Alumni Giving Begins in the Classroom

It is a simple fact: Current college students are the future of alumni giving programs. Too often advancement officers forget this fact and neglect current students and young alumni, since they are often not the means to immediate large gifts. However, investing in student advancement programs and placing greater focus on young alumni cultivation will help pave the way for future fundraising success.

At the same time, another often-overlooked fact is that African Americans are extremely generous. According to a 2003 Chronicle of Philanthropy survey, despite wealth disparities between white and black communities, African Americans give a larger percentage of their disposable income to nonprofits than any other racial group (Anft and Lipman). However, although African-American communities are generous with philanthropic dollars, participation in fundraising campaigns is low, simply because they are often not asked to give (Gasman and Anderson-Thompkins).

Given these findings, what can advancement officers do to involve young African Americans in their fundraising efforts? The answer is simple: Engage and encourage African-American students to participate in prosocial behavior—voluntary actions that include giving of time, talent and treasure.

Based on the findings of my recent case study of the United Negro College Fund’s student-alumni association, the National Pre-Alumni Council (NPAC), Cultivating a Culture of Giving: An Exploration of Institutional Strategies to Enhance African-American Young Alumni Giving, there are several recommended practices that can increase fundraising participation among young alumni.

1. Advancement offices and advisers to student-alumni associations should treat students as future alumni and educate them on the needs of the institution by creating an appropriate case for support. Just as cases for support are developed for small and large fundraising campaigns to explain an institution’s needs and how gifts will help achieve its goals, communications to students should provide similar information.

2. Institutions should solicit their students for “tangible” fundraising projects. While all institutions need unrestricted dollars, such as those provided by the annual fund, they are the hardest for donors to understand. This is even truer for college students, who are at a developmental age where prosocial behaviors are motivated more by accomplishing something specific than by something abstract. Giving students the opportunity to donate or to help raise funds for tangible institutional priorities, such as building projects or even scholarship funds rather than unrestricted funds, affords students the ability to identify with their gift and say, “Without my participation this would not exist.” Encouraging young donors to connect their giving in a practical and visible way can help teach them about the need for and purpose of fundraising and allow them to feel a greater sense of satisfaction in the process. This will help pave the way for building a culture of giving among new generations of donors.

3. Student-alumni associations often use incentives such as T-shirts, admission tickets to socials or other university paraphernalia to encourage participation in class giving programs. Advancement officers should attempt to connect the “act of giving” to these extrinsic motivations. Without making a direct connection to the act of giving, students may think they are simply purchasing a T-shirt, an ice cream sundae or a ticket to an event, rather than getting the gift as a “thank you” for their first gift to the college or university. Thanking students—and thereby helping them understand that they are contributing to the institution—is important in creating that culture of giving.

4. It is critical for institutions with active student-alumni associations to maintain contact with alumni. Institutions should continue to cultivate these students and ask them not only for donations, but also to volunteer on behalf of their alma mater. Student-alumni association participants’ school spirit is usually high. Therefore, advancement officers should ask these students to solicit their classmates, lend their names to letters and volunteer in other pro-
grams, such as campus admission tour guides. Research shows that volunteer- ing for an organization most likely leads to future monetary donations. Students in these organizations should be considered important partners in fundraising. Allowing them to learn about their alma mater’s needs is an important part of this process because they will communicate the importance of giving to fellow students and, later, as alumni. Personal solicitations from people whom prospective donors identify with are often the most successful, for both majority communities and communities of color.

5. To encourage post-graduation participation, advancement officers should look for other access points for alumni to remain involved with their alma mater, such as encouraging service to the institution. Understandably, some alumni might not have the means to give a monetary gift to their alma mater, especially young alumni who are in their first job, making student loan payments, in graduate school or starting a family. However, these alumni may be willing to volunteer at career fairs or admissions programs, etc., which would help them remain involved in the institution and develop a stronger level of organizational identity. By doing so, they may be more likely to donate when they acquire additional income.

6. Advancement officers also should involve alumni in campus events. Modeling philanthropic and prosocial behavior is one way to teach and cultivate such behaviors. Having alumni of all ages return to campus, participate in activities, volunteer for the institution and be recognized for their generosity—both monetarily and in service to the institution—is a form of behavior modeling for current students. Providing examples of what is expected of them as alumni while they are undergraduates can result in a more active alumni population going forward.

Alumni returning to campus also may provide students an opportunity to see how older, more established alumni have given back to the institution, engendering a sense of tradition around philanthropy by creating continuity from one generation to the next. Additionally, involving respected alumni in thanking and recognizing young alumni and students at campus events is one way to achieve this goal.

At the same time, advancement officers should expand programs that educate students on the needs of the institution and how alumni dollars have helped students attend college—even if they are not scholarship recipients. All students, regardless of scholarship status, benefit from alumni donations.

7. When seeking donations from young African-American alumni, advancement officers at black colleges, as well as traditionally white institutions, should use examples and messages of racial and community uplift in their solicitations. Fundraising campaigns will be more successful if they harness and communicate the great work these institutions are doing to uplift African-American communities. Thus, colleges should inform their students and alumni about how their institutions are engaged and making a difference in their communities. Institutions should celebrate their achievements both academically and within their communities. Black colleges also should share their achievements, such as sending more African Americans to graduate school than do predominantly white institutions (Solorzano; Wenglinsky). Further, institutions should share with alumni what they are doing in their surrounding local communities. NPAC students interviewed for my study were excited to work in the community and wanted to hear more about their colleges’ contributions to local communities.

These recommendations may take time and additional resources to implement. Nevertheless, they should be viewed as an investment in the future. They allow institutions to improve their culture of giving, thereby increasing the overall philanthropic behavior of the students and alumni—a benefit to the broader society.

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Works Cited

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