

Fundraising Behaviors by Academic Leaders in Response to Covid-19

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Introduction

College of Agriculture (COA) leaders shoulder a multitude of expectations, including generating funding required to successfully achieve their mission (Williams, 2007). This aligns with the trend of boards of directors including fundraising as one of the metrics utilized to determine an academic leader's success (Cook, 1997). In 2019, higher education institutions (HEI) raised over \$49.6 billion in voluntary support with colleges of agriculture often securing some of the larger financial gifts (CASE, 2020). Currently, COA leaders are navigating fundraising during unique circumstances of economic uncertainty coupled with a global pandemic. The Transformative Leadership Fundraising Model (Nicholson, 2007) suggests that combining transactional and transformational leadership behaviors will increase fundraising success, however, this model has not been explored during a pandemic. While economic recessions are not uncommon, there is a dearth of literature regarding fundraising practices during a pandemic (Waters, 2009). This study provides insight into leadership styles utilized by COA deans fundraising during the Covid-19 pandemic and addresses the AAAE's research priority of educating the public and policy makers about agriculture (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016).

The purpose of this study was to examine academic leaders' responses to a crisis in terms of fundraising behaviors. Specifically, we sought COA development officers' perceptions and observations of their dean's leadership fundraising behaviors prior to and during the Covid-19 pandemic. Our research objectives were 1) Determine COA deans' leadership styles during the Covid-19 pandemic and 2) Describe COA deans' leadership fundraising behaviors during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Conceptual Framework

We utilized Nicholson's (2007) Transformative Leadership Fundraising Model (TLFM) as a conceptual framework. The TLFM was synthesized from Bornstein's transformative leadership concept (2003) and Bass and Avolio's augmentation model of transactional and transformational leadership (2004) in an attempt to capture the leadership style utilized by college and university presidents as it pertains to fundraising. Nicholson (2007) suggested that higher education leaders who are successful at fundraising use both transactional and transformational leadership approaches, applying a transactional approach to develop a relationship with a donor prior to transformational leadership to secure impactful gifts.

Methods

We used a phenomenological approach in this study because we sought to understand how the perceived leadership styles and behaviors were influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic. A phenomenological approach is appropriate when attempting to understand individuals' own perceptions of their lived experiences related to a specific phenomenon along with understanding how multiple individuals make meaning of their shared experiences within the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Development officers in this study had the shared experience of serving Colleges of Agriculture as well as fundraising during the Covid-19 pandemic. We interviewed five participants using a moderator's guide that included four questions. Each

interview was conducted via phone and lasted approximately 30 minutes. Transcripts were analyzed and coded using the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965).

Results

Data analysis resulted in eight sub-themes that were then clustered into three themes: 1) COA Deans inspire and motivate donors through storytelling 2) they seek intellectual stimulation regarding fundraising, and 3) they exhibit idealized behavior in fundraising during Covid-19.

Theme 1: COA Deans Inspire and Motivate Donors Through Storytelling

Each dean was perceived by their development officer as successfully inspiring and motivating their donors through storytelling. The development officers shared that this ability to tell the story in a compelling manner is effective because donors can sense that the dean enjoys communicating and engaging with donors and possesses a strong vision for the college.

Theme 2: COA Deans Seek Intellectual Stimulation Regarding Fundraising

Each dean was perceived to have different strengths regarding donor engagement; Some were perceived as thriving in group alumni settings while others were perceived as preferring one-on-one visits. Regardless of their perceived strength, each development officer acknowledged that their dean was coachable which allowed the development officers to provide the feedback needed to help the deans excel in their role as a fundraiser during the pandemic.

Theme 3: COA Deans Exhibit Idealized Behavior in Fundraising During Covid-19

The attribute of being coachable and building upon their fundraising strengths allowed for COA deans to ultimately establish their own idealized behavior and approach for fundraising during Covid-19. Several deans were perceived as shifting towards stewardship, or thanking donors for previous gifts, as their idealized behavior. Others, in an attempt to maintain the status quo, acknowledged the crisis, but continued to solicit gifts. Regardless of the engagement strategy, all of the deans were perceived as having their ideal approach to fundraising during the pandemic.

Conclusion, Implications, Recommendations

All three themes that emerged aligned with the Transformative Fundraising Leadership Model, suggesting that our participants perceived their deans to be utilizing aspects of transformative leadership to engage in fundraising during the Covid-19 pandemic. We noted a shift towards attributes linked to transformational fundraising which can be explained by the participants' immediate focus on maintaining relationships with current and previous donors rather than utilizing a transactional approach to engage new donors at this stage of the pandemic. The findings of this study suggest that college of agriculture deans utilize communication with their internal and external stakeholders as a means to engage in fundraising, particularly during a pandemic. Again, what is interesting to note is that there was not one particular fundraising strategy, but rather a perceived implementation of storytelling. Future studies on fundraising leadership could explore the perceived value of developing a specific message versus simply delivering a timely message during a crisis. This reliance on communication is particularly important for colleges of agriculture with communications departments to note, as they can play an important role in developing the fundraising communication that can be utilized by their colleges during a pandemic.

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