

The Care and Feeding of Volunteers: Philanthropic Stewardship Activities and Protocols in Community Colleges

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Abstract:

Community colleges increasingly make use of and even rely on philanthropic gifts to support their operations. This reliance has evolved from primarily business and industry giving to giving by individuals, major gift donors. This shift has led fundraising professionals working in community colleges to explore how certain cultivation efforts are employed to care for these current and future benefactors. The current study was designed to identify and come to consensus on the practices community college fundraisers perceive as the most effective for donor stewardship and cultivation. Using a national panel of 16 experts, a three-round Delphi survey was employed. The first round of the survey resulted in the identification of 46 activities, which when edited for duplication, resulted in 23 stewardship related strategies to be rated. As a group, the final mean rating of the items was 4.27 (on a 5-point Likert-type scale; 5=Strongly Agree), including four strategies that had complete agreement of effectiveness by the experts. Strategies identified ranged from sending thank you letters and issuing news releases to naming ceremonies, private dinners, benefactor recognition events, and meetings with faculty. These findings subsequently both provide a road-map for community college fundraisers, offering suggestions about how to steward their donors, and also provides a departure point for future research and theory building.

Keywords: community college fundraising, community college development, community college advancement, community college philanthropy, community college donors, fundraising

INTRODUCTION

Higher education funding continues to experience the challenges of political priorities. Competing with federal matching programs along with state-wide priorities, all of public higher education institutions have had to increasingly find alternative and new sources of revenue to fund their activities (Katsinas, Bray, & Kanter, 2022; Patterson, Justice, & Scott, 2012). This search for funding is particularly true for public community colleges which have mostly evolved to rely upon state instead of local funding (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Falkner, 2017).

An important activity for community colleges in this search for additional revenue sources is the engagement with benefactors in the fundraising process (Barnes & Lion, 2018). Largely driven by presidential leadership, fundraising has become an increasingly common activity for many community colleges. And, as community colleges have come to enroll almost half of all undergraduate college students, they receive less than 2% of all philanthropic gifts to education (EAB, 2021). This disparity suggests that community colleges have not capitalized on their prominent role within all of higher education.

Community colleges have been actively engaged in some forms of fundraising since their inception, often relying on business and industry collaboration to fund instructional activities, specifically those that have led to employer training (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Kopecek & Kubik, 1997). A local business, for example, might have contributed a particular piece or type of manufacturing equipment that would have been used for training purposes, and those students would have the skills necessary for immediate employment and work. These types of gifts, however, do not expand the capacity of the institution to fund student scholarships, faculty development, campus improvements, etc. An important result, therefore, is that community colleges have begun the process of engaging in major gift fundraising from not only these local business and industry leaders, but also college alumni and friends of the institution (Gyllin, 2013).

Major gift fundraising is fundamentally different from corporate giving. Major gift fundraising is typically based on individual donors making a deliberate choice and decision to gift of their resources to a corresponding value that the individual holds (Hodge, 2011). This requires a high level of trust in an organization to receive and responsibly steward the gift, in addition to a high level of belief in the ability of the organization's leadership to operate the institution in an appropriate manner (Harrison, 2018).

Institution's manifest their commitment to benefactors through a series of behaviors and activities, a process often termed "stewardship." This process of caring for benefactors involves a demonstration of gratitude for a gift and can evolve into elaborate processes of showing appreciation (Harrison, 2018; Whillans, 2016). These activities are common in 4-year universities and range from gala dinners to sky box receptions for athletic events. Community colleges typically have a more limited range of resources for this type of benefactor recognition and stewardship, and therefore it is critical to understand what community colleges are implementing that are effective practices. Subsequently, the purpose for conducting the study was to identify the practices community college professional fundraisers perceive as the most effective for donor stewardship and cultivation.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Theories of Fundraising

There are multiple conceptualizations of fundraising in higher education, some of which are proposed as theories but have not been tested or proven to the point of generalization. These conceptualizations, however, do provide a good blueprint of understanding of how fundraising is and has been implemented on a broad basis. One of the first of these conceptualizations was Cook and Lasher's (1996) qualitative, national study of multiple case institution presidents. Using interview data with 10 college presidents in Texas, they identified the key attributes of fundraising as: team-focused, presidential driven, based on major gift leadership, reliant on the academic quality of the institution, institution and context specific. These elements subsequently inform the idea of a grounded theory for fundraising.

