

2010


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## Scholarly Commons Citation

Casey, A. M., & Lorenzen, M. (2010). Untapped Potential: Seeking Library Donors Among Alumni of Distance Learning Programs.,  
(.). <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2010.488597>

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## **Untapped Potential: Seeking Library Donors among Alumni of Distance Learning Programs**

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, decreases in higher education budgets have forced academic libraries to rely more heavily on philanthropy in order to operate or expand collections. Alumni are the most obvious potential donors to an academic library. Many alumni recognize the library as part of their higher education experience and are happy to give to the library. For many institutions with distance learning programs, a growing number of alumni have never been to campus or have rarely visited but they may use and appreciate library services. However, few academic libraries have attempted to tap this source of potential donors. This paper examines the possibilities of soliciting donations from graduates of distance learning programs who were users of library resources.

### **Introduction**

For a number of reasons, libraries in general and academic libraries in particular are no longer funded at the same levels as they have been in the past. Limited revenue means choices must be made by higher education administrators about funding for academic and support units including campus libraries. Because of this, academic libraries are increasingly seeking private funding. This financial augmentation has been either out of necessity or by mandate. Costs for libraries have increased at the same time funding for them has decreased. Dewey (2006) noted that library periodical acquisition budgets are having difficulty with 8% to 12% annual inflation increases. In addition, the shift to electronic collections results in increasing costs to acquire existing digital resources or for a library to create their own. Many libraries cannot afford access to both print and electronic versions of journals. The high costs of scanning and uploading existing collections to the Web also strain library budgets. However, there is money to be had. According to Summers (2006), "By several measures, well over \$100-trillion will exchange hands in the next decades as baby-boomer wealth passes to the next generation" (p. 22). Thus, academic libraries are now seeking supplementary new sources of revenue from private donors just as one of the largest transfers of wealth is about to occur between generations. The recent recession may have cut into the size of wealth to be transferred, but it is still huge. In recent years, academic libraries have become active players in the fund-raising game in order to supplement decreasing funding from their parent institutions (Hoffman, Smith, & DiBona, 2000). Despite this level of activity, there appears to be little effort being made to solicit funds from alumni of distance learning programs.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2008), 66% of two- and four-year degree-granting institutions in the United States offered some type of distance learning courses in the 2006-2007 academic year. Students who enroll in distance learning courses tend to be more mature than the average undergraduate or graduate, need flexible programming to accommodate lives that often include families and jobs, are usually returning to school to complete a degree or retool their careers, and tend to be self-directed (Birnbaum, 2001). Further, they seem to be "less concerned about titles and more concerned about what the instructor knows and wants to share with them" (p. 17). The majority of adults who reported using any type of distance education method in the 2004-2005 academic year were aged between 25 and 54, female, white, had some college education, and worked full time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006).

In addition, assessment conducted among distance learning students of their library experiences, such as at Athabasca University (Schafer, 1998), is generally quite positive. Since libraries tend to reach out and deliver materials and services to distance learning students, responses such as this in a 2007-2008 survey, “[This] program really makes the extended campus population feel welcomed and part of Eastern Michigan University” (Block, 2008, Findings section, question 9), are fairly common.

Recent graduates of such programs may prove to be a group worth pursuing for library fund raising. As older, working adults, they often possess sufficient income upon graduation to enable them to donate. In addition, if they had a positive relationship with library support services and collections, they may be inclined to view donating to the library in a positive light. Unlike traditional students, those who graduate from distance learning programs may be financially and emotionally prepared to donate upon graduation rather than after a period of years which the younger graduate often needs to become financially ready to give back to the institution.

### **History of Library Fund Raising**

The scholarship pertaining to library development efforts is not large (Wedgeworth, 2000). This lack is surprising since much of the public and academic library systems originated from philanthropic efforts and fundraising activities are increasing. What literature exists tends to be quite narrow. Latour (2003) reported that the literature is, "becoming more common, but it continues to be characterized by narrowly defined descriptions of techniques used at specific libraries" (p. 18).

