

Fundraising and Healthy Departments

Of all the tasks that department chairs and program directors take on, there are few for which we are less prepared than fundraising and development. Chairs often experience a discomfort in soliciting donations from alumni and friends, and wonder how in the world to work development and fundraising activities into an already heavy schedule. Yet we are all aware that in a climate of shrinking state budgets, our programs have to rely increasingly on private gifts to support activities that are crucial to maintaining vibrant and healthy departments. These activities include hosting visiting speakers, funding student travel to conferences, and holding receptions to recognize faculty and student achievements. The idea of having a discretionary fund that can be used to support these activities can be extremely appealing.

Through my experience in fundraising as a former department head and now an administrator, I have learned to put aside a number of misconceptions. Once I did this, it became quickly apparent that fundraising need not involve large amounts of time but can be woven into our day-to-day work as faculty and chairs. Here are some common misconceptions.

1. *Fundraising is begging.* Fundraising is no more begging than applying for research support to NSF or another funding agency. Both involve the articulation of a set of compelling ideas or objectives to present to the funding agency/donor and getting the reviewers/alumni excited and on board with the project. Potential donors are rarely interested in supporting impoverished programs – their focus and interest is drawn by departments that are strong and have a high potential of achieving their objectives. Think of fundraising in terms of building relationships to connect resources with opportunities.

2. *Alumni do not want to be solicited for gifts.* A closely related misconception is that alumni/friends will be turned off by a department's solicitations for funds. Yet over and over, surveys show that many

alumni are looking for opportunities to reconnect with their department in a substantive way. Indeed it is more often the case that former students wonder why they have not heard from a department or been approached for support – could it be that the department does not need their help? Don't underestimate the desire of your former students to maintain their link with the department by supporting its programs.

3. *Fundraising is done via an annual newsletter.* Although it plays a valuable role in communicating what is going on in a department to a wide base of friends and alumni, the departmental newsletter is rarely the main vehicle for fundraising. Instead, 90% of gifts to a program will come from less than 10% of its donors. So the broad solicitation made by the newsletter, or even a direct appeal to alumni, is likely to net a relatively modest amount. For the major gifts it is essential to cultivate and build relationships with prospective donors. The university or college development office can play a key role in identifying and helping you connect with these individuals. Which takes us to our fourth misconception.

4. *The university development office skims off gifts to the department.* This misconception often prevents departments from seeking the help of the professionally trained development staff in their universities. Yet, most development staff are aware that alumni and former students connect first and foremost with their departments and that cutting out departments is not a wise idea. You will find the development staff to be true partners in helping review your promotional materials, providing alumni addresses, and assisting with the planning of alumni functions. Further, when the professional staff knows you and your programs they will be better equipped and enthusiastic about representing your department to a wide array of donors they encounter.

Getting involved in fundraising and development can be remarkably simple. A good start is to put in place a development plan that outlines and prioritizes the key needs of your department. Most departments already have a strategic plan – review this plan and identify specific resources necessary to achieve the vision it outlines. Share this development plan with your institution's development office so they can match the needs of your program with the interests of potential major donors.

Broaden the relationships with your former and current students. Faculty members can play a crucial role here. Over and over again, alumni who become major donors speak about how a faculty member inspired them or took extra time to guide and mentor them. The more we can reach out to our former students and keep them connected to the department, the more they will want to honor and support the work of the department. And along the way we will get the satisfaction of renewing our ties with past students and learning of the directions their lives have taken after graduation.

Over time, you can consider ratcheting up your efforts by appointing an alumni advisory committee to help strategize on special fundraising efforts and launching an endowment campaign. Throughout the process, don't forget to recognize your donors in as many ways as possible.

In today's budgetary climate, successful fundraising is becoming an increasingly important factor in building and sustaining strong and vibrant geography programs. You will find that the satisfaction of building for your department's future and deepening your links with alumni and friends will make the time and effort you put into fundraising well worth it! ■



Pandit

Kavita Pandit
pandit@uga.edu