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Recruiting and Retaining Top Fund-Raisers at University-Affiliated Foundations

By Jerry May

You often hear it said that “good fund-raisers are hard to find,” or that “good fund-raisers are hard to hold onto.” When my fellow Big Ten foundation presidents and development vice presidents gather for an annual professional meeting, the most repeated agenda item is the recruitment and retention of senior professional staff to manage the foundation and its top fund-raisers.

A recent survey by the executive search firm EMN/Witt/Kieffer showed that demand for talented fund-raisers is outpacing supply, mostly because many fund-raising executives are well compensated and content with their jobs—only one in five is looking for a new job.

The current glut of unfilled jobs in our profession is a reality that can deeply damage a fund-raising program—especially at institutions that are in the midst of a universitywide fund-raising campaign. That means university-affiliated foundation executives will have to try harder to attract candidates who are enjoying a seller’s market for their services.

How do public university and college foundation boards and senior management overcome these challenges at a time when, paradoxically, there may be more fund-raisers than ever at colleges, universities, and university foundations?

Put the problem in its historical context. It has materialized over the past quarter-century as the growth in fund-raising and foundation staff has flourished and as colleges and universities have demonstrated their ability to attract vast amounts of private money for buildings, endowments, and initiatives for programs and research. The current economic contraction has only made the competition among institutions fiercer.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

University-affiliated foundations have difficulty locating and retaining good fund-raisers. A recent survey found that demand for fund-raisers is greater than supply; only one in five is looking for a new job. This paper explains issues and lists strategies that can help affiliated foundations recruit and retain chief advancement officers and senior fund-raisers. Among the strategies are the following:

- 1. Opportunities for Growth and Learning. Provide fund-raising training seminars and presentations from outside experts.**
- 2. Opportunities for Advancement and Promotion. A reputation for moving staff up the promotion ladder is attractive to candidates.**
- 3. Strong Leadership from Above. Staff respond to regular communication, strong motivation, and genuine excitement.**
- 4. Environment of Recognition, Reward, and Appreciation. Say, “We value you” in communications, benefits, and deeds.**
- 5. Adequate Support Infrastructure. Provide reliable back-up staff, livable office space, travel allowances, and budgets for social functions.**
- 6. Extensive Access to Major-Gift Prospects. Assert confidence in the fund-raising staff by minimizing restrictions on contacting prospective donors.**
- 7. High-Quality Colleagues and Personal Affiliations. Offer mentoring as well as an atmosphere conducive to growth, laughter and fun.**

A university foundation that provides achievable aspirations, a spirit of vitality, and an environment focused on making a difference will enjoy a competitive edge in the quest to attract and retain talented professionals.

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