Despite the largely American origin of academic library development work, the first recorded instance of library philanthropy goes back to Roman history. Early giving can be traced to 39 B.C. In that year, Gaius Asinius Pollio built the first known public library in history by the Forum in Rome. The bequest was entirely funded by Pollio's defeat and plunder of the Parthini in Illyria (Bobinski, 1994). Examples of gifts to college libraries can be seen as early as 15<sup>th</sup> century England. Evidence shows that Oxford University had an active development program that aimed to solicit books for the library. Oxford University considered books “the most prized of earthly goods” (McMahon, 1949, p. 424).

Most library funding in the early days of the United States was private (Kemmis, 1998). An example of this is John Harvard's establishment of the Harvard College library in 1628 when he left his entire collection of 400 books dealing with theology, general literature, and classics to New College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The institution was then renamed Harvard College in his honor (Morison, 1932). As such, the name of perhaps the most prestigious university in the United States is a direct result of an act of academic library philanthropy.

Yale University is also named for a book donor based on the 1718 gift of 300 books by Elihu Yale (Bobinski, 1994). In addition, Thomas Jefferson sold a book donation which reseeded the Library of Congress after British troops destroyed it when they burned Washington, D.C. during the War of 1812 (Malone, 1932). Jefferson also made sure that the University of Virginia, which he helped to establish, had a proper library (Martin, 2002).

After the initial libraries at these early academic institutions were established, the majority of their collections grew as a result of direct or indirect gifts of books well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Shores, 1934). Shores noted, “Benefactions themselves were more frequently the result of ingenious devices and appeals on the part of the college or its agent, and occasionally resulted in funds for the purchase of books” (p. 102). Shores also noted, “Without the interest and aid of private benefactors the colonial college library would have been poor indeed” (p. 109). From these inauspicious beginnings, academic libraries continued to develop into their modern day formations. Development efforts for library support increasingly become more sophisticated over time.

Perhaps the most well known library philanthropist was Andrew Carnegie who gave massive sums of money to libraries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Carnegie's donations helped create thousands of public libraries which were the base of the modern American public library system. Carnegie gave money to build 2,509 libraries throughout the English speaking world including the British Isles,

Australia, and New Zealand. Of these libraries, 1,679 of them were built in the United States and in American possessions (Lorenzen, 1999). He spent over \$55 million on libraries alone and he is often referred to as the "Patron Saint of Libraries" (Bobinski, 1969, p. 39). Although most of the Carnegie libraries were public, many academic libraries were built as well (Jones, 1997). A total of 108 academic library buildings were constructed from Carnegie funding (Bobinski, 1978). Carnegie's giving helped to serve as an example as well to higher education on how to make use of a wealthy benefactor to find significant funding.

Harvard University again played an important role in academic library development history in the early 20th century. Harry Elkins Widener died at the age of 27 when the *Titanic* sunk in 1912. His mother gave \$2 million and her son's personal collection of 3500 rare books in his memory to Harvard University after a request by Harvard librarians. The Harvard University library was renamed the Widener Library in Harry Elkins Widener's honor (Lynch & Marschall, 1992). As the Widener Library is a major worldwide research library, this is a noteworthy story of successful academic library development work and donor philanthropy. Although this is not the first instance of a library successfully asking for a large donation, it is one of the first that received a great deal of publicity and attention thus it influenced other academic libraries to make similar attempts.

It was not only large academic libraries that participated in large scale fund raising work. Carleton College, a small private school in Minnesota, had an active library fund raising program as far back as the early 1950s. In 1952, a development campaign was held for the library after a donor offered \$1.3 million for a new library. As a condition of the gift, the college had to raise \$1.5 million more to build a new library within two years (Paustenbaugh, 1999).

Despite the long history of fund raising in academic libraries, Kemmis (1998) noted that funding for most publicly funded libraries shifted from private to public funding and the need for development work decreased. This shift in practice took place in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, reversing historic funding trends for libraries. Hood (1991) referred to the 1950s and 1960s as the "golden age of higher education" in the United States. Academic libraries in public universities and colleges were well funded by their parent institutions which were receiving generous public funding. There was little need for libraries to engage in development work. Fund raising was a minor part of the job for library directors if they engaged in it at all and development officers did not exist for the in libraries.

