Original Article

Working on the short grass: A qualitative analysis of fundraiser roles and experiences at public historically Black colleges and universities

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ABSTRACT The former president of Morehouse College, Dr Benjamin E. Mays, once said, 'Higher education for Blacks has always been in a precarious position. These institutions were founded on short grass financially, and they live today on short grass.' Today, many public and private historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have found success in fundraising endeavors, with the schools taking advantage of the opportunities extended to them. Although these colleges are not on the same long, financial grass as are other institutions with larger endowments, larger advancement staff and larger alumni pools, the advancement offices and top fundraisers at public HBCUs are striding toward greater fiduciary goals and heights. This paper examines the experiences of 27 institutional advancement officers at public HBCUs. The practitioners interviewed believed that they were in the dominant coalition that guided the university's decisions. However, practitioners were constrained or limited in their roles by the lack of financial or personnel support for their function. The fundraisers enacted the expert prescriber, problem-solving facilitator and technician roles described by Kelly (1998). *International Journal of Educational Advancement* (2009) 9, 3–15.
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INTRODUCTION

Since the opening of Cheyney University in 1837, public and private historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have been crucial resources for equity and diversity in graduate education and the business sector. For more than 160 years, HBCUs have served as ‘the authentic custodians of the archives of black history and life. They are the political and social centers for black communities’ (Jackson and Nunn, 2003, p. 3). Of the 105 HBCUs, 43 are accredited public institutions, offering, at minimum, baccalaureate programs. Of the Black students attending HBCUs, approximately 70 percent attend public institutions (Yates, 2001). Often, public HBCUs are studied as though a single identity and history unite the institutions (Williams, 1988). Although a common ground regarding the circumstances of their establishment binds them together, Black colleges differ considerably in ‘their academic quality, financial health, physical facilities, student body attributes, and faculty strength’ (Williams, 1988, p. 135). Although the founders, educators and students of HBCUs believed that education was ‘the great social equalizer’ (Williams *et al*, 2004, p. 3), HBCUs were limited in their initial mission, geography and reach. The pursuit of private, unrestricted gifts is necessary for the continuance of these colleges and universities. However, the lack of informed scholarship on the fundraising practices and the careers of advancement officers at historically Black institutions prevents the development of the applied and theoretical scholarship from benefiting academics and practitioners.

The primary goal of this study is to understand the fundraising roles and experiences of advancement officers at public historically Black universities within the context of public relations theory. This research is needed to understand the current contexts in which fundraisers or institutional advancement officers at HBCUs operate, and to acknowledge the role that fundraising plays in higher education. Theoretically, this research is important because it applies and extends the fundraising roles typology offered by Kelly (1998) to a set of practitioners typically left unexamined and marginalized.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Organizational roles of public relations practitioners and fundraisers

Each member of an organization is directly associated with a set of interdependent and interrelated activities and behaviors. The recurring patterns constitute an individual’s role in the organization. The idea of roles as a collection of organized and repetitive activities aligned with a particular position has intrigued many researchers in public relations and fundraising.

The daily patterns of behaviors and actions of those involved in fundraising are identified by the four roles conceptualized by Kelly (1998). Using a different terminology to promote clarity among the fundraising community, Kelly reconstructed the four public relations roles of expert prescriber, communication facilitator, problem-solving process facilitator and communication technician. The

fundraising roles are liaison, expert prescriber, technician and problem-solving facilitator. Liaison is the traditional role for fundraisers. These practitioners serve as consultants to the senior managers and other fundraising officers, advising on how to obtain the money and relying on others to carry out the functions and goals. Liaisons 'act as facilitators, interpreters, and mediators in bringing together organizational representatives with prospective donors' (Kelly, 1998, p. 106). The limitation of the role is that it is reliant on others in the organization, making the fundraising function susceptible and vulnerable to not achieving goals and being inefficient (Waters *et al*, 2005).

