Matching Donor Interests with Problem-Centered Academic Programs

Department chairs and faculty need to play a larger role in fund-raising than they typically have in the past to appeal to today's donors, say Susan Frost and Larry Hirschhorn, two higher education consultants who have developed a methodology that brings together faculty and the board of trustees to develop programs that address societal issues that donors are interested in.

"There has been a shift in how donors regard institutions," Hirschhorn says. "In the past, donors and alumni were closely held by ties of loyalty and sentiment to the institution and were easily connected to board members or high-level administrators. But today, the donors are much more topic oriented. While they have sentimental feelings about the institution they've attended, they're more rational, and they scrutinize [donation opportunities] to see which best represent their values. "In that context, the faculty's interest and passions become more important because they really are the university's window into the wider world. What are the most important issues facing society? That's something the faculty can address—something you won't necessarily be able to address out of an alumni office or fund-raising organization."

The process

Frost and Hirschhorn have implemented the following process at one institution to develop several problem-based programs that involve collaboration across disciplines. The programs are part of a larger fund-raising campaign,

and Frost and Hirschhorn note, "The work of academic leaders is not fund-raising per se or a substitution for the work of fund-raising consultants. Rather, it is a way to align the institution's strengths and donors' interests."

The process began with academic leaders and the board of trustees working together to identify the institution's broad areas of strength and a set of issues that will be relevant in the future in society and in scholarship. After that first input from the board, there are several points in the process where the board and the faculty come together to check in with each other and have conversations that influence how they will move forward. As the process unfolds, board members take on a more reactive role, commenting on the plans the faculty come up with. "Their reactions are important and are always about enlarging the idea," Hirschhorn says.

Each initiative has a faculty leader, usually an associate professor, selected by the deans and department chairs. These leaders take on a planning role, doing the day-to-day work to get the programs organized and to build a budget for the fund-raising elements. These leaders need to represent the intellectual content and have the standing to do so. "It's not just administrative in nature. They need good skills in the politics of building faculty coalitions and support. That means not just using the normal chains of command but inventing other forums through which faculty can participate and express their interests," Hirschhorn says.

One of the side benefits of this

methodology is that it has helped bring out leaders among the faculty, giving them a chance to take a leadership role that spans the institution.

The program leaders work with others to achieve consensus on the particulars of the program, which need to be almost as detailed as a formal business plan—detailed enough to show that the faculty members are ready to implement the project if funding is available. "All relevant stakeholders have to have an influence over the ultimate form of this program, and they are constantly revising this document, bringing it back to the people, sometimes one-on-one and sometimes in groups," Hirschhorn says.

"Rather than making vague descrip-

tions about something that's unformed, the documents are evidence that people can react to," Frost says. "We're always trying to enlarge the circle of people who know about [the program] and have input. Since we're talking about elements of a major [fund-raising] campaign, we're talking about the potential for big dollar amounts associated with these programs. We're not trying to divide small amounts of help. We're trying to get big, exciting, robust ideas that touch a lot of people in the institution. You need several of these programs to form a campaign."

At the institution, Frost and Hirschhorn have driven the pace of the development of these programs. The process for developing a single program takes about a year, and several can be developed in parallel, Hirschhorn says.

Frost and Hirschhorn help speed the process along by interviewing, writing, and producing the supporting documents, which have a journalistic tone rather than that of a grant proposal or journal article.

Ideally, several of these programs would cover the "intellectual profile" of the institution, raising funds for all the institution's strengths. "It wouldn't be just one interdisciplinary program. You're looking for new ways to combine many things to really address important questions," Frost says.

From the point of view of the donor, the appeal is the problem that the program focuses on, not necessarily the interdisciplinary nature of the program. "Donors aren't going to be interested in giving money to integrate two disciplines. That doesn't tell them too much about the utility of what the money will do or bring to the world," Hirschhorn says. "I don't think I would say that this is a way to get interdisciplinary studies done. That's putting the cart before the horse."

Interdisciplinary collaboration, however, is a side benefit that may appeal to some donors, Frost says. For example, a donor might be interested in improving the freshman experience, which would take a real interdisciplinary effort. Or a donor might be interested in providing global internships for juniors or seniors.

One of the challenges that administrators face is getting board members actively involved at meetings. Rather than doing a show-and-tell presentation, meetings with board members should be interactive, Frost says. Program leaders need to prepare and distribute documents before meetings with the board.

Selling a program idea to the board is somewhat like applying for a grant, but there are some significant differences. "When faculty get together to talk about a grant proposal, they're usually trying to narrow their ambition to fit within the grant requirements. We're trying to get them to amplify their ambition," Frost says.

'Another way to do strategic planning'

The president of the institution initially contacted Frost and Hirschhorn to help develop alternatives to traditional strategic planning. In addition to helping with fund-raising, their methodology can also replace traditional strategic planning.

"It's another way to do strategic planning. Strategic planning suffers sometimes from high degrees of abstraction—goals, vision, and mission. People who march through that process spend an inordinate amount of time wordsmithing the different meanings of these terms but often come up with results that are flat and don't really move, inspire, or excite anybody," Hirschhorn says.

Hirschhorn says that their methodology is also more effective than focus group planning, another approach in which faculty vote on what initiatives to pursue. This often results in a laundry list that is "essentially a list of people's current activities," Hirschhorn says. "It's very hard to generate innovation out of that process. It tends to reproduce the status quo."

Institutionalizing the process

Frost and Hirschhorn have played a major role in facilitating this process at the institution. Their presence has helped move the process along, and their perspective as people outside the institution has enabled them to see possibilities that others might not have seen.

They have taken steps to keep the process going after they are done consulting with the institution. The most important of these is building a broad constituency within the institution. Each program has approximately 15 architects—those actually designing and modifying the programs, 20 to 30 people who are very familiar with and contribute to the initiative, and 100 or more people who know about the initiatives.

Another important element is establishing each program's location within the "administration constellation," Frost says.

The programs also will become more ingrained in the institution once the development consultants select which programs to seek funding for and once the faculty develop the content for these programs.

Throughout the process Frost and Hirschhorn have tried to incorporate techniques that they have seen work in other higher education settings. "From research I've done, I've found that academic programs that survive more than one leader tend to have outward-looking missions. These programs all have this by being developed to address societal problems. That attracts donors and also makes them more likely to succeed when the first faculty leaders move on," Frost says.

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