Attracting Donors to Your Academic Library

by Michael Lorenzen

Introduction

Academic libraries are no longer funded at the same levels as they have been in the past. Bad economic conditions have rattled public higher education funding for years. Limited revenue means choices must be made by higher education administrators about funding for academic and support units, including campus libraries. Because of this, academic libraries have increasingly sought private funding. This funding augmentation has been either out of necessity or by mandate. Costs for libraries have increased at the same time that funding for them has decreased. One proven method of acquiring private funding is to solicit funding from private individuals in hopes of acquiring donations. This funding approach has been either out of necessity or by mandate. Costs for libraries have increased at the same time that funding for them has decreased. One proven method of acquiring private funding is to solicit funding from private individuals in hopes of acquiring donations. With effort and a good strategy, academic libraries can attract donors and use their contributions to make up shortfalls in the library budget.

The Positive Approach

While there is a lot to consider when thinking about asking donors for money, one thing to remember during the process is to stay positive. It is important to highlight the library in a beneficial manner when approaching potential donors. No matter how badly a library budget has been cut, do not mention this. Donors want their names to be associated with success. Discussions about staff layoffs, reduced hours, and cancelled periodical subscriptions will not usually work. If the library is struggling, do not draw attention to this fact. Most potential donors do not want a recognition plaque on the wall of a library that appears to be failing.

A better way to approach potential donors is to show how important and central the library is to the success of the academic institution. Show how crucial library database subscriptions are to students. Provide examples of faculty research that was completed with the assistance of library resources and staff. Be quick to list the campus events that were held in the library building. Clearly show potential donors how their contributions will aid in the continued success of the library and the entire institution. That is an approach that appeals to prospects and makes them seriously consider providing a gift. As Susan K. Martin noted, “As in so many areas, success breeds success.” Donors to a library give because it makes them feel good, they believe the library is important, and they believe a library is strong.

Getting the Donors in the Door

Finding potential donors can be hard work, and academic libraries have a major problem regarding fund-raising. Quite simply, they have no built-in constituency. Although all alumni may have used the library at some point, no one ever graduated from the library. Further, many academic institutions of higher education have carefully laid out procedures for who may approach a donor with the potential to benefit degree-granting areas on campus. These facts mean that the library needs to be creative in reaching out to potential donors.

It is important for any library
to work with the central development office on campus. This will allow the library to get lists of potential donors whom the staff may approach. It will also allow the library to network with those doing development for the institution and to get leads on reluctant prospects who expressed an interest in the library. Maybe the person will not give to the college of education but would be delighted to endow a position at the library. It will also cut down on political problems if someone else’s hot prospect donates to the library instead.

In addition to alumni, many individuals who are not affiliated with the academic institution are often willing to give significant sums of money to the library. The central development office on campus also has lists of these prospects. Another successful approach to prospect research is to talk with your current donors. Whom do they know that might be interested in learning more about the library? Current donors are often connected with individuals with similar interests who may be likely to make good potential future donors.

After prospects have been identified, it is important to get them into the library. For this reason, the library should hold frequent events such as lectures, films, book signings, and exhibits. These occasions serve to educate potential donors about library needs and also help the library check out a potential prospect. And, based on the responses of event attendees, appropriate donor cultivation can then proceed. Many events also draw visitors who were never targeted for donor cultivation but who may be interested in supporting the library financially. Public relations efforts by library staff attending these events can help to educate the community at large about the importance of the library as well.

Holding events also allows a library to reach out to potential donors who have been claimed by other units on campus. The library may not be allowed to approach a wealthy graduate who looks inclined to make a big gift. However, if that potential donor walks into the library for an event and then decides to give to the library, the library can accept the donation without any political complications.

Another successful technique relates to persistence. If you keep coming back to a current or likely donor, the odds increase that the prospect will give money. Potential donors offended by this approach were probably not likely to have donated in the first place. This method might be time-consuming, but it also creates the potential for good results. Further, those who give a small gift even once are more likely to be big or repeat donors than those who have never given to the library. Small gifts can lead to bigger gifts over time.

Keeping Donors Happy

Once a donor has given to the library, it is helpful to make sure the donor is satisfied with having done it. One of the best ways is for the library to promptly acknowledge any gift, no matter how small. Thank-you letters should go out within days of the donation. In addition, larger donations should be acknowledged by a call from the library director with a personal thank you. Beyond these recognitions, all donors should receive yearly updates from the library director that explain how the contributions that year helped to make the campus a better place. Repeat high-level donors rate special attention such as having the library director take them out for lunch or dinner at least once a year.

