

The Emerging Role of the Department Chair in Development: Creating a Development Plan

Gil D. Brum. "The Emerging Role of the Department Chair in Development: Creating a Development Plan." *The Department Chair* 13, no. 3 (winter 2003): 15-18. Reprinted with permission from [Anker Publishing, Inc.](#)

The first article in this two-part series will outline a basic process that your department can follow for crafting an effective department development plan. Part two will present proven techniques for ensuring the success of a development plan, as well as provide some examples of successful development efforts that may serve as a model for your own plan.

Even in traditionally state-supported institutions, department chairs are playing an ever-increasing role in development activities. Yet, as with most of their duties, chairs receive little or no training on the basics of development and advancement. Without training and understanding of the principles of development, chairs often feel uncomfortable during fundraising activities and certainly unprepared to create an effective development plan to raise funds for department programs and activities.

WHY SHOULD A DEPARTMENT HAVE ITS OWN DEVELOPMENT PLAN?

Think about what your department could do with an extra \$10,000 over and above your normal operating budget. Would these funds be used to offer additional courses, perhaps on topics that would add breadth to your department's normal course offerings? Or would you use the extra \$10,000 to purchase needed equipment and supplies, or to fund faculty travel to attend conferences that bring back exciting new ideas and information to the department? Now think about how your department might use an additional \$50,000 each year, or \$100,000.

No matter how you envisioned using these funds, there is no doubt that even a modest influx of funds would have a positive impact on the quality of your department's program. Many of us have learned that university-wide development efforts often fail to bring resources directly into the department. And the continued shrinking of public support for higher education is likely to continue. In just the past five years, 30 of the 50 states cut support to higher education from 4% to as high as 20%. For these reasons alone, your department should implement a development plan.

A SEVEN-STEP PROCESS TO BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL DEPARTMENT DEVELOPMENT PLAN

What often distinguishes a successful development effort from one that has limited or no success is the clarity and consistency of the message being sent to prospective donors. If prospective donors hear from one person that new equipment is absolutely essential to the growth and health of the department, and then hear from someone else that the future of the department rests on completing a new extension to the current building, donors are not only confused, but often lose their confidence that the department really knows what its critical needs are. Donors may feel that any donation would likely be divided among several priorities, diluting its impact. Very few donors are willing to give under such conditions. Most donors want to know what the funds will be spent on and why it is important to the department. They also like to see tangible, measurable outcomes. Knowing that their donations helped the department reach (or make measurable progress toward achieving) critical goals makes donors more willing to invest in the process.

Clearly, then, the core of a successful department development plan is a consistent and clear statement of the department's long-range priorities. To achieve this requires a great deal of planning, discussing, debating, and compromising in order to build consensus among all department members. These activities comprise the first four steps of the seven-step process for building a successful development plan. Steps 1 to 4 require the participation of the entire department, whereas Steps 5 to 7 can be completed by the department as a whole or by individuals who want to play an active role in the development process.

Step 1: Department brainstorming. It is important in launching a development effort that everyone in the department become aware of the reasons why development should be a priority. Of course, you could start this process by asking your colleagues the same questions I asked above. This technique helps people quickly see the value of investing some time and energy to produce and implement a development plan.

Many donors are attracted to uniqueness, so part of the value of a brainstorming session is identifying the unique strengths in the department. Perhaps you have certain equipment or facilities that no other campus has, or perhaps your curriculum has elements that distinguish it from other similar programs. In addition, donors are often attracted to activities that have already achieved some level of success, but could improve or reach their full potential with additional funding. Contributing to a unique and already successful department priority is a good investment. The brainstorming session might also include a discussion of the department's weaknesses, particularly areas that could achieve success or

uniqueness if additional funds were available. Both of these lists should be used to help the department identify the main elements of its development plan.

Step 2: Developing a long-range plan. To a donor, an inconsistent message often means the department has not carefully outlined and approved a path to future success, nor has it identified the essential steps that must be achieved in order to progress along the path. If your department already has a long-range plan, be sure it identifies the critical steps needed to reach each goal. Each step represents an intermediate level of accomplishment and, therefore, is a tangible outcome that may appeal to a donor.

