

## **Involvement of Academic Department Heads and Chairs in Fundraising at U.S. Public Research Universities**

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*The purpose of the study was to examine the involvement of department heads and chairs in fundraising activities. We surveyed 440 department heads and chairs who served in Engineering, Business, and Arts and Sciences colleges at 13 public research universities in the Southeastern region of the United States. Based on the data from 114 department heads and chairs who responded to the survey, it appears that they are rarely engaged in direct fundraising activities on a continuing basis, but they seem to show interest and perceive that fundraising should be the expectation of their position.*

Higher education today is in a world of uncertainties. The cost of education has risen dramatically as states have made sizeable cuts in education appropriations and state spending. Since the great recession in 2008, state spending on higher education remains well below historic levels. According to the *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, “overall state funding for public two- and four- year colleges in the 2017 school year (that is, the school year ending in 2017) was nearly \$9 billion below its 2008 level, after adjusting for inflation” (Mitchell, Leachman, & Masterson, 2017, p. 1). Naturally, this has caused institutions of higher education to raise tuition, lay off personnel, including faculty at some places, and implement cost controls that have threatened quality. Even though some states have improved their fiscal outlook from 2008, very few states have made up the losses to higher education experienced by the downturn in the economy. Many institutions are operating well below their budgets of 15 years ago and the prospects for improvement look quite dismal. Many major public research universities - highly prestigious ones - receive less than 10% of their total revenue from the state tax dollars (Mortenson, 2012).

Fundraising, development, advancement, and capital campaigns are extremely important to the operation of today’s universities. The people in the United States have always been generous contributors to many causes. In 1991, approximately \$124 billion was given away in the United States. That figure surpassed \$390 billion in 2017, and experts believe it will continue to increase dramatically as the country witnesses a major intergenerational transfer of wealth over the next 10 to 30 years (Giving USA, 2017).

These philanthropic gifts and grants have the capacity to transform institutions - be they colleges or universities, health agencies, hospitals, social service organizations, the arts, humanities programs, environmental agencies, or schools.

Most colleges and universities in the U.S., both public and private, have a fundraising or development administrative function. For some time it has been recognized that private funding can make an enormous difference in the life of an institution of higher education and many institutions have built large fundraising staffs to ferret out philanthropic support. A substantial endowment, earmarked for critical academic needs, can make the difference between a good university and a great one. State legislatures can no longer provide the support necessary to sustain institutions and if it were not for private gift support, scholarships for students, endowed chairs for faculty, and even bricks and mortar needs would go wanting. While presidents and chancellors, as well as college deans, spend considerable time in fundraising, this study was designed to determine the extent of involvement of academic department heads and chairs in the fundraising process at public research universities.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

Few articles or studies exist that deal with academic department heads' involvement in fundraising. Morse (2013) undertook a study that explored the fundraising roles of three tenured academic department heads in a college of education at a large, public, research institution. His study concluded that department heads believed they lacked important skills to be effective and did not have the time to commit to fundraising activities.

Dove (2001) in his book on conducting a successful fundraising program notes that development should involve the whole organization, not just development personnel, and that the entire organization must be involved in analyzing the mission, programs and objectives to be able to establish fundraising goals and objectives. Therefore, it is axiomatic that frontline academic personnel, such as department heads/chairs, should also be engaged in fundraising. Some parenthetical evidence does exist that donors to academic institutions do enjoy communicating with academic personnel, deans and even department heads, about academic fundraising priorities. Stories of academicians being able to close a gift for their academic department are legendary among development professionals (Dove, 2001). Weidner (2008) states that faculty can play an important role in fundraising. Alumni often give back to the institution because they remember a particular faculty member who had an impact on their education and who supported and motivated them (Weidner, 2008). Their emotional connection with the institution often centers on an academic unit or a faculty member. For that reason, faculty leaders who serve as department heads or chairs can help deans make the case for support, craft the message to donors, and advance college's fundraising goals (Hodson, 2010).

Fundraising professionals will also proclaim that most major gifts (those above \$25,000) are generally designated to specific programs or projects. Unrestricted and undesignated giving occurs principally through annual fund efforts and from gifts below \$25,000 or even \$10,000. Donors are most interested in giving to a program where they have abiding interest and commitment and this tends to be an academic unit and even department where they may have matriculated (Dove, 2001). If that is where their interest lies, then it is only practical that department heads and chairs also be engaged in philanthropy.

