

# Creating a Culture of Philanthropy at Your University Library

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At William & Mary (W&M), raising funds for the university libraries is a team effort: Our goal is to create a culture of engagement and philanthropy amongst staff, faculty, students, alumni, and community members. To drive fundraising success, we invest in building relationships, creating connections, and telling stories about our value and impact.

In this article, we will share how we have leveraged our community to exceed previous fundraising benchmarks and earn one of the highest alumni giving rates, at 21%, of any national public university. We will discuss our strategies for engaging current students, who are our future alumni donors, highlighting the importance of cultivating relationships early in a student's academic career. We will explore managing a library fundraising board and creating community partnerships to engage local community members. Additionally, we will examine the significance of transparency in budgeting and fundraising, ensuring that librarians and staff understand the profound impact of philanthropy on library resources and services. Central to our discussion will be the concept of "fundraising is everyone's job," and we will provide insights into training techniques that enable librarians and staff to effectively advocate for W&M Libraries.

## About William & Mary

William & Mary is a public research institution founded in 1693 and is the second oldest university in the nation. Although W&M is a public university, it relies heavily on private dollars. The university receives approximately 12% of its budget from the state legislature. The remaining budget comprises tuition, fees, grants, and fundraising.

The university's first fundraising campaign did not occur until 1976, so many universities engaged in philanthropy long before W&M. In 2020, the University completed its "For the Bold" campaign, which raised over a billion dollars for the university, \$22 million of which was earmarked for the libraries. Specifically, William & Mary Libraries achieved the following outcomes during the "For the Bold" campaign:

- Raised more than \$22.3 million,
- Received gifts from more than 5,600 individual donors,
- Received gifts from 48 states and 19 different countries, and
- Established more than 40 funds, with 25 of those being endowments to benefit the libraries in perpetuity.

Considering the success of the recent campaign, W&M has made significant progress in a relatively short time. To capitalize on this success, the library is working to build a culture of philanthropy, which begins with current students and continues through planned giving and estate gifts.

The success of W&M Libraries' fundraising initiatives is intrinsically linked to our community engagement strategies. There's wisdom in the philosophy that we shouldn't measure each day solely by immediate results, but rather by the groundwork we lay for future growth. In that vein, our library staff members have made substantial investments in building relationships and fostering connections. By prioritizing meaningful donor engagement today, we have significantly enhanced our potential for fundraising success in the years to come.

While fundraising numbers are important, and they provide a concrete way to track fundraising success, they only reflect part of the picture. The work invested into fundraising long before a gift is made is equally, if not more, important. The work of engaging and stewarding donors is key to increasing donor giving.

In this article, we will explore three different audience segments that play an important role in our engagement strategy: the library board of directors, current students, and community members.

## Developing and Managing a Fundraising Board

William & Mary Libraries' Board of Directors is a philanthropic giving board, and they share their time, talent, and treasure by securing funding and raising awareness for W&M Libraries. They do not advise the library on operating policies.

Although board members are expected to contribute a standard amount in exchange for service, there are situations when exceptions can be made based on circumstances. For example, if the W&M Libraries hoped to engage a younger graduate who is a good fit for our board but could not meet the giving obligations, the library could reduce the amount required, or another board member could "sponsor" a potential board member who otherwise would not be able to serve. This is an important strategy for ensuring diversity in age, gender, race, etc., on our board.

We view our library board as a scaling-up board with many of our members moving up to a larger board, like the university's Foundation Board, after serving on our library board. Alumni can learn the ins and outs of serving on a board and take that knowledge to serve on other boards.

Our board is composed primarily of alumni, plus a university administration representative, a faculty representative, and a student representative (our board loves having a student member!). These representatives are exempt from the giving requirements expected of other alumni and community board members.

We have a multitude of ways our board members have been involved with W&M Libraries, including:

- Volunteering to transcribe documents in the library archives
- Hosting dinners and parties to engage with other alumni and recruiting future board members
- Sharing their expertise and passion for collecting
- Asking their reunion classes to pick the library for their class gift.

