

An Unexpected Fundraising Success

Karen Horny

Materials budgets in academic libraries are often viewed by their institution's top administrators as "black holes" that suck in ever-increasing amounts of funding just to maintain a consistent level of journal subscriptions, monographs, and electronic resources. Although libraries may succeed in raising funds for new buildings or other facilities improvements, such fundraising is generally the result of one-time, targeted efforts. It is much rarer to find an ongoing method for acquiring significant annual donations to enhance the materials budget, and particularly to build the endowments that provide continuing support for acquiring collections.

Many academic libraries in state-assisted institutions have only recently sought to build collection development endowments to aid in acquiring library materials. At Missouri State University, as of 1998, the university foundation's most consistent fundraising success had been the cadre of student phone callers talking with alumni. There had been some fairly unsuccessful efforts also to call parents of students to request special financial donations, but there were two common obstacles. The first was the issue of parents already feeling that they contributed enough to the university by paying tuition. Second, the callers also had found that asking for a gift for the student's subject department or favorite sport often got responses about that parent's student contemplating changing majors or giving up sports. An idea developed that those objections might not apply if parents were approached seeking a donation to the library collection endowment.

Fortunately, because arrangements for calling parents were already included in the phone campaign setup, it was relatively easy to convince the foundation administration that it would be worthwhile to change the focus of the solicitation to see if better results would be achieved by asking for support for the libraries. It was also helpful that this planned attempt to benefit library collections did not compete directly with the academic colleges' efforts to raise funds for scholarships and other purposes directly from their alumni.

Although the basic model for phone campaigns was already in place, gearing up to ask parents for donations for library collections involved some thoughtful preparation. The two dozen (now increased to four dozen) members of the student calling teams required training

to work from annually updated "scripts" based on information provided for the particular focus of that calling period. The libraries supplied facts of interest, such as the average cost of an academic book purchased during the past year. To further inspire callers, the libraries also developed a kickoff reception for them early on the first evening of that semester's drive for the collections endowment. Callers assembled in the main library's curriculum resources center, which has a large comfortable area often used for classes. Food of a light-supper variety, such as finger sandwiches, brownies, and soft drinks, was provided. At this event, several librarians talked briefly about how the callers' successful efforts have been benefiting the library collections. The students had an opportunity to ask questions about the libraries and departed full of enthusiasm to start their calling program. Over time this approach has been refined, and now the calling function is part of the regular fundraising routine.

Although any donation is welcome, callers begin by suggesting a very significant gift at the thousand dollar level. Then, if necessary, they ease down somewhat and put particular emphasis on the average cost of an individual book for academic studies. Since the campaign launched in 2000, there have been a number of gifts from parents at the \$500 level and there have also been significant numbers of \$100 gifts, or gifts at the annual book cost amounts. Student callers emphasize that it is possible for donors to pay in installments.

Incentives Help

Midway through the semester's calling cycle, the libraries' dean and associate dean visit the calling center with snack items and words of encouragement and thanks. The libraries also provide pizza for the callers once during the semester and contribute to the end-of-year phone campaign banquet for the students. There is a gift, usually a university book store gift certificate and a special bookmark, for the caller who achieves the highest amount in donations for the libraries during the academic year calling cycle.

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That top fundraiser is also recognized with a bookplate honoring their achievement that is placed in a new book of their choice. The student callers are very appreciative of all of the libraries' recognition activities, and that appreciation is clearly reflected in the special efforts they make in behalf of the libraries. Their fundraising for the collection endowment has often rivaled the amount raised from alumni called in the campaign for the College of Business Administration.

One problem surfaced as calling parents for the library collections became a regular part of the student callers' routine. Unlike alumni calling, which was scheduled for each college only once during the academic year, the very successful parents' campaign, a particular favorite of the callers, actually was scheduled for both semesters. Some parents began getting called two semesters in a row. Although some willingly gave an additional gift, it was clear that others were annoyed to be called again so quickly. A control on the distribution of parents' contact information to the callers to ensure that solicitations to specific parents were spread out to an annual basis was important to implement.

Naturally, there are some parents who really do think they are giving more than enough to the university in tuition and fees, so the callers can get some quite negative responses. These are hard to avoid except by taking those individuals off the list for future calls. Of course, the callers are forewarned to expect some of these rejections and, because they are students themselves, their calls are usually politely received by parents, even if they don't make a donation. A number of parents have actually contributed \$5 just so they could do a little to help.

Adding to the positive responses when parents receive the calls is the fact that students frequently bring their visiting parents to see the library, especially on the annual family weekend. They show their parents the library's group study rooms, the electronic compact shelving, the new books area, and often comment on the considerable size of the collections. Members of the student calling teams have volunteered to help host the reception given at the library that weekend, and they enjoy emphasizing how the collections the parents' contributions have helped to build benefit the entire student population.

Parent donors are always offered a personal thank you. Both the university foundation and the library send letters of thanks immediately following each donation, and repeat donations receive specific added notes thanking the parents for helping again. Donations of more than \$100 result in the personalized thank-you letter and a nice metal bookmark. The library has also sent special follow-up letters to all the parents who have contributed, highlighting a small selection of resources purchased from the proceeds of the materials endowment and letting them know how much their contribution has benefited the collections.

To the considerable surprise of almost everyone, this solicitation has proven to be a popular success. Perhaps

partially because the university has drawn many students from the region in which it is located (southwest Missouri), an area that has recently emerged from comparative economic hard times as a strong regional economy, many parents are still seeing their daughters and sons become the first in their families to earn a college degree. A significant number of parents are themselves the first generation of alumni and feel a special loyalty to the university. However, many wonderful gifts also come from parents located across the country.

