

Steven Escar Smith

If no one graduates from the library, then who are its donors?

Some reflections from an accidental academic fundraiser

I have been involved in academic library fundraising for nearly 20 years. I backed into this experience mostly as a result of taking on administrative duties. I am not a development professional, and, except for a workshop or two, I have had no training as such. What I have learned has come on-the-job as a part-time, accidental fundraiser.

Over the years I have often heard that academic libraries are at a disadvantage in development work because they have no graduates. This is partly true. Libraries don't have an alumni base to draw on when fund-raising.

However, this does not mean that libraries can't raise money. And neither is the library unique in the fact that it has no former students to tap for private gifts. Student affairs and alumni relations are two examples of nondegree granting entities that benefit from private support, sometimes greatly so. And the most successful fundraising machine on most campuses, the athletic department, does not graduate anyone either.

So academic libraries are not unique in this challenge, but they are different from a college or an academic department. If the library has no graduates, then who are its donors? Of course library supporters come in all stripes, but, in my experience, they most commonly fall into one of a few categories, and sometimes these categories overlap.

Faculty are a key group of supporters. Many give to the library in addition to their own programs and departments, while a few make the library their sole focus. For

a very few, their own department is a little too close to home, and for them the library represents an appealing alternative. Life inside the academy is not easy, and years of competition for scarce resources, space, and attention can dampen one's philanthropic enthusiasm. The library is often seen as the one campus intellectual resource that rises above or exists outside of the hurly-burly of the normal academic fray. For many faculty, the library is their ivory tower.

A closely related group of donors are long-term library employees. Like the faculty, they also often see the library as a neutral and unsullied campus good. They quite often also retain a strong interest in the particular collection, program, or service they were most closely affiliated with over the course of their career. In their giving, or gift planning, it is not uncommon for them to single out this interest as their primary focus.

Student workers make up another important potential donor group. Though no one receives a grade or a diploma from the library, student workers get a scholarship in the form of a job as well as valuable life experience. A paycheck not only helps to pay tuition and buy books, but it often helps cover the rent and put food on the table, too. Further, a job teaches lessons that are not easily conveyed in the classroom, such as

Steven Escar Smith is dean of libraries at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, e-mail: ssmit216@utk.edu

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how to please a boss or serve a customer or how to balance competing demands. These are the kinds of lessons that pay lifelong dividends and contribute to that all important “other” education that should be a part of every undergraduate’s experience. Some of the most dedicated donors that I have known look back fondly on their time shelving books, assisting at the circulation desk, tipping in torn or missing pages, and any number of other activities. They remember these times as among the most important of their college career.

Library support groups (often called “Friends”) are another important constituency. Whether formally or loosely organized, the individuals associated with these groups are typically united by a passion for the library’s mission to serve the research and learning needs of the entire campus.

One of my favorite library friends once told me that he helped the library because he knew that in doing so he was helping all the students, faculty, and staff of the university. Support from these groups comes in many forms. Sometimes the group makes a collective or group gift—that is, a gift from the

group made up of a number of smaller gifts by each member. At other times individual members will make single gifts, sometimes called “lead gifts,” that inspire fellow members to do likewise.

A library donor is usually also someone else’s donor, too. Most of our donors also give, have given, or will give to other parts of the institution. It is not uncommon for colleges or academic departments to share donors too, but, perhaps precisely because we do not have an alumni base, the shared nature of the enterprise is more apparent in the library than elsewhere. On occasion they come to the library first, but more often they come to us after beginning a development relationship elsewhere on campus. Thus, coordination, communication, and courtesy on the part of the library with other units is of paramount importance.

This brings me back to where I began—that often quoted fundraising lament about no one ever graduating from the library. True, but no student ever graduated without one either. And in that sense, I prefer to think that everyone graduates from the library. *zz*

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