

The President and Advancement

Advancement success depends on being an effective CEO.

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AS FINANCIAL CHALLENGES impact all of American higher education, and billion-dollar, multi-year capital campaigns proliferate, the average college president now spends more than 50 percent of his or her time off campus fostering external relationships — fundraising.



In this environment, the necessary role of the president is that of public leader, team-builder, motivator, financial strategist and consummate spokesperson for the institution. Yet no matter how effective the CEO is in these responsibilities, success for transformational presidents results from a team effort, a focus on donor relations and an understanding of the

many constituents of a college or university.

If you are not known as a master fundraiser yourself — or even if you are — it's important to remember some central principles of advancement success.

Be an advancement team builder and leader. Transformational presidents assemble cabinet members who are ethical, proactive, energetic, goal-oriented, creative and articulate in their own right — in other words, extensions of the values the president holds important.

Effective institutional advancement vice presidents can be the president's greatest asset, on and off campus. As visible ambassadors who are knowledgeable about the multiple constituencies of a college or university, they represent the enterprise to key stakeholders. They typically have strong people skills, and a well-honed sense of community. Other members of a cabinet, such as the chief academic officer, can similarly be valuable as advancement-oriented leaders of the institution.

Be a convincing steward of your relationships. Successful fundraising often looks easy. It is anything but. Major gifts can take years to close, and a productive relationship with donors never truly ends. Stewardship does not cease with the writing of a check. Saying “thank you” to your contributors, and demonstrating to them the conscientious use of their financial commitment, is the entrée to future giving.


Practice effective public relations at home, too. Public relations practices should originate on campus, beginning with an understanding of institutional history, culture and aspirations. Although faculty and staff may be tempted to view a road-warrior president as

inattentive, the wise CEO fosters critical relationships with former and current campus opinion leaders as part of the cultivation of internal constituents who can help to articulate the overall vision and importance of fundraising. Remember that faculty and staff have money to contribute, too. Campus legends abound about maintenance workers who have made seven-figure bequests to the scholarship fund.

Appearances matter. A president must not only be honest, modeling integrity for the entire community, but also must appear to be ethical and beyond reproach — especially over highly visible and sensitive issues such as budgets.

More new campus CEOs have failed because of unwise expenditure of institutional funds than over any other single issue. Don't spend precious campus dollars on anything that might be viewed as extravagant or unrelated to the educational needs of the institution. Such practices give donors the excuse to think, “They obviously don't need my money.”

Share your “elevator” speech with others. Even the most effective president cannot be everywhere at once. Your concise case for giving to the institution — the “elevator” speech that captures the rationale for fundraising in the time it takes to reach a top floor — is a tool worth sharing with those who can articulate the needs and opportunities to be realized through private giving. Team fundraising, though always directed operationally by the president and the vice president for advancement, benefits from engagement by the wider community of institutional constituents — trustees, alumni, friends, employees, parents, students.

All have a stake in the institution's fundraising success, and yours. 

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