

CHAPTER NINE

Telling Your Story: Stewardship and the Honors College

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“mais il faut cultiver notre jardin.”
 (“but let us cultivate our garden.”)

Voltaire, *Candide* (221)

Telling the story of the honors college, letting the campus and the outside world know the value an honors experience can add to the undergraduate educational journey, is a fundamental role of honors leaders, especially in the wake of COVID, the competition of other options such as dual enrollment and AP credit, and financial pressures from changing demographics. Yet that project is complicated by the day-to-day middle management tasks that bombard such leaders: honors deans are budget managers, class schedulers, student advisors, hiring managers, teachers, and liaisons between upper administration and faculty, to name a few roles. Honors deans, however, also function very much like provosts

in that they are not beholden to any discipline or group of similar disciplines. This liminal positionality can sometimes place the dean of an honors college outside the inner circle of more traditional deans and administrators. But it often gives the honors college dean valuable access and insight into other disciplines that might otherwise be held at bay by disciplinary boundaries. As many of the chapters in this volume note, work in honors colleges presents both opportunities and challenges. This particular essay will explore that dynamic in terms of one of the primary roles of an honors college dean: stewarding the relationships with donors.

We must note at the outset that the role of a college dean is a public role in the way that, say, the chair of a department is not. Although a department chair mediates between the faculty and administration, the chair still maintains primary allegiance to fellow faculty members. Furthermore, the dean of any college and/or school, or any administrator for that matter, does not have the luxury of free speech like that of a faculty member when it comes to how one is perceived outside of the walls of academia. In our current milieu where anything one says can and will be held against them, one must be quite careful about one's public persona. The attention to perception is especially true when it comes to donors and their needs and desires.

Other than tangentially, my intention is not to go into detail about how a dean finds a donor and secures a major gift. Instead, I focus my attention on the continued cultivation of already established relationships and how those relationships can lead to possible new relationships. Most specifically, I am interested in the role that stewardship plays in maintaining healthy and fruitful relationships with donors, which in turn can impact the overall health of an honors college, and this includes the public persona of the dean. Moreover, the role fundraising plays in the life of the dean is now more important than ever and has become an increasingly essential part of the dean's portfolio of duties. Through careful and sustained stewardship, the honors college dean can also enroll donors to help with fundraising. Donors are often connected in ways that reach far beyond alumni networks.

There are several ways in which the dean can practice effective stewardship. At the outset, stewardship demands a long-term commitment from the dean, the university (and its president), the office of institutional giving, and the donors themselves. All players must be on the same page when it comes to the needs and desires of the honors college. A strong mission statement can be indispensable when it comes to helping the dean articulate the needs of an honors college, especially one that maps onto the overall mission statement of the university. In this sense, the honors college can be promoted as the player moving the entire institution forward in ways that may be less apparent for disciplinary-specific schools and colleges. In other words, if the honors college draws from every major, and it is a wise tactical move if all honors colleges embrace this expansive reach instead of defaulting to departmental honors, then an investment in honors is an investment in the university as a whole and should be promoted as such.

Although deans can be considered middle management, and most of their duties reflect this assumption, it helps if deans also possess an outgoing and animated personality, especially if they are to be successful when it comes to the cultivation and stewardship of the donation. The dean must exhibit a highly contagious level of passion for the honors college, the students, faculty, and staff, as well as the community in which the university is situated. Passion is something that cannot be taught, and even some of the savviest deans can display a rigid or distant persona. Passion for one's program and the ability to articulate that passion are what inform and guide the dean toward major gifts. In this sense, the honors college dean must act more like a politician representing constituents than a professor with administrative duties.

