

Tapping into Student Philanthropy During a Campus Giving Day: Ducks for Donations

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Abstract

To increase the likelihood that an academic library would obtain enough donors to receive a bonus challenge gift during their campus giving day, a librarian created a Ducks for Donations event. This tabling event, held for two or three hours in the library lobby, targeted students by providing them with a rubber duck that they could customize with accessories in exchange for making a donation. Because Ducks for Donations taps into a library tradition in a unique way, is interactive, and helps students connect with one another, the academic library implementing this program received the challenge gift and boosted the number of students contributing to the library during their giving day from 2 to 24 in just two years.

Tapping into Student Philanthropy During a Campus Giving Day: Ducks for Donations

Across Towson University, a comprehensive public university in Maryland with approximately 19,000 students, philanthropy is steadily growing. In 2014, the Towson University Foundation raised \$4,341,224 in contributions compared to \$6,653,803 in 2024 (ProPublica, 2026). This expansion is due, in part, to the addition of an annual giving day known as the TU Big Give. Started as a giving week in 2019, TU Big Give is an opportunity for many units on campus, including the library, to fundraise for between two and five of their top priorities. Most educational institutions primarily target their alumni on their giving days, but many universities promote their giving days to current faculty, staff, and especially students as well (Council for Advancement and Support of Education, 2025). These universities hope to build a culture of philanthropy among students while they are on campus so they will be more likely to give when they become alumni (Council for Advancement and Support of Education, 2025). This has been the case at Towson University (2025), where the University Advancement division began holding fun events like the Great Pumpkin Smash, where students could donate five dollars to the Student Emergency & Food Insecurity fund and demolish a pumpkin in the center of campus on a cool, fall day. University Advancement has begun to incorporate engaging campus activities into TU Big Give, too. In 2026, University Advancement staff hid plush tigers around campus and gave clues throughout the day where each one was located. Whoever found the tiger would be able to redeem it for up to a \$1000 donation to the TU fund of their choice, and most of those who found the tigers were current students (Towson University, 2026c, 2026d).

Students are the central focus of most Towson University activities, from strategic planning to fundraising. The top priority listed for TU President Mark Ginsberg on his list of 10 is to support holistic student success (Towson University, 2026a) and the top core value in the strategic plan is, “Dedication to student intellectual and personal growth” (Towson University, 2026b, para. 7). Initiatives to benefit current students are the primary focus of Towson’s philanthropic efforts as well, during TU Big Give and throughout the whole year. For example, donors have made over 65 scholarships available through the TU Foundation just to students in the Towson University College of Education (2026). Overall, universities, including Towson University, have begun focusing on student fundraising to benefit students.

Towson University has a single campus library, Albert S. Cook, with a staff of 54, including 26 full-time librarians. In line with the university’s goals, values, and strategic plan, Cook Library provides resources, services, spaces, and events to bolster holistic student success. These range from large initiatives focused on academic success, such as providing a textbook collection so students can borrow, rather than buy, expensive course materials (Albert S. Cook Library, 2026), to smaller single-day initiatives centered on wellness, such as hosting therapy dogs in the library for two hours during the stressful final exam season (Albert S. Cook Library, 2025). Students do use library resources, services,

and spaces with a gate count of almost 12,000 visitors during a typical week within the academic year.

One of the library's longest-running student-centered wellness initiatives, however, is Study Ducks. For the last 20 years, library staff have placed rubber ducks in spaces around the building for students to find throughout the final exam period. When students find a duck, they are encouraged to pick it up and take it with them, adopting it as their study companion. This tradition is so powerful that even when the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the entire university transitioning into remote learning, Library IT staff found a way to hide virtual ducks on the library website so students could still participate in the supportive practice. More recently, the Study Ducks tradition has become so popular that the staff member who places the ducks around the library reported that she needs to start varying her route and schedule for duck disbursement because students were following her and snatching up the ducks as soon as she put them out. In spring 2026, she estimates that she hid, and students found approximately 200 ducks during a 10-day final exam period.

Cook Library leadership has focused their philanthropic efforts on students as well. For many years, library student employees have created social media campaigns to promote TU Big Give and have played an active role in donor stewardship activities by writing thank-you cards and making short gratitude videos for donors. Students are also the primary beneficiaries of library fundraising activities. For instance, the dean has made fundraising to expand the textbook lending program a key priority during recent giving days, so more students can affordably access their course materials.

