

# Five Years of Annual Giving Day Campaigns for Academic Libraries and Lessons Learned Along the Way

Elizabeth Batte, MLIS

Outreach and Strategic Initiatives Librarian, Assistant Professor

University Libraries, The University of Mississippi

## Author Note

Elizabeth Batte <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2044-4982>

I have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Elizabeth Batte (they/she) via email at [ebatte@olemiss.edu](mailto:ebatte@olemiss.edu)

## Abstract

Annual Giving Day campaigns are the norm for many public higher education institutions. With a lack of funding from government entities, universities look to donors to fill the void. It can be difficult for academic libraries to find and connect with a donor network without a true alumni base. In this article, Elizabeth Batte, outreach and strategic initiatives librarian looks at research and their past five years of experience in fundraising to offer insights into how academic libraries can improve their fundraising campaigns and foster relationships with future donors.

*Keywords:* Annual giving, academic libraries, fundraising

---

## Annual Giving Campaigns: Big Donations from a Small Donor Pool

When it comes to fundraising strategies, annual giving campaigns are nothing new among public higher education institutions. In 2020, there was a record \$49.5 billion in annual donations to higher education institutions. This was surpassed in 2022 with \$52.9 billion in giving (Moody, 2022). With such high numbers, one would assume these campaigns are successful and worth repeating. However, it is worth noting that some institutions have reported that 95 percent of their donations come from a very small portion of their donor base, around 5 percent (Davenport, 2022).

Universities rely on alumni donor funding sources to support programs, faculty endowments and student scholarship endowments as federal and state governments continue to greatly decrease funding to public higher education institutions. In an attempt to gain new donors and appeal to younger alumni, many institutions have begun hosting Giving Day campaigns where a university's schools, organizations and units on campus host their fundraisers on the same day as one university-wide campaign. As an academic librarian, I have led Giving Day campaigns for an academic library at two different public institutions. My first was a medium-sized regional university that awarded master's degrees. Their enrollment was 6,000 with one lead foundation officer with one support member whose focus was only athletics. My current institution is a large R1 public institution that is the flagship of its state. The current enrollment is 27,000 and they have two separate teams for the university's foundations and the university's development. The development team consists of a six-person leadership team and 47 staff members. One of those staff members' official job title is the senior director of annual giving and is the primary one who oversees the Giving Day campaign. Most academic areas have a development officer specifically assigned to them to help with fundraising. The library used to have one but currently, it does not. Both institutions continue to host Giving Day campaigns that have been classified as successful by their institutional foundations.

It can be a struggle for academic libraries to connect to alumni for fundraising campaigns because even though they are academic units, they do not award degrees. For this reason, academic libraries must be creative and strategic about how they pursue fundraising campaigns. In the pursuit of expanding the donor pool, academic libraries must remember to also maintain good relationships with their previous donors. A simple thank you card in the mail can go a long way when reaching out to donors annually. This idea of stewardship in fundraising has been documented as a key component to higher education institutions being able to gain record-breaking dollars from private donors and foundations (Worth, 2002).

### **Organization-Public Relationships: Measurable Exchanges**

Hon and Grunig (1999) have broken down the relationship between organizations and their public (donors) into four evaluations: trust, commitment, satisfaction and control mutuality. When creating a campaign strategy these are important factors to consider when marketing your library, university and fundraiser.

Trust is made of three attitudes that the donor should view the organization favorably. As institutions, we should strive to be seen as having integrity, dependability and competence (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Donor loyalty has been linked to trust as being a reliable indicator (Pressgrove & McKeever, 2016).

Commitment is observed in two ways: continuance and affective orientation (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Commitment can be maintained from both sides of the relationship. The organization has to be committed to maintaining the relationship with the donor(s) and the donor(s) in turn have to be committed to donating to the organization based on the commitments the university or organization shows in their daily functions and production goals (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

Satisfaction refers to both parties involved feeling favorable about each other and having positive experiences in the relationship (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Satisfaction can sometimes be out of the library's control when it comes to the experience of giving the actual donation, for example, a campaign site crashing or a donation accidentally being charged. However, the library can control the satisfaction of services they provide to their donors through effective communication and efficient follow-up with donors before and after Giving Day.

