

FUNDRAISING AND ALUMNI RELATIONS: A PRESIDENT'S ROLE

By Dr. Jack Thomas

Fundraising is the heartbeat of a university presidency. In 2011, the nation's colleges and universities received \$30.3 billion in charitable contributions (Council for Aid to Education, 2012). The largest source of donations comes from foundations; the second largest source from alumni; and the third largest from corporations. To be successful in fundraising, in a long-term capital campaign, or an annual giving campaign, a university president must build, and be an integral part, of a solid fundraising team.

A university president should have a solid understanding of and spend a tremendous amount of time on the fundraising process. Fundraising is a perpetual undertaking in which relationships with donors are cultivated and maintained. A president who has a firm grasp of development initiatives will use the university's values to serve as a guide and will involve the entire university.

At Western Illinois University (WIU), each of our colleges and some specialized programs have a development director dedicated to raising funds for his/her division, while working closely with the dean or director, and in some instances, directly with the president. Administrators must be involved when visiting and hosting donors, coordinating events and engaging alumni, and a university president must cultivate a culture where others see themselves as institutional fundraisers.

University presidents play a significant role in assuring donors they are making a difference. Sharing student success stories as the result of donor-related scholarships, and demonstrating to donors how their gifts make a difference, creates engagement. Given the ongoing financial uncertainties facing higher education, fundraising has become more challenging. Donors may be hesitant to commit when state appropriations wane and state government appears to dismiss the necessity of higher education. This precarious situation can create "a crisis of confidence" among donors, prospective students and their families. A university president must alleviate concerns, while also highlighting successes despite the challenges. As WIU's president, I must have a strong presence at alumni and other university events, and stand ready to answer questions.

Involving alumni as stakeholders is also critical to an institution's success, and a president must make alumni relations a priority. A well-informed alumni base is more likely to support the institution's fundraising initiatives and provide positive outreach.

In 2007, my predecessor formed the WIU President's National Advisory Council, comprised of successful alumni from a variety of businesses and industries. I meet with the council twice a year to solicit feedback and ideas to further enhance our institution. In a similar spirit, our colleges and select programs have established advisory boards comprised of alumni and other stakeholders. Involving alumni in university initiatives positions an institution for success in future endeavors. We recently hosted a series of alumni summits to share university news and to obtain participants' feedback. These summits gave us an opportunity to hear directly from alumni, and the information gleaned will aid our institution as we move forward.

In addition to alumni-based boards and events, alumni involvement in the recruitment process is critical. Alumni assist in building a higher level of insight among prospective students and offer first-hand experiences. They may assist with retention beyond philanthropic efforts by providing career-related guidance, internship opportunities and employment. Further, alumni are indicators of the successes students may achieve post-graduation.

Modern theory has shifted focus from leadership as "power over" to "power with." University presidents sharing power with donors and alumni elicit greater involvement and cooperation from these critical constituencies. Leadership should unite others toward a common goal, and that starts with a university president serving as a good steward of the donor's generosity and of the graduate's alma mater. **P**

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