or cars—attending campaign rallies or political protests—organizing political fundraisers for a candidate.

As Dean my profile is higher, and so I will not affiliate with any political party or contribute to any political candidate.

Our employees have a First Amendment right to engage in partisan political activities—but we choose to restrict our activities given the extent to which professional and personal worlds overlap.

And people are paying attention—more than ever before.

Two years ago I received an email from someone at the legislature saying that only two of the School's faculty members were Republicans and whether I wanted to respond.

My response was that I had no idea how many of our faculty members are Republicans because I never have asked that question and I never will. And then I repeated our commitment to non-partisanship in all of our work.

My guess is that you face the same challenge to your credibility as our faculty if you are perceived as partisan among certain audiences.

One difference is that some of you may be working for someone who is a partisan officeholder, which makes it much harder, and so is there really any way for you to present yourself as neutral along party lines—and therefore more credible with people from different political parties.

It feels like you should be able to do some of the same things we do to appear more non-partisan in your role as a government information officer.

Don't register with a political party. Don't do other things in your personal life that might cause people in your community—however it is defined—to see you as aligned with one party or the other. Don't go to rallies. Moral Mondays. Don't put bumper stickers on your car.

I'll be interested in your thoughts once I stop talking.

Policy Neutral Value

Faculty members do not take positions on public policy issues.

Our role is to work with policy-makers by giving them good information and helping them consider the consequences of the different policy options under the circumstances.

No one elected our faculty to make policy decisions, and our job is not to influence the outcome by nudging policy-makers in one direction or the other based on our own values, beliefs or preferences.

Instead, our job is to put aside our personal views and help people on all sides of an issue gain access to information and put forward their ideas for consideration in the policy process.

It is an old-fashioned idea. The democratic process works best when everyone has access to the same objective information and they work through the political process to arrive at a solution.

It is not a perfect process—we might want to improve it in a variety of ways.

But the part that makes sense to me is the fundamental idea that reliable information is the one constant that is necessary for the system to work effectively.

The system still may not work perfectly—or even close to perfectly—but arguably it doesn't work at all without good information.

And so we are back to the critical importance of your role—and the way in which our roles are similar in trying to give people access to objective information that will be trusted.

The premise, again, is that if the School is viewed as located at a certain place on the ideological spectrum—or “biased”—then officials and citizens who see themselves occupying a different place on the ideological spectrum will not trust us or the information we provide to them.

As I give you some examples from our experience at the School—think about whether the value of policy neutrality applies to you—or could apply to you. **Not your agency**—but for you in your role as government information officer.

Consider this example that shows that statements about neutrality alone are not enough to convince people. They will decide if you are neutral based on what you do—not necessarily what you say.

The Brookings Institution says it is focused on “rigorous, innovative, **evidence-based research**,” which suggests objectivity and neutrality, and Heritage Foundation says that it “provides timely, **accurate research** on key policy issues,” which again suggest neutrality.

Yet if I do a work-association game with people who are even vaguely familiar with each organization, here’s what happens most of the time.

I say Brookings and people say “liberal,” and I say Heritage and people say “conservative.”

Notwithstanding what they say about their objectivity, both of those organizations somehow have come to be identified with a particular spot on the ideological spectrum for public policy.

I think that’s because both organizations take positions on policy issues, and that allows people to place them somewhere along an ideological spectrum.

My point is that once you are identified with a policy position or orientation, especially in the current political environment, you become labeled in a way that defines how other people see everything you do or say.

Our goal at the School of Government is for people to not have that word-association reaction when they hear our name or see our logo. Our goal is that they not be able to place us on the ideological spectrum.

Instead, we want them somehow to have a sense that we are a place that can give them good and reliable information without trying to push them in one policy direction or another.

It feels like your goal as government information officers might be the same—even as you are providing information about policies adopted by your agency.

Let me give you a few examples of how the School of Government has tried to remain policy neutral in terms of maintaining our credibility across the ideological spectrum.

As I'm giving these examples, think about how our approach is similar or different from the approach you take as a government information officer.