Donors who make significant contributions should also be acknowledged in other ways. Major contributors should get significantly more and more visible recognitions as the contributions increase. Simple ways to do this include putting donor names in the library newsletter and on the library website. Higher-level donors should also have nameplates on bookshelves, tables, chairs, and rooms. The highest-level donors may even have collections or a building named for them. Do not be afraid to be creative with donor recognitions. How does the donor want to be acknowledged? Visible recognitions also help to bring in new potential donors who see the recognitions and are motivated to donate for that reason.

An example of this could be to talk with a donor and see how he or she wants to be recognized. Is recognition desired? A few donors prefer anonymity. However, if the donor wants recognition, find out which type is most appealing to the individual. The donor might be happy with acknowledgment on the library website or might instead prefer to have his or her name appear on a recognition plate. Work with the donor to match the gift with an appropriate acknowledgement.

Beyond recognition, donors like to feel connected to the library. They want to be involved in the life of the library and feel that they personally are part of the family. Create boards and committees that meet on a regular basis to provide advice or help with different aspects of library life. Library boards of all kinds (friends, advisory, foundation, etc.) can be used to find new donors and keep current donors actively engaged with the library. As one researcher reported, “Our strongest continual large donors are those that have been here and understand us, and many of them have become board members.” This appears to be a very successful practice in soliciting donations. Academic libraries can also use volunteer boards as a form of donor cultivation that will get prospective or current donors to start or continue giving.

There are many examples of these sorts of donor boards in
higher education. Many academic libraries place donors (or potential donors) on boards and committees relating to activities such as exhibits, speakers, or fund-raising. These boards are usually advisory, and they rarely address personnel or policy issues. However, they give board members an opportunity to engage in the life of the library and become more connected in the process.

**Make Fund-Raising a Priority**

Finding, cultivating, and keeping library donors is hard work. Usually the library director is either the primary fund-raiser or the supervisor of those who raise funds. No matter what skills a library director has in development work, academic librarians usually identify their director as the primary fund-raiser. Potential donors want to talk with the library director. When they are thanked, they want the thank you to come from the library director. Fund-raising work has to be a priority for a library director if the library efforts are to be successful.

Many academic library directors have no training in fund-raising. In addition, many do not have any desire to work with donors. For both reasons, a library director may be tempted to delegate the responsibility to other library staff or even to a liaison in the central development office on campus. This is a mistake. The library director bears primary responsibility for the financial well-being of the library and is the person whom the donors want to talk with on a regular basis. The library director must find time for fund-raising activities.

Despite this, it is not inappropriate for a library director to seek help. In addition to working with the central campus development office, the library director can designate staff to assist with fund-raising in the library. Many large academic libraries have multiple individuals devoted full-time to fund-raising work. The most commonly seen employee of this type is a library development officer. This person does much of the research and preparation needed to ready the library director to be successful in cultivating and retaining donors. Most library development officers do not have library backgrounds, but are instead trained in fund-raising work.

The whole library staff can also help with finding donors. After all, it is library staff who normally make first contact with many patrons who may later become donors. With some training, library staff can be made aware of what to do when a patron seems interested in contributing to the library. The library director and library development officer can act as team captains in gearing up a library staff to respond to potential donors. Fund-raising is not taught in library schools, and some library staff may be unwilling to help with it. Despite this, getting library staff engaged in the development process may pay big dividends for the library.

A good example of this is the many special collections librarians who help with fund-raising. Archival and special collections usually hold unique or valuable collections that are attractive to donors. For example, a donor may not want to endow the regular library collection relating to history, but that same donor may be thrilled to create an endowment that funds a local history collection that features ancestors who were prominent in the area. As special collections librarians often are the first library staff to interact with these potential donors, it is a good idea to get them on the fund-raising team as soon as possible.

**Conclusion**

Getting donors interested in giving to an academic library can be an important strategy during difficult financial times. Generous alumni and community members can help make up budget shortfalls. It takes a considerable amount of planning and perseverance to attract, cultivate, and retain donors. Working with the central development office on campus can help, as can holding events. Recognizing donors and getting them engaged in the life of the library can help to make sure that the donors are interested in donating again in the future. Fund-raising is the responsibility of the library director; and, if the director does not put effort into it, failure is likely to result. However, dedicating some staff full-time to development activities as well as getting regular library staff involved can help make the library director a more successful fund-raiser. With hard work, an academic library can make use of donors to survive bad economic times.

**Notes**