Kelly (1998) described the expert prescriber as the one in the organization with the skills and sole responsibility for raising gifts. The opposite of the liaison, the practitioner enacting the expert prescriber role has been granted the power and authority to decide which institutional needs and donor prospects are addressed, and to handle events and activities. Expert prescribers have assumed the commitment to raise money for the university and the responsibility for the success (or failure) of all fundraising endeavors. According to Waters *et al*, a weakness of this role is the isolation of fundraising from other organizational capacities: 'Commitment to fund raising [*sic*] and its success is limited to practitioners, which often leads to unrealistic expectations and dissatisfaction with results' (p. 6).

The problem-solving facilitator gives consultations to officials and collaborates with individuals inside and outside the organization. The

problem-solving facilitator guides the university through the fundraising process: research, setting objectives, programming, evaluations and stewardship. These officers are knowledgeable about and intimately involved in the university's 'offerings, policies, and actions' (Kelly, 1998, p. 198). Kelly proposed that this role is best because, rather than placing fundraising as a silo function separate from the other departments, the problem-solving process facilitator coordinates and integrates fundraising into the management and decision-making structure of the educational institution (Kelly, 1998; Waters *et al*, 2005).

The technician makes few contributions to fundraising success, and the effectiveness of this role is subject to the strategic planning of others (Kelly, 1998, p. 197). The technician is the practitioner who is hired to generate the dominant coalition's 'mandated communication services' (Dozier, 1992, p. 330). Technicians do not initiate policy, solve problems or build organizational action plans. Technicians are not considered members of management or members of the dominant coalitions; these practitioners focus on providing and implementing the various techniques used in raising gifts.

Similar to a public relations manager, the fundraiser must be a member of the organization's dominant coalition, the informal yet influential power network, for any communication endeavor to succeed. Having a seat at the table or access to the president and the board is the achievement of power for the fundraising practitioner, personally,

or the advancement department, organizationally. The department is able to access and mobilize resources and gain credibility. The fundraiser has the ability and the authority to make autonomous decisions. He or she is an empowered practitioner who has the ability to act as an independent strategist for the good of the organization while cooperating with the heads of other departments (Kelly, 1998; Grunig *et al*, 2002).

Research questions

This is an exploratory study for purposes of understanding the potentiality of Kelly's (1998) fundraising roles at public HBCUs. Based on the assumptions and the arguments offered by Kelly (1991, 1998), the research questions posed for this project were the following: How do fundraisers at public HBCUs enact their roles? What barriers and constraints do they see pertaining to their role? What opportunities do they see related to their role and function?

METHOD

To obtain a greater understanding of fundraising roles and experiences at public HBCUs, the sample included the top fundraising administrators at public institutions located in the 21 states having higher educational institutions with the HBCU designation.¹ E-mail messages were sent to the top institutional advancement officers listed in the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) membership directory. As the CASE directory did not have complete contact information for all colleges and universities, the researcher

obtained the fundraising officers' telephone numbers and e-mail addresses through their university websites.

In that initial e-mail message, the purpose of the research was explained, and each development officer was asked to respond to the message, indicating whether he or she was the correct person to respond to the researcher's questions. A follow-up email message was sent to those advancement officers who did not respond to the first contact. If that message was not returned, phone calls were placed to the university fundraising office to check the validity of the contact information and to schedule a telephone interview. Of 39 participants eligible to participate, 30 advancement officers participated in the first research phase – the quantitative survey portion (Tindall, 2004). For this qualitative interview portion, 27 advancement officers participated. Three participants who returned the written survey to the researcher declined participation in the telephone survey, citing time constraints and scheduling conflicts.

The telephone interviews, which lasted between 15 and 45 min, were recorded for accuracy.² The interviews contained questions that were few in number and simple enough to garner responses within 15 to 30 min. The open-ended questions provided practitioners an opportunity to reflect on individual accomplishments, to state each university's goals for fundraising, and to give their opinions on the state of fundraising for public historically Black colleges.

The qualitative responses collected from the interviews were treated as data according to Silverman's (2000)

understanding of such material as 'accessing various stories or narratives through which people describe their worlds' (p. 723). Themes were created after the researcher looked 'for metaphors, for repetition of words, and for shifts in content' in the interviews and from the literature review (Ryan and Bernard, 2000, p. 780). The researcher applied an interview technique that emphasized the interaction between the interviewer and the respondent. The responses were then coded, with the researcher clustering responses together that shared common threads of words and concepts (Ryan and Bernard, 2000; Silverman, 2000; Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002).