Powell (1967) conducted a survey of 22 academic libraries in 1956/1957. He found that cash gifts and other endowments represented 18.5% of the total library budget at private institutions but was only 2.5% of the library budget in public institutions. During this time of excellent funding for academic libraries, librarians focused their efforts on collection development by soliciting gifts of books and other materials from private collectors rather than seeking external funds (Magrill & East, 1978). The downturn in public funding mostly impacted public institutions that were tax payer supported. Private institutions receiving federal grants were also impacted but not nearly as much.

Only in the last three decades have economic changes forced libraries to rediscover the need to find private funding. As this change occurred, authors quickly noted the lack of a sound literature. Eaton (1971) complained that, "fund raising has been a relatively neglected aspect of university librarianship" (p. 351). Steele and Elder (2000) looking back at the sparse literature on the topic wrote, "the literature has been unfocused, undeveloped in its thinking, and approaches, and sometimes just plain wrong" (p. 9). Veaner (1990) noted, "The view of the library as a special preserve, protected from the rough-and-tumble of the business world, is fast disappearing" (p. 442). Administrators in academic libraries have become motivated to raise funds on their own from private benefactors as future funding for their libraries is not assured.

To a large extent, those who were writing about fund raising were responding to the establishment of many academic libraries of major development efforts in the 70s and 80s. In 1977, the University Libraries of the University of Pittsburgh received \$100,000 dollars from the 1977 Sugar Bowl. Also in 1977, Edmund and Louise Uraff Kahn gave both the University of Pennsylvania Libraries and the Smith College Library \$1 million dollars. In 1982, the Xerox Corporation gave \$3 million dollars worth of

Kurzweil Reading Machines to 200 academic libraries (Bobinski, 1994). These early efforts in development were unfocused and conducted by library directors versus a designated library development officer. Nonetheless, these forms of donations began to establish the foundation for current practices in development.

Lynden (1980) listed six development concepts that many academic libraries were beginning to use in the 1970s. These included appointing staff to seek external funds, including the library in the institutional capital campaigns, shifting from federal fund sources to local and alumni support, increasing public relations efforts, creating friends of the library newsletters, and creating fund raising literature. Martin (2002) reflected on this listing, "It should be observed that these techniques were being described as novel and unusual means of addressing budgetary problems only 21 years ago" (p. 3). The emergence of library development efforts provides areas that require more research to better understand how the initial stages of development outlined by Lynden have matured and to determine what strategies are most effective. However, Martin has also shown that this emergence has been hampered by the slow development of these fund raising techniques and their relative newness.

In the early 1990s, research discovered that libraries at doctoral-granting institutions were more likely than the libraries of smaller institutions to get money from federal or state grants, foundations, and donor gifts (Lynch, 1991). From 1987 to 1990, more than half of doctoral-granting institutions engaged in library fund raising while academic libraries from other Carnegie classifications were much less involved (Beaubien & Lynch, 1991).

The literature relating to academic library development began to increase significantly in the 1990s and it continued to grow some more into the 21st century (Martin, 2002). This recent increase in literature has helped to better understand fund raising for academic libraries, but it is still sparse in comparison to most other areas of library management. However, the focus of most of these publications centers on problems and strategies at specific institutions rather than focusing on library development theory (Steele & Elder, 2000). Significant and relevant articles included one that linked fund raising in academic libraries to the broader field of public relations (Wedgeworth, 2000) and a survey of academic libraries which identified factors that allow libraries to be successful or fail in fund raising (Hoffman, Smith, & DiBona, 2000).

### **Library Marketing and Library Fund Raising**

Raising funds for a library is often tied to marketing a library. Donors are unlikely to donate to a library if they are unaware of it or if they do not think highly of it. Despite a general knowledge and appreciation of libraries by many potential donors, libraries are not always a high priority for donor giving. Karp (2006) stated:

We all know that libraries are wonderful entities. Why is it, then, that librarians and libraries are often taken for granted? Why is it that academic libraries and academic librarians are sometimes relegated to less than central position at their institutions? Why does it sometimes seem that administrators don't recognize the critical importance of our services? (p. 101).