Andreoni (1998) offered a different conceptualization proposed as a theory by examining fundraising in a charitable context and not specifically in higher education. His mathematical model proposes that there is the idea of 'seed' money, that is, an initial gift provided by an individual or in the case of other charitable organizations, some form of grant, that demonstrates organizational value leading to additional charitable giving. The key in Andreoni's model, therefore, is that the fundraiser must obtain the critical initial gifts in order to reach a point of

additional gift support. Referred to as “charitable entrepreneurs” (p. 1211), these individuals work in a market-economy that sees incremental growth in giving to a specific level before diminishing.

McAllister (2013) explored fundraising in the community college specifically, taking the perspective that the process is theoretically grounded in public relations. By public relations she explored and related fundraising to public exposure and online media practices, specifically using the expression of fundraising through websites as a lens to gauge effectiveness and possibly efficiency. Drawing on the population of community colleges in New Jersey, she concluded that community college fundraising has not maximized the potential of the internet, websites, and fundraising, suggesting that there is a lost opportunity, and lost resources, for these institutions.

Harrison (2018), similar to McAllister, situated higher education fundraising within the broader theoretical framework of public relations. Drawing on data from one research university, she challenged the idea that there are four important donor stewardship approaches, including “reciprocity, responsibility, reporting and relationship nurturing” (p. 544). Her model collapsed multiple other variables into a broader category that she termed “respect” and found that it, combined with reciprocity and responsibility were the most likely to predict a giving relationship. She stressed that donor behaviors are critical to understand and that modeling institutional relationship building variables will be critical to understanding who ultimately these donors are and their expectations. She concluded that public relations theory is appropriate for understanding these relationships as it is based on relational aspects of organizations and individuals, such as the higher education institution and benefactor.

More recently Shaker and Nelson (2021) offered another grounded theory of fundraising in higher education drawing on interview data with fundraisers. Their theoretical model included a series of “tiers” (p. 9) of activities and relationships, including (1) establishing a “basic connection,” (2) forming a “personalized association,” (3) solidifying a “confident relationship,” (4) diversifying a “purposeful partnership,” and (5) actualizing a “consequential bond” (pp. 9-17).

Fundraising in the Community College

Historically, community college funding has been tied to the local taxation of the school districts that served as their predecessors (Miller & Holt, 2005). From that early financial model, colleges now rely on a combination of local and state funding for their operations, and increasingly, they look to private philanthropic support to augment and support their operations. Early fundraising for community colleges was primarily tied to business and industry, as local employers support specific job training programs to prepare and enhance their immediate labor force. Philanthropy of this nature expanded to more individual giving, and has been supported through groups such as the National Council for Resource Development.

Fundraising practices have evolved in their sophistication at many community colleges with some growing into highly sophisticated development offices with strong alumni, foundation, and corporate giving programs (Smith & Miller, 2023). Despite those which have evolved in such a way, many are still struggling with their infrastructure, attempting to better track their alumni accomplishments and contact information in addition to developing effective cultivation practices (Gyllin, 2013). Additionally, community colleges have been slow to adopt capital campaign fundraising practices (Smith et al, 2018), yet have made attempts to use crowdfunding (Gearhart et al, 2019) and websites (Bucci & Waters, 2014) to grow their donor bases.