Ducks for Donations is Hatched

Cook Library started the Ducks for Donations program in 2025 as a way to unlock a challenge gift during TU Big Give. Like 87% of institutions (Bara, 2026), Towson University sought to establish challenge gifts, where donors meet a specific threshold during a specific period of time to unlock a large or matching gift from a donor, to create a sense of excitement and competition during their giving day. To help get TU Big Give challenge gifts off the ground, the university's provost launched a competitive challenge for all the colleges and the library. In 2025, the library would unlock a \$1000 gift from the provost if 75 donors gave to one of their funds during the day, and in 2026, the library needed 100 donors to unlock a \$1000 gift. Because each of these donor goals represented an increase from what the library had attained in the previous year, library fundraisers needed a creative way to reach new donors if they wanted to unlock the challenge gift. Given that only two students donated to the library during TU Big Give in 2024, student philanthropy is a priority for the institution, and students frequent the library during giving day, I knew I needed to create an engaging way to encourage students to give to Cook Library so we could get the provost's bonus gift. As a result, I developed Ducks for Donations, which consisted of a table in the library lobby during TU Big Give, where students could select and custom-decorate their very own limited-edition sparkle study duck in exchange for a donation.

How Ducks for Donations Took Flight

For the 2025 TU Big Give, I planned to have a table in the library lobby for three hours during the middle of the day, where I would give away glittering gold, library-branded rubber ducks to anyone who donated. We had never given away branded ducks before, and we had very rarely put out study ducks that were glittery, so I felt comfortable labeling these as limited-edition giveaways in hopes of heightening the appeal. I wanted to make it easy to donate to the library, so I designed a sign with a QR Code to the library's giving page on the TU Big Give microsite. I would have given a duck to anyone who donated to any TU fund at some point during the Big Give that year—all they would have to do is walk up and show a receipt to get a duck—but I secretly hoped that the convenience of giving to the library while in the library would bring more donors our way. My dean also wanted to give away cookies to anyone who donated, as well, with the hopes that free food would be a draw. A manager in the library's Access Services department volunteered a student to assist with staffing the table during the event.

Library leadership did not find out about the provost's challenge until about a month before the 2025 TU Big Give, so this meant that I had minimal time to order 250 gold, branded rubber ducks for \$400 and publicize the event through university and library channels. Knowing that supply chain challenges can result in shipping delays, I hesitated to publicize the Ducks for Donations ahead of time out of fear that the ducks would not arrive. After reaching out to the vendor daily and not getting a definitive response on when I could expect the ducks, I knew I needed to pivot. I ordered dozens of unbranded glitter rubber ducks from Amazon for about \$100, and some of them came with attachable accessories, like hats, bows, sunglasses, and necklaces. By the time the 2025 TU Big Give had arrived, the branded rubber ducks had not, so I was thankful that I had not publicized them and had a backup plan.

The inaugural Ducks for Donations started out slowly at 11 am with a handful of passers-by making donations and choosing ducks. I staffed the table during that first hour and had forgotten to put out the duck accessories. When a library staff member came to take over at noon, she asked what was in the extra box off to the side. I told her about the accessories, and her eyes lit up. She enthusiastically brought them out and arranged them alongside the ducks on the table. At 1 pm, a student worker took over staffing the table, and then I stopped by at 2 pm to clean up. I was nervous to ask how it went, but the student worker told me that so many people she knew stopped by. She enthusiastically said they all loved choosing a duck and picking out accessories. Remember the cookies that we wanted to give out too? The student reported that no one was interested in them, and we needed to find a home for all the leftovers.

Soaring into the Second Ducks for Donations

The branded golden sparkle ducks arrived about a week after the 2025 TU Big Give, so I was ready to deploy them during our giving day the next year. The provost's challenge returned in 2026, but this year, we needed to obtain even more library donors to receive her \$1000 gift. Because we had the branded ducks in advance in 2026, I felt more comfortable

publicizing Ducks for Donations the second time around. I took photos of the ducks with some accessories and used Canva to create graphics for the library's website and social media.

Figure 1

2026 Ducks for Donations Promotional Image



I also shared my photos and information about our tabling plans with University Advancement and University Marketing in the hopes that they would help publicize the event as well.

