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From student to alumni: Sustaining support after graduation

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One of the challenges we face in the world of community college fundraising is developing philanthropic relationships with our students and sustaining those relationships as students transition to alumni. Although the most effective ways to achieve this goal will vary with your institution's student demographics, culture of philanthropy and the size of your development team, here are the seven best practices I recommend based on my 20 years of professional experience.

1. **Recruit students to serve on your foundation board.** Your foundation board members help raise funds for your college. Therefore, what better person to raise funds from your students than a student board member? I advocated for this position at a community college several years ago, and the decision paid off for us. At my current community college, we just proposed a student seat on the college foundation board. Once the foundation board approves, we will work with the Student Government Association to recruit a high-performer to serve in that position.
2. **Teach students how to cultivate fellow student as donors.** Most of us could use more fundraising talent, and students are some of the best fundraisers. They are walking billboards for our community colleges, and we can use them to cultivate, solicit and steward donors from among their peers. Whether they're work-study students, interns or even student board members of our foundations, we should invest in them like we invest in our employees, teaching them approach potential donors, inviting them to planning meetings and bringing them along on selected fundraising visits.
3. **Empower students to raise money from other students.** Once we identify superstar student fundraisers, let's empower them to be creative and courageous in raising funds from other students. Let's recognize that they may not follow traditional fundraising guidelines, philosophies and "rules," and that's OK. As long as they adhere to the core values of the college, the college foundation and our profession, let them go for it! For example: At a previous community college, the student who served on the foundation board developed a fundraising campaign in conjunction with the college president to encourage students to contribute to the foundation in honor of their favorite college employee. We then informed the employees of the honor. The campaign gained collegewide attention, raised funds and allowed us to honor hardworking employees. To us, that spelled success.
4. **Allow students to determine their fundraising priorities.** We recently conducted focus groups with students to determine their interest in philanthropy and fundraising. The results showed that students are willing to help us to raise money, and they are overwhelmingly interested in contributing to the community college foundation. Most intriguing was the fact they would like to have input into the types of projects their philanthropy supports — especially helping other students who face emergencies. Since our college already has emergency assistance funds for students, we will be working with the student member of our foundation board, once appointed, to raise even more money to support that initiative.
5. **Tell students about the impact of their philanthropy.** When we involve students in our fundraising, we need to remind them of their impact. If they helped us to raise \$50,000 for scholarships, let's tell them that, and let's use both traditional and social media to do so. If they contributed \$75,000 to renovate a wing of the student center, let's celebrate and showcase their gift at work. The wonderful feeling of helping others is contagious, and thousands of students can spread it more quickly than a team of employees.

6. **Engage student fundraisers and donors as alumni when they graduate.** We need to discuss the importance of our students paying it forward and giving back to their community college, both during their tenure with us and especially after they graduate. For example, during each graduation ceremony, my college president asks any graduating student who has ever received a scholarship from the college foundation to stand up. What a beautiful sight! Eventually, we want to add another question to the president's graduation script: "How many of our graduating students have contributed to our community college foundation?" And we should be communicating with our alumni, especially new ones, via email, e-newsletters and fundraising solicitations. For example, my team and I send monthly e-newsletters to alumni for whom we have email addresses, we involve them in college activities and events and we solicit them at least once a year. Of the four community colleges where I've served, my current alumni are the most generous and engaged.
7. **Modify student-centered best practices and use them with alumni.** Finally, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. Take the student-centered approaches you have used and modify them with your alumni. If they don't work, fine. At least you tried. But you have to try. At our college, we have an active Alumni Council of 10 to 12 alumni who lead our strategic planning, fundraising campaigns and alumni engagement initiatives. Currently, we are celebrating our 50th anniversary at the college, and the Alumni Council intends to take the lead in raising the funds to commemorate the milestone.

I believe that adding a student to our community college foundation board will be a game changer. In fact, I predict that the student will be a superstar who will help us to raise thousands of dollars from other students. I predict the movement will go viral and grow each year. I also predict the superstar will fall in love with our profession. And after he or she earns an associate degree and later a bachelor's degree, my team and I will be waiting with open arms to welcome this superstar back into the fundraising fold.

I would love to hear your thoughts and learn about your best practices.

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