Library staff spend time on:

- Cultivating board members: We send thank you notes, birthday cards, and get-well cards; we communicate frequently with them, helping them feel like they are "in the loop" about library news and happenings.
- Conducting board meetings: We plan productive, inspiring board meetings. Our board meets in person twice a year. It is critical to maximize the time they spend with us. We collect continuous feedback from board members about topics they are interested in, information they would like to receive, and ways they would like to engage with us during the meetings. We spend time crafting a theme for each meeting, scheduling engaging speakers to discuss topics that are timely and relevant, and arranging behind-the-scenes tours of campus spaces and/or programs that appeal to our board.
- Authoring fund reports: We write annual reports describing how we spent private funds. With over 180 funds, this is time-consuming, but important as it demonstrates the value and impact of donor giving.

## **Students as Library Ambassadors**

Why are students important to an academic library's fundraising strategy? Today's students are tomorrow's alumni. The opportunity to engage them in fundraising when they are current students means they are much more likely to stay engaged when they graduate and give back to their alma mater.

Earlier, we mentioned building a culture of philanthropy, so what does that look like for W&M as it relates to students? First, we created a student affinity group called Library Ambassadors. This student-led group serves to provide a place for connection and engagement between the libraries and current students. The members of this group provide feedback on library services and resources, staff library events, write thank you notes to our donors, and play a big role in promoting William & Mary's giving day.

Since the library established this group five years ago, it has steadily grown in membership. We attribute this success to several reasons. First, it is casual. This is not a formal advisory board. There is no application process, no membership fees, and no Robert's Rules of Order. Students can join at the beginning of the year or halfway through. They can choose to be as involved as they want, which makes entry into this organization very easy and stress-free. Second, this group is student-led and student-driven. The students select their leadership team (president, vice president, secretary, and social media chair). The students run their meetings and plan their group activities (with support from the Senior Director of Communication and Engagement, who serves as their staff liaison.) W&M Libraries provides food at the monthly meetings because students love free food, and this encourages engagement. Lastly, and possibly most importantly, the Library Ambassadors program provides a place for connection. In surveys of our ambassadors, students consistently highlight the ability to connect with their peers as a motivator for joining. Many students, especially first-year students, are longing for a sense of belonging and connection. The Library Ambassadors group provides a place to connect with others, share a love of books and libraries, and find a sense of purpose.

Ambassadors give back to the W&M Libraries by providing feedback on library services and resources, advocating for the libraries, and assisting in fundraising efforts. Engaging students in W&M's giving day, called One Tribe One Day, has been critical to the library's giving day success. Our 2024 giving day was W&M Libraries' biggest yet: We raised over \$240,000 and reached 700+ donors in 24 hours. Over 100 of these donors were students, nearly triple compared to the year before. How did the libraries achieve this? We spent significant time educating ambassadors on why giving matters and why they should give to the libraries. We asked them to advocate for the libraries to their classmates and friends through word of mouth and social media. We wanted our fundraising appeal *to* students to come *from* students, and they responded by donating to the libraries in a significant way on that day.

## **Alumni & Community Engagement**

The majority of W&M Libraries' donor base consists of alumni and local community members. Most alumni choose to give back due to their affinity with the university, but why would a local community member feel inclined to support a university library? The libraries have focused on being a visible part of our community by contributing to our local community in many ways. First, all library events are free and open to the public. Additionally, W&M Libraries sponsors local events and organizations, such as the Williamsburg Book Festival and Williamsburg Symphony Orchestra, and we partner with our local public library on a "One Book, One Community" reading event.

The most significant way W&M Libraries contributes is through our partnership with our local public library, Williamsburg Regional Library. We entered into a reciprocal borrowing privileges agreement, which provides access to the collections at both library systems. Individuals can receive borrowing privileges at W&M Libraries at no cost, and likewise, W&M affiliates receive library privileges at the public library, including those who do not live in the immediate area.

This agreement eliminated a barrier to our library – a required donation for a library card– and opened our library collections to the community, allowing them to take advantage of W&M Libraries' resources in ways they had never been able to before. Through engaging messaging and outreach efforts, W&M Libraries are now positioned as a community library. This positive change has led to many gifts from community members.

