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Patience and Persistence Lead to Success at Eastern Washington University

BY PETER SMITS

What is it about “the little engine that could” that allowed it to successfully pull the train over the mountain when larger engines refused to even try? Why is it that California pistachio farmers so often become millionaires when the trees take years to mature and bear fruit? What can we learn from the little engine that exclaimed “I think I can...I think I can” as it huffed and puffed to the mountain top?

Can universities and colleges embarking on their first-ever comprehensive campaign learn from these examples? Yes, when one considers the common characteristics or ingredients in a successful campaign: patience and persistence. It is almost universal that comprehensive campaigns, especially multi-year, first time efforts, are a mixture of challenges and opportunities. But with patience and persistence, the challenges can be met, and the opportunities can bear fruit.

Consider Eastern Washington University, a public comprehensive university outside of Spokane in the town of Cheney. Home of the Eagles and the football field with the red turf, Eastern is nearly halfway through its first comprehensive campaign and has been successfully tackling many common challenges. A quick look at these issues and obstacles demonstrates how patience and persistence can lead to success.

✓ **Setting priorities:** When Eastern decided to take the plunge and prepare for its first comprehensive campaign, the run rate for annual fundraising was approximately \$1.5-\$2.0 million. Their history of philanthropy was not robust, and the campus was not actively engaged in setting fundraising priorities tied to mission, vision and values. When The Phoenix Philanthropy Group partnered with the University, we asked campus leaders (executives, deans and chairs) to brainstorm big ideas that would be transformational and impact the University for decades to come. As one might expect, the resulting list was formidable – more than 200 ideas. Eastern quickly learned that the campus did not have the capacity to raise money for everything (the wish list was estimated at more than \$800 million), so it became necessary to systematically review each big idea through the lens of mission, impact and attractiveness to donors. The result was consensus on 14 priorities that were then tested, along with a \$100 million goal, in an external feasibility/market positioning study.

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As the campaign unfolded, some of the priorities established at the beginning of the campaign shifted. It may have been that prospects believed a priority was interesting but not something they wished to invest in. It may have been that there were slight alterations in mission and vision, or the strategic plan, which made certain priorities no longer relevant. In any case, it is common to adjust priorities when necessary.



✓ **Changes in leadership:** Leaders don't stay in their positions forever, and so it is with Eastern Washington University. During its current campaign, EWU has welcomed its third president, fifth provost, third vice president for advancement, and third athletics director. Assuming that there is a learning curve for each new leader, this can be very disruptive; at Eastern, the transitions have been a little bumpy but ultimately productive. Dr. Shari McMahan, president, is a perfect fit for Eastern. As the former provost at Cal State San Bernardino, her energy and enthusiasm have given the campaign a real boost. Barb Richey, the vice president for advancement, is an Eastern alumna and former development director. She is a creative and inspiring leader. One of the major goals of the EWU campaign is intercollegiate athletics. The new director of athletics, Tim Collins, came to Eastern from Fresno State, where he was senior associate director and the principal fundraiser — exactly the right person at the right time.

Perhaps the greatest leadership challenge is with frontline fundraisers. Like many comprehensive universities, Eastern often finds it difficult to hire and retain development directors, whether for issues of highly competitive compensation packages or even poaching from other nonprofit institutions. Couple that with the fact that the average length of service for development directors is less than four years, and this can put a significant crimp donor cultivation.

✓ **An insufficient prospect pool:** When asked if the campus has enough prospects to achieve campaign success, most Advancement leaders will squirm a bit and admit that the pool is not deep enough. At Eastern, the prospect pool was assuredly less than desired, but with grit and determination, the Advancement team and the Phoenix Philanthropy team developed a strategy to expand the pool for the remaining years of the campaign. The hardest part of that work is the discovery process...finding new prospects, usually alumni, about whom you know absolutely nothing. Frontline fundraisers tend to concentrate on known prospects and donors, often avoiding the challenge of discovery work. Another example of the value of persistence.

✓ **Inadequate investment in Advancement:** Return on investment. It takes money to raise money. These are nearly universal clarion calls by Advancement executives. All true and critically important to successful first-time campaigns. And the common misconception that the lower the cost to raise a dollar, the more efficient the campaign is just not true. In fact, the most efficient cost to raise a dollar is between .18¢ and .22¢. Too low and you are leaving money on the table. At EWU, President McMahan inherited budget and enrollment challenges, which made it increasingly difficult to invest more in Advancement as their campaign unfolded. She implemented a Strategic Resource Allocation process that will recalibrate course and major offerings and stabilize the budget, but it will take



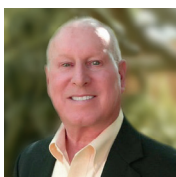
patience to allow the process to work while the campaign marches to victory.

✓ **Campaign fatigue:** Whether a campaign is big or small, short or long, there comes a time when fatigue sets in. Volunteers get tired or need to move on to other things, staff move on or get frustrated, people will begin to wonder if it will ever end. It happens all the time. Here is where we can learn a few lessons from California pistachio farmers. When a farmer plants a grove of pistachio trees, they are just sticks in the ground for four to five years. They don't seem to be doing anything. Does the farmer bemoan the fact that his trees appear to be worthless and uproot them? To the contrary. He prunes them, waters them, fertilizes them, and nurtures them, all because he knows they will start to bear nuts in about seven years, and by ten years they are economically viable – so much so that they become an extremely productive cash crop.

Just like the persistent and patient pistachio farmer, the campus and volunteer leaders at Eastern Washington University are successfully overcoming campaign challenges and obstacles by remaining energetic, forward looking, patient and persistent. President McMahan has embraced a campaign that was already underway when she arrived and brings a fresh spirit and vision to the University. Vice President for Advancement Barb Richey has molded a team that has raised the bar for fundraising higher than ever before. The campus is nearly at 62% of goal and climbing...soaring like the Eagles they are!

Key Takeaways:

- > Develop campaign priorities that are bold, transformational and aligned with your mission and strategic plan. And don't forget to measure prospect and donor interest. Be flexible and amenable to change if needed.
- > Expect to experience changes in leadership – sometimes the president or other executives, development team members, or volunteers. Consider these changes to be opportunities for fresh perspectives and new energy.
- > Be prepared to state your case with the need for sufficient resources. You cannot expect to take your fundraising program to higher levels with the same old budget.
- > When your prospect pool is insufficient for your chosen goal, you must build the ship while sailing it. Building your pool takes grit, patience, hard discovery work and creativity. Never stop mining your database.
- > Remember the story of the little engine that could, which teaches the value of optimism and hard work. Despite a steep climb and a heavy load, the little engine slowly succeeds in pulling the train over the mountain. And keep in mind the lessons of the pistachio farmer, who never gives up and sees from the beginning the value of nurturing cultivation of his trees, just as we must be patient and persistent with our prospects.



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