To explore what makes legislators effective, a new University of Wisconsin-Madison study went inside the Statehouse and conducted face-to-face interviews of 212 legislators in Indiana and Wisconsin. The sample included all 132 Wisconsin legislators in the 2015-17 biennium and half of the 150-member Indiana legislature. Both states had a Republican governor and Republican control of both chambers of the legislature. In classifications based on salaries, session days, and staffing, Wisconsin is regarded as a full-time legislature and Indiana as part-time. Yet in previous studies, the time legislators spend on the job varies, and Wisconsin has about three times as many partisan and nonpartisan staff as Indiana. In Round 1 interviews, 123 legislators (60% of the sample) discussed what makes an effective legislator and nominated colleagues who were exemplars in using research, building relationships, and championing youth and family issues. In Round 2, 89 legislators (84% of those nominated as exemplars) were interviewed.

**DEFINING AN EFFECTIVE LEGISLATOR**

Legislators provided several definitions of effectiveness. The four most frequently mentioned definitions are described below in legislators’ own words.

**BUILDS TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS**
Legislators defined effectiveness as working both within the party and across the aisle, being honest with colleagues, and being trustworthy.

“They came in and said, ‘This is my way or the highway.’ They’re going to have a rough go of it because, well, I’m sorry, bucko, but that’s not how we operate here.”

“I know some ‘Lone Rangers’ in this building, and you can’t get anything done.”

**WORKS EFFECTIVELY ON LEGISLATION**
Legislators defined effectiveness as passing good legislation, stopping bad legislation, and making incremental change toward longer-term goals. Legislators emphasized that effectiveness means not the number of bills passed, but how meaningful they are.

“I want to know how much you moved policy. How much did you make a difference? . . . Does the difference matter? Does it change quality of life? Does it improve health? . . . Not just does it change anything, does it improve anything? . . . We’re here to work to benefit and move things that benefit people, and not just fill a seat.”

**DEMONSTRATES COMMITMENT TO A LARGER PURPOSE AND THE GREATER GOOD**
Legislators defined effectiveness as doing what is right for the people in their state. This included taking tough votes that may go against caucus or leadership, sticking to core values, and being motivated by positive outcomes for constituents rather than personal gain.

“There’s a number of initiatives . . . I’m doing research and I’m working hard on. But if there’s someone . . . [in the majority] that cares as much as I do about this, and I need to bow out because me being involved is going to actually make it hard to get across the finish line, I’ll bow out. Because it’s not about me putting my name first on the bill. It’s not about me getting the press . . . and being in the spotlight. Ultimately, I’m here because I want to be working in the best interest of the people in my state. I love my community. I love my people.”

**RESPONDS TO CONSTITUENT NEEDS**
Some legislators defined effectiveness as knowing the “pulse” of their district, being responsive to constituent needs, and representing their district through voting in its best interest.

“Being an effective legislator is number one, representing the views and beliefs of the people you serve and helping them solve their problems.”
SOME DEFINITIONS OF EFFECTIVENESS STAND ALONE AND SOME DON’T

Legislators say that some definitions of effectiveness, such as building trusting relationships, can stand on their own.

“I think an effective legislator is somebody that people trust their judgment, not what [bills] they pass... When they talk, do people listen and trust their judgment? . . . You may never pass a bill but . . . you have a lot of say in what does and what doesn't [pass].”

Other definitions of effectiveness overlap with each other. For example, passing meaningful legislation was sometimes defined as legislation that meets constituents’ needs.

“An effective legislator is a legislator that understands the needs of the person or the persons that they represent, and communicates that through the legislative process.”

Legislators also emphasized that without trusting relationships, it would be difficult to be effective in other ways, such as passing legislation.

“That's what your currency is around here . . . credibility, you either are respected or you’re not. And if you’re not, it's very difficult, just as in life, to formulate relationships that people will be willing to work with you. You don’t want to work with somebody you don’t trust.”

DIFFERENT DEFINITIONS OF EFFECTIVENESS FOR LEGISLATORS IN THE MAJORITY AND MINORITY PARTY

Minority legislators were described as effective if they were able to shape (not necessarily pass) legislation, and for taking more incremental approaches to legislation. Majority legislators, in contrast, needed to do more than pass legislation to be effective, including making big policy changes and working with the minority when they didn’t have to.

“Minority legislators get a different definition [of effectiveness] just because they don’t have institutional power. They only have personal persuasiveness. So, their abilities to be effective come from a different place, and a lot of times they can’t be effective on really partisan issues. But when they're trusted and intelligent and well versed in a certain area . . . [legislators] know that on this topic, that’s the ‘go to’ person who knows more about this than anybody. And they have the ability to change and shape legislation. Majority legislators . . . are effective for different reasons. In a situation like we’re in in Indiana with super-majorities, any idiot can get a stupid bill heard. Just because you get it heard and pass it, it doesn't mean that I think you’re effective. So, an effective legislator from the majority is a person who can sort of act in a more bipartisan manner, even when they aren’t forced to.”

DIFFERENT DEFINITIONS OF LEGISLATOR EFFECTIVENESS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE STATEHOUSE

Legislators described differences in effectiveness inside and outside the legislature. Constituents are often unaware of the inner workings of the policy process, so their assessment of effectiveness varies from that of legislative colleagues.

“The constituents only really get a snippet of what you do—whatever appears in the media or Facebook. Your colleagues are inside the baseball stadium. So they see the pitches as they're thrown and swung at. The constituency sees much more of the strikeouts and the home runs.”

“People don’t always recognize . . . that you work hard when you’re out on the campaign trail. It’s all about you. ‘I will do this’ . . . ‘we’ versus ‘them’ . . . It’s important to stop when that’s done and make that turn . . . Now I’m part of the team. I’m still the representative for my district, but I’m part of a team in my caucus . . . It's not just about me.”

For further information on this fact sheet or the study findings, contact Human Ecology Emeritus Professor Karen Bogenschneider at karen.bogen@wisc.edu. The study was coordinated by the Family Impact Seminars and funded by the William T. Grant Foundation.