Rethinking library development

The ethical implications of library fundraising

by Phillip J. Jones

Philanthropy is an increasingly potent force in our society, particularly in the nonprofit sector. Colleges and universities have sought external funding for generations, but the scale of this activity has increased markedly in the last decade. Almost every institution eyes its endowment, striving to raise that figure. On campuses across the United States, fundraising has become big business.

It is not surprising that the proverbial heart of the institution, the library, has caught the fundraising bug. Many academic librarians have embraced development with a vengeance, which they view as necessary to guarantee the fiscal future of their libraries.

Directors of library development and their support personnel have mushroomed. Their work has encompassed both raising funds and writing about the process; this commitment has led to an inflow of cash and to an outflow of journal articles and conference papers. However, these papers have been almost exclusively practical, within the genre of "How we done it good." As such, almost no authors have critiqued this nascent activity. Most librarians have accepted library development as a necessary good without subjecting it to scrutiny.

Nevertheless, scrutiny is in order. Academic librarians need to think critically about the development ventures that they pursue with such enthusiasm. In particular, they should examine the ethos of fundraising and how it relates to the professional ethics of librarianship, the yardstick against which they should assess their practices. At first glance, library development and these ethics appear uneasy bedfellows.

Making social distinctions

Foremost, fundraising is unapologetically the process of seeking money, of fiscal aggrandizement. To ferret out money, one must identify potential donors, and to identify potential donors, one invariably makes social distinctions. This is the genesis of the problem.

ALA strives to ensure that all library users have equitable access to information and library services in order to ensure an informed citizenry in a democratic republic. In essence, ALA seeks to minimize social distinctions. These ideas are enshrined in the ALA Code of Ethics and other pertinent sections of the Policy Manual. Library schools drum these principles into their students. Although academic libraries have a different mission from public libraries and a more narrowly defined clientele, an ethic of equity of access (and treatment) guides their service.

Most academic librarians offer their senior administrators more prompt and deferential service than they offer freshmen, but they acknowledge this service differential with discomfort. An ethical librarian keeps inequity of service as well as distinctions among patrons to a minimum.

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An insulation of fundraising from general library operations, and most patently, public service, would lessen the tension between library development and professional ethics. However, library development rarely occurs in a vacuum. Directors of development seek to extend their activity throughout the organization; they succeed when gifts pour in and endowments rise. Therefore, they encourage their colleagues to adopt a development mentality, to cultivate "constituencies" and "relationships."

Useful inside the office of library development, a bottom-line mindset is problematic outside of it, particularly in the public service departments. Most academic library units operate with reduced staffs, and public service departments are no exception. Public service personnel should offer the best possible service to their primary clientele and make this service as equitable as possible.

Few academic libraries have sufficient staff to offer special services to moneyed constituencies. One who bends over backwards to serve special patrons (i.e., donors or potential donors) undermines professional ethics and may do so at the expense of others (e.g., the undergraduate masses).

Collection development

Collection development and library development constitute another dicey pair. Most librarians are familiar with the quotidian problem of gift books; the professional literature has examined this issue at length. However, more serious than filling up one's shelves with junk is the specter of censorship, either indirect or direct.

Most donors will not have the same commitment to academic freedom and to balanced collections as librarians, and some donors may attempt to put their stamp on a library's collection, much as a prospective donor may seek to endow a chair with an ideological bent. A donor may offer a library a slew of books from a narrow perspective; or worse, one may offer a library a check on the condition that certain texts be removed from its collection.

It is difficult for librarians to refuse a large check, but it is dangerous for them to cede their professional judgment to others when it comes to developing their collections. Donors

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can provide needed cash and materials to supplement collections, but librarians must ensure that they themselves determine the contents of their collections in accordance with the mission of their institutions.

Ethical arguments aside, library development is problematic on utilitarian grounds. In the short term, the academic library that mounts an aggressive development campaign shoulders partial responsibility for providing its own resources. This responsibility should lie with the parent institution, the college or university, as long as the academic library fulfills the mission of its parent.

Fundraising may also erode long-term parental support. If an academic library raises a significant sum of money, the college or university may cut funding. Noteworthy success at development may prove its undoing.

Library development was not conceived as an end in itself—the ultimate objective was to secure materials for patrons. Nevertheless, unless kept in check, the process may overwhelm the ultimate objective. The pecuniary interest of the library must never trump other interests.

Development should complement other library operations and be in harmony with the ethics of librarianship. Therefore, it behooves librarians to examine fundraising critically, especially its ethical implications. Such study need not eviscerate library development, but ensure that it be ethical and valuable in the present and the future.

The metaphor of the library as the heart of the institution can supply an instructive, twofold meaning to this investigation. The library must be the heart (as in the center or core of intellect) of the campus, but it also must be the heart as in the conscience.

Although we librarians may witness the leasing of the ivory tower, we can attempt to keep our venerable workplaces beacons of democracy. In short, money talks, but we need not amplify the sound. ■