The second aspect to which a dean must attend is that in a short time, incoming students will become alumni. This is not to say we should think of students as customers and treat them as such. Instead, we must ensure that the honors experience is one that adds value to the undergraduate experience in meaningful and transformative ways that subsequently create strong affinity with the honors college. Moreover, the dean must be the one to take

the lead in cultivating the relationships among students, faculty, staff, and the university writ large. Deans are also storytellers-in-chief in that they must take the lead in informing students, their parents, and the public on how honors experiences enhance and enrich the undergraduate experience. In addition, the honors college dean must also be persuasive about how the honors college adds value to the entire university. In *How to Be a Dean*, George Justice makes the following claim: “You [the honors college dean] need to demonstrate added value to students. And you also need to demonstrate added revenue to the university, through the number and quality of students who attend specifically to take advantage of what the college has to offer” (8). Justice’s point is worth pausing over. Not only do honors colleges add value to the university through the recruitment of especially bright and self-motivated students, but the honors college can also attract donors through the college’s recruitment of high-level students and the honors curricular philosophy. Although gifts may be directly deposited in honors college accounts, the overall funds also add to the picture of the health of the university when it comes to fundraising and donorship. Here I am not just speaking about major six or seven figure gifts, but the acquisition of smaller funds that support opportunities like scholarships. The acquisition of smaller gifts can contribute to the overall story of the college or university in meaningful ways, but these smaller gifts must be promoted within and beyond the college or university.

Fundraising campaigns are also effective in helping an honors college link itself to the overall mission of the university. Fundraising campaigns can be either university-wide or honors-based. In either case, including already established donors in this endeavor and asking for their help in raising additional funding may be wise. The relationship between the honors dean and the development office and its officers is key here, especially with the staff member who is assigned as a liaison to the honors college. Another wise move is to bring in members of the data analysis team to help articulate the honors story. Hard data are useful only when one knows what to do with the information. Data can highlight and support

the major and minor milestones and accomplishments of an honors college, or data can show strategically where key deficiencies in the honors college exist, thus demonstrating need that is not fulfilled through budgets and standard operations. In fact, showing the deficiency or deficiencies is a way of ushering in the donor, new or one already secured, to the continuing needs of the honors college.

Stewardship is the cultivation of a relationship among many different aspects of the honors college and its donors. That cultivation is an ongoing process that must be attended to even after the departure of the dean who was a part of the initial gift. According to Angelique S. C. Grant and Mimi Wolverton, “Stewardship can be thought of as a philosophy and a means by which an institution exercises ethical accountability in the use of its resources” (47). Grant and Wolverton’s assertion underscores the ethical responsibility of the institution, the dean, and the honors college to care for the funds that have been bestowed upon the honors college. Part of the honors dean’s responsibility is to show how that major gift is being ethically utilized. As I suggested earlier, perhaps the best way to approach this obligation is to show how the gift is indissolubly related to the mission of the honors college and how that mission is executed through in-class and out-of-class activities. The donor is, for all intents and purposes, investing money in the mission of the honors college and in the character of the dean. But more than that, donors are also investing their reputation and name in the honors college. One need not secure a naming gift for this logic to apply. In fact, every major gift, from naming gifts to smaller scholarships, should be portrayed by the honors dean as an *investment* by that donor. Therefore, the honors dean must be clear about the mission statement, about the trajectory of the honors college—past, present, and future—and about how the honors college fits into the mechanism of the university as a whole. Beyond that, the honors college dean must also be aware of the expectations of the donors. This is where regular communication becomes key.

In addition, the definitions of stewardship may differ between the institution and the donor, for not all donors require the same attention and reporting. One must approach all donors differently,

adhering to their particular idiosyncrasies. Some donors are content with merely bestowing the gift, while others like to be more involved in the honors college. Some prefer to give anonymously while others appreciate being recognized for their gift. The situation becomes difficult because juggling more than one donor becomes a feat (a very good problem to have). Moreover, not all donors have a full or even limited understanding of higher education and its many foibles. For example, the recent case of a high-profile donor who funded and designed a residence hall on the University of California at Santa Barbara's campus has caused significant controversy. According to Katherine Mangan's article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "The 11-story building is based on a design created by Charlie Munger, the longtime business partner of Warren Buffett and a vice-chairman at Berkshire Hathaway. Munger donated \$200 million toward the project on the condition that it be built according to his plans" (Mangan). Those plans called for the bedrooms to be windowless and for only two entrances serving 4,500 residents, ultimately causing the consulting architect to resign. The controversy surrounding this very public story may be an example of extreme behavior, but the story still resonates as a cautionary tale on how we develop our relationships with donors.