RESULTS

Five main themes were identified. The first section will address the roles enacted by the participants. The education and training of the fundraisers and their concerns about the increase in prestige and professionalism for the field are presented in the second section. The third section will cover the advancement officers' observations, explanations and rationale regarding alumni behavior. The fourth section will highlight the participants' responses and comments about the involvement of the president in fundraising and advancement programs and the importance of those institutional leaders to the shaping of the organization's fundraising identity. The final section will detail the participants' concerns over fiscal matters that eventually impact the state of institutional fundraising, state funding for the

institution and institutional allocations for the advancement function.

Fundraiser roles and satisfaction with roles

The advancement officers enacted one primary role in their offices. For some, that role was one of expert prescriber, the sole person in the organization who understands the fundraising process and the only person who is responsible for raising gifts. According to one advancement officer who has a staff of 32, she was isolated in the organizational hierarchy. Being the single person responsible for the operations of the advancement function hampered the relationship-building activities her office could have with donors and other stakeholders. Another vice president whose oversight responsibilities included research and planning, planned giving, alumni affairs, and foundation and corporate relations was organizing a capital campaign and searching for another advancement officer: 'Right now, it falls on me to do all of it – the research and the development.'

Other practitioners were a part of the management team, enacting the problem-solving facilitator role. Many reported integration between the fundraising function and the university's decision-making structure. They collaborated with the president, chancellor, provost and other important people on fundraising initiatives and goals. One advancement officer who worked across and with other campus departments to establish the first endowed chair in the college's history summed up his operation as a conduit and catalyst: 'We are the campus-wide fundraising mechanism. We facilitate it for the whole campus.'

Along with all the communication services and fundraising programs, another fundraiser at a land-grant institution had a myriad of integral campus functions under the umbrella of the advancement office. 'Any time something new comes to campus, a new entity – to get it developed, it falls under planning and advancement.'

Even though several practitioners served as the heads of advancement departments, they were concerned about the production and implementation of the college's fundraising material, actually performing some of the work in the development of these programs and tactics. The advancement officers were eager to explain and share the tactics used to successfully engage alumni, current students and other publics to participate in activities, join associations or donate money. Some advancement officers took advantage of their college or university being chosen as the school of the month on the 'Tom Joyner Morning Show,' a nationally syndicated talk show with a large African American audience. Through the national alumni association presidents, word of mouth and regular publications, the officers detailed communicating to their alumni and supporter base about their designation and how they could help to generate scholarship funds for the school. Other strategies of these fundraisers consisted of developing and distributing informational brochures, booklets, magazines and direct mail to alumni and supporters of the university.

Career entry and education of public HBCU fundraisers

Only 10 fundraisers reported having earned a doctorate, and the areas of

study for fundraisers were heavily concentrated in the traditional arts and sciences/liberal arts and education. Several advancement officers spoke about the importance of bringing a diversified skill set and qualifications to the job. A practitioner who moved from the corporate world believed that her non-traditional advancement background expanded the outlook and capacity of her office and the university's foundation:

The commercial credit training and corporate side [of her experience] is providing a lot of assurance to donors and prospects ... My understanding of commercial financial statements, fiscal policies, and controls, as well as the investment side of it, provide for the university expertise that it heretofore has not had in this job.

Kelly (1995) noted that universities and colleges have sought candidates for fundraising positions who have 'credentials apart from practitioner experience (e.g., a Ph.D. degree)' (p. 115), and public HBCUs are no different. However, the practitioners voiced opposition to the belief that more than practical experience is needed for those applying for fundraising positions. One stated: 'You don't need a Ph.D. to ask people for support.' Another advancement officer elaborated on his experience of reviewing a job description for a fundraising position at a public HBCU. 'I called the president back and I told him, "It's wonderful what you have here, but it has very little to do with fundraising. I couldn't even apply for the job even though I just gave you a million dollars [through another organization]

because of the requirements that you have here.”