The same questions must be considered when contemplating library development work. How can donors be made aware that a library is a worthwhile beneficiary of a gift? How do donors perceive the academic library can impact decisions to give. How the library development officer frames the library for donors, therefore, influences donations. Marketing is one tool in creating this frame.

Marketing is not a new idea to libraries. The library literature has more than 100 examples of articles that can be recognized as dealing with library marketing which appeared before 1900. However, the terminology of the time was different (Carmichael, 1994). Briscoe (1921) argued that libraries should use such strategies as newsletters and movie tie-ins. Despite this early recognition of the power of marketing, however, much of the literature seems to have been forgotten in the halcyon days of public funding that occurred in the middle of the twentieth century. It was only in the 1970s and the decline in public funding that librarians rediscovered marketing (Geiger, 1993).

Librarians and information specialists were noted as beginning to use marketing techniques to encourage the growth of information systems in the 1970s (Weinstock, 1976). Marketing techniques were being advocated for in academic libraries in this time period as well (Bellardo & Waldhart, 1977). This was quickly followed by articles advocating marketing ideas for specialty areas of librarianship such as law, art, special, and school libraries (Koontz, Gupta, & Webber, 2006). The concept of marketing has figured prominently in the literature of library services in support of distance learning. Between 1999 and 2005, nineteen articles on the topic in peer-reviewed publications were identified (ACRL Distance Learning Section, 2008). Since distance learners rarely have the opportunity to utilize the library on campus, librarians in this area have made marketing a priority.

### **Donors**

The bigger and richer a library is, the more likely it is to be engaged in fund raising (Wedgeworth, 2000). Martin (2002) noted, "As in so many areas, success breeds success" (p. 5). It appears as though larger and more successful academic libraries have more access to a larger pool of donors and a greater ability to get these donors to contribute to the library (Cervone, 2005). More donors would be aware of and interested in the library system of Harvard University for example than those at a smaller and less well known library system at Central Michigan University. Regardless of size or prestige, the ability of an academic library to be successful in development is access to and cultivation of donors.

Academic libraries have a major issue in regards to locating potential donors given their lack of an apparent built-in constituency (Martin, 1998). This sentiment was expressed by Clark (1986) who wrote: Many institutional development professionals feel that the university library presents a real challenge in garnering support. They argue that the colleges have a different ready-made constituency in their graduates, whereas the library offers no degree and has difficulty building a loyal base of support. (p. 20).

One way that libraries can gain access to donors is to be part of larger campus-wide development efforts (Martin, 2000). The absence of alumni often results in the library getting access to lists of donors from central development offices on a campus of donors who have proven in the past to be unresponsive to fund raising appeals and does not help the library much (Ruggerio & Zimmerman, 2004). The central development office is often unwilling to give the library access to a potential donor who may donate to a specific college instead. Even though this option might not seem productive, it gives alumni an additional option for supporting their alma mater (Paustenbaugh & Trojahn, 2000). Downes (1984) argued that every major gift to an institution of higher education should have a portion given to the library as the library supports the entire campus. The obstacles that are placed in front of libraries in accessing donors can also be turned into opportunities for the library to work hand-in-hand with units on a campus to make for a more potent donor appeal (Welch, 1985).

Alumni are the most obvious potential donors to an academic library. Many donors recognize the library as part of their higher education experience and are happy to give to the library (Brittingham & Pezzullo, 1990). Sherratt (1975) noted that successful fund raising appeals to alumni were based on "sentiment for the college years, pride of university association, and a demonstrated need to support the university" (p. 144). Thus, building on feelings of good will toward the college may be a successful development strategy. Some alumni are more reluctant, however, to give to the library. Matson (1989) reflected:

Our problem is that most alumni praise us--but take us for granted. We were always there, always serving quietly and efficiently, but largely unregistered in students' minds...They think of themselves as alumni of their school, department, athletic team, sorority/fraternity, or dorm, but not the library. (p. 26)

For this reason, it is important to make students aware of the needs of the library while they are still in school. In this manner, they may be more likely to contribute to the library after they graduate even if it takes decades for this to occur (Ezzell, 1989; Sherratt, 1975).