Control mutuality is directly tied to the previous three evaluations. It relies on a balance of power in the relationship between donors and the organization. Imbalances will occur, but libraries must make sure that one side of the relationship does not dominate over the other which can destroy the other three factors (Hon & Grunig, 1999). An example of this is not allowing donors to use their donations to push library administrators to take on projects they do not have enough team members to complete or allowing donors to make demands about collection development.

### **Community Networking: Fundraising Campaign Strategizing at a Smaller Institution**

From 2018 to 2022, I was at a smaller institution. During my first 18 months, I was the Electronic Resources Librarian who also oversaw all outreach efforts. And then for the remaining time, I was the Library Director who oversaw all fundraising efforts for the library. In both roles, I was annually co-leading what our campus called Give-N-Day. My first year co-leading the fundraising for our library was an improvement in previous years but we had no real base of donors to pull from for support, so it was most friends and family of library employees who donated. This was impactful but not sustainable for major annual growth to meet the goals we had set for ourselves.

So, in my first year as Library Director, we wanted to find a way to create more buy-ins from library users. To do this we named three of the librarians as “champions” for the fundraiser and made it a competition to see who could raise the most. The winning “champion” agreed to take a pie to the face. This challenge sparked our previous network of friends and family to increase their donations, but it was also a fun gimmick we were able to market to the current students and faculty who were library users and wanted to see their favorite librarian get pied. We saw not only our number of donors grow, but also, we were able to almost double our final donation amount. That year I received a pie to that face which we filmed live for social media, and I had to shampoo my hair three times that night. Lessons learned.

Building off our growing momentum and having successfully grown our donor network, we wanted to continue making sure our donors felt a buy-in toward our fundraising goals. The next year we partnered with our library student workers to videotape them rating which chairs they preferred to use in the library. For transparency’s sake, it was a clear winner because many of our chairs were very old and only one of the options was our newer study chairs. Again, being at a smaller institution meant we had fewer funds to replace furniture within the library, so we had to do it in phases. The videos were done with humor and were a hit on social media leading up to that year’s Give-N-Day. We continued to have librarian “champions” for the fundraiser, but no one would get pied. Instead, we focused on who’s donations would buy the most chairs. That year we saw a growth in donations but only slightly and our donor numbers also remained about the same. From this, I concluded that our efforts to connect with our donors so that we would maintain them were successful, but to make a larger jump in contributions we needed to give new donors an incentive they would enjoy – like seeing the library director getting pied in the face by the other library champions.

My campaign for Give-N-Day last year was bittersweet because our community was still recovering from a hurricane that had damaged much of campus months beforehand. In all honesty, that year we were all trying to survive and did not campaign as strongly because no one had the time or bandwidth to oversee the campaign effectively. We still did the fundraiser that year and still received donations, but they decreased from our past years. It reinforced the need for a campaign strategy that is planned and marketed in advance. We were not surprised by the decrease in donors or donations. When taking on a role that will require you to fundraise for your unit, having a sustainable model that can be carried out even in “down years” is important. Looking back, I would have made sure my co-leader had better support from colleagues to run a small campaign. A little bit of social media marketing and direct marketing to past donors could have changed our outcome by a large margin with minimal effort.

Since leaving that institution they have hosted two other Give-N-Days, and the campaigns seem to have been successful. They have had clear strategies that utilize social media heavily and networking with current users. In one of their more recent campaigns, the social media content creator did a live stream playing a game to garner interest in the campaign's goal to expand the library's game offerings for students to check out.

