

YOU WANT TO BE A LOBBYIST?

Popular course lays out culture of the Capitol

By Aurelio Rojas, Sacramento Bee Capitol Bureau

There are more than 1,200 registered lobbyists in the Capitol -- about 10 for every member of the Legislature -- but judging from the hiring that continues unabated there's room for courses like Lobbying 101. That's the introductory course taught by Ray LeBov, who worked for more than three decades in the Legislature and as chief lobbyist for the state court system. LeBov also teaches an advanced course, Lobbying 201. The courses he launched last June have been such a hit "most of the graduates of 201 are asking me to do a 301, which I'm considering."

Students pay \$250 for each four-hour class, and LeBov helps them cut through the arcane language and culture of the Capitol. So what does a lobbyist do? LeBov has a boilerplate answer. "At the most elemental, a lobbyist tries to persuade people in the Legislature or the administration to act on issues that affect their clients in ways that are consistent with their client's interests," he said.

LeBov's students are generally wannabe lobbyists, lobbyists taking refresher courses, and employers who hire lobbyists and want to know what they're paying for. They are people like Randall Echezarria, Robert Dugan and Cheryl Yerxa. The three were among a dozen students who attended LeBov's Lobbying 101 class this week in a downtown bank building. "My employer is interested in having me take over the lobbying aspect of the business," said Echezarria, who works for the California Space Authority, a nonprofit organization that represents commercial, civil and defense contractors.

Dugan, corporate legislative affairs manager for Granite Construction Co., once worked as a staff member in the Legislature. He was taking the class as a refresher course. "I don't actually plan on being a registered lobbyist," he said. "I have one that I've hired. But it's good to stay up up on current trends." Yerxa was assigned to the class by her employer, the League of California Cities, which advocates for cities in the state. "My director suggested to me I take this to get a better understanding of the Legislature," Yerxa said.

In Sacramento, even lobbyists have lobbyists. Parke Terry is president of the Institute of Governmental Advocates, which represents lobbyists. He's been one for more than two decades. "It's not something you learn in the class," Terry said. "I don't think anybody offers a bachelor's degree in lobbying -- not yet anyway." Terry didn't grow up wanting to be lobbyist. But while working for 15 years as a staff member in the Capitol, he remembers telling himself, "Hey, I can do that." Like LeBov and Terry, many lobbyists are former legislative staff members who were lured to the profession by the prospects of dramatically increasing their incomes.

Some lobbyists are former lawmakers. "Others learn the profession primarily by contact with other lobbyists, by being part of an association or an activist group that has issues that need lobbying work," Terry said. As with other professions, LeBov has no illusions that he can distill three decades of experience into a 4-hour course. His classes, however, are designed to send students on their way. He has compiled a thick set of materials that he hands out, including glossaries and guides that illustrate how the legislative process works. There's also a lobbying disclosure information manual published by the California Fair Political Practices Commission that is designed to keep practitioners on the right side of the law.

The profession has become much more public relations conscious since the legendary Sacramento lobbyist Artie Samish was photographed by a magazine in the late 1940s with a ventriloquist's dummy, saying, "This is my Legislature." In 1949, legislation regulating lobbying was passed by the Legislature. Samish was denounced by the Sacramento County grand jury, convicted of tax evasion and sentenced to prison. LeBov said that while his classes are designed to impart insights that maximize the chances of his students' success, ethics are interspersed. "I don't think that's at all inconsistent, because so much of what you accomplish in the long run is a function of your reputation," he said. Included in the packet of materials he hands out are "Ray LeBov's Rules for Effective Lobbying." The rules include such headings as "Your Word Is Your Bond," "Underpromise and Overdeliver," and "Perseverance = Persistence Plus Patience."

He also offers practical advice, teaching students about how to manage relations with their clients, finding the right lawmaker to carry legislation, and cultivating personal relationships. Since California in 1990 became one of the first states in the nation to adopt term limits for state lawmakers, lobbyists have assumed a more prominent role.

A significant sector of the Legislature now turns over with each election cycle. As veteran lawmakers depart, so does their institutional memory, leaving lobbyists to fill the void. LeBov said term limits have dispersed leadership roles in the Legislature, creating new obstacles and opportunities for lobbyists. “Before you only had to convince the leadership,” he said. “Now, you have to persuade more people.”

That means more work for lobbyists. And with more money at stake than ever in the Capitol, employers are hiring more lobbyists -- which has been a boon to LeBov.

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