Perhaps the primary difference in community college fundraising as compared to the rest of higher education fundraising has to do with the role, engagement, and cultivation of alumni as donors (Falkner, 2017). In the four-year sector of higher education, new students enroll and progress through a long period of time, typically four, five, or even six years of study and residency resulting in a particular, often fond, memory of their alma mater. Through cultivation and age, alumni recall these periods in their lives in such a way that they want to give back in some capacity to the institution that provided a transformational moment in their lives. The community college context is fundamentally different, with many students studying part-time in short-cycle programs such as occupational certificate programs, and even the longest degree programs have historically been two-year associate degrees (Falkner, 2017; Miller, 2013)

An important challenge, then, is how the community college fundraising process creates a pool of potential benefactors and how they are stewarded and cultivated to the point of making philanthropic contributions. Several of the studies on fundraising theory alluded to the process of engagement, noting the importance of the relationship between the potential benefactor and the giving process (Harrison, 2018; McAllister, 2013). This relationship has been described in detail in practitioner-oriented literature, stressing the importance of creating a relationship, continuing the relationship, and sustaining the relationship. At each stage of the process of gift solicitation through stewardship, the emphasis has been placed on recognizing the importance of the benefactor in enhancing the institution and its work. Subsequently, the current study is important because it looks to identify what strategies community college philanthropic leaders use in stewarding their benefactors. This identification will be critical to the future of the fundraising process for community colleges, ultimately impacting their success or failure in raising funds and diversifying their revenue.

RESEARCH METHODS

As a descriptive, exploratory study, the intention was to identify and find consensus on the strategies that community college fundraising professionals use to cultivate and demonstrate gratitude for major gifts. This intention is important because it both allows for the identification of strategies that work, but also begins to create a catalog of fundraising strategies that community college leaders can make use of.

Using a snowballing sampling technique, 15 community college fundraising professionals were identified to participate in the study. The sampling began with the identification of 5 full-time professional fundraisers with 10 or more years working in community colleges. These individuals had participated in a previous research project and were considered to have the experience and success to be considered experts on community college fundraising. These five individuals who were from geographically diverse areas in the United States were each asked to identify 3-5 other professional community college fundraisers whom they knew and considered to be 'experts' at using different strategies to cultivate and steward major gifts for their community colleges. A total of 29 individuals were identified through this procedure (some 'nominated' more than 5), resulting in a total possible pool of 34 participants. Each potential participant was emailed explaining the Delphi survey process and requesting their participation throughout a three-round process that was anticipated to take approximately 6 weeks to conduct. Of the 34 who were emailed, 17 agreed to participate in the study.

The Delphi survey technique was employed as the procedure for data collection. The Delphi procedure is particularly appropriate for use in situations where experts can be engaged in the

data generation process but are geographically separated and are difficult to bring together (Miles, 1997; Van del Ven & Delbecq, 1974). The strategy allows for the identification of items that might not otherwise be available, and then the creation of consensus about some aspect of those items. In this study, the Delphi question focused on the identification of stewardship and cultivation practices and perceptions about what is effective.

The process began with participants being asked to respond to the written question "What strategies do you perceive to be the most effective for community college major donor stewardship and cultivation? List up to 5 possible strategies, techniques, events, etc. that you are familiar with. You may list more than 5 if you wish." This generative process produced a listing of possible strategies that participants then rated their perceptions of the effectiveness of each on a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale, where 1=Strong Disagreement with the perceived effectiveness of the strategies progressing to 5=Strong Agreement. Following the second round of the survey process, measures of central tendency were provided to each study participant who was then given the opportunity to consider group data and re-rate each strategy.

Data were collected in the middle of the 2023 Spring academic term.

FINDINGS

Of the 17 individuals identified to participate in the study, 16 of the 17 completed all three rounds of the Delphi study and only their data were used in the analysis. Of the 16 individuals who completed all three rounds of the Delphi survey, 9 were from stand-alone campuses and 7 were from systems or centralized community college bodies. All had a president or similar campus senior executive officer, and these colleges were located across the US, with four colleges in the Pacific Northwest, three from the West Coast, three from the South Eastern US, five from the Mid-West, and two from the Mid-Atlantic/Northeast (see Table 1). Responding fundraisers had a range in their length of professional experience, including the majority who had 10 or more years of experience (n=9; 56%), six who had 5-9 years of experience (37%), and one who had under 5 years of experience (6%).

