

Integrating the *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* to Improve National Fundraising Objectives

Monica G. Williams
PhD Student in Educational Leadership
The Whitlow College of Education
Prairie View A&M University
Prairie View, Texas
Director of Development
William Marsh Rice University
Houston, Texas

ABSTRACT

Improving academic achievement is at the heart of college and university fund development. It has become increasingly important for fundraisers in educational settings to find innovative means to improve educational opportunities by increasing the institution's financial resources. The purpose of this article is to discuss the benefits of integrating the six realms of meaning as defined by Dr. William A. Kritsonis in the *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* (2007) to increase private financial support at higher education institutions.

Introduction

The six realms of meaning cover the range of possible meanings and comprise the basic competencies that general education should develop in every person. A complete person should be skilled in the use of speech, symbol, and gesture (symbolics), factually well informed (empirics), capable of creating and appreciating objects of esthetic significance (esthetics), endowed with a rich and disciplined life in relation to self and others (synnoetics), able to make wise decisions and to judge between right and wrong (ethics), and possessed of an integral outlook (synoptics). These are the aims of general education for the development of complete persons.

Using the six realms of meaning in the fundraising profession can increase private resources for institutions of higher education. Being a successful fundraiser in higher education means employing a wide range of strategies in order to increase the donor pool and continue the giving cycle for current donors. "Fundraisers know that average gift

value increases with donor longevity, so the most productive use of professional and volunteer time in fundraising is spent giving donors what they need to stay loyal to the cause” (Burk, 2003, p. 6). Cultivating loyal donors increases the likelihood of building a solid and sustainable donor base that is willing to contribute meaningful dollars over an indefinite time.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to help fundraising professionals increase charitable giving through use of the six realms of meaning as defined by Dr. William A. Kritsonis (2007) in the *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning*. University advancement professionals and development officers can increase and stabilize institutional resources by using symbolics to improve donor communication; by using empirics to become more knowledgeable about their individual donor preferences; by using esthetics to gain an appreciation for the value of donors’ personal interests; by using synnoetics to cultivate relationships with new donors; by employing ethics to foster a sense of trust between fundraisers and donors; and by using synoptics to increase giving among historical donors.

Using Symbolics in Fundraising

One of many ways to build donor relations and secure the next gift is through the use of symbolics. The use of ordinary language between fundraisers and donors demonstrates existence of a true, personal relationship and creates a forum for open communication. People give money to people, not causes. Donors need to feel that they can communicate on a personal level with development professionals. Oftentimes, donors communicate their wishes through gestures, signs, or symbols, and fundraisers are required to read those signals. “Being conscious of how donors feel when they give makes it easy to respond in kind. A gift given eagerly in the anticipation of achieving something worthwhile should be matched by an equally enthusiastic response from the solicitor or the charity” (Burk, 2003, p. 15).

Donors need to feel connected to the cause. This connection becomes more likely when fundraisers increase communication and recognition practices. Increasing communication means presenting timely information through regular university publications and on-line tools. It means reaching out to donors and having them anticipate a development officer’s next contact. “Everything you do that is read, heard, seen, or attended by even one of your donors is a part of your donor communication inventory, whether you intend it to be or not” (Burk, 2003, p. 113).

A significant component of donor communication is donor recognition or acknowledgement. Thanking donors through written correspondence or with meaningful

tokens represents appreciation for gifting. “On a gift-by-gift basis, budgeting communication and recognition relative to gift size seems to make sense, but it is actually the opposite of what we need to do if we want to retain more donors and increase the average value of contributions. We make the mistake of designing and budgeting communication as a post-gift activity instead of what it really is—the investment cost of securing the next gift” (Burk, 2003 p. 111).

Empirics in Fundraising

The ability to secure the next gift from a donor presupposes that fundraisers are empirically savvy. Fundraisers should be factually well-informed about their donors. They must know donor history and have the wherewithal to match donor preferences with unfunded priorities and critical agency needs. Ideally, fundraisers solicit the first gift, acknowledge that gift, prepare to re-solicit in a short but respectable timeframe, solicit the donor again, and continue the cycle accordingly. Knowing what the donor wants and expects will provide a smooth transition into giving and repeat giving.

Donors appreciate feeling as if they have a partnership with the organizations to which they contribute. Universities have “...altered their fundraising methodology to give donors what they really need, and in so doing they have reaped the rewards” (Burk, 2003, p. 33). By adding structure and strategy to higher education fundraising through professional consulting firms, universities have made their claim to a fortune that has long awaited them. Much of what continues to await fundraisers is how to become more creative in cultivation strategies in order to gain more resources during “the ask” and seek more money in areas that have been intentionally avoided by educational institutions.

Appreciation for Esthetics

Charitable organizations and individual donors have a variety of funding priorities. Accordingly, it is important that fundraisers embrace an appreciation for matching donor preferences with institutional needs. This requires flexibility in fundraising practices. It could be stated that donors largely give in two primary, broad categories—arts and sciences. To this end, being knowledgeable of all institutional programs is critical in fund development. Fundraisers must be appreciative of contributions in esthetics. They must be knowledgeable of the arts, understand the value of art collections, etc. They must know how to handle family members when the institution is the beneficiary of bequests.

