

# Clemson Libraries' Campaign Gift for Neurodiversity: A Strategic Model for Library Advancement

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Clemson University alumni Bob and Beth Shepard made a historic contribution to the advancement of Clemson University, its libraries, and the future of neurodiversity through ClemsonLIFE. ClemsonLIFE (Learning is for Everyone) is a program that provides young adults ages 18-30 who have intellectual disabilities with on-campus experiences, while simultaneously teaching students life skills and independence (Clemson University, 2026). This program embodies the concept of neurodiversity, the idea that differences in brain function are natural variations rather than deficits. Through this program, Clemson University has established itself as a trailblazer in postsecondary education for neurodivergent individuals.

Established through a gift made in early 2025, the Shepard Family's high-six-figure cash investment created a first-of-its-kind collection that highlights the historical and present activities of the ClemsonLIFE program, as well as academic and oral histories from ClemsonLIFE students and graduates, staff, faculty, family members, and volunteers. The collection also documents the origin and growth of ClemsonLIFE through artifacts such as branded T-shirts, lanyards, administrative records, newsletters, and other promotional materials. In addition, the gift funds a ClemsonLIFE student worker position and training for staff, equipping them with the tools to mentor neurodivergent students. Furthermore, the gift funds a Shepard Family Archivist for Neurodiversity, a dedicated staff member who will lead the acquisition of related materials and the collection of oral histories. The collection will be open to the public nationwide, marking a pioneering step toward the creation of a national archive for the history and future of neurodiversity. This gift comes amid a comprehensive university-wide fundraising campaign, *Fiercely Forward*, which establishes three priorities:

1. Delivering the No. 1 student experience
2. Doubling research by 2035
3. Transforming lives statewide and beyond

The establishment of Clemson as a national model in this field has naturally drawn influential philanthropic support from donors such as the Shepard Family. Bob and Beth, both graduates of the Class of 1978, are actively engaged as members of the Library Campaign Committee. Their gift aligns directly with the *Fiercely Forward* campaign and demonstrates an effective philanthropic strategy: aligning library-specific priorities with the institutional campaign goals to secure transformative gifts and position the libraries as essential partners to the university.

The process to fulfill this strategy began with the recruitment of campaign cabinet members who shared aligned passions and the enthusiasm for advocating for the Libraries. The Libraries had already identified a key priority: expanding their marquis collections. After extensive research, leaders identified a glaring gap in neurodiversity research. This led to a university-wide partnership between the Shepard Family and deans from the Libraries to the College of Education to create a gift that addresses institutional priorities while elevating the university's impact on a national scale.

This gift enhances the student experience by providing neurodivergent students with the opportunity to work in a professional and academic setting, such as the libraries, fostering a more embracing environment. Not only does this gift support a dedicated student assistant, it also provides staff with specialized training, allowing neurodivergent students to learn and work in an

atmosphere that is tailored to their needs. Furthermore, this collection solidifies the legacy of ClemsonLIFE students and graduates as drivers of institutional change.

With this collection, the Libraries serve as a strong catalyst for further research, contributing to the university's goal of expanding research by providing students and scholars with access to unique sources and stories. An investment in Special Collections and Archives is a direct investment in the broader community, as these collections are globally accessible to researchers around the world. Research is an essential component of discovery and innovation, fueling progress and change that address challenges locally and globally.

In return, the Libraries' Special Collections and Archives received additional staff support through the student worker position, the archivist role, and expanded library staff training. However, this gift doesn't just provide more staff support; it elevates the scholarly value of the archives. Ultimately, the Shepard Family gift embodies the spirit of the *Fiercely Forward* campaign, enabling the Libraries to advance their priorities while serving as an essential partner to the campaign's core mission.

Bob and Beth Shepard were not simply asked to fund the Special Collection and Archives; they were asked to preserve history and help shape the future of neurodivergent research. Many library advancement professionals cite the lack of a designated alumni base, lower institutional visibility, and emerging technology as obstacles to fundraising. However, clearly articulating the library's value as a high-impact partner—and its ability to inspire success across all divisions—can help address these challenges.

The Shepard gift created a direct connection between the Libraries and a nationally recognized program, increasing opportunities for elevated relevance and engagement. This gift not only sets an example for the future of neurodivergent research and the role of the libraries in university campaigns, it also provides library advancement professionals with a practical model for showing donors how their support can move beyond the operational funding to propel the core institutional initiatives.

At any higher education institution, the library plays an instrumental role as a central hub for discovery, research, and academic excellence. The library is not just a building or a department; it is a collaborative enterprise that supports creativity and campuswide partnerships. The Shepard family's gift demonstrates the libraries' emerging role as indispensable partners in advancing the university's goals and provides valuable insight into the benefits of creating a meaningful partnership between academic units and the university.