### **Building a Culture of Philanthropy with Library Staff**

While engaging external donors is crucial for academic library advancement, developing an internal understanding of philanthropy amongst library staff is equally important. We will examine two key components for building a culture of philanthropy among librarians and staff: Understanding library advancement principles and developing budget awareness.

### **Introducing Staff to the Idea of Philanthropy**

Within William & Mary Libraries, we believe that successful library fundraising depends on engaging all personnel—from public services staff to Research & Instruction librarians to catalogers and archivists. William & Mary Libraries' fundraising achievements stem from making fundraising part of every employee's experience. This begins with onboarding, when new employees learn about the library's fundraising framework, including priorities, fundraising goals, the board, and the library's approach to donor engagement.

Librarians, archivists, and library staff can be strong allies in advancement; however, they need to be set up for success. We ensure staff success in interactions with the library's Board of Directors or other potential donors by reinforcing messaging around engagement and fundraising in every staff meeting and frequently reinforcing library goals and priorities. Every all-staff meeting includes updates on fundraising initiatives, donor activities, and progress toward goals. This consistent messaging helps connect library initiatives with broader university priorities while ensuring staff at all levels can confidently discuss the library's vision with

potential donors, board members, and university administrators. Library administrators highlight donor-funded collections, spaces, events, and even furniture purchases to ensure that staff are aware when purchases are funded through philanthropy. Librarians, archivists, and staff are often asked to give presentations on library projects or new initiatives during board meetings, further integrating employees into philanthropic engagement.

This comprehensive approach to advancement awareness creates several benefits. It builds shared investment in the library's success by showing how individual roles connect to the whole. It also transforms every staff member into a library ambassador. We've found that genuine interactions between library personnel and library users often spark philanthropic support, with donors mentioning interactions with specific staff members as their inspiration for giving.

### **Budget Literacy and Transparency**

Budget transparency serves multiple strategic purposes, including fostering accountability, ensuring alignment with institutional goals, and promoting effective resource stewardship. While implementing transparent financial practices requires an environment of significant trust, the benefits can significantly outweigh potential challenges. This is particularly relevant as library staff increasingly express interest in understanding the library's financial decisions and resource allocation.

What does this look like in practice? The budget discussions take the form of meetings, which are tailored to different staff constituencies, acknowledging varying levels of financial literacy, interest, and professional needs. For example, the Research & Instruction librarian team participates in a budget review led by the Associate Dean of Research & Public Services. These structured sessions examine detailed spreadsheets covering major budget categories, including personnel costs, collections, technology infrastructure, and operations, as well as private funding sources, such as endowments and cash accounts. These meetings serve multiple purposes. First, they provide concrete context for abstract budget concepts. When staff understand that the integrated library system costs over \$260,000 annually or that employee benefits add approximately 30% to base salaries, they gain valuable perspective on institutional costs and constraints. Next, the budget sessions create opportunities to explore how spending decisions reflect library values and priorities. Additionally, they allow for detailed discussion of fund restrictions, endowment parameters, and donor stewardship practices, such as annual reporting and their usefulness in philanthropic engagement. Library staff have shown particular interest in endowment fund purposes and restrictions, understanding that some funds are designated for specific uses.

While frontline staff are never expected to directly ask donors for contributions, their regular interactions with library users often lead to meaningful donor relationships. Our experience shows that positive patron interactions frequently result in gifts made to recognize exceptional service. This highlights the importance of comprehensive staff professional development centered around library advancement principles and fund management.

### **Professional Development Benefits**

Budget literacy represents an increasingly valuable professional competency for academic librarians. Understanding financial management concepts better positions library professionals for leadership roles and career advancement. Moreover, early exposure to budget management provides important experience that many librarians traditionally acquire only upon reaching management positions. This proactive approach to budget and financial literacy helps develop the next generation of library leaders while improving current organizational effectiveness.

### **Conclusion**

Fundraising is no longer confined to development offices; it now demands a collective effort that permeates every corner of an organization. This article spotlights how the university libraries at William & Mary thrive on the active engagement of all staff, faculty, students, and alumni.

### **Additional Resources**

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