Practitioners' Guide

Mega Campaigns For Colleges and Universities: Achieving Success

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Editor Note:

With a special interview of James D. Thompson
Senior Vice President and Chief Advancement Officer, University of Rochester
On succeeding with billion-dollar campaigns

Introduction

The growth in college and university fund-raising campaigns continues at a record pace. Ambitions abound and results vary. Campaigns seeking