Yet, few institutions seem to make fundraising among department heads a major priority. Not so among college deans as increasingly more relevant in hiring an academic dean is their ability and/or interest in fundraising (Hodson, 2010). Much literature exists regarding deans and fundraising and numerous seminars are held around the country touting the need for deans to be highly engaged in development activities. A few of these professional training workshops have now begun to include department heads/chairs (Masterson, 2017).

Much has been written about the motivations of persons, corporations, and foundations to become benefactors to an organization - self-interest and aggrandizement, altruism, memorializing a loved one, recognition, empathy, the list goes on. But the adage that people do in fact give to people is still seen as a compelling reason for many major gifts to philanthropic endeavors. As a relationship business, fund

raisers can make the difference in galvanizing a donor and closing a gift. A fund raiser's role in stimulating giving often makes a huge difference in landing a gift (Sargeant & Shang, 2010). Donors that may want their major giving earmarked to an academic program might find the prospect of interfacing with a faculty member or department head, in the academic area of their interest, a welcome plus in the cultivation process. Indeed development professionals should provide leadership in encouraging academic personnel to engage in fundraising activities as partners in the cultivation and solicitation of gifts (Tempel, Seiler, & Aldrich, 2011).

The purpose of this study was to examine the involvement of department heads and chairs in fundraising activities at public research universities in the southeastern region of the United States. The primary questions that guided this investigation focused on their level of involvement in fundraising, interest and perceived expectations for this involvement, and preparation/training. In this study, fundraising referred to the practice of attracting private funds and philanthropic support from constituents for the department chair's institution. It did not include generating external funding from state or federal agencies or funding sources to support specific research projects, service grants, and contracts.

## **METHODS**

Descriptive survey research design was used to address the purpose of the study. We designed a 26-item survey to gauge the department heads/chairs' engagement in fundraising activities during the 2016-2017 academic year, including time spent on fundraising, experiences with developing fundraising plans and engaging in solicitation activities, perceived expectations for fundraising, level of interest, interface with college and campus development offices, and participation in training and fundraising workshops. The survey also included one open-ended question to allow participants to provide additional feedback and five demographic questions that asked participants to report their gender, race/ethnicity, academic rank, years in the position, and college affiliation.

As the first step in sample selection, we identified 440 individuals serving as department heads or chairs in Arts and Sciences, Engineering, and Business colleges at 13 public research universities in the Southeastern Conference (SEC). All public SEC universities were included in this study (i.e., University of Florida, University of Georgia, University of Kentucky, University of Missouri, University of South Carolina, University of Tennessee, University of Alabama, University of Arkansas, Auburn University, Louisiana State University, University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, and Texas A&M University). We collected the contact information of each department head and chair by visiting the respective academic college and departmental websites. Once a list of contact information of potential participants was generated, we invited them via e-mail to participate in the study. The invitation e-mail included a cover letter containing an informed consent and a link to web-based survey.

The invitation e-mail with the cover letter and the link to the survey was successfully delivered to 433 department heads and chairs in our sample. The survey was sent three times at weekly intervals between August 30 and September 26, 2017. Out of 433 individuals who received the invitation e-mail, 118 responded to the online survey, with a 34% response rate, which is regarded as an average online response rate (Nulty, 2008). We excluded four participants from the final sample due to incomplete surveys, which left the final sample at 114 participants.

Of the 114 department heads and chairs in this study, 74.5% identified themselves as male and 25.5% as female. Majority of the participants (82.7%) were white. Most of the department heads and chairs in our study were at the rank of full professor (91%). Among the respondents, 21.3% had served as department heads or chairs for 8 years or more with another 22.1% serving in their first two years. Of the 114 department heads/chairs, 59.3% were from Arts and Sciences, 19.5% were from Business, 18.6% were in Engineering, and 2.6% in other colleges.

