

## FUNDRAISING AND ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT

### Energize Your Alumni - and Your Fundraising in the Process!

*The temptation for under-resourced institutions in financially-strained times is to cut back and retrench across the board. Here are three key strategies that will engage alumni and help energize your fundraising efforts for the long run.*

*By Myra Garcia, Of Counsel*

**I**ndividualized. Personal. Accessible. These are the qualities that make private liberal arts colleges the unique, engaging places of learning that they are.

These are also qualities that may make it difficult for under-resourced institutions with younger advancement operations to have dynamic, highly-organized fundraising programs. Why? Alumni might be ready and willing to engage – but institutional resources and the fundraising systems and culture required to meet those needs might not be in place.

Even more challenging, the temptation for under-resourced institutions in financially-strained times is to cut back and retrench across the board. Truth is, this short-term thinking ultimately hurts revenue generation because it focuses on challenges and weakness, making it even more difficult to bounce back – or surge ahead – when situations improve.

The best approach is to think long-term while your competitor institutions are thinking short-term, to see opportunity instead of challenges, and to focus on your strengths instead of your weaknesses. For start-up and under-resourced development programs, here are three key strategies that will help energize your fundraising efforts for the long run:

#### **Strategy No. 1.** *Engage your Future, Connect with your Past*

Create a culture of philanthropy right now by engaging students who are on campus – your future alumni – in giving back. Start by establishing a senior class gift committee, but start small and look to achieve tangible results. Success breeds success, so concentrate on doing things that are going to be successful and put points on the board – for example, by focusing on using social media to achieve high participation rates rather than size of gift.

At the same time you are building your future, reconnect in a personal way with your past: your graduates from the '50s, '60s and '70s. Get out and visit those alumni, especially your most consistent donors. Talk to them, hear what they have to say, connect to them. Make them a part of your institution's family. You'll likely start to uncover opportunities for planned gifts, major gifts, even milestone gifts that will help the next generation of students.

#### **Strategy No. 2.** *Create Highly Personal Experiences that Bring Back Memories – and Instill Loyalty*

Focus on quality, engaging alumni experiences. Have your president, trustees, or other volunteers host – and underwrite – small regional gatherings at their homes or clubs. If you can bring a couple of star students or faculty, all the better! These special, intimate receptions should replicate the personal touch that was the hallmark of these alumni's experience as part of a private liberal arts education. The goal: bring these alumni emotionally closer to you and reignite a sense of loyalty in them.

**Strategy No. 3. *Focus on the Fundamentals***

Too many institutions focus solely on getting that “big” gift. Yes, major gifts are critically important. But it is equally important to plant the broader seeds of giving by building your annual fund. Ask your alumni to give – and do it often and in a progressive pattern. Ask them at least three times a year, via mail, email, phone, in your newsletters and magazines, and through personal meetings.

More importantly, think about how you can recreate, in your annual giving approach, your unique value proposition as a private liberal arts college – personal, individualized, connected relationships and sense of community. With each contact, you’ll improve the integrity of your data, learn valuable insights about the interests of your alumni, and raise more money both short- and long-term.

When you need to do more with less, remember: the personal touch will bring your alumni back home to the place that they loved and felt loyal to, and your institution will reap those rewards for generations to come.

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