If your department does not have a long-range plan, then Step 2 is to begin a long-range planning process. One effective exercise I have used is to ask department faculty and staff to think ahead ten years and envision what they would want the department to look like then. I deliberately use the nonspecific phrase "look like" so as to not restrict creativity by focusing on curriculum, department structure, faculty hiring, or some other specific aspect of the department. I ask everyone to describe their vision in one paragraph and identify the critical steps necessary to reach that vision. I then prepare a spreadsheet showing the similarities and differences among everyone's vision. You may be pleasantly surprised at how much consensus already exists about the department's future, a perfect beginning to a long-range planning process.

Step 3: Building consensus on department priorities. For some departments, building consensus may be one of the more challenging aspects of the entire development process. For example, when all department members want to have their own pet project listed as a priority in the final development plan, it can be very difficult for these individuals to give up their project in favor of someone else's. One way to sort out competing priorities is to list them all and then identify only those that are absolutely necessary to achieving the department's long-range plan. This list of absolutely necessary projects, along with the department's list of its unique strengths and its weaknesses generated in Step 1, should help identify what the department's development priorities should be.

Step 4: Agreeing on a consistent, clear message to donors. Not all donors are experts in your field, and many may not understand some of the nuances of your program. Consequently, your chances of success improve if you craft a very clear statement of your department's priorities without using disciplinary jargon, and a brief explanation for why each of these needs is critical to future success. When writing this statement, keep in mind the five factors mentioned above that motivate many donors:

- 1) Donors want to know specifically what the funds will be spent on.
- 2) Donors want to know why a priority is important to the department.

- 3) Donors like to see tangible or measurable outcomes.
- 4) Donors are attracted to uniqueness.
- 5) Donors are attracted to priorities that have attained some measure of success.

Step 5: Finding potential donors. How do you find these generous individuals who may have an interest in the future of your department? Consider the following as starting points for locating possible donors:

- Identify corporations, agencies, businesses, or individuals who already have a vested interest in your department. Perhaps there is a business or industry that frequently hires your graduates (contact your career center to determine which corporations/agencies regularly recruit graduates from your program). The success of these companies or individuals is tied to your success, and they may be willing to invest in your department as a way of investing in their own future. The same is true of businesses for which your faculty do consulting and corporations that hire your students as interns.
- Another important source of potential donors is your alumni. As a fellow chair once said: "If I'd known how important they would be as alums, I would have treated them better as students." Work with your campus alumni office to obtain a complete list of alums. All alumni are important in development, but you may want to focus first on those who graduated seven to 15 years ago. These alums are usually in more advanced positions and therefore are more aware of the value of the education they received from your department in helping them reach their career objectives.
- Although your current students are not likely to be in a financial situation to be donors, their parents may be. Parents of current students want to know that their children are getting the best education possible. If they can help improve the level of education in your department, it will directly benefit their children.
- Emeritus colleagues are often very aware of the areas that have potential for improvement and success. Not only might they be interested in donating funds for a particular program, they may also be interested in helping lead a development effort.
- The surrounding community likely has many connections with your campus, and therefore has an interest in its success. The closer the connection to your program, the more likely community members are to be donors.

Step 6: Identifying a department spokesperson. As the department chair, you are most often the individual that is best equipped to be the department spokesperson. However, the heavy demands of your position as chair may prevent you from being the most effective person for this job. For example, a chair may not be able to leave campus to meet a donor at a time that is convenient for the donor, or may not be able to spend sufficient time with a donor to fully explain the department's priorities. Identifying a spokesperson who is able to focus on implementing the department's development plan will improve the plan's chances of success.

Step 7: Making a minor investment. The department should consider making an investment to implement the department development plan. Funds could be used for providing release time for the department spokesperson, for printing brochures or newsletters to advertise the uniqueness and strengths of your department, or for hosting events that bring potential donors to campus. If your department can't afford this investment, ask your dean or provost if they would be willing to advance the money to the department. Administrators are acutely aware of the need to supplement budgets with outside funds and know that an initial investment that successfully attracts a donor will save money in future budget cycles.

CONCLUSION

There are three overriding principles to keep in mind when launching a development effort:

Principle 1: Get help from the experts. Work with others in your university, particularly members of the university's advancement and development team. Also, contact other departments or units on campus who have achieved some success in development and apply what worked for them.

Principle 2: Remember that everything you do now lays a foundation for a donation in the future. The more time and energy you invest now, the more likely your plan will be a success.

Principle 3: There are always donors out there, including one or two big donors. The challenge is find them and help them understand why they should contribute to your department.

In part two of this series, I will discuss a number of the proven techniques for implementing your development plan based on these three principles.

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