### **Bigger School, Bigger Funding, Bigger Support: Fundraising Campaign Strategizing at an R1 Institution**

For the past two years, I have been the Outreach and Strategic Initiatives Librarian at a large R1 public institution. Fundraising and marketing are two responsibilities within my role. This institution also does an annual campaign called Giving Day. There are two big differences in how I have campaigned for this institution. One, the Development Office at this institution provides a lot of support to all units that run a campaign. They host a "war room" party in their building on the day of the event that all campaign leaders are invited to utilize to support their campaign and to help with social media content. The Development team also helps each unit curate their email messaging to new and previous donors; has each unit make a one-minute video for them to run on the main university social media platforms; and hosts large planning meetings leading up to Giving Day so all units are fully prepared. Two, this academic library has an active Friends of the Library organization. Their Friends of the Library meet at least twice a year and have a network that expands outside of the state. Friends of the Library groups are created to provide funding and support with fundraising for the library, but in my experience how they use the funding they have differs greatly from organization to organization. Thankfully my current library has a Friends of the Library group that listens to the librarians about the needs of the library and has supported local community and state literacy programs.

### **Friends of the Library: A Powerful Partnership for Fundraising**

Despite having an active Friends of the Library group with adequate funding to help support multiple library initiatives, the previous Giving Day campaigns for the library had minimal results and the Friends of the Library group were not directly involved. The Friends of the Library group were previously individual supporters of fundraising campaigns but had not been visibly campaigning for the Giving Day campaign as an official group. When planning our strategy for my first Giving Day I knew getting the Friends of the Library involved would be essential to our efforts to be successful. At their meeting close to Giving Day, I had our fundraising representative from the Development Office come present to the Friends of the Library board about the importance and potential impact campaigning for Giving Day could have on the library. I worked with our representative to pitch the idea of the board being the voice of our campaign. We were able to convince the board how easily they could spread the word through their networks, big gains with small efforts.

The president of the Friends of the Library organization also agreed to sponsor a challenge which meant he would donate \$2,000 once 20 gifts had been made to the Library. We also had an alum who was working with the development team to support a \$1,500 challenge once 15 gifts were received. This meant as someone new to the university and with a smaller network, I was able to focus on encouraging my library colleagues to reach out to their friends and family for donations while the other two challengers did the same with their networks. This was the Library's first strategized fundraising campaign for Giving Day and we were able to collect donations from triple the amount of donors they had in the past and both challenges were met with ease. It has also set a precedent for the Friends of the Library group to be directly involved in the helping campaign in future Giving Day efforts.

### **Marketing the Campaign: Social Media and Email Worth the Effort**

Giving Day campaigns usually have three audiences: previous donors and alumni, current students and their families, and employee friends and family networks. In all my campaigns, social media and email were the most effective in reaching these audiences.

As mentioned previously, academic libraries usually do not have alumni but still have previous donors to reach out to via email. The university development offices often have a system of reaching out to previous donors with a form letter. It is too easy for donors to ignore a form letter email or for them to go to spam. For these reasons, I would like to encourage the Dean or Director of the library to send a more personalized email to previous donors.

Current students and their families, in my experience, have been the hardest group for academic libraries to reach. Partially this is because students are being marketed for Giving Day by all units. Student families are nearly impossible to reach without contact information. However, using the library's student workers and encouraging them to share our social media campaigns has been effective in connecting with new donors. Social media has been proven to be a powerful tool for non-profit organizations to connect with potential donors (Saxton & Wang, 2014).

The easiest—and often most overused—audience is the library employees' network of friends and families. I make sure all employees are aware of the Giving Day campaign and ask that at the very least they like or share one of the social media graphics. For colleagues more willing to take an active role in the campaign, I designed a template email for them to send out to their networks. This is by far the most effective means of expanding the donor network and reaching new donors. Most academic libraries will have at least a handful of new employees every year with new contacts. My colleagues are also the ones who have a direct interest in advocating for library funding. I loop Friends of the Library members in this group because my marketing to them works the same as how they reach out to their networks.

