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Note

(Fund)raising honors: Blending conventional and technological approaches to development

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1. Introduction

The success of an academic institution is predicated upon its ability to recruit top students and to prepare these students to become productive citizens. Despite the fact that honors programs and colleges offer a value-added approach to higher education, the current funding climate leaves many of us relying on external sources of funds. Most honors administrators are not trained in development work, so it is imperative that we build networks and relationships that can assist in fundraising efforts (Carnicom & Mathis, 2009). This note will focus on development with an emphasis on (fund)raising honors at a public, four-year university in the United States.

The Van D. and Barbara B. Fishback Honors College is fairly young at nearly twenty years old. While we received an endowment that established honors as the first named college at South Dakota State University, the most frequent donations we receive are between \$1 and \$100. Our graduates are early-career professionals and often have close ties to both honors and their home academic college. While these facts may seem like obstacles, there are many opportunities to engage alumni, community members, and industry professionals in support of honors. Our capacity for development work is enhanced when we shift our emphasis from raising *funds* to raising *honors*. We accomplish this by raising the bar, raising awareness, and raising relationships.

2. Raising the bar

Honors colleges and programs provide an opportunity for institutions of all sizes and financial means to engage with students searching for more in their educational experience. In the spirit of our institution's land grant mission, our vision is an inspired honors alumni base who are equipped with the skills and ethic to achieve their greatest potential and to offer their skills in service of others. We serve our students by raising the bar to prepare them for success in a rapidly changing and complex world. We raise the bar by focusing on innovative methods for developing our students and mobilizing those priorities as integral foci in our strategic plans.

Components of a comprehensive strategic plan include mission, core values, a long-term vision, tactical plans, budget, and an infrastructure to support the strategic priorities. The Fishback Honors College engages students, staff, faculty, alumni, and donors as collaborators in our strategic planning process. This method accomplishes two important goals: 1) it sends a strong message by building the strategic plan around raising honors and planning clear methods for being accountable to the mission; and 2) all stakeholders are invested in co-creating a vision for what success should look like and how to get there. Whether a program has a current strategic plan with bold and compelling visions or is starting with a fresh slate, never underestimate the importance of developing and communicating a bold vision for providing premier honors education.

3. Raising awareness

Every honors program has incredible value to offer. The key is finding effective strategies for raising awareness by sharing a bold and compelling vision, telling impactful stories, and creating meaningful ways to engage donors. A key element of raising awareness is establishing honors as a priority within the campus and within the development program. Andrews (2009) recommends establishing relationships with key administrators as one of the first steps toward a more comprehensive honors development plan. Establishing a place for honors, as well as appropriate infrastructure and resources, is also among the National Collegiate Honors Council's characteristics of a fully-developed honors program (National Collegiate Honors Council). This awareness can be accomplished by sharing that the value of Honors is that we exist everywhere across campus. Honors enriches the academic framework and provides enriching co-curricular opportunities to develop our students as scholars, leaders, and global citizens. In the words of John Kennedy, "A high tide lifts all boats." Similarly, a robust honors program can elevate the academic experience of all students and faculty through transformative education when these experiences and expectations permeate the rest of campus.

Effective strategies for raising awareness can include significant accomplishments or national recognitions bestowed upon members of the students and faculty, but we have also found that appealing to personal connections and creating opportunities for student growth have piqued the interest of donors. Carnicom and Mathis (2009) also found that sharing students' stories was a vital tool for marketing honors. The culture present within the Fishback Honors College is one that feels like family. We offer a home away from home for students and are committed to building a strong community and creating connections to empower one

another. Additionally, we embrace failure and use it to build better outcomes. Success for our students is not necessarily winning every single time but rather growing from experiences and leveraging lessons to build a future they can thrive within. Ultimately, the Fishback Honors College is a safe and challenging space for students from all disciplines to push beyond their comfort zones so that they can stretch themselves towards achieving their greatest potential.

