

## OBSERVER

### What Professors Can Teach Fund Raisers -- and Vice Versa

By CAROL KOLMERTEN

As I slouched in my chair in the large, drafty ballroom filled with other people eagerly taking notes, I felt that old, familiar distancing and rising anger, so long forgotten from my undergraduate years decades ago.

Back then, after hearing something patently absurd in class, I would glimpse other students nodding to each other with tacit understanding -- seeming to be part of some club that I was excluded from, seeming to have some understanding of the world that I did not. I remember just sitting there, weighing whether to be one of those disagreeable students who challenged and confronted others or to be just silent and sullen.

Now, some 35 years later at a fund-raising conference of college and university administrators, I found myself, a professor, suddenly silent and sullen because the topic had turned to faculty members and how clueless they were. About everything. A man in the back of the room had commented that the faculty members at his college questioned the ethics of development offices' doing intensive research on potential donors. The audience members sighed their agreement. You could hear it in the room; you could see it in the nods, as everyone thought: "What can we do with those head-in-the-clouds-idealists who do not understand how the real world works?"

My anger would probably seem strange to some people, as I am both a professor and a fund raiser at the college where I teach -- which is why I attended the conference. Yet in my heart I will always be a professor first and will always take offense when I hear collective sighs about "idealistic faculty members" who do not understand, as someone said at this conference, the true golden rule: "He who has the gold, rules."

I suppose I also will always be different from other people working in fund raising. I speak like a professor, loathing clichés and abstractions -- like the current jargon for fund raising, "institutional advancement." I write like a professor, upset with institutional writing that eliminates needed commas and adds colons without an independent clause coming first. And I look like a professor: no fancy suits and high heels for me. When I appeared at the conference on the first day wearing my new and spiffy (by faculty standards) Chico's beige cropped pants, a nice black T-shirt, flat shoes, and my wash-and-wear hair, I got a few strange looks. As I glanced around, I could tell that I definitely wasn't at a meeting of the Modern Language Association.

Yet, truth be told, I am now out of place at the MLA as well, especially when colleagues who have known me for 25 years ask me what my latest scholarly monograph is about, and I reply, "Well ... um ... I am not exactly doing scholarship right now, though, of

course, um, I am attempting to write an academic novel. ... " And my message to both fund raisers and my friends at academic conferences is this: I am convinced that the two disparate groups should join forces.

Yes, outward and visible signs do reflect some inner -- perhaps even spiritual? -- differences, but those differences can and should benefit each other. Building a fund-raising program around faculty members can help raise money for a college and benefit faculty members, too.

How can professors help fund-raising efforts?

- With professors around, the top-level administrators can never forget why they are there. Student learning is what our "business" is. No matter how much money I might ever raise for my college, somewhere in my heart, I will always consider what I do in the classroom as the most important job of the college. I can't forget that role, because my students will not let me forget it. Their papers, their e-mail messages (with all their exclamation points! just like "institutional advancement" letters!!), their dropping by my office just to talk never let me forget that we all exist for them. They are the point of it all. And we don't have "clients," we have students.
- As more and more donors want accountability and connection, we can provide that. Professors have a commitment to the college. Fund-raising staff members, and even top administrators, come and go. Faculty members, at least at the small colleges that I know, stay and can provide the long-term relationships for which so many donors yearn.
- No one is more effective on the road, talking about needed facilities, scholarships, and equipment, for example, than faculty members. We can sell a college and its academic programs better than any glossy "case statement" can. We can convey better than anyone else the real business of the college to donors. Faculty members can talk enthusiastically about teaching because it is, after all, what we do every day. We can effuse over the joys of our summer research with a special student, about the impact of a new nuclear-magnetic-resonance spectrometer in our laboratory. Faculty members can remind donors why they support higher education in general and a particular college in the first place.
- Professors also are able to ask the development experts naive or provocative questions. Some colleges routinely send highly confidential donor information to all volunteer fund raisers, or so I learned at my conference. Other colleges rely far too much on stereotypical generalizations. ("We always appeal to women through their hearts and men through their heads," I heard someone say at the conference.) Faculty members -- especially those in the humanities who never heard a generalization that they liked -- can challenge an overreliance on such questionable practices.

How can participating in fund raising help faculty members? We can benefit from activities other than teaching. Teaching is always more inspired and passionate when done by scholars who push themselves in unexpected directions. Most professors, probably, expect sabbaticals to give them the space and time to create that push. But some faculty members would benefit from the experience of appealing to donors to help improve the academic life of their students. For instance:

- Faculty members can learn new skills -- believe me, figuring out our tax code qualifies as a major new skill -- and do something completely different from what we've ever envisioned.
- Rather than always being focused on the current students who do not always seem to care, for example, about the correct placement of colons and commas, faculty members can enjoy the appreciation graduates have for great teachers -- expressed often during fund-raising meetings and events. Sometimes "great" translates into "simply knows more about comma use than anyone else," but often "great" translates into "the professor who cared about me, who listened to me." We do leave a lifelong impression. How good to hear about it while we are still teaching, when such knowledge can inspire us further.
- We can learn the importance donors place on accountability. Donors value how their money is spent and how it makes a difference. Nothing makes a donor happier, and thus more likely to give again, than hearing exactly how her or his gift helped students. In addition, many donors are a great deal of fun and love to be engaged in discussions about what professors care about. Oh, and have I mentioned that those discussions can take place in good restaurants?
- We can benefit from listening to the stories of the former students who love their campus. Hearing about the woman who in 1931 eloped down the dormitory fire escape and onto a waiting motorcycle rather changes our cultural stereotypes of "older women."
- Finally, most faculty members who went into teaching, especially those of us at small colleges, want to make a difference in the lives of young people. Receiving a major gift that will give professors and students some support for summer research, or that will provide a needed piece of equipment for a laboratory, or that will allow a low-income student to continue her studies is simply the greatest high there is. Yes, even greater than teaching the correct use of the comma.

Faculty members and fund raisers are natural partners. Some colleges have already discovered that. More need to -- not only to make my conference experiences pleasant, but to remind professors everywhere that their research, their facilities, their teaching opportunities ultimately depend on someone's ability to persuade a series of nonacademics (donors) to invest in the faculty enterprise. Who better to do that than ourselves?

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