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End of the Trail for the Lone Ranger

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How many times have you wanted to get your students more involved only to hear them say things like, "Somebody else will do it," or, "It's just one assignment, who cares," or perhaps, "The team doesn't need me, what good can I really do?" These attitudes of insignificance and apathy can be pretty frustrating. This summer it has been my experience that getting people to realize their role in public policy is much like getting students to realize their full potential in academics and leadership. It is when we all take responsibility in our nation's policy-making that we truly see the results that we want.

I am currently a senior at Iowa State University studying Public Service and Administration in Agriculture, and this summer my internship with the NAAE was a less traditional one. My office was located at the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE) headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia. I worked with NAAE Executive Director, Jay Jackman, to lobby Congress about the Carl D. Perkins Act reauthorization, an essential program, which we all know is the primary federal funding for career and technical education, including agricultural education.

Throughout the summer my responsibilities included over 50 meetings with the offices of United States Senators and Representatives. At the beginning of almost every meeting I was asked, "What part of (enter your state name here) are you from?" I would explain that I was not from their home state, and then we would continue our meeting. They ask that question for a simple reason; because they care about the people of their districts. People like you. Why? The big reason is votes. You re-elect them when

the time comes, and therefore what matters to you really does matter to them, however directly or indirectly. Since you hire them or fire them every few years, they are much more receptive to your opinions than somebody from outside their state or district. Think of a principal or administrator from another state coming into your classroom and telling you how to do your job. You can imagine how persuasive that would be!

In addition to your vote, being from their state opens up endless avenues of connections. You pay taxes in the state, perhaps you own a small business, or as an agricultural educator you might have a large impact in your community. Chances are you both know a few of the same people! If it is a "small world after all," then think how small your state or Congressional district is. You are probably better connected than you think, and you are certainly more influential than any person from another state, regardless of how much they know about policy.

It is because you have so much more influence on your Members of Congress that often times the success or failure of important legislative battles hinge upon the ability of many individuals sending a message to their respective representatives. Contrary to popular belief, it is not the heroic effort of a "Lone Ranger" by which things happen, but by the unified effort of many.

This is why having an attitude of insignificance or apathy will surely squelch any hopes of reaching those legislative goals that are so important to us all, such as Perkins reauthorization. The good news is that your letters, phone calls, and e-mails are a great way to make

your message known. Many times your Senator or Representative will reply to your concern. To encourage NAAE members to stay active in the public policy process, you can be sent updates about moving legislation. There is even a page in the NAAE website devoted solely to the purpose of helping you write a letter to your Members of Congress.

The responsibility to be informed and involved in our government's actions isn't just a civic duty, nor is it reserved for the elite or politically powerful. Rather it is an opportunity to make things better and to influence the decisions that shape our country. One person can do much, but they can't do it all. Remember, your biggest chance to influence America comes in November at the polls, and in the words of Andrew Lack, "Bad officials are elected by good citizens who do not vote."



NAAE Intern, Stefan Knudsen (right) on a Capitol Hill visit with Legislative Aide James Rice of Iowa Senator Charles Grassley's office.

