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Can You Spare a Dime?

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HEADS UPAdvice for
academic
administrators

It's not uncommon to hear administrators at public universities joke that their institutions once were "state supported," then became "state assisted" and now are merely "state located."

The loss of state support has had a substantial impact on academic programs, with universities often left scrambling to fill the gap. In light of those cutbacks, the role of fund raising is ever more important to the health and development of academic programs.

Unfortunately, many academics disdain fund raising -- and even, at times, the professionals employed by their institutions to do it.

A former colleague once told me that he saw fund raisers as nothing more than "oily, used-car-salesman types." His image of the development officer was of the glad-hander always poised to pounce; he couldn't see himself in the role. "If I had wanted to be a salesman," he retorted wryly, "I would have gone into selling Volvos."

A department chairwoman at the same institution complained that it was nearly impossible to interest her faculty in activities related to fund raising. "They all say that they just want to be left alone to do their teaching and research," she told me, "and they expect me to single-handedly find new donors, steward the ones we have, and bring in the additional dollars that will make their jobs easier."

Implicit in such negative characterizations is the belief that development activities somehow taint the purer activities of teaching and research, that academics who engage in fund raising are compromising their core values. In effect, the self-interested activity of fund raising is thought to erode the disinterested pursuit of knowledge.

Far from tainting the academic enterprise, however, fund raising has become an essential tool for fostering the very academic endeavors that we all so ardently cherish. Public institutions are learning (as the privates learned long ago) that now more than ever it is essential that they discover ways to reduce their reliance on state assistance.

To the extent that an institution depends too much on state support, it places in jeopardy its programs, centers, institutes, adjuncts, instructors, and summer school, because those are precisely the areas that typically are cut each time the state demands that a university accept a smaller portion of state dollars.

Fund-raising endeavors will only be successful if professors and administrators begin to recognize development officers as their allies, not as interlopers irrelevant to the academic enterprise.

Many of us work in buildings named after prominent donors. Some of us hold chaired professorships

bearing the names of generous benefactors. Many of our students have received scholarships supported by private dollars. Those and other benefits were made possible by the generosity of friends of the institution.

In an age when public support of public education is dwindling, we desperately need the assistance of private donors -- friends who recognize the value and centrality of academic work, friends who understand and are sympathetic to our mission, friends who are willing and able to support our work, both morally and financially. All of that has changed the job of academic leader from what it was in the past.

Effective department heads find ways to keep in touch with alumni, inviting them to campus from time to time for organized events. They also keep in touch with emeritus faculty members, another potential source of external dollars. Effective deans do all of that, too, and serve as tireless promoters of the college's programs and departments -- not only to audiences within the institution but also, and more crucially, to those in the surrounding city.

But administrators can't do the job alone. The success of a fund-raising effort will depend on the participation of faculty members. The fund raisers -- the department chair, dean, president, or development officer -- must know what to promote to donors and how to promote it, but only faculty members can craft the story that will inspire the donor's support.

As a dean overseeing 16 academic departments and several institutes, centers, and other worthy entities, I need to know before I visit with potential donors which priorities a department wishes to champion and precisely why they are worthy of support:

- Does the physics department want me to secure money to upgrade our planetarium, or would it rather increase the budget of its Intense Laser Physics Institute?
- Would the anthropology department prefer that I concentrate on finding support for its field archaeology program, or for its Centre for the Study of Rural Ireland -- or both?
- Does the School of Communication wish to obtain additional support for the student television station or for its nationally prominent forensics team?

If I am to assist a department in realizing its goals, I need to know which priorities to concentrate on and exactly what it is about a given project that will inspire and excite. Why should a donor be encouraged to invest in it? Only faculty and staff members intimately involved in the project -- and then the department as a whole when it identifies its priorities -- can best position the dean, the president, and the professional fund raisers to articulate the department's needs and to excite donors about the project.

Without the help of those who are intimately involved, we lack the specificity to be persuasive.

Fund raising, then, is a team effort, but despite the fears of some faculty members, no one is asking them to become fund raisers; we employ professionals to do that job. What I am saying is that if our academic programs and projects are going to be competitive in the face of decreased public support, then we must engage in strategic fund raising; and if our development efforts are going to be successful, then they necessarily require the participation of professors, who along with students are the heart and soul of the academic enterprise.

It wasn't many years ago when those of us who identify strongly as scholars or intellectuals would disparage fund raising as an activity that sullied the life of the mind. Development was seen as a crass activity that no self-respecting scholar should ever stoop to. But now we live in a very different era and work in a very different academy. We can no longer afford those prejudices.

Far from being someone to avoid, the fund raiser is the academic's new best friend and ally.

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