Finally, we exist to make high quality honors education accessible for all. Because South Dakota State University is home to the Van D. and Barbara B. Fishback Honors College, some of the best and brightest students in the world can receive a premier education in the modestly populated upper-Midwestern town of Brookings, South Dakota. In the spirit of accessibility, we do not charge additional fees for honors courses or activities. So, donor support is vital to ensuring that quality educational and extracurricular opportunities are available to all honors students.

4. Raising relationships

Raising awareness corresponds with raising relationships. Understanding alumni, donors, and prospects is essential to being relevant in their lives. Development programs need to evolve to meet the needs and expectations of those who financially support their institutions. One strategy, suggested by Johnson (2018), is reaching out to families of students, in addition to alumni and community members, to support the work of the honors program. Digital platforms have also emerged in recent years and are great examples of fund raising tools. Digital platform fund raising should be a core element of all fund raising programs. According to Josh Birkholz, Principal at Bent Whaley Flessner, (J. Birkholz, personal communication, October 5, 2018), 'Platform fundraising needs to become a profession in the modern development program. Like analytics, it needs to be purposeful, multifaceted, and cross functional.' One way we have engaged in fund raising using digital platforms is through a partnership with the South Dakota State University Foundation called *One Day for STATE*.

The first and preparatory phase of *One Day for STATE* entails identifying lead donors who will provide *challenge gifts*, or gifts that will be revealed on the actual date of the *One Day for STATE* event. The challenge gifts do not become available to the university until a target number of people have made a gift, of any amount, during the 24-hour campaign. *One Day for STATE* uses social media and digital platforms to engage students, alumni, and community members in supporting campus programs—including the Fishback Honors College—through donations that contribute toward “unlocking” the challenge gifts. Each time a targeted number of donations is met, a new challenge gift becomes available to the university. These results are updated in real-time and contribute to the level of excitement surrounding the concept of giving. Because large challenge gifts are “unlocked” by the numbers of total donations made during the 24-hour event, and not on the amount raised, every prospective donor knows that a gift of any size is meaningful and helps to make larger sources of funds available to the institution and college they love. Donations of all sizes are encouraged, with the hope that people who are giving for the first time—especially students and recent alumni—will become interested in continuing, and eventually bolstering, their support of honors.

5. Raising honors

We also build relationships in more traditional ways—engaging prospective donors in conversations about the Fishback Honors College and our students. These relationships with community partners and alumni are invaluable because alumni especially may feel a particular loyalty to an honors program they benefited from personally (Andrews, 2009). The members of our honors community are engaged as honors advocates and are regularly integrated into our programming. Prior to asking a prospective donor for a substantial gift, we have invested in the relationship and have gotten to know what they are passionate about supporting. When they ask questions about honors, we are able to provide personalized and detailed examples about the transformative impact Honors has on the lives of our students. We are able to answer honestly, while speaking directly to the donor’s heart. Simply put, relationships matter. People want to know that they are valued and that they can add value.

Regardless of whether an institution is dependent on fundraising, all honors administrators have the responsibility of raising honors. The strategy of raising the bar, raising awareness, and raising relationships establishes a culture where people want to be a partner and see the value of investing (time, resources, expertise) in honors. Having a strategic plan and including stakeholders in the planning process can increase support for honors programs from external sources and from one’s home university. Sharing the story of your honors program can help to recruit supporters and make honors a priority within your university. Blending traditional fundraising methods with time-sensitive crowd funding approaches embedded in trending social media platforms can maximize the opportunities for all members of our honors communities to invest in the Honors College. A similar blended approach to raising honors is equally powerful beyond the context of fundraising. These strategies can and should be adapted by any university to raise the conversation about the importance of honors education.

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- Johnson, M. L. (2018). Including families in the honors experience. *Honors in Practice – Online Archive*. 279.

Other resources

National Collegiate Honors Council. *Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program.*

(https://www.nchchonors.org/uploaded/NCHC_FILES/Program_Review/NCHC_Basic_Characteristics.pdf)

South Dakota State University Foundation (<https://www.sdstatefoundation.org/impact/one-day-for-state>)