

Articles



THE ACADEMIC ASK

More colleges want professors to play a part in fund raising, but only a few have risen to the challenge.

Arno Selco, a professor of theater arts at Ithaca College who has spent some sabbatical time working in the fund-raising office, acknowledges that most academics do not want to ask for money: "Most faculty would rather talk about anything else in the world." (Photograph by Robert Barker)

A Call for Faculty Fund Raisers

Professors are being recruited to drum up donations, but many are reluctant to get involved

By ERIN STROUT

Even with years of experience working at a nonprofit organization, James C. Garman, an assistant professor at Salve Regina University, feels anxious when asking donors for money.

When he was named chairman of the cultural and historical preservation department seven years ago, he joined an academic program that was starting from scratch, with little financial support in place. He had no choice but to put his experience with nonprofit organizations to work, not only to jump-start the program, but to make sure that the collection of historical buildings on campus remained properly maintained.

"Being a faculty member gives donors a level of assurance and a strong feeling that their money is going toward something that will have a direct benefit to students," Mr. Garman says. "It also gives them a sense that the administration and the faculty have collaborated."

His sentiments are exactly what fund-raising staff members are trying to replicate, encouraging more professors to take a turn at raising money for their institutions. These days, college officials agree, everyone is a fund raiser. Large institutions are starting the biggest campaigns in history, and other colleges of all types are beginning their first significant fund-raising drives. Billions of dollars are up for grabs, and the more people each college has asking for money, the more each will raise.

Professors often resist requests for help from the fund-raising office. It's not part of their jobs, some say. Others just hate asking people for money. And most simply do not have the time. In a recent survey by Eduventures, a higher-education research firm, only 7 percent of successful ideas for large donations came from faculty members.

But professors are in many ways ideally suited to the task. Faculty members are the closest university employees to the students. Professors usually maintain the strongest connections with the institution's most successful alumni. They know better than anybody what the most pressing program needs are and can speak to donors about the impact their money makes.

"Faculty can provide a unique role in development because they are like color commentators," says Elizabeth A. Flanagan, vice president for development and university relations at Virginia Tech. "They can explain to a donor like nobody else what good specific research does for society, or how students will directly benefit from a certain gift — and fundamentally, everybody responds to students."

Fund-raising staff members are coming up with creative ways to encourage professors to help secure donations. They offer professors informal training on asking for gifts. They invite scholars to tag along with the president or other administrators on visits to prospective donors. And they even put professors in leadership positions during capital campaigns.

Despite the support that fund-raising offices try to provide to faculty members, success stories are few and far between. Ms. Flanagan says that professors often worry most about the most basic aspects of fund raising.

"I've done a number of programs to educate faculty members about how they can use fund-raising strategies to get more money into their programs," she says. "In areas like research sciences, you'll find that many are not 'people people.' They want to learn how to work a room or even just how to make conversation at an alumni event."

Professors Reaching Out

Arno Selco, a professor of theater arts at Ithaca College, has helped to get gifts of all sizes for the college over the past eight years. He spent sabbatical time working in the development office and once convinced a \$10-million donor with an affinity for theater that the athletics department needed the money more at the time.

"I've been at Ithaca for 24 years, and my daughter went here as well," Mr. Selco says. "During my last years on the faculty I wanted to give back to the institution that has been good to me and my family."

Mr. Selco says the real help he provides is getting other faculty members involved. He is the co-chairman of a new faculty and staff fund-raising drive, an effort created to encourage employees of the college to give to the current \$115-million fund-raising campaign.

While the employees' goal — \$25,000 — is a fraction of the campaign, Ithaca considers it the first step in creating a culture of philanthropy among those who work there. The mini-campaign has been successful so far, already collecting \$14,500.

"We're making some headway," Mr. Selco says. "It will create the first faculty-staff endowed scholarship, and they are attracted to it because we're all here for the students and it's an opportunity to help them."

Mr. Selco's direct involvement with donors has been all over the map, starting with asking for smaller gifts to the annual fund and all the way up to being a key player in multimillion-dollar donations. He also speaks with young alumni, teaching them the importance of giving even small amounts, in the hope that donating to Ithaca becomes a habit for them over the years.