Although many donors have an appreciation for the value of higher education, many come from other industries that often function by a very different logic. In *The Essential Academic Dean or Provost*, Jeffrey L. Buller writes: "Donors, like everyone else, want to feel they're in charge of situations where they're making a substantial contribution" (327). Buller's take is important because it persuasively suggests that it is not enough for honors deans to explain and sell their vision: they must also link that vision to the personality and goals of the donor and continue to evolve with the donor over time. I am not suggesting that honors deans cave to the whims and wishes of donors, but if deans are to cultivate a strong, long-lasting relationship with a donor, then they must be willing to listen and, at times, incorporate the donor's ideas into their own thinking about projects. In this sense, strong stewardship with donors operates as a partnership. From my own experience at

Salisbury University, our donors Robert and Glenda Clarke were clear from the outset that they were interested in investing in people and not buildings. When my honors college was endowed by the Clarkes and became the Glenda Chatham and Robert G. Clarke Honors College, we agreed that the Clarkes would take an active role in the educational lives of our students, not through curriculum, but through events hosted at their home, as well as other networking opportunities. Moreover, the story of the Clarkes is one that began at Salisbury University (Salisbury State then), where they met as undergraduate students. We take every opportunity to tell that anecdote whenever we recruit new students, look for other potential donors, or engage with alumni and the community. The story of the Clarkes has become a central part of the narrative of the Clarke Honors College far beyond the naming gift, one that adds emotional depth to the honors college and the rearticulation of our history.

The development office also plays a fundamental role in stewarding the gift even after it is secured. Just as securing a major gift is a team effort, so is its ongoing stewardship. It is not advisable that the dean alone take on these additional responsibilities. In fact, keeping the development office or the major gift officer assigned to the honors college apprised of the communication and outreach practiced with the donor is wise. This is not to say that all communication should be relayed to the major gift officer; however, good practice dictates keeping the lines of communication open among the players involved, including the provost. This practice not only will ensure the provost is up to date but will demonstrate the goodwill that goes with stewardship, reinforcing a team-based culture. Equally important is consistently demonstrating how the donor is part of the mission and vision of the honors college.

Larry R. Andrews's insightful 2009 NCHC monograph, *Fundraising for Honor*, provides a useful starting point if one wants a comprehensive overview. Although much about fundraising and stewardship has changed since 2009, the monograph still serves as a standard for honors administrators looking to expand their knowledge on this subject. "Good stewardship," writes Andrews,

“is usually expressed through effective communications, through formal and informal events, and through donor recognition” (27). Working with donors and showing appreciation on a regular basis is one of the most important aspects of good stewardship. As Andrews states, this good practice can be executed on many levels. For example, during the naming ceremony of my own honors college, we were forced to curtail the number of participants because of COVID. As a result, we did not generate the attention a naming ceremony warrants. A year later we planned a “Meet the Clarkes” event for our honors students and university faculty and staff. In many ways, however, we garnered more mileage out of the naming ceremony by holding smaller, more intimate events. The points of contact between the honors college and the donors increased, which also opened up the possibilities of using the donor as a networking line to other donors. As Andrews observes, “Active and ongoing contact with major donors is a basic principle of Stewardship 101” (34).

I would like to highlight the concept of stewardship as a relationship. One is a steward for the long haul, and just as one must work on relationships, one has to work on the care and cultivation regarding stewardship. “Good stewardship is common courtesy,” according to Andrews, “but it also pays off in the long run in directors’ increased comfort level with fundraising and in donor confidence expressed through additional contributions” (35).

Earlier in this chapter I mentioned the ethical responsibilities of the dean when it comes to stewardship and the relationships one forms with donors, along with the ethical responsibilities of the honors college and the university. In addition to embodying high-impact practices, honors colleges also promote a greater sense of community, both within the walls of the university and the surrounding community. Whether a college or university is public or private, it has a responsibility to the greater good. This responsibility often gets lost in the neoliberal capitalist frame of utility and the job market. In other words, we must look beyond the job market and take back the narrative of education from an entirely utilitarian storyline. Donors can be especially helpful pushing back against instrumentalism. I want to be clear: I am not suggesting

that training our students for the job market is not important; it is. And yet, there is something inherently distasteful about the role of higher education functioning only as a training program for specific skills. If anything, honors education is or should be about thinking itself, and so honors is positioned to fill that gap left by higher education as it continues to buckle and give way under the whims of legislators and the market. One way to demonstrate this opportunity is to map the mission of the honors college, its curricular and co-curricular activities, and its ties to the community and the greater good.