Scheduling and logistical challenges also resulted in some unexpected changes in 2026. Because of another staff-focused event taking place in the library, we didn't have the capacity to host a Ducks for Donations table for more than 2 hours this year. I looked at library hourly gate count data from the previous year to determine what times were busiest on Wednesdays, the day of the week when the TU Big Give would be held, and found that noon to 2 pm was when the most people entered the library. In addition, when I took promotional photos of the ducks, I discovered that the branded ducks were a different shape and size from the ones I had purchased from Amazon. This meant that some of the accessories didn't fit well or at all on the new branded ducks. Just in case, and to offer some variety, I also purchased some additional ducks and accessories from Amazon to give away in 2026 as well.

Ducks for Donations 2026 began with a student employee and me staffing the table for the first hour. I put out lots of duck and accessory options along with a QR code sign so visitors could easily give.

Figure 2

The 2026 Ducks for Donations Table in the Library Lobby



In an attempt to encourage passers-by to donate, I emphasized the ability to select and customize a duck both in the language that I used on the sign (Give Dollars Get Your Duck) and by calling out to them, “You can get your very own limited edition sparkle study duck if you make a donation!” while I was staffing the table. After a student worker joined me, she took a different promotional tactic. She asked the students she knew who passed by our table, many of whom were also student employees, to support the library, and getting a duck was secondary. I noticed that more Ducks for Donations donors chose the unbranded ducks over the branded ones. Many donors also took multiple minutes picking accessories for their ducks. They seemed to carefully look over all the options and remarked at how cute the tiny versions of human accessories, like earphones, cameras, hats, and necklaces, were.

Figure 3

A Library Staff Member who is also a TU Student Proudly Shows Off Her Duck



At 1 pm, another library staff member took over the table, and after she closed down Ducks for Donations at 2 pm, she remarked that she had noticed the same donor patterns I had an hour earlier.

Results and Reflections after the Quack

TU Big Give data suggest that Ducks for Donations had a positive impact on student giving to Cook Library. In both 2025 and 2026, enough donors gave to the library that we were able to meet the provost’s challenge and receive her \$1,000 bonus gift. In addition, Ducks for Donations enabled us to substantially grow student giving from 2 donors in 2024 to 24 in 2026.

Figure 4

Number of Donors and Total Gifts Made to the Library during TU Big Give 2024-2026

Year	Amount Raised	Donors	Student Donors
2024	\$6,711.42	74	2
2025	\$7,852.88	91	20
2026	\$7,308.22	105	24

While Cook Library raised less money overall in 2026 than we did in 2025, our major gift officer noted that the growth in the number of donors is what stands out, “And that is what Big Give is about — participation!” (M. Crawford, personal communication, June 25, 2026). This suggests that Ducks for Donations not only brings in support for the library, but it also plays an important role in advancing the university’s philanthropic goals.

Why did Ducks for Donations work, and how can I make it better in the future? I would argue that the program’s success results from three elements: (1) Unique Tie to Tradition, (2) Interactivity, and (3) Student Connections.

Unique Tie to Tradition

Researchers have found that scarcity marketing, using limited-edition language, can influence consumers’ willingness to purchase an item and their willingness to pay more for a product across a variety of industries (Jamil et al., 2026). Many nonprofits have been able to successfully collaborate with brands to create limited-edition products with proceeds going to the organization because consumers who value the status that comes with having a limited-edition item are more likely to make that purchase, resulting in a donation (Kim, Park, & Shrum, 2022). As a result, limited edition giveaways have the ability to compel a group of potential donors that may not have given otherwise. This suggests that Ducks for Donations may owe part of its success to the limited-edition effect. Those potential donors who are interested in the status that comes with having their own custom sparkle rubber duck may have been more willing to donate.

Research also suggests that giveaways or products connected to a cause need to reinforce, not contradict, the values espoused by the organization in order to be effective. In 2015, Mart and Giesbrecht lamented how 17 instances of alcohol product marketing contained imagery indicating support for breast cancer, even though multiple studies confirmed a link between drinking alcohol and developing breast cancer. Bujalski (2025) argues that this type of marketing is more about legitimizing a corporation and less about

supporting a cause, so nonprofits need to be cautious about their connections. As a result, libraries may want to consider how any donor giveaway ties to the organization's values and goals. Ducks for Donations is connected to Cook Library's well-established study duck tradition, which is grounded in the institutional goal of supporting students during the difficult final exam period.