All of the fundraising officers interviewed for this study noted that fundraising at HBCUs is gaining respect and recognition as a profession. They believed that there was sufficient evidence to show that the status of fundraising at HBCUs had been bolstered. Practitioners expressed a degree of autonomy, an orientation to service and the development of a knowledge base, all measures of a profession. As one said during the interview, ‘Acknowledging that this profession has grown and matured and that there are individuals who understand the profession, how to do this stuff, that has brought a certain amount of sophistication to the enterprise and has created for some successes.’

The advancement officers commented that the approach to fundraising was changing. ‘In the past,’ said one, ‘I think it was done haphazardly but not as a science ... Most of the institutions are approaching it from the standpoint of a science, fundraising as a science.’ In addition, the shift in fundraising orientation was slow coming to HBCUs, but the institutions are moving from a volunteer base to a professionally driven program. A respondent stressed, ‘White schools have been doing it for many years, but we’re only catching up with them now.’

This visibility of the profession allowed some practitioners the greater challenge and impetus to succeed. ‘It is an area where you can’t hide if you aren’t producing. Your achievements or lack thereof are quite evident to the campus community and to the

community at large,’ said one.

Echoed another, ‘This is an area where you can’t fudge it. Either you raised the money or you didn’t. Job satisfaction comes from knowing that we contributed to the causes of this institution.’

Many officers were optimistic about the future of fundraising at public HBCUs. Two advancement officers encouraged the development of new paradigms of fundraising. Other officers were eager to recruit and engage younger persons of color in the profession. One mentioned that the lack of knowledge and general awareness about fundraising as a profession impeded many young African Americans from considering the field. ‘There are opportunities for them not only at HBCUs but at majority institutions, but the average young person out of college doesn’t even know what a vice president for university advancement does.’

The changing face of donors and the possibilities and opportunities opening up to public HBCUs encourages them. ‘This is an ideal time to get into the profession and make a significant difference. It’s a time where you can bring an institution from a six figure annual fund to a seven figure.’ Another suggested that ‘the world is ahead us’ and that ‘HBCUs have a lot of potential we have not tapped yet.’

Historical and current contexts of public HBCU alumni giving

Giving by alumni was a source of a concern for many participants and a source of pride for a few. Several participants reported that alumni giving to public HBCUs was discouraging, but framed it within historical contexts. A few fundraisers

reported that the alumni's main criticism of their institutions was the lack of information sent to them from the college/university. 'They want us to take the time to write something to them, put it in an envelope, and mail it so they periodically get it,' said one fundraiser. How she mended this situation with her alumni was to start monthly mailings to the alumni base at that university. From the university's calculations, the number of alumni giving back to the university has increased. Said the same officer, 'For our institution, we saw ... a 14 per cent increase in alumni giving. Not in dollars, but in numbers ... But if we operate from a relationship-building prospective, if I can get the person to give \$5 this year, then perhaps I can get them to \$7.50 the next. So we build on it.'

Several participants linked an individual's bad experiences as a student to that person's lack of support and concern for the institution. According to one advancement officer, alumni who had problems when they were in school 'hold a grudge for years and years and years' and take out their issues 'on the institutions, rather than expressing their unhappiness directly.' Said another, 'People tend not to separate their personal feelings – positively or negatively – from the chief executive for the institution.' To one fundraising executive, the issue was a matter of building a climate for customer service on campus. For this fundraiser, these issues should be addressed and identified before students graduate: 'We must start when they come on campus, showing them that we are, in fact, here for their benefit, not

here to get their dollars, but to build their opportunity to have a greater, an opportunity for a better profession.'

Many fundraisers said alumni giving was limited, and they provided historical reasons for why that occurred, as well as identifying new giving trends among younger alumni. Several advancement officers said that many HBCUs – both public and private – were 'teacher colleges,' having a large percentage of alumni that became 'preachers and teachers' or went into professions that did not command large salaries. 'Over the past century,' said one advancement officer, 'a lot of opportunities were not available for our alumni.' Another considered the discriminatory dual systems of education as the culprit. 'It's not our fault we didn't support our schools. They didn't give us professional schools, medical schools, engineering,' all fields that were established at many public White colleges and contributed to their alumni's prosperity.