Wells (2006) notes that libraries are beginning to realize that providing some services and materials to alumni might prove to be valuable to them and to the library in terms of relationship building. "Today's information-savvy graduates will miss the seamless access to quality resources, full-text articles and reports, and the research support and advice provided by their library alma maters" (p. 413). However, in a survey of 102 top academic libraries, Wells (2006) found that only 18% currently offered any type of service. This may change in the near future, however, as more vendors offer alumni licenses to their database and full-text journal products (Wells, 2006).

Several academic libraries have recently instituted alumni services or conducted feasibility studies of such services. Among them are Regis University in Denver (Turner, Sweany, Stockton, & Gaetz, 2009), the University of Ottawa (Horava, 2007), and Case Western University (Wells, 2006). In addition, the United Kingdom Open University Library, which serves only distance learners, recently conducted a pilot study to determine the efficacy of supplying full-text resources to MBA alumni (Smith, Street, & Wales, 2007). The results of these efforts have been mixed but they have all attracted some alumni who consider library resources and services valuable.

In general, donors to a library give because it makes them feel good, they believe the library is important, and because they believe a library is strong (Clark, 1991). An important factor in a donor's decision to give to a library is developing projects that will interest them (Welch, 1985). Cervone (2005) wrote, "A good development plan balances the wishes of a donor and the needs of a library" (p. 7). Donors to libraries are also likely to have never been married and/or to not have any children (Strand, 1990). Understanding the donor base is critical to developing an effective development plan.

Reaching out to potential donors can be done in several ways. Prospect research and public relations have been found to provide key elements of successful fund raising (Jordan, 1991; Sherratt, 1975). Three typical ways that institutions of higher education ask for donor support are face-to-face, telephone, and mail solicitation (Nichols, 1990). Historically, one third of philanthropy in the United States is attributed to direct mailing which makes it an important fund raising avenue for libraries (McGovern, 1990). However, in the 21st century, direct mail and telephone calls have lost their appeal and many libraries are no longer using them for fund raising although many still do (Cervone, 2005).

Once a donation is received, it is important to recognize the donor. How a library acknowledges a gift is as important as how it goes about first asking for the gift in the first place (Clark, 1991). There are many ways to acknowledge gifts from a simple thank you, either in print or in a Web publication, name plates on library building furniture, naming a collection after the donor, etc. Cervone (2005) wrote, "Ego is deeply involved in all giving. People giving to an organization usually expect some type of recognition" (p. 8). Thanking donors is a key to future success in fund raising and it is possible that this is something the academic library development officers would note as well.

### **Library Development on the Web**

The world in which libraries have operated has changed dramatically in the last several decades. For centuries, the basic operational structure of libraries remained unchanged. However, the advent of the World Wide Web and the shift of information resources to electronic format resulted in a revolution in the ways that libraries are operated and how patrons are taught about library resources.

The impact the Web is having on libraries is not fully understood. Given this, it is not a surprise that the impact of the Web on the library remains uncertain. It is apparent though that there has been some impact already. The relatively recent introduction of the Web has been some impact on library development work as well. This fund raising trend has been noted by library development officers and directors. By 2002, one third of the libraries in the American Research Association had information on their index pages on giving to the library. An additional 50% had information on giving to the library but this information was located within sub-pages on the site (Martin, 2002). This shift of some fund raising activities to the Web is in line with American charities as a whole who raised 20.3 million online in 2006 (Wallace, 2007).

Libraries have used a variety of methods to raise money on the Web. One approach is to use the Web to allow current and new Friends of the Library members to pay their dues (Corson-Finnerty & Blanchard, 1998). Not surprisingly, the design of the webpage makes a difference in the success of online donations for the library. One non-profit organization found that it could increase its online completion of the donation form from 12% to 70% by making the form more informative about gift options (Wallace, 2007). Another simple option is just to put a "Donate Now" button on a library web site. Gerding (2005) wrote, "Online donations offer a quick, easy way to donate that is attractive to a new generation of tech-savvy donors. With a donation button on your library Web site, visitors can donate to your library online" (p. 212).

