

Forget creativity: Can lobbying be taught?
by T.R. GOLDMAN, The Washington Post
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WASHINGTON (AP) — It's been almost 30 years since Steve Billet, at the time a newly minted lobbyist for AT&T, pulled up behind a car at a red light in Washington and noticed the bumper sticker: "Don't tell my mother I'm a lobbyist. She thinks I play piano in a whorehouse."

Since then, things have only gotten worse, at least reputationally, for what may be the most remunerative of the world's more beleaguered professions (and yes, it is considered a profession by many). Billet, in fact, no longer lobbies; he runs a graduate program at George Washington University that teaches people how to lobby. It's a tall order, and not just because the whole concept has many on K Street rolling their eyes.

"Parents don't raise their kids to be lobbyists," says Billet, with some understatement. "It's an extra challenge from a marketing perspective. We have to actively promote our program."

Indeed, many K Streeters simply believe the craft (and yes, it is considered a craft by many as well) is something you can't learn by reading a book. "It's all about good instincts," says Mike House, who directs the lobbying team at Hogan Lovells, the behemoth law firm whose revenue reached \$1.67 billion last year. "And instincts," adds House, a lobbyist since he left the Hill as chief of staff to Howell Heflin, the late Democratic senator from Alabama, more than 20 years ago, "can never be taught."

Now that the presidential and congressional elections are over, Washington's quadrennial personnel shift begins, with hundreds of Hill staffers and political appointees from dozens of federal agencies preparing to descend on K Street, trying to convince prospective employers that they can either advance their agenda or stymie those of their opponents.

For many, signing up for American University's two-week series of lectures and seminars, enrolling in the master's degree program at George Washington's Graduate School of Political Management or taking the American League of Lobbyists' Lobbying Certificate Program by attending 11 of 14 different monthly lectures — to name some of the most popular programs

around town — might provide that competitive edge.

Then again, it might get you no more than a very expensive piece of paper, one that costs \$1,500 for a certificate of completion for American's course and as much as \$47,160 for the 36 credit-hours it takes to earn a full-blown master's of political management at George Washington. It certainly won't let you waltz into one of the city's thousands of lobby shops with a guaranteed position — particularly not in today's tight job market.

In short, you can go to school to learn about lobbying, but you don't become a lobbyist by going to school.

"I always start off the first night by saying, 'If you thought when you finished this course you could be a lobbyist, you're wrong,'" explains Julius W. Hobson Jr., a senior adviser at Polsinelli Shughart and former top lobbyist at the American Medical Association who graduated from the George Washington program in 1980 and has been teaching a course there twice a year ever since 1994. "Not everybody has the instincts to be a good lobbyist."

Hobson remembers relating a story to one class about a senator whose office he used to visit.

"There were pictures of his wife and children on the wall, and I'd study those pictures, and then one day I went into his office and there were just pictures of his daughter. So I asked the class, 'What does that mean?' Silence. I get no answer. 'It means he got divorced!' It's those little things you look for so you know to say 'How's the family?' and not 'How's the wife and kids?'"

At a recent Hobson class, the discussion ran from the role of think tanks in the lobbying process to the significance of term limits for committee chairs to the importance of the House Rules Committee.

"When you hear lobbyists talking, they're likely not talking about the substance of the bill, but the rule," he added, as the seven class members diligently wrote or typed the concept into their electronic notebooks. "Face it," said Hobson at one point during the 90-minute lecture: "The Hill is a hermetic institution, and you need to know the culture."

In fact, it's not so much the culture you learn when you study lobbying as the nuts and bolts of the process and its various components, something its supporters call "applied politics," compared with traditional political science, which is far more theoretical.

"Let's be candid," says James Thurber, a political scientist who runs American's lobby program. "It's an area that pure academics look down on."

This semester, for example, George Washington's 36 credit hour, two-year degree program in "political management" includes courses on fundraising, international lobbying, communications strategy and principled political leadership.

A few miles away, American's Public Affairs and Advocacy Institute — it used to be called the "Lobbying Institute" until it was changed by a university dean who didn't like the connotation,

says Thurber — offers a full-time, two-week workshop whose speakers include some 30 lobbyists who talk about strategies and tactics used to influence public policy.

"One misconception about lobbying is that it's simply hiring somebody who goes into Congress and talks to people to influence legislation. That's a very narrow view," says Thurber, adding that "what we think lobbying is, and what we teach, is that it's important to develop a clear strategy." These include everything from TV and print ads, social media, using survey research to evaluate how effective your lobbying campaign is to the public, developing grass roots and grass tops, coalition building, and knowing the law."

Yet there is widespread agreement that perhaps the only sine qua non to becoming a successful lobbyist is a prior job on the Hill.

"It's not just understanding the mechanics," says House, "it's having a feel for how Congress operates and the mood of Congress, and the only way to get that is to have been part of the process."

There is a type of personality common among the best lobbyists, "a certain indefinable quality that makes certain people appealing," says one top Senate aide who has been lobbied hundreds of times over the course of a two-decade career.

Burdett Loomis, one of a handful of university professors who actually study lobbying, puts it this way: "I do think you can teach a lot of this stuff," he said from his office in the political science department of the University of Kansas, "but obviously you can't give someone a personality transplant."

For Thomas Susman, who runs the American Bar Association's government affairs office and has been a lobbyist for 30 years, "lobbying is salesmanship on a very personal level." Susman spent his college years selling everything from newspaper subscriptions to Christmas gifts to air conditioning filters door to door, an experience he considers crucial to his career.

"You'd knock on a door and there'd be an old drunk with a gun, a latchkey kid high on dope, a woman in a negligee whose husband's been gone for two years — and you have to sell to all of them." It's the ability, says American League of Lobbyists president Howard Marlowe, "to deal with 535 different personalities, and there's nothing standard about that."

Hobson says he sometimes wonders if that particular quality so important to a successful lobbyist — the ability to make a real and personal connection with a member or staff — is lost on a generation of students more comfortable and more used to communicating in short, impersonal digital bursts.

"Technology has eroded the communications process," he complains. "Lobbying is about building relationships and face-to-face contact, and you don't get that in an e-mail."