Several advancement officers did not express concern about alumni giving. To them, the situation is changing in favor of the institutions. 'As our alumni come into their own and become more and more prosperous, they give more back to the institution,' said one. Another found that the issue was 'overblown.' Alumni giving at some public HBCUs was significant, according to an advancement officer whose institution provided graduates in the fields of human services. 'Our alumni give small, but they do give.' Another stressed the historical factors of segregation and discrimination: 'You know who owns the banks, the football leagues, the commerce.

It's not our people. We are just moving into that arena.'

Institutional leadership and their role in university fundraising

The responses of the top fundraising administrators reflected the impact, both positive and negative, of a college/university president on fundraising.

Traditionally, the presidents of HBCUs have been the only ones cultivating donors and the only ones responsible for establishing and maintaining relationships with donors. 'As my understanding of it is and my experience has been,' said one respondent, 'the chief executive was always the fundraiser, and he or she never allowed the staff to interact with board members or important corporate types.' Although that model of fundraising is becoming extinct, the president and board members continue to play significant roles in fundraising.

Many fundraisers acquiesced to the president and moved into the background when he or she was performing advancement work with corporate executives, major donors or alumni. One fundraiser declared, 'They are the chief fundraising person at a university. I think the person who wears the title director or vice chancellor or vice president is merely the person who provides the backup the president or chancellor needs.' Said another, 'The president is the key fundraising individual. He or she has the opportunity and the audience to go forth and sell the university, to express the need for support in all the different publics we deal with. So they are vital to the fundraising activities at any institution.'

Several fundraisers agreed that the president was the chief fundraiser, making him or her essential to any fundraising endeavor. 'An institution's ability for growth, opportunities to move the institution to a higher level, depend upon outside support. And the board provides that stewardship, as well as the president, and other entities in the university,' according to one advancement officer. Practitioners also stressed the need for the president to understand fundraising and philanthropy. One reported that a lack of knowledge about the financial muscle that moves the university forward is endemic in HBCUs: 'The culture of historically Black colleges – in terms of leadership and administrators – is such that the lack of exposure to worlds outside of education hurts them severely. The whole climate of running a university is beyond just academic competence. It's a business.'

Impact of university support on the fundraising function

Many respondents were frustrated by the lack of consideration given to the time, effort and management of raising funds. The money for the support of the function is never sufficient, but the need always becomes greater. According to one fundraising officer, the institutional leadership places emphasis on fundraising, but the leadership does not understand the processes required: 'You simply cannot go out and say, "I need a million dollars," and then turn to the development office and say, "Go raise it" without increasing their budget proportionately.'

The institutional support funds given to the advancement officers affected

how fundraising is conducted. As one advancement officer stated, 'Fundraising [is] largely motivated by the inadequacies of higher education budgets.' Thus, the priority the institution places on the fundraising program can determine whether it will have the opportunity to do what it needs to do to achieve success.

According to another executive, fundraising is 'woefully underutilized. Its power is not understood.' And many agree, realizing that institutions must balance their priorities. 'Investing in development is hard, it's hard to do when you've got to worry about keeping buildings open,' said one. Another fundraiser in a state with several major research institutions knows that advancement will be the last thing funded within the institution. 'When they are making the allocations within the university, after they get their small-potatoes allocation, you have to look at academics first, you have to look at the business office and plant operations – the essentials that keep the institution operational.'

One officer remarked, many offices have been 'piddling along for a number of years with skeletal staff, (and) insufficient funding.' That lack of support has hurt and continued to mar many programs. For an advancement officer at a large public HBCU, 'We get spread very, very thin and can't do all of what we want to do and know needs to be done well.' One officer who discussed the problem at length lamented, 'I have nobody here who is doing prospect research. I'm aware the University of Miami has eight of those people.'

One of the concerns for the executives interviewed was the perceptions of complete state funding

for public universities. Many of them considered their colleges and universities 'state-assisted' rather than 'state-supported.' One officer who has won awards for her office's work stated that 'It's extremely difficult for public Black colleges now because foundations have initiatives geared more toward private institutions. The misconception that we have all of these state funds to do all of these great things does us a disservice.' One advancement officer initiated an awareness campaign about state funding for alumni and staff. 'We had a pie chart and scales and everything. It was a real rude eye-opener.'