STRATEGIES

Many strategies for good stewardship exist when it comes to donor relations. The following list is not meant to be exhaustive but rather provide a sketch of some of the strategies deans can utilize to ensure good practices. First and foremost, the lines of communication among all the players must be kept open and exercised regularly. This obligation does not mean that the dean should send donors updates every time a student receives a national fellowship, for example. Instead, consistent, periodic updates may be most effective. The dean need not be the only conduit for communicating the happenings of the honors college to donors; student outreach, for example, can provide an effective engagement tool.

A year-end report can powerfully showcase what the honors college did during the academic year. Year-end reports need not be so comprehensive that they include all data points, but they should be comprehensive enough that readers get a good picture of the year the honors college had. Year-end reports can highlight national fellowships and other student accomplishments, research projects and presentations, community engagement activities, special classes that were offered, as well as guest speakers who might have appeared. The report should also feature honors and honors-affiliated faculty. In addition, the report may want to include a section on alumni and their recent activities.

If the honors college publishes a newsletter, that should also be sent to donors. Newsletters typically offer up-to-date information,

usually from the perspective of the students, who will talk about honors in a voice different from that of faculty and staff. Including a short note or one written by a student with the newsletter mailing is a thoughtful gesture. Taking the time to handwrite notes demonstrates an intimacy that year-end reports lack, and many donors appreciate the gesture. Mailing holiday or seasonal cards is an easy and non-intrusive way to maintain contact. If the relationship is more intimate or personal, sending a birthday card is a lovely tradition.

For the most part, donors want to be problem solvers. One best practice is to ask donors for advice. If the honors college is always asking for money, then the donor is apt to suffer from donor fatigue and may lose interest in the college. By incorporating donors into the planning phases of an initiative or asking their assistance with addressing a problem, deans may find that donors are more willing to give beyond already bestowed gifts and help in other meaningful ways. Discussing possible strategies with donors ensures they are being heard and are part of the evolution of the college. Involving faculty members in these collaborative enterprises is also a good idea. Moreover, the more players donors meet, the better understanding they may have about the college, its mission, and its needs. Broadening the relationship also ensures the donor is connected with the institution and not just the dean, an important sustainability strategy given that administrators move on to other positions while the institution remains. By sharing the expertise of faculty members and their talent as mentors with donors, the dean can promote faculty engagement with the honors college on a different level, which has the added benefit of enriching the connections to honors for both constituencies.

Advisory boards offer another way for donors to deepen their connection with the honors college, and they can take many different forms. While advisory boards can be made up of internal members, where the charge may be more curricular in nature, outside advisory boards can be charged with looking at the honors college in a different or broader context. The dynamics and activities of advisory boards can be complex; moreover, advisory boards

may not be appropriate for every honors college. If an honors college does have an advisory board made up of outside members that includes donors, the intricacies of stewarding the honors operations, its funding, and its many contributions to the institution is likely to be an important component of that group's agenda. Deans need to recognize that orchestrating an advisory board properly requires an enormous amount of work and thought.

Finally, accessing resources outside of the university through organizations such as ACAD <<http://www.ACAD.org>> and CASE <<http://www.CASE.org>> can be invaluable for honors deans, both new and more seasoned. CASE frequently hosts seminars on fundraising and stewardship, and attending those sessions is worthwhile. CASE also publishes pamphlets that are useful in helping honors deans familiarize themselves with the culture of donor relations. ACAD has an active listserv populated by deans and provosts while also offering an annual meeting that provides hands-on workshops and networking opportunities with other academic leaders who face similar challenges and opportunities.

The secret to good stewardship is building relationships and partnerships. The benefits to building those relationships can bring more than just monetary gifts. I believe that once a major gift is secured, part of the task of stewardship is to utilize and build upon that gift. Success follows success. Ultimately, donors should be utilized to help the honors college tell its story. They should be thought of as partners in the overall tending of the garden, as Voltaire's *Candide* suggests. By involving donors in the story of our honors colleges, we are expanding our networks and reputations in potentially immeasurable ways.

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