## RESULTS

Development or fundraising was not an activity that department heads and chairs in our study often engaged. Overall, majority of the participants (65.5%) spent less than 10% of their time on fundraising activities during the 2016-2017 academic year. Out of 114 respondents, only 36 (31.6%) indicated that they often or very often participated in development or fundraising activities. Forty-four department heads/chairs (38.6%) reported that they engaged in these activities sometimes, but another 34 (29.8%) participants indicated that they either never or rarely engaged in these activities. As illustrated in Table 1, communicating with alumni from the department was the activity that the department heads/chairs most frequently engaged in ( $M = 3.58$ ;  $SD = 1.01$ ), followed by working with the development office personnel in their respective colleges ( $M = 3.44$ ;  $SD = 1.07$ ). Even though the department heads/chairs were more engaged in the development and alumni events in their college than at the university level, overall their participation levels were low. For example, the percentage of respondents who indicated that they never or rarely participated in fundraising events in the college or on campus equaled 40.4% and 57%, respectively. The numbers were even higher for those respondents who never or rarely engaged in alumni events in the college and on campus (46% and 67.5%, respectively).

**TABLE 1**  
**DEPARTMENT HEADS/CHAIRS' INVOLVEMENT IN FUNDRAISING AND DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES**

During the 2016-2017 academic year, how often did you do any the following in your role as the chair or head of the academic department	M (SD) (Range 1 – 5)
Engage in development or fundraising activities	3.02 (1.02)
Work with the personnel from the development office in your college	3.44 (1.07)
Work with the personnel from the central development office at your institution	2.10 (1.06)
Participate in development or fundraising events in your college	2.82 (1.11)
Participate in development or fundraising events on campus	2.36 (1.15)
Communicate with alumni from your department	3.58 (1.01)
Meet with alumni from your department	3.13 (1.06)
Participate in alumni events in your department	2.79 (1.29)
Participate in alumni events in your college	2.61 (1.11)
Participate in alumni events in your university	2.04 (0.95)

*Note.* 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*

Majority of the respondents reported that they at least once engaged in solicitation activities (62.3%) or developed a list of fundraising needs for their departments (85.5%). Eighteen respondents (24%) were able to solicit gifts over a \$1,000,000 and an additional 24 (32%) department heads/chairs were able to

secure gifts in the amount of \$100,000 to \$999,999. For 14 (18.7%) survey respondents, the largest gift they solicited was less than \$10,000.

Even though 63.7% agreed or strongly agreed that fundraising should be part of their department chair/head duties and responsibilities and 68.1% noted that their deans had at least some expectation that they be involved in fundraising, 80.2% of them reported that their annual evaluation as the department head or chair did not consider their effectiveness in fundraising. Sixty-three percent of study participants expressed interest in fundraising activities; however, majority of them had never attended an on campus (58.8%) or an off campus (82.3%) seminar or workshop on fundraising. It should also be noted that majority of them (66.4%) reported that their college or university did not even offer any fundraising training programs.

**TABLE 2**  
**DEPARTMENT HEADS/CHAIRS' PERCEPTIONS REGARDING INTEREST IN AND EXPECTATIONS FOR FUNDRAISING**

	M (SD) Range (1 – 5)
<sup>a</sup> To what extent are you interested in engaging in fundraising activities?	3.62 (1.14)
<sup>b</sup> To what extent do you agree that fundraising should be part of your department head/chair duties and responsibilities?	3.58 (1.11)
<sup>c</sup> To what extent does your dean expect you to be involved in fundraising activities as department head/chair?	3.63 (1.18)

*Note.* 5-point Likert scale ranging from a. 1 = *definitely no* to 5 = *definitely yes*; b. 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*; c. 1 = *no expectation* to 5 = *high expectation*.

The survey also included a single open-ended question for participants to provide any additional information they wanted to share. A total of 28 participants provided their feedback. Several participants discussed the lack of time as one of the main obstacles to their involvement in fundraising activities. One department head/chair noted: “I feel like we don’t really have a choice – I do believe alumni give to departments, and not the university as much. Thus, having departments involved in fundraising makes sense. The question is which part of our job do we NOT do in order to make space for adding this task?” Department heads/chairs believed in the importance of fundraising but their time was already very full. Having limited resources was also highlighted as the barrier in addition to time. As one department head/chair put it, “Given all the other expectations in running a large department, the problem in engaging in fundraising is prioritizing available resources. Fundraising isn’t going to pay the bill in the way the main mission of the department does, so it is a luxury item. We can’t afford to engage in it.”