Table 1: Profile of Study Participants N=16

Participant Characteristics	
College Location	
Mid-Atlantic	1
Mid-West	5
Northeast	1
Northwest	4
West Coast	3
Campus Governance	
Stand-alone college	9
Part of a system	5
Centralized state structure	2
Length of Experience	
Over 10 years in fundraising	9
5-9 years	6
0-4 years	1

The 16 participants who completed the first round of the Delphi survey developed a listing of 46 activities or strategies that they defined as major gift cultivation and stewardship and indicated their perception that these were effective strategies. After reducing the list for duplication, 23 strategies were then used in the second and third round of the study in which participants were asked to rate their agreement with the strategies (see Table 2).

Table 2. Mean Scores of Major Gift Cultivation and Stewardship Strategies

	Round 2 \bar{x}	Round 3 \bar{x}	No. Changes
Recipient to benefactor thank you letters	5.00	5.00	0
President staff thank you letters	5.00	5.00	0
News release	5.00	5.00	0
Social media recognition	5.00	5.00	0
Naming ceremonies	4.81	4.87	1
Private dinners	4.80	4.80	0
Donor receptions	4.75	4.75	0
Thank you gift token	4.49	4.75	6
Recognition posted on website	3.99	4.57	8
Thank you gift token with ceremony	4.51	4.51	0
Private receptions (at home)	4.50	4.50	0
Name listed in honor roll of donors	4.25	4.22	1
Private dinners (at home)	4.23	4.45	2
Ground breaking participation	4.40	4.40	0
Benefactor-recipient events/meals	4.15	4.35	6
Name listed in other publications	4.00	4.25	5
Benefactor-recipient meetings	4.00	4.23	4
Meetings with faculty	3.74	3.90	4
Name on recognition wall	3.38	3.23	2
Event watching – off campus	3.30	3.75	8
Online ceremonies	2.73	2.55	4
'President for a day' activity	2.25	2.25	0
OVERALL	4.16	4.27	58 (2.52)

For the first round of rating the identified strategies, the group had a $\bar{x}=4.16$ agreement level for the 23 items. Provided group data from these strategy ratings, 58 changes were made to the agreement levels for an average of 2.52 changes per strategy. The round three statements had a slightly higher level of agreement that they were effective cultivation and stewardship strategies with a $\bar{x}=4.27$. In the third round of rating the strategies, the fundraising professionals rated 10 strategies higher than they had in the second round and three strategies lower than in the second round.

The community college fundraisers agreed most strongly with four strategies for benefactor cultivation and stewardship, including providing thank you letters, a thank you from the college's president, issuing a news release, and posting recognition on social media (all $\bar{x}=5.0$). These four strategies could be considered 'common practices,' and none of them received any rating change

from the participants from the second to third round, meaning that there was consistent strong agreement with their use.

Seven strategies had strong levels of agreement about their effectiveness with mean ratings between 4.50 and 4.99. These included such strategies as using naming ceremonies ($\bar{x}=4.87$), private dinners ($\bar{x}=4.80$), donor receptions ($\bar{x}=4.75$), and thank you gifts or tokens ($\bar{x}=4.49$). Conversely, there were six identified strategies that had lower levels of agreement (below 3.5 which would be interpreted as Neither Agree or Disagree to Disagree), including posting names on a recognition wall ($\bar{x}=3.23$), using online recognition ceremonies ($\bar{x}=2.55$), and using a president-for-the-day experience ($\bar{x}=2.25$)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The professionals who provided data for the study identified a broad range of activities that could be generally classified into standard and customized practices. The several strategies for cultivation that had a strong level of agreement (thank you letters, etc.) could and should be developed into a catalog of standard practices for any organization participating in fundraising. Sending a thank you letter, for example, was suggested to be a minimal level of demonstrating gratitude for a financial commitment. Similarly, these standard practices should be explored individually to identify if they make a difference with the benefactor or the overall program of giving. Identifying the impact of social media posts about a gift, for example, might help determine what set of practices are undertaken for different giving levels.