Social media posts start a week in advance and are posted daily. On the day of the event, I make sure to post several times to make sure the algorithm is working in my favor. I also make sure to send a reminder email to everyone I know about our campaign, such as the Friends of the Library Board, library employees and others from my personal network. According to Osili (2019) "Mobile platforms, peer-to-peer fundraising, crowdfunding, text-to-give campaigns, and social media have reduced barriers to giving and have the potential to make philanthropy to America's colleges and universities more democratic and inclusive." (p.4)

### **Stewardship: A Final Step in the Campaign Strategy for Maintaining Organization-Donor Relationships**

Once all the social media posts are up, the emails are sent and the donations are in, there is one final step in making sure your future campaigns can depend on that year's donors: a thank you. Stewardship in fundraising has been proven to be a leading factor in why donors decide to repeatedly donate to the same organization. Communication gaps were found when looking at stewardship, specifically in higher education. Institutions are not good stewards of effective communication to donors about the gifts they have received which impacts the organization-public relationship not being fostered positively (Grant & Wolverton, 2003). This may partially be due to the existing relationship that most donors have with higher education institutions as alumni. Despite academic libraries not having direct alumni, they are still guilty of communication gaps when it comes to university alumni donating to the library. Libraries cannot assume that the Development Office will communicate to donors or assume that communication is sufficient in the opinion of the donors.

Direct stewardship from the library builds upon the organization-public relationship with donors. It is a relationship that must be fostered with communication to be sustained. It has also been shown that improvements in stewardship and thoughtful relationship nurturing are effective in leading to bigger donations and potential major gifts like endowments (Dunlap, 2002).

### **Conclusion: It is Worth It in the End**

Fundraising for academic libraries can be a challenge without alumni or known supporters to distribute direct marketing. However, fostering relationships with colleagues, student workers, Friends of the Library groups and previous donors can help libraries create donor loyalty and continuously improve their fundraising efforts annually. The biggest lesson I have learned over the years is that putting in the time and effort to build and maintain those relationships is worth it, not only financially but also for future networking.

### **References**

- Davenport, J. (2022, March 16). Troubling trends for higher education. *Philanthropy Daily*. Retrieved from: <https://philanthropydaily.com/troubling-trends-for-higher-Education/>
- Dunlap, D. R. (2002). Major gift programs. In M. J. Worth (Ed.). *New strategies for educational fundraising* (pp. 89–104). Westport, CT: American Council on Education and Praeger Publishers.
- Grant, A. S. C., & Wolverson, M. (2003). Gaps in stewardship quality at three institutions. *The CASE International Journal of Educational Advancement*, 4(1), 45–64.
- Hon, L. C., & Grunig, J. E. (1999). *Guidelines for measuring relationships in public relations*. Institute for Public Relations. Available from [http://www.aco.nato.int/resources/9/Conference%202011/Guidelines\\_Measuring\\_Relationships\[1\].pdf](http://www.aco.nato.int/resources/9/Conference%202011/Guidelines_Measuring_Relationships[1].pdf)
- Moody, J. (2022, August 18). Colleges report strong fundraising year. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/08/18/colleges-report-strong-fundraising-fiscal-year-2022>
- Osili, U. (2019). *Key issues facing higher education philanthropy*. American Council on Education. [www.acenet.edu/Documents/Key-Issues-Facing-Higher-Education-Philanthropy-201903.pdf](http://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Key-Issues-Facing-Higher-Education-Philanthropy-201903.pdf)
- Pressgrove, G. N., & McKeever, B. W. (2016). Nonprofit relationship management: Extending the organization-public relationship to loyalty and behaviors. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 28, 193–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2016.1233106>
- Saxton, G. D., & Wang, L. (2014). The Social Network Effect: The Determinants of Giving Through Social Media. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 43(5), 850–868. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764013485159>
- Worth, M. J. (2016). *Fundraising: Principles and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.