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research on fundraising roles at public HBCUs is important and relevant because the roles proposed by Kelly offer tools that practitioners can use to manage and balance their responsibilities, shifting their priorities to what is important and relevant in advancing the mission of the department and university. This research has identified certain conditions and factors at public HBCUs that are unique to this type of educational institution, and that make fundraising at HBCUs a different operation and task than at other schools.

A factor to consider regarding fundraising at public HBCUs is the inequitable funding given to public universities and colleges, both in their early years and currently. According to Brady *et al* (2000), the interactions between race, money and public policy have been central to an analysis of higher education disparities between HBCUs and predominantly White institutions. Historically, public Black

colleges and universities 'have had to endure continual institutional discrimination' over control and finances (Brady *et al*, 2000, 5). Sav (2000) examined the potential existence of fiscal discrimination in state funding to Black colleges, and found that disparities in funding remain a concern.

The situation with Black college alumni is a distinctive situation. The historical contexts and circumstances of the establishment, maintenance and leadership of HBCUs are idiosyncratic. The founders and early administrators of many HBCUs structured the curriculum, limiting the courses to vocational and technical training. Although the curricula were broadened as the years progressed, students had barriers to entry into particular fields. Bowles and DeCosta (1971) acknowledge, '[T]he never ending problem of Black colleges and universities centered around the previous effects of the isolation from the educational mainstream and the fact that most of these institutions offered programs geared mostly toward the restricted opportunities believed to be available to their graduates' (p. 36).

Another point to consider with alumni giving at HBCUs is the factors shaping how and what motivates this type of donor to give to his or her alma mater. According to Hall-Russell and Kasberg (1997), the tradition of giving and philanthropy in which most HBCU graduates are enculturated and based – the African American community – is more relational and communal than the White community. The alumni must be familiar with and have a high opinion of the college's president (Gasman and

Anderson-Thompkins, 2003). Beyond that, a trust and confidence between the alumni, the development office and the president must be obtained. Skepticism of institutions, including Black colleges, is substantial and deep-seated, and many alumni do not want to be involved with planned giving efforts because of their distrust of financial institutions and the legal system (Hall-Russell and Kasberg, 1997). The university, through honest communication put forth by the advancement office and the president, must be seen as a credible source and an honorable steward of the alumni's donation.

There are several limitations to this research. The findings are confined to a group of higher educational institutions that are public HBCUs, and only 27 practitioners were interviewed. By focusing on the top fundraisers at public institutions, the research did not address or examine the experiences, traditions or conditions of staff members at private HBCUs – how their daily working lives may be similar to or different from other practitioners. Another limitation is that this is a qualitative study. Interviews were conducted with the participants to gauge their perceptions of their work environments and their situations. Further qualitative work and additional quantitative work should be carried out to capture the true picture of what roles constitute the duties and experience of fundraisers at historically Black colleges.

A focus that emerged from these interviews was alumni giving and alumni relationships with HBCUs. Alumni giving to HBCUs has been studied previously. However, the face of Black college alumni is changing.

As minorities gain access to corporate boardrooms and executive suites, the opportunities for public HBCU alumni increase. With alumni becoming successful leaders in industry, there is a greater opportunity for them to give at higher levels, to serve in important roles for the institutions, and to orient their corporations to giving to HBCUs. More must be done to understand the HBCU alumni and institutional relationship and how important historical factors such as segregation and denied access impacted the fundraising practices of HBCUs. In order to exist, colleges must have beneficial and collaborative relationships with their other stakeholders. This would include corporations and foundations. The lack of scholarly research on corporate and foundation giving to HBCUs hinders the study of fundraising. For many corporations and foundations, giving to higher education is an economic issue, with the school benefiting from the additional resources and the corporation benefiting from access to potential employees and the perception that it is involved with the community. Corporate and foundation giving are important and should be addressed in future quantitative and qualitative research.

NOTES

- 1 Southern University is a college system that has three campuses in Baton Rouge, New Orleans and Shreveport. The National of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges consolidates the three campuses into the university system, and in this research only the college system was included.
- 2 In compliance with Florida law, the researcher first obtained the consent

of all interview subjects to have their remarks tape-recorded.

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