The second category of stewardship and cultivation activities could be classified as 'customized,' meaning that they might be very appropriate in some college settings and not in others. In highly rural areas, for example, a private reception at the president's home might be better received than some other form of recognition. Similarly, some institutions and types of gifts might have a stronger and more visible participating faculty, and a benefactor in those environments might have a greater sense of appreciation of meeting with a faculty member whose program or students are impacted by a gift.

These findings also provide some insights and guidance in the exploration of theories of either the fundraising process or effectiveness. The identification of ceremonies, social media recognition, and new releases, for example, lend credence to the conceptualization that benefactors find meaning and relevance in this type of recognition. Giving may, therefore, have a great deal to do with what was described as legacy extending or brand building for benefactors.

Similarly, demonstrating gratitude to benefactors or cultivating potential donors in more private spaces, such as a private dinner or reception in a home might suggest a more individualized or personalized approach to stewardship. In this vein, such activities might focus less on the visibility of the individual's giving or potential giving and more on the altruistic impact of a gift.

Expanding the current study would also be helpful in a variety of ways. First, developing a more exhaustive menu of stewardship and cultivation activities could help community college leaders as they expand their fundraising efforts. Being able to draw on a list of activities, complete with best practice protocols and information could be helpful and also provide many of these colleges' greater agency in their determination of how fundraising is practiced on their campus.

Second, future research on the uses of donor cultivation activities should include modeling that extends from the identification of practices to correlational research and the creation of predictive models for different types, and perhaps levels, of benefactors. Exploring questions around the use of public and private stewardship activities, for example, stratified by giving level or frequency, might yield important and useful information for enhancing fundraising activities.

And third, expanding the study to explore how benefactors and prospective donors respond to and experience different types of stewardship activities will be helpful in aligning practices with needs. Qualitative studies that begin to profile community college benefactors would greatly enhance the existing research base on fundraising in these institutions, and would also provide important and useful information to development professionals who are expanding their work in this sector of higher education.

The primary conclusion to be drawn from the study results is that community colleges do actively use fundraising industry standard stewardship practices. This results in the need to identify how well they work, how well they work in different types of community colleges, and how they align with the myriad fundraising theories that have been proposed.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

These study findings have a direct implication on the practice of fundraising in community colleges. First and foremost, they begin to catalog what these development programs can use to cultivate and steward their benefactors. Community college fundraising operations that are relatively new or are only a part of an individual's assignment will find this identification useful for future planning and the creation of a comprehensive stewardship program.

Second, findings begin a critical conversation about the growing professionalism of community college fundraising. As noted in the literature, there is currently a broad array of the types of fundraising structures in use in community colleges, with some institutions maintaining large professional staffs and others making use of part-time help or contracted agencies to manage their work. Studies such as this demonstrate that community colleges are serious about expanding their traditional fundraising work and are willing to share best practices and insights about how to work with their donor bases.

Third, findings identify practices that can be directly used by fundraisers. Although there is no indication as to what works in different settings, the fundraisers participating in the study provided strong perceptions about what they saw as effective. Practitioners can immediately adopt several of these strategies and perhaps begin to explore the use of others.

Overall, the study findings provide important information about what fundraising in the community college looks like and begins to hint at what it might look like in the future. The identification of practices in the study is an important first step in exploring in greater detail how major gift fundraising specifically occurs and how it might be implemented with greater effectiveness as community colleges increase their emphasis on philanthropic giving to support their work.

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