Jim Gardner. In 1989 Jim Gardner was elected Lt Governor. He was the first Republican Lt Governor elected in 100 years, and in response the Democratic-controlled legislature transferred many of the powers of the Lt. Governor to the President Pro Tempore of the Senate.

Lt. Governor Gardner was interested in putting together a legislative package that included a number of law enforcement measures.

He came to the School of Government and asked if our faculty would help him develop his proposed legislative package on crime.

Here's what he said. "I don't trust the legislative staff because they were all hired by Democrats." As an aside, I thought that was unfair to the non-partisan staff, but the important point is that was his perception. He said "And I don't trust the Attorney General's Office because he's a Democrat."

"I trust you."

Let's pause for a second and reflect on the irony of an extremely conservative Republican official coming to the University at Chapel Hill and trusting us to help him accomplish his goals.

I'll return to our Carolina connection and the challenge it can present in a couple of minutes.

I was a faculty member at the time and I was assigned to work on a part of the legislation—a bill that would have created a state drug enforcement agency roughly comparable to the federal DEA.

How did I do that work? I started by asking what Lt. Governor Gardner was trying to accomplish, and I listened carefully to understand **his** policy interests.

Then I analyzed the federal law and also looked at what some other states had done in terms of their own approaches to drug enforcement.

The goal was to craft a piece of proposed legislation that would reflect his policy interests, not mine.

And my purpose was not to influence his goal. It was to help him understand the different possible ways of meeting his interests, and some of the consequences of the different ways of meeting those interests.

In the end, I drafted a bill that met all of his interests—and I modestly would say that technically it was an excellent piece of legislation.

And here's the thing that I will reveal for the first time. I personally thought it was a completely unnecessary piece of legislation from a public policy perspective.

It seemed duplicative and that it wasn't likely to have much impact on the challenges facing North Carolina around illegal drugs.

And I was completely fine after was introduced and failed to pass.

Because my role—the School's role—was not to judge his policy ideas or to advocate for particular a policy outcome.

Our role is partly a process role—helping those who are elected and appointed carry out their policy interests to the greatest extent possible.

The key is good information—including data to understand more deeply all sides of an issue—and to understand legal constraints given current law.

And here's sometimes the hardest part. When a policy-maker says "What do you think I should do?"

And it is especially hard if you have worked with someone in a particular field over a number of years—they trust you and genuinely want to know your opinion.

In order to maintain our neutrality and trust, it is important to answer "That's really not for me to say. That's your call. What other information do you need to make a good decision for yourself?"

Because the minute I publicly identify myself with a policy position, I allow people to locate me at a specific place on the ideological spectrum.

And fair or not, that will limit my ability to work with some people who see themselves at a different spot on the spectrum.

Conclusion

Let me return to where I started.

Access to objective information that can be trusted is a key to our functioning democracy.

It is at the core of our work at the School of Government, and it also is why your role as government information officers is so incredibly important.

In talking about the School's values and how they have contributed to our credibility, my goal has been to raise the question whether those same values might help you in being viewed as a source of objective and trusted information in your work.

Again, I recognize in some ways your challenges are greater. You may work for a person or an agency that is identified closely with a political party. And the organization is taking policy positions all the time because that is its responsibility.

The question is what's the best you can do under the circumstances to have credibility—for you and for your agency?

Do you give yourself greater credibility with the widest possible range of people by not personally affiliating with a political party?

You have a First Amendment right to do it, and it may even be expected by the person or organization that appointed you, but should you do something to indicate that your primary goal is to provide trusted information?

How do you communicate information about policy without being identified personally with the policy perspective?

It is important to your organization that you and your information are trusted. You can't take personal positions or express your personal opinion about the organization's policy positions. **In some ways you need to be viewed as independent and separate.**

Who are the main audiences for your information and who matters the most from the perspective of your organization?

We know that not every possible recipient of information is equally important to the mission of your organization.

They are important for the democratic process, but that is different from the mission of your organization or agency.

Maybe it is the editor of your local newspaper, or maybe it is the head of the local chamber of commerce, or maybe it is a key committee chair in the General Assembly.

