If Not Sufficiency, at Least Empowerment

Larry Andrews

Kent State University

Richard Badenhausen has offered a generous range of ways to think about "the economy of honors" and has concluded with a call for honors leaders to be aggressive in seeking appropriate funding from the upper administration. He passes over, however, the need to be equally aggressive in raising money from private donations, seeming to worry that pursuing "endowment support" runs the "ancillary cost" of "framing the educational experience primarily in economic terms." He also refers to some honors administrators as spending their time "watching endowment returns if [they] are lucky enough to benefit from such support."

Indeed, endowment gifts sometimes arrive as a matter of luck. An affluent donor on rare occasions surprises us with a large donation, or the development office finds a lead and cultivates a relationship, bringing us in to clinch the deal for honors. But most endowment fundraising success results from hard work: developing a prospect list, working with development people who have different mindsets than ours, writing case statements, traveling to meet potential donors, and conversing with confidence, knowledge, respect, and discretion. This work is often fruitless and frustrating, but the reward is potentially so valuable—a degree of economic self-sufficiency for the program—that it justifies the time and effort. Of course, our institutions must allow us to pursue such activity on behalf of honors in the first place.

I do not wish to argue here, however, that all honors leaders need to spend their precious time in pursuing large gifts. For most of us, time, timorousness, inexperience, or institutional policy constrains such efforts. What I urge is a baby step toward economic self-empowerment, if not self-sufficiency: developing an all-purpose fund of small donations, usually held by the institution's foundation, that we can tap for any need that promotes the learning experience of our students and the stability of our program. (I discuss such a fund further in my NCHC monograph, *Fundrai$ing for Honor$*.) Such a fund allows us complete control over its use. Depending on its size, we might use it to send students to the NCHC conference, a regional honors conference, an NCHC Honors Semester, or the NCUR conference. We might draw on it to support thesis research or study abroad. We might simply be able to afford refreshments at honors student events, purchase a teaching aid for a classroom, or print an anthology of student writing.

Sometimes called a "discretionary" fund, this pool of spendable dollars grows from small donations, usually from honors alumni. If the program is well-established and mature, it has a significant pool of alumni approaching or exceeding mid-career status. Even young programs, however, quickly establish an annual pool of new alumni, even if they lack much earning power and labor under student-loan debt. The first step in establishing a discretionary fund is to secure the right to do so from the chief academic officer and the development office. For several years my graduate institution has dunned me for contributions, but no matter how much I preferred that my small gift go to my doctoral department, it ended up in a large general fund for graduate assistantships. Finally I persuaded the department chair to establish a discretionary fund, and now I am a much happier, still modest but annual, donor.

After establishing the fund, we must communicate its existence to our alumni and interested others. Accurate mailing or email addresses and perhaps an effective alumni Facebook page are crucial for spreading the word. A periodic newsletter, in whatever medium, serves to keep alive the bond between former students and the program. Most important is an appeal to graduating seniors and a contact during their first year out. We can appeal to their "pay-forward" motivation because most of them have relished their honors experience and may have benefited from scholarship support. To get started, why not ask each senior to donate at least $25—a couple of pizzas, after all—as a parting gift? A class gift could be directed to such a fund rather than to a less useful physical object. The important thing is to establish a tradition, an expectation, in fact a *habit* of giving back. Then we can follow up with a request for a gift renewal in the first year out and then build that up to a regular solicitation, gradually increasing the suggested amount but keeping it realistic for the nature of the alumni pool we have. Constant renewal of the fund is critical.

Developing a discretionary fund does not mean the abandonment of ongoing efforts to secure appropriate and stable support from the upper administration, nor should possession of such a fund—or even an endowment, for that matter—let these administrators off the hook. Working to implement and then increase such a fund, however, offers us not only a source of support for small projects but a sense of empowerment and perhaps an end to whining as the only alternative to generous institutional support.

****

The author may be contacted at

landrews@kent.edu.