

Raising More Money at the Nation's Historically Black Colleges and Universities

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to discuss the importance of increasing fund development at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Increasing the endowments at HBCUs means placing more emphasis on cultivating alumni and educating them about the importance of philanthropy. Advancement professionals at these specialized institutions face a growing dilemma – how to strengthen university resources in a climate that has historically relied almost wholly on public funding. Public HBCUs will eventually be forced to identify private resources to survive and thrive. Identifying an effective model for fundraising is the first step.

Predominantly White institutions have alumni giving rates that range between 20-60 percent while Black college alumni giving rates typically fall below ten percent. At a time when endowments are decreasing due to economic forces and public

support of institutions of higher education is at an all-time low, it is a matter of survival that Black colleges increase their giving rates (Gasman, 2003, p. 22).

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to stress the importance of increasing endowments at public Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) by implementing the Black Church model. It is important for development officers and advancement professionals to pay close attention to the shrinking revenues allocated for public institutions. Realizing the relevance of engaging alumni and friends of these specialized institutions will help to increase and stabilize resources for the underserved.

African Americans Look to the Church for the Promotion of Social Needs

“Throughout American history, the Black Church has occupied a distinctive position in the individual and collective lives of African Americans” (Ellison, 1991, p. 4). Research indicates that African-Americans attend church more frequently, participate in church-related activities, and belong to more church-affiliated activities than many other Americans. African Americans look to the church for guidance, advocacy, and the promotion of social needs. These church members are committed to the emotional and financial well-being of Black religious institutions. There is no wonder why the most effective fundraising mechanism for African-Americans can be found in the Black church.

Most African-Americans are taught philanthropy as children through their obligation to attend church and make a donation. Through personal engagement and building trust, Black preachers convey the needs of the church and consistently encourage parishioners to support the work of the church. “African-Americans understand that the role of the Black church – especially in the area of fundraising is legendary. We recognize that the Black church puts the force of authority and legitimacy behind its appeals to reach givers in the Black community. The Black church is a triumphant example of philanthropy among friends” (Carson, 2001, p. 4). Consequently, studies of the Black church and its congregants should be a vital source of inspiration for an effective fundraising model

Recognizing the Importance of Giving Early in Their College Career

Fundraising literature tells us that colleges and universities need to begin educating their students about giving as soon as they arrive on campus. If minority institutions can make their mission and needs more visible to the minority community at-large, they may be able to attract more funds from their alumni and the community as a whole. Accordingly, students will recognize the importance of giving early in their college career because they will have been exposed to philanthropists' generosity.

In order to be successful, HBCUs must engage all members of its society including faculty, staff, alumni, students, parents, and other close constituents. Involving these groups will, at a minimum, satisfy their need for inclusion. Boards of regents generally make decisions with little influence from the grassroots supporters, and with public universities facing shrinking funding allocations from states, it will become imperative that boards invite their best advocates to the table. Volunteer boards should help to advance the university's agenda by providing support to the president in those areas where the institution has unfunded priorities.

Fundraising as a Viable Profession

Until recently, fundraising was not respected as a viable profession. Another responsibility of board members should be to educate legislators and other external constituencies about the importance of the fundraising industry. In essence, they ought to become lobbyists and change agents. Consequently, educational fundraising will be more widely accepted as a discipline with dignity with "rigorous requirements for attention to the details that make it the productive servant to philanthropy that it is" (Rosso, 1991, p. 17).

Giving Back to Humankind is the Greatest Gift

As mentioned, the Black church instills an obligation to give in the congregant's mind from an early age. Historically Black Colleges and Universities and other minority serving institutions should follow this model and create an expectation of giving as soon as students matriculate. Continuous connection to alumni after they graduate is also critical. Offering alumni and community residents opportunities for continuing education, career advancement, and other training and leadership workshops will foster a sense of commitment, reconnection, and stimulate a motive to reciprocate giving back to an institution that was instrumental in their lives. Giving back to humankind is the greatest gift one could give.

The Fundraising Profession

The fundraising profession is made up of people who are values driven. They want to know that they make a difference in the lives of others, and they are motivated by the fact that what they do has value and promotes goodwill. Motivated employees, students, and volunteers can and do play a vital role in relationship building which is fundamental to successful fundraising (Dube, 2005, p. 2).

Challenges for Public HBCU Presidents

One of the major challenges that public HBCU presidents face is shrinking revenues and growing school needs. Without external funding, HBCUs will be good institutions, but they will not have the quality that is essential for students to become successful in the global new world that is taking shape. “The interminable retrenchment of state and federal support has forced colleges and universities to become increasingly reliant on the procurement of funds from private sources in order to recruit quality students, retain distinguished faculty, and produce value-added research” (Johnsen, 2005, p. 1).

Matching Donor Preferences and Institutional Funding Needs

Only recently have minority institutions embraced the concept of matching donor preferences with institutional funding needs. Approaching donors from this angle has yielded a wealth of resources for HBCUs. In the fund development community, stewards often overlook the importance of building relationships. It is imperative that fundraisers understand and respect donors. Donor appreciation embodies the culture of any reputable fundraising organization.

In the very near future, there will be more alumni graduating from minority institutions. More people of color will enter the middle class. Not only does this mean that more African-Americans will be in a position to give, but as they advance economically, they will be more philanthropic. Financial planning and charitable giving will extend beyond the church. As the children of minority alumni enter the institutions of their parents, those parents will seek to increase their giving in an effort to support the continued social and economic development of their families. This situation presents enormous opportunities for minority serving institutions to increase their financial stability, and above all, to solidify their position within the minority community and within the greater world of American higher education (Ostrander, 1990, p. 78).

Questions for Development Officers

Consequently, this article was designed to investigate how to increase fund development at HBCUs. In order to evaluate best practices in fundraising, the following questions were developed for use by development officers:

1. Given the African American church model, how would it be possible to cultivate donors using the concept of tithing?
2. What issues need to be addressed to improve the recruitment of minority fundraisers?
3. What motivates alumni and other university friends to give back?
4. Why is it important to effectively engage fundraising students in the learning process to the degree that they become experts in their field of study?
5. How important is the connection between an organization's mission and vision to the work that fundraisers do?
6. What is a fundraisers responsibility to an institution?

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, contemplating the answers to these questions will guide HBCU advancement professionals to an understanding that will reward the institution in the long run. Fulfilling the obligation to donors will maximize trust and gain generations of dedicated philanthropists. By working hand-in-hand with Black churches, HBCUs will add a new dimension to fundraising at minority institutions.

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