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Building an Honors Development Board

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“Like other colleges within the university, a fully developed honors college should be involved in alumni affairs and development and should have an external advisory board.”

—from the *Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College* (Sederberg, 2008)

INTRODUCTION

Development has a long history in American higher education. The first institutions of higher education founded in the United States were private and relied heavily on donations of money or land (Brittingham & Pezzullo, 1990). Public schools, which once enjoyed a period of relatively generous government funding, must also now vie for development dollars in an increasingly competitive market. The organized development efforts of both private and public colleges and universities have evolved and expanded over the years, giving rise to centralized development offices and trained, professional development officers. However, many academic leaders outside the development office, including honors directors and deans, find that they also have an emerging role in development (Mercer, 1997; Wolverton, Gmelch, Montez, & Nies, 2001; Zane, 2006; Zimpher, 1995).

Because most honors administrators tend to have a background in academics instead of development, this new role is strange and foreboding. Despite our lack of experience (or even discomfort or disdain), we have to recognize the potential value and importance of development to honors. While strong, permanent, institutional support in the form of an independent budget should provide the backbone of any honors program or college (Schuman, 2006), most honors administrators can easily think of many ways that additional outside funds can support the unique vision and mission of their programs. Development of private support, while intimidating to the uninitiated, can be an extremely powerful tool in cultivating friends, raising money, augmenting a program, and countering unwarranted charges of elitism or disproportionate support for honors. Given the financial challenges facing higher education today, the decision to engage in private fund raising and development is an imperative. Additionally, if we aspire to meet and/or exceed the NCHC's *Basic*

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Characteristics (Sederberg, 2008), then we as honors professionals should embrace this opportunity and be as engaged as possible with development.

Understandably, external relations, fundraising, and development often conjure up cringe-inducing images of corporate sponsorship, phone solicitation, glad handing, and raffles. However, many honors administrators across the country carry out development of private support without sacrificing academic principles or values. Unfortunately, published information about development approaches in the honors community is relatively difficult to find; we hope that this article will be one of many forthcoming on this topic (e.g. Andrews, 2009). This brief essay will present one development strategy currently employed at the authors' institution: the formation of an external advisory board dedicated to honors development (The Board of Visitors).

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE BOARD

Honors development at MTSU has historically depended upon the dean and associate dean working in concert with the university's office of development. Over the years, efforts have resulted in the establishment of a small endowment of approximately \$400,000 and in raising approximately \$5 million to build and equip the Paul W. Martin, Sr. Honors Building. Although past efforts have been successful, they have not been formalized in a systematic way. As a result, we have recently launched a new Board of Visitors (in close cooperation with our development office) and have given new emphasis to the stewardship of past gifts. Our hope is that the Board of Visitors will become the nexus for development efforts and will help the college build a network that nourishes vital connections among students, alumni, corporate patrons, and friends.

The Board of Visitors for the University Honors College was officially established on July 1, 2007. The board's mission is to: (1) assist the University Honors College in realizing and maintaining a distinctive niche within the domain of higher education, (2) provide consultation to the dean concerning the perceived needs of students in a changing world, (3) promote public awareness of the academic programs of the University Honors College, and (4) enhance academic quality through gifts and by assisting in identifying and securing funding sources. In the establishment of our board, we consulted with our development office (which we continue to do) and also explored the composition, operation, and bylaws of other similar college boards. In our case, models that were particularly helpful included the Board of Visitors for the MTSU College of Mass Communication and a similar group associated with Berry College in Rome, Georgia. An abridged copy of the MTSU University Honors College Board of Visitors Mission and Bylaws can be retrieved from: http://www.mtsu.edu/honors/BOV_Brochure.shtml.

BOARD MEMBERSHIP

The mission and bylaws provide for the appointment of board members by the dean to three-year terms, with the possibility for reappointment. The bylaws also call for the board to consist of no fewer than twelve members and no more than eighteen members, excluding any ex-officio members or distinguished (honorary) members. Initially, a list of potential board members was created in consultation with various stakeholders across the university community. This list was then pared based on potential members' records of philanthropy, university involvement, interest in the University Honors College, and ability to complement board diversity (based on age, geographical location, profession, ethnicity, and past connections to the institution).

During the 2006–2007 academic year, we communicated with individuals on our “short list” (usually over lunch) about the possibility of joining the new Board of Visitors. Potential board members were presented with a packet of materials about the honors college and provided with a brief overview of recent success stories. Finally, we shared the Mission and Bylaws of the Board of Visitors and emphasized how that group could help build upon the strengths of our college and provide support for our high-achieving students. We also directly stated that the board would be expected to identify and secure new sources of revenue and that individual members would be expected to provide personal donations of time and money. Eventually, eighteen out of twenty individuals agreed to participate on the board.