Finally, connecting to a well-established tradition helped make it easier to communicate with passersby. Those staffing the library's TU Big Give table only had a few short seconds to connect with potential donors walking through the lobby. This meant that the less the staff had to explain what the cause was and what the tabling was about, the more likely that passersby would be unable to dismiss Ducks for Donations as too complicated for their busy lives. As a result, using limited-edition language to create a sense of urgency while communicating clearly about our ties to a supportive library tradition encouraged potential donors to take the time to invest in decorating a duck to support the library.

Interactivity

While college student donors and younger staff members may not be able to be major library donors yet, they do demonstrate a growing interest in supporting philanthropy. Gen Z (those born between 1997 and 2012) especially wants to be engaged with the causes they care about, with 51% reporting that they also volunteer (Mercurio, 2024). Fundraising experts argue that Gen Z is the generation most excited for fundraising events, so it is important to design events with them in mind (Mercurio, 2024). This includes providing multiple entry points, such as establishing reduced rates for young donors to participate in events and creating signature event activities that are both meaningful and fun, enabling them to easily share on social media with their communities (Uradnik, 2025).

This suggests that Ducks for Donations' success stems from tapping into Gen Z's interest in participating in engaging and interactive activities that allow them to support a cause they care about and share that support with their friends. By selecting and customizing a duck, library donors can create something that is uniquely their own. I heard some students comment on how the duck accessories they chose represented their interests or coordinated with their aesthetic. Donors also had a low barrier to participation, since they could get a duck for any amount over \$5 they wanted to give. Many students also took pictures of their creations and had their friends and colleagues take pictures of them with their ducks (see Figure 3) so they could share on social media. Ultimately, Ducks for Donations was able to tap into many of the characteristics that matter to younger donors, according to philanthropic experts.

Student Connections

Not only do young donors want engaging events, but they also want to strengthen their community connections with their philanthropy. "Fundraising gatherings that prioritize connection—through networking opportunities, interactive experiences, and

shared purpose—help cultivate a community of advocates who return year after year” (Uradnik, 2025, para. 6). Similarly, philanthropy experts suggest that Gen Z is particularly responsive to peer-to-peer fundraising where they can share their commitment to a cause with their community either digitally or in-person (Mercurio, 2024).

These statements suggest that a substantial part of Ducks for Donations’ appeal came from the student worker’s invitation to her colleagues and friends to donate to Cook Library. By inviting her peers to support Cook, she is signaling that she shares a connection with them, the library is a cause that matters to her, and therefore, it is a cause that should matter to them, too. Notice how the ducks are secondary in this student worker’s appeal. She is leaning into her community connections to encourage her friends and coworkers to give, and those who do are reinforcing the strength of their relationship with her. Ultimately, a Gen Z library student worker’s appeal to her library community connections allowed Ducks for Donations to take off.

What’s Downstream for Ducks for Donations

Because the Ducks for Donations event has been able to substantially raise the number of student donors to Cook Library during TU Big Give, and it is likely that the number of donors we will need to obtain to receive the provost’s bonus challenge gift will increase, I am confident that library leadership will retain, but tweak the event in future years. A key part of the tweaks will involve expanding those elements that are already working well and seem to contribute to the event’s success. This includes expanding the tabling event from two to three or even four hours. I will also include more unbranded ducks and diversify accessories, if possible, since those held the most appeal. In addition, I am hoping to involve additional student employees in staffing the Ducks for Donations event so they, too, can appeal to their community connections.

Other beneficial changes may be more difficult to implement. Ideally, University Advancement will provide additional visibility for Ducks for Donations by boosting social media and campus promotion of the event. Unfortunately, I think University Advancement may be reluctant to publicize Ducks for Donations more because doing so might be seen as providing the library with an unfair advantage that would help them obtain the provost’s bonus challenge gift, while other colleges are not receiving equivalent support. This will mean that the library will still primarily need to use its channels to promote Ducks for Donations to a student audience. Additionally, it would be ideal if the minimum donation limit could be lowered from \$5. Multiple students said they would like to contribute, but they couldn’t afford a \$5 gift. While credit card processing fees may make such a change cost-prohibitive, library leadership and University Advancement staff may be able to brainstorm an alternative that allows even more students to participate.

The success of Towson University Albert S. Cook Library’s Ducks for Donations event during our university giving day demonstrates that academic libraries can engage college students in philanthropy with an engaging, community-centered, but inexpensive, event. If library leadership is able to expand the elements that contributed to Ducks for

Donations' success, increase awareness, and enable even more people to participate, this event has the potential to continue to really soar.

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