Once the calling campaign proved to be a success, the library did some investigation to determine whether other academic libraries might be using similar approaches to fundraising. None seemed to be using regular phone calling focused on parents in the same continuing manner. However, McGill University in Canada used its November 2006 "Parents Newsletter," available through the McGill Alumni Online Community, to promote supporting the library with gifts to the McGill Parents Fund.¹ This fund was created in 1963 to encourage annual gifts from parents for the library. A number of other universities, including Purdue, Loyola-New Orleans, and Amherst College have parents funds that are used to support special library projects or give occasional assistance to their libraries, but they are not using student callers for a continuous effort dedicated solely to the purpose of enhancing the library collections.²

Although most gifts are comparatively small, since 2000 the average size of a gift to Missouri State University Libraries has risen from \$25 to \$50 and above. The callers really enjoy asking parents for support for the libraries and are proud to have discovered that the results compare favorably with the donations from other fundraising efforts. As clear proof that small gifts do add up, the materials endowment is now over half a million dollars. Missouri State University Libraries' experience suggests that academic libraries can benefit significantly by becoming the focus of a campaign to request financial support from parents of current students.

Keys to Implementing a Similar Plan

- Talk with the fundraising administrator about phone campaigns to see if parents are being successfully solicited.
- Indicate the proven potential of Missouri State University's experience in targeting gifts for the library's collections endowment.
- Work with the phone campaign supervisor to develop an appropriate script.
- Arrange to talk with callers to provide additional background information and emphasize the need for added funds for library materials.

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39. Peter Hernon, Joan Giesecke and Camila A. Alire, *Academic Librarians as Emotionally Intelligent Leaders* (Westport: Libraries Unlimited, 2008): xi.
40. Ibid., xii.
41. Ibid., 135.
42. Leanne E. Atwater and David A. Waldman, *Leadership, Feedback and the Open Communication Gap* (New York: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2008): 2.
43. Ibid., 3.
44. Ibid., 101.

45. Stephen Denning, *The Secret Language of Leadership* (San Francisco: Wiley, 2007): xxii.
46. Ibid., xxiii.
47. Ibid., 211.
48. Annie McKee, Richard Boyatzis, and Frances Johnston, *Becoming a Resonant Leader* (Boston: Harvard Business School Pr., 2008): 1.
49. G. Edward Evans and Patricia Layzell Ward, *Leadership Basics for Librarians and Information Professionals* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow, 2007): x.

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support it and the university libraries. At the same time, he says, "Don't over-plan. Do be flexible," for there is never any way of knowing when or in what form an opportunity might present itself.

And, of course, keep a sense of humor. Stevens notes that librarians are often overly sensitive and preoccupied with the image of their profession, to the point where they become the stereotypes that they reject. His advice, in this as in most other matters involving self-importance: "Lighten up!"

References

1. Norman D. Stevens, "The Catalogs of the Future: a Speculative Essay" *Journal of Library Automation* 13, no. 2 (1980): 88-95; "Looking Back at Looking Ahead, or The Catalogs of the Future Revisited" in *Information Technology and Libraries* 17, no. 4 (1998): 188-90; and "Research Libraries: Past, Present, and Future" from *Advances in Librarianship* 17, ed. Irene Godden, (San Diego: Academic Press, 1993): 79-109.
2. Norman D. Stevens, "The Molesworth Institute," *ALA Bulletin* 57 (1963): 75-76; "The Fully Electronic Academic Library," *College & Research Libraries* 67, no. 1 (Jan. 2006): 5-14.

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- Provide appreciation with food treats for all callers and gifts for the top caller.
- Thank parent donors and provide occasional follow-up communication.

It is expected that a library will want to tailor its approach to best fit local circumstances. However, the general plan can work to significantly benefit any academic library.

References

1. Available through the McGill Alumni Online Community at www.martlet.mcgill.ca/?id=MjQxNA= (accessed Jan. 2009).
2. The parents fund webpage at Purdue: www.purdue.edu/udo/path_parents/parents_fund.shtml; at Loyola: library.loyno.edu/about_us/giving/parents_annual_fund.php; at Amherst: www.amherst.edu/give/parents_fund (accessed Jan. 2009).

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won't be a penalty from me for doing that. At least one team did stop and reflect, all for the better, but for the most part the confidences went no further than between the student and me. Regardless, the student's private realization of a problematic group dynamic was still important. I always coach each student—this is after all, his or her *What Now?* moment—to consider what they would do differently. What would they say? Some, I believe, did confront themselves and now resolve differences in a more open and satisfying manner.

P.S. For dog lovers and readers of this column, Bridger, the black lab is back! My daughter's National Guard unit is away for a year so B is here and teaching me new tricks:

communicating with one's tail; never forgetting to show appreciation for current, past, and future kindnesses; and finding the joy in doing your job, any job.

References and Notes

1. For a useful discussion of facilitation techniques see Michael A. Gass and Cheryl A. Stevens, "Facilitating the Adventure Process," in *Adventure Education: Theory and Applications*, ed. Richard G. Prouty, Jane Panicucci, and Rufus Colinson (Beverly, Mass.: Project Adventure, 2007) 101-23.
2. John Lubans Jr. "Thank God and Greyhound, She's Gone," (to a Workshop,) and Other T&D Matters," *On Managing, Library Administration & Management* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2007) 35-37.