The board currently consists of sixteen regular members (including a chair selected by the dean and a vice chair elected by the board), two distinguished members (the founding director of the honors program and a Nobel Laureate in economics), and two ex-officio members (the Dean of the Honors College and the Vice President for Development). Of the regular members, six are graduates or former students of the University Honors College, and two are ethnic minorities. One member is a state legislator, one is a television news anchor, and one is a headmaster at a local private school. Others are licensed professionals (architecture, law, medicine), business owners, academics, or top-tier executives. Two members of the board serve on similar boards at other colleges or universities.

BOARD MEETINGS AND ACTIONS

Thus far, the Board of Visitors has met twice, in December 2007 and in October 2008. At the inaugural meeting, our focus was to introduce board members to the University Honors College, outline our past successes and future vision, and charge the members with assisting with our funding challenges. A highlight of the day-long meeting included a panel discussion by five junior and senior honors students who described their background, honors experience, and thesis research (informal feedback from board members overwhelmingly indicated that this was their favorite session). Other highlights included lunch with students, faculty, and the provost, a short presentation by

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the university's vice president for development, and a tour of a newly refurbished honors dormitory. At the end of the meeting, the dean's selection for chair of the board was announced and a vice chair was elected.

Our most recent board meeting was held over a two-day period. On the first day, we gathered for dinner with board members, honors students and faculty, and university administrators. A keynote address was provided by an honors faculty member, who outlined his latest book, and later several honors students provided anecdotes about their honors experience. The next morning, following breakfast and the introduction of the new Dean of the University Honors College, the board engaged in a discussion of the honors college's recruitment strategies with the university's director of admissions. Following this meeting, the board met for two hours to further discuss the issue of recruitment and marketing. Additionally, the board discussed a new endowment to fund student conference travel. To date, the board has raised nearly \$120,000.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As a result of our admittedly limited experience with the still-embryonic Board of Visitors, we have reached or reaffirmed a small set of conclusions:

SHARE YOUR STUDENTS' STORIES

Student experiences and dreams inspire board members and motivate them to act. Through these interactions, board members can develop an affinity with our honors college and become increasingly generous advocates and oracles, helping shape and support our future vision. Additionally, we recognize that student success, which is the core of our mission, can also be a critical marketing and development tool for an honors program or college if properly communicated to key consistencies.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO BUILD A BOLD DEVELOPMENT VISION

Don't be afraid to think boldly, and don't apologize for seeking new resources even when current resources seem to be adequate. Associate the need for new resources with new purposes and objectives, and think of current programs as foundational rather than a finished edifice. People like to give to successful organizations, not some struggling unit with a beggar's attitude. Success begets success. Don't be afraid to highlight past successes, but don't worship the past either. There will always be room at the bottom for organizations willing to limp along and live on past accomplishments.

Additionally, clearly communicate and/or create a shared vision for both your program and the board. Encourage the board to establish appropriate short-term objectives, and provide staff assistance to help the board reach its objective(s) and the overall vision. The time of capable leaders should not be wasted by unnecessary wandering and endless exploration. Most corporate executives, professionals, and other board members are accustomed to a task-oriented approach to problem solving and progress.

BE A GOOD STEWARD OF GIFTS

As your mother and/or Emily Post always told you, write timely and personal thank-you notes. However, don't just thank your supporters or provide photo-ops at the time a gift is given; instead, provide continuous feedback and update your donor on the impact that a past gift is having on students (Andrews, Carnicom, & Goodstein, 2007). Not only is good stewardship of gifts the right thing to do, but it is also self-serving. Gift-givers are often those who have given before, and when we ask for new commitments we go first to patrons of the past (Panas, 2006). Benjamin Franklin recognized this principle of fundraising for the American Philosophical Society when he stated, "Go first to those who may be counted upon to be favorable, who know the cause and believe in it" (Kelly, 1997, p. 362). Finally, consult and work with your institution's centralized development office at every step of this process to avoid the possibility of potential donors receiving multiple requests from different campus units.

BUILD COMMUNITY AND ENGAGE ALUMNI

The emphasis of this essay has been on the financial and fundraising role of an external advisory board. However, we should add that our notion of development is inclusive; it includes, for instance, resource development, student recruitment and services, faculty engagement, alumni involvement, and community building. We contend that successful, long-term financial development begins by providing the most positive, enriching experience possible to students. The academic and co-curricular merits of providing students with an educational experience that is academically and socially enriched is obvious to most in the honors community; indeed, many of us strive to build a cohesive community of scholarship in our programs, forming a unique identity among our students (e.g. Swafford, 2005). These foundational community-building efforts may also have the potential side effect of creating loyal alums and thus bolstering future development efforts. In other words, what we reap is what we sow; the community, affinity, and identity formed by successful honors programs nourish the seeds of generosity among future alumni. Additionally, by involving a significant number of young alumni as board members, we hope to build a foundation for future board leadership, affinity, and giving.

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