Participants also commented that most of the fundraising or the solicitation is done at the college level, but some department heads/chairs did reference their accomplishments (e.g., creation of an Alumni Board, preparation of the development letter for alumni once a year, annual meetings with the college development team, etc.). A few also shared their frustrations with adding fundraising expectations to department heads/chairs’ other obligations. One noted that “expecting [them] to be good fundraisers just because [they] are now administrators [was] laughable.”

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The following are conclusions the authors have gleaned from the data, as well as points of discussion for further study and analysis. The study suggests that the department heads and chairs spend little time on fundraising activities. When they are involved in these types of activities, it generally concerns

communication with department alumni and not necessarily fundraising activities. The involvement that does take place mostly happens at the college level, but not university-wide.

While participation in fundraising activities is low among department heads and chairs, the survey did indicate that some activity does, in fact, occur, albeit infrequent. The majority had engaged at least once in direct solicitation as well as in the development of a list of fundraising needs in the department, but no evidence exists that chairs and department heads are regularly engaged in direct fundraising on a sustainable basis. Those that did engage in solicitation mainly solicited gifts in the five and six figures, with relatively few above six figures. However, most of the respondents were not evaluated for this activity during the annual evaluation by their dean, which placed little significance on their involvement in fundraising.

While department heads and chairs have an interest in fundraising, most have never attended a seminar or workshop where they could receive training. Colleges and universities should provide fundraising training for department heads and chairs on a regular, sustained basis. Department heads and chairs may increasingly be asked to make fundraising a central responsibility in their portfolio and carve out time for the direct solicitation of alumni and friends (Masterson, 2017). "Chairs have a closeness to the student experience that senior leaders don't," Masterson (2017, para. 6) noted. Additionally, they seem interested to learn about fundraising since many of them may plan to pursue an academic deanship in the future. Involving department heads and chairs in fundraising will reap benefits to the institution, since most alumni would prefer to give to the academic degree program and/or department where they matriculated rather than the college or university as a whole.

There appears to be very little assistance from the central development office, and what support does take place comes primarily from college development professionals, not the central office. The professional engagement of department heads and chairs could possibly produce more revenue for the college and department. Such activity should be coordinated and staffed properly and training should be provided on an ongoing basis. Central development offices should encourage department heads and chairs to become more involved in fundraising and provide professional expertise and training on a continuing basis. College development personnel should also support fundraising at the department level and encourage faculty to engage in a coordinated fashion.

This study has provided data that support the conclusion that department chairs and heads are not engaged in direct fundraising on a continuing basis. However, that does not mean that they are opposed to involvement. In fact, they believe that fundraising should be part of their duties and responsibilities and that their deans hold that expectation. The main issues seem to be time commitment and expertise. This finding is consistent with Donachie (2017) who also noted that department chairs had an interest in fundraising but it was difficult for them to find time to engage in this activity. Department chairs typically do not have the extra staff support, like the deans would have, to whom they can delegate some of their other responsibilities (Masterson, 2017). Therefore, additional personnel may be required to assist the head and chair in day to day activities and relieve them from some of their other duties and responsibilities so that they can devote their time to fundraising. A dean must recognize the time squeeze and provide adequate support not only to resolve the workload issues but also clearly define the roles and expectations of department heads and chairs in fundraising. The college and university development staff should also be a catalyst for support to the department chairs and heads. This can take the form of training exercises in fundraising and major gift asks and the accompaniment of them on fundraising calls.

The longstanding fundraising adage, "people give to people" is still relevant and alumni should appreciate being called on and cultivated by a department head or chair, however, more direct evidence is needed to substantiate this statement. Surveying alumni and other stakeholders to understand their attitudes towards academic personnel, such as department heads and chairs, soliciting gifts from alumni that matriculated in the department would be a valuable next study. This study cannot provide conclusive evidence that alumni stand ready and willing to receive department chairs and heads in the cultivation process.

Department heads and chairs appear ready and willing to engage in fundraising programs and can provide a whole new set of solicitors eager to be a galvanizing catalyst for new opportunities in garnering

much needed capital for academic programs. At most, if not all, major public universities, the vast number of alumni can pose a serious problem in the ability to cover all the prospects by limited development staff. These chairs and heads can provide, when properly trained and coordinated an entirely new set of people eager and willing to call on alumni. They would be highly knowledgeable about the academic needs of the department, college and university and could provide a very sophisticated set of change agents.

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