Perhaps Mr. Selco's theater background puts him at ease in front of people, but he still understands that many of his fellow professors feel uncomfortable about being part of the college's fund-raising efforts. For example, many find activities such as cocktail parties nerve-racking and struggle to strike up small talk or approach people they do not know.

"As faculty members, we're so idealistic, and money is not of any interest to most of us," he says. "In fact, most faculty would rather talk about anything else in the world."

To ease them into the world of development, Mr. Selco and others have given professors opportunities to mingle and connect with alumni without having to necessarily even mention money, leaving the "big asks" to the professional fund-raising staff. Professors are often invited to travel with administrators on fund-raising trips. When traveling to conferences, academics are given short lists of alumni they should meet in the area. Simply cultivating relationships with former students they already know is sometimes the biggest help of all, says Shelley Semmler, vice president for institutional advancement.

She has learned, however, to tread carefully when it comes to those relationships. She found out during the beginning stages of the campaign, for instance, that one faculty member was in close touch with a donor she had hoped to contact for a gift. She backed off from any aggressive solicitation when the professor expressed concern, leaving the initial contact in the faculty member's hands. Ms. Semmler waited to call on the prospective donor until the professor felt like it was an appropriate time.

"The faculty member was protective and didn't want me bullying my way in," she says. "So I've found that it's really important to build a trust between my office and the faculty — if development is seen as the enemy, they will never get involved."

Sometimes professors are involved in fund raising without even realizing it, by merely doing their jobs. Leah Golberstein, who has created an endowment for the Jewish-studies program at Ithaca, says her generosity is a direct result of the positive relationships her son had with his professors and the stewardship faculty members have provided for the money she has given.

Ms. Golberstein says that when she visited her son during his undergraduate years, she was surprised that his professors asked to meet her.

"And the longer I've been involved at Ithaca, the more I've realized that this is not unusual, that other parents had the same experience," Ms. Golberstein says.

Eventually her faith in the institution led her to help the Jewish-studies department create a study-abroad program. Through the donation process, she met the faculty members who would be involved in creating and directing the program, even discovering that one of them — Barbara C. Johnson, an associate professor of anthropology — was visiting Jerusalem at the same time she was. They met at a cafe during their travels, talked about the direction of the study-abroad program, and discovered that they had mutual friends.

Since that time, Ms. Golberstein has remained close with Ms. Johnson and other professors in Jewish studies and has increased her endowment at Ithaca. "I knew it was in good hands," she says. "I feel good about it."

A Career Booster

Donald C. Christ is the secretary of the Alletta Morris McBean Charitable Trust in San Mateo, Calif. Since the late 1990s, the trust has directed about \$2-million in donations to Salve Regina University for the restoration and preservation of its many historical buildings and for its academic program in historical preservation.

A key factor in the charitable trust's decisions has been the involvement of Mr. Garman, the professor who has taken significant time to educate board members about the historical importance of the buildings. Mr. Christ says that gathering such decision-making information can "only happen when you get that one-on-one time with the professors."

"Jim Garman in particular is a terrific advocate for the college," Mr. Christ says. "As a donor, it is terribly important to get that frontline view of how the money is going to make a difference. When he appears before our group, it's always impressive."

Mr. Garman has learned to write grant proposals and cultivate donors, and is now also heavily involved in the final "asks" for gifts. Over the years, it has all become much easier and less intimidating.

"Donors really like to hear what is really going on in a program or on campus, and all of that can be very easy to talk about," he says. "There's also a natural tie-in with what I'm trying to teach my students, who will eventually be in positions in their careers where they will need to ask for money."

His colleagues sometimes feel that fund raising might compromise their integrity, but often their hesitancy is more rooted in the time it requires and the fear of the unknown.

"I think personality goes a long way, and so many faculty members simply haven't been schooled to do this," Mr. Garman says. "Frankly, though, it really can be a time drain, so I'm just fortunate that I enjoy it."

Taking on the responsibilities in a more active way can pay off personally, too. Mr. Garman asked the administrators in the development office to write letters of recommendation when he was up for tenure in 2006.

And for those who have aspirations to eventually become administrators, honing fund-raising skills can give them a leg up. Ms. Semmler, at Ithaca, says a few faculty members have approached her to help just for that reason. She invites them to attend campaign and prospect-management meetings so they understand what is involved.

"Not to use them strategically would be a mistake," she says. "It's a matter of demystifying fund raising."