One thing you can do is reach out to those key people or organizations and talk explicitly about your role and what they can expect from you in terms of non-partisanship and policy neutrality.

Give them the opportunity to address the issue of your neutrality directly with you—instead of making their own assumptions about your role and never considering any other perspective.

And then you have to deliver with your actions.

I'll give you one more example where that has been helpful for the School in recent years.

More than any other time that I can recall, we have more new legislators who come with no previous experience in government.

It used to be that legislators may have had some experience with the School as a county commissioner or a mayor—which usually meant that they came to the legislature understanding our role and trusting us—and being willing to call on us for assistance.

A few years ago I went to the legislature and reached out primarily to new Republican legislators who had no prior experience with the School.

I told them about us in the same general way that I've told you, **and then I addressed directly the issue that I thought might be on their mind.**

I said that I recognized our affiliation with Carolina might cause them to make some assumptions about our political views, and that as a result they might think we would come from a liberal perspective and as a result not be comfortable working with us.

I referenced that at one point Senator Helms had argued against the need for a new state zoo in Asheboro, saying that “We should just put a fence around Chapel Hill.”

Those impressions are real and I thought it was better to deal with them directly rather than pretend or hope that they didn't exist.

Are there opportunities for you to do something similar with selected people or audiences?

One very conservative member looked me straight in the eye and said, smiling as pleasant as could be, “That's right. I do believe you are a bunch of liberals.”

I said. “I completely understand and I'm not going to try and talk you out of it.”

“My request is that you give us the opportunity to help you in some way and decide for yourself if we are biased with our own agenda or if we will help you accomplish your agenda.” He said, “I’m going to do that.”

I told him “That’s great. If we work with you and you still believe that we are a bunch of liberals with our own agenda rather than with a commitment to helping you, then you should tell other members.”

“But if you find the opposite, then you have to promise me that you’ll tell them that too.”

We worked with him and he found what others have found, and he was very happy with our support for him and his agenda, and he said so.

I won’t say that everything is perfect and that we are trusted by everyone, but we are doing good work on a number of legislative projects.

Our neutrality and credibility is something that we just always must pay attention to and work on.

How do you find ways to demonstrate your neutrality, reliability, and credibility? Every time you interact with someone is an opportunity to demonstrate it.

We do an orientation for new legislators after every election cycle, and I typically do a session on the legislative institution and its relationship to the other branches.

It is a basic civics lesson, but you could do it in a way that was political and partisan, especially if you argued that the governor should have greater authority in the balance of powers—as opposed to laying out how the balance has been struck over time in North Carolina.

I did it a few years ago, and a legislator came up to me right after the session. He was a big guy and a huge Wolfpack fan—wearing a bright red blazer.

As he towered over me, here's what he said. I apologize for the profanity, but no softer translation can do it justice.

“When they introduced you, I said to myself ‘Here’s another asshole from Chapel Hill. But I was wrong.’”

My immediate response was “About which part.”

His point was that he expected a bunch of liberal policy opinions from the “People’s Republic of Chapel Hill” and instead he got a factual summary of how North Carolina’s state government has evolved over the years.

It is critically important that you have credibility whenever you speak.

We can disagree about policy, and we should disagree. Democracy is messy and that’s not necessarily a bad thing.

But we need to agree about the facts if we ever hope to make progress—however you define progress.

You are the lynchpin to making it all work.

We need for you to be a source of reliable and credible information—that can be trusted by people within your organization, and by people outside of it.

The Founders didn’t get everything right, but they were right about the centrality of an informed public as essential to a democratic government.

You are the leading embodiment of that ideal.

Shortly before he died, the historian Stephen Ambrose was asked the main lesson he had learned from his study of American history. He had studied the Lewis and Clark Expedition and D-Day.

He said his main takeaway was that **Optimism Always is Justified.**

I share Ambrose's optimism about the country, even in the face of its many challenges—some old and some new.

One reason for my optimism is the knowledge that you and your colleagues are committed to providing reliable information that all of us can use in carrying out our responsibilities as citizens.

Thank you for what you are doing for North Carolina. I really appreciate it.