April 2007

The Year in Higher Education: External Relations

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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58188/1941-8043.1109
Available at: https://thekeep.eiu.edu/jcba/vol0/iss2/30

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Two words nicely sum up this new challenge in public higher education: **friend-raising and fund-raising.**

**What’s new?** As the percentage of revenues from public sources continues to decline, public higher education institutions are entering a period of very aggressive competition – in the arenas of institutional advancement and development – with private colleges and universities.

This is something new for public sector institutions, and represents a paradigm shift.

**What’s new about what’s new?** The extent to which the entire institution must be engaged in this effort is unprecedented. Faculty and staff are expected to give dollars and time for this purpose.

There is constant pressure to raise funds for their institutions – whether in the form of direct government support for public colleges, increased student aid so that access to higher education can be expanded, or robust institutional advancement and development efforts.

The success of higher education institutions is reliant on relationship-building skills in every arena.

The very foundation of these external relationships is communication – communication with alumni, emeriti, benefactors (public and private), the community as a whole, and the neighborhood organizations that expect higher education institutions to be responsive to their concerns about student behavior in off-campus housing, parking and traffic concerns, support of neighborhood businesses, and other issues.

Colleges and universities are expected to be adept at marketing, media relations, and public affairs.

Both internal and external customers have these expectations of public higher education institutions. The demand for transparency and accountability from external customers has never been as vocal.

In the area of governance, external stakeholders expect their efforts to spill over into the academy.

In February, the chancellor of the State University of New York (SUNY) embarked on a 10-campus listening tour across New York State, joined by the co-chairs of Empire State Development Corporation.
The purpose: to hear what the business community had to say about its relationship with the local state universities and colleges.

The message SUNY wanted to convey is that SUNY institutions will be responsive to their needs and more business friendly.

The chancellor’s efforts to improve the image of SUNY schools run parallel to the individual efforts of each school.

A college or university’s image as an institution is vitally important to friend-raising and fund-raising efforts.

Public higher education institutions cannot appear to be disengaged from their communities, or indifferent to the concerns of community stakeholders including businesses.

This expectation to be responsive calls for both administrators and faculty members to attend community meetings and develop ongoing relationships with neighborhood groups and local businesses.

As an illustration of this new expectation, Buffalo State College opened the Office of College and Community Partnerships last year to facilitate the community’s ability to communicate with and access college resources and expertise for their needs.

This investment in community relations enhances the image of an institution, as well as its cultivation efforts and student recruitment. It is a win-win for both the community and for the college.

Alumni offer a great resource in terms of community relations. By integrating alumni activities with current student activities, by welcoming graduates to the alumni fold at commencement, and by staying in contact with alumni, a college or university strengthens both its friend-raising and fund-raising efforts.

Leaders should be cultivated among alumni. Alumni are very important to development efforts.

Media savvy is no longer the sole domain of the President’s Office or the office of college/public relations.

At Buffalo State College, faculty members are offered training in dealing with the media, and this invitation is extended to members of the Foundation Board and College Council.

Anyone in the position of representing the college in front of the media needs to become acquainted with the “do’s and don’ts” of media and public relations.

Following is an example of what’s new?
New York State is now requiring all policymaking entities, including state agencies, SUNY, and all state colleges and universities, to be more open and transparent to the public.

What’s new about what’s new? This broad brush stroke policy results in SUNY colleges and universities having to broadcast live, as well as webcast, their board and council meetings.

The technological challenges around doing so are the least of the concerns of colleges and universities.

How well council members, many of them private sector business men and women, will adjust to the media spotlight is a greater concern.

Again, this change brings challenge. But, it also brings an opportunity for institutions of higher education to improve the manner in which they conduct college business, and in turn their external relations will be enhanced.

All external relations activities at Buffalo State College have one purpose – building an external base of support so that the college’s mission, vision, and goal to prepare graduates for productive and successful careers in a global society can be met.

Successful colleges and universities will become a more integrated part of the community. Effective external relations are essential to success.