### **Fund Raising among Alumni of Distance Learning Programs**

Clearly alumni have proven to be a good source for library fund raising. The traditional view however, may overlook those who have recently graduated from distance learning programs. As students who are generally older and perhaps more financially solvent, distance learning alumni may be prepared to donate to the library as soon as they graduate rather than years down the line after they established themselves financially. In addition, distance learning students work full time and may be more aware of the usefulness of library resources to their professional lives while students, and thus be more willing to contribute financially to the library in return for access to resources.

Indeed, in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a growing number of alumni at Central Michigan University (CMU) have been requesting access to library resources. Although these requests, which in 2009 averaged five to ten per month, come from all manner of alumni, the overwhelming number are from recent graduates of Off-Campus Programs. While students, those enrolled through CMU Off-Campus Programs are generally fulltime workers, with an average age in the late thirties, who use library resources extensively. Upon graduating, many express a willingness to pay for continued access to the library resources. In addition, an alumni resources web site maintained by the library unit that supports CMU Off-Campus Programs, received 7,365 hits from January 2007 to February 2009 (T. Peters, Personal Communication, March 31, 2009). Although it serves primarily as a gateway to university resources for alumni, it is reasonable to believe that many people visit this web site in the hope of finding access to library resources and services.

In the late 1980s, the CMU Libraries were successful in targeting alumni who were graduates of Off-Campus Programs with a phone-a-thon, according to the Dean of Libraries (T. Moore, Personal communication, December 4, 2009). It was spectacularly successful for many years and often raised in excess of \$80,000. There was little cost to the library. Every year Dean Moore would visit student employees who were assigned to make calls for the library for several days. He would give a pep talk, highlight services, and present the student employees with gifts. Calls to alumni of the Off-Campus Programs continued for many years until institutional changes brought this annual campaign slowly to an end. Other units on campus, including Off-Campus Programs, saw the distance learning alumni as their graduates and they resisted efforts by the library to claim them in fund raising efforts. The library continued to have access to the phone-a-thon but it has shifted from distance learning alumni to more traditional alumni by the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Moore (Personal communication, December 4, 2009) said that distinctive library programs for Off-Campus Program alumni are worthwhile and should be pursued if no one else is pursuing these potential donors.

In a request for information from other libraries conducting fund raising among distance learning alumni sent to the Offcamp list in October, 2009, the authors received only one response. However, it referred to fund raising among alumni of a distance learning library school program for the college rather than the library, so further investigation was not pursued. Thus, they conclude that there is little being done currently in academic libraries to target fund raising efforts to alumni of distance learning programs.

One possible approach that libraries may consider in developing graduates of distance learning programs as potential donors is to establish access to a set of library resources, such as databases popular among these alumni when they were students, through annual membership in a *Friends of the Library* organization. Since there is some evidence, at least from the Central Michigan University Libraries



experience, that alumni appear to be willing to pay for continued access to full-text resources after graduation, it might be beneficial for academic libraries with large populations of distance learning alumni to develop trial programs to test the efficacy. If a subscription program is successful, the fees could make it self-supporting, and at a minimum, provide a new service for alumni. In a best case situation, alumni who join a *Friends of the Library* organization may identify themselves as library supporters and thus be considered eligible for further library fund raising efforts.

### **Conclusion**

In the aftermath of the recession of 2008, higher education in general and academic libraries in particular, are dealing with cuts from public appropriations, tuition and donations. Locating new sources of revenue are increasingly important to maintain basic services and collections in libraries. Alumni of distance learning programs might be a good group to pursue as potential library donors. They are often older and so may be more financially secure than a younger recent graduate. In addition, they express satisfaction with library services that may indicate a relationship that could be developed further.

There are doubtless a number of ways that such alumni can be approached, and more work in this area is needed. The literature of the library field is not well developed in the area of academic library philanthropy. Much of the work in the area is recent but the alumni of distance learning programs have not been explored as potential donors. It would appear that more research needs to be done in this area. Further, it would make sense for academic libraries with these types of donors to begin active campaigns to connect with this potential donor group. Logistics and politics may make any attempt difficult but the potential increase in charitable revenue should make it worth attempting.

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