Relationship Building Using Synnoetics

Shared beliefs and values often shape an organization's culture. Organizations conduct business under the presumption that they will be able to sell and deliver a product that is mutually appreciated by the customer. Therefore, customer satisfaction can shape an organization's culture. In higher education, the concept of synnoetics exists among fundraisers during the processes of donor cultivation and gift stewardship. Convincing donors that an agency operates at their best interest is largely influenced by common philosophies and values.

According to Lance Loren Johnsen in a theoretical study involving conflicts that confront academic fundraisers, "fostering ethical relationships with donors is essential for preserving the integrity of the philanthropic gift economy" (Johnsen, 2005, p. 2). "Being conscious of how donors feel when they give makes it easy to respond in kind" (Burke, 2003, p. 14). A gift given eagerly in the anticipation of achieving something worthwhile should be matched by an equally enthusiastic response from the solicitor or charity. Ultimately, the shared belief or common goal between fundraisers and donors is what creates a continuum of giving.

If a donor does not feel connected to an organization, the likelihood of acquiring a major gift is minimized. Philanthropists rely on their relationships with organizations to influence their giving. The lack of shared beliefs between prospective donors and organizations results in unsatisfied philanthropists. It is incumbent upon the fundraiser to resolve any differences in philosophical underpinnings prior to donor cultivation. "Academic fundraisers resolve deliberative conflicts through choices grounded in their responsibilities to persons" (Johnsen, 2005, p. 115).

Senior fundraising professional and author, Penelope Burke, addresses donor philosophy best by saying, "When a donor sits down to write a check, her heart may be racing, she may be imagining how you will react when you open the envelope, and she is certainly wondering whether her gift will have a positive impact on the work you both cherish" (Burke, 2003, p. 15). This statement is the foundation of the fundraising profession. People give money to people, not causes. In translation, philanthropists give careful consideration to making substantial donations, and when cultivated by the right person at the right time, the organization reaps the best harvest.

In the fund development community, stewards often overlook the importance of building relationships. Fundraisers must embrace the philosophy that requires them to appreciate the customer. Donor appreciation embodies the culture of any reputable fundraising organization. It is, therefore, imperative that fundraisers understand, respect, and trust donors.

Ethics in Fundraising

Direct correlation between ethical behavior and fundraising is clear. In fact, the basis for successful fundraising is ethics. Without application of ethical principles, fundraisers would not garner the support necessary to achieve effective results.

Assessing ethics among fundraisers is a fascinating topic. It is almost understood that educational advancement professionals are responsible for the welfare of others (i.e. employees, students, parents, community, and the society at large). Having a responsibility of this magnitude insists that fundraisers have basic core values that represent the highest level of ethical principles.

These development leaders are called upon to make moral decisions at many levels of complexity. The degree to which they make the best decision is how they are publicly evaluated by the donor community. While the values of fundraisers influence the make up their ethical framework, it is incumbent upon them to make decisions that satisfy the vast majority of its constituents. This is probably the single most challenging attribute fundraisers have to adopt. Being flexible enough to please a diverse community requires minimization of personal opinions. A collaboration of values that embodies input from a committed donor community will foster the opportunity for buy-in from all who have a vested interest in increasing resources for institutional advancement.

Donor Attrition through Use of Synoptics

Fundraisers must understand individual societal contributions by employing synoptics. “If a nonprofit organization is going to thrive in the twenty-first century, it must not only recognize and serve diverse cultures but also raise substantial portions of its monies from them” (Newman, 2002, p. 3). Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have recently embraced the concept of matching donor preferences with institutional funding needs. Approaching donors from this angle has yielded a wealth of resources for HBCUs. Many of these schools have discovered that using students to call alumni produces results. When alumni receive a call from a student pursuing a similar academic discipline, alumni perceive that they are in touch with a beneficiary who has similar beliefs and/or philosophies. For example, an engineering student contacting an alumnus who majored in engineering prompts a thoughtful and proportionate gift and presents the opportunity for the alumnus to reconnect with the institution. Reestablishing the relationship will nearly guarantee support.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, having a universal vision about the importance of philanthropy will help fundraisers achieve the epitome of excellence (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 564). The six realms of meaning as introduced by Dr. William A. Kritsonis present an effective model for fundraising achievement in higher education. The model embraces using symbolics to communicate more effectively; empirics to define and meet donor preferences; esthetics to gain an appreciation for the value of donors' personal interests; synnoetics to improve personal knowledge and experience through donor contact; ethics to foster a sense of trust between fundraisers and donors; and synoptics to unite donors with a worth cause. Understanding how each realm can work intermittently to establish a donor community will nearly guarantee a continuum of philanthropic generosity.

References

- Burk, P. (2003). *Donor-centered fundraising*. Chicago: Cygnus Applied Research, Incorporated.
- Johnsen, L. L. (May, 2005). *Understanding deliberative conflicts that confront academic fund raisers: A grounded theory study*. Retrieved June 6, 2006, from ProQuest Information and Learning Company Website:
<http://www.lib.umi.com/dissertations/search>
- Kritsonis, W.A. (2007). *Ways of knowing through the realms of meaning*. Houston, TX: National Forum Journals.
- Newman, D.S. (2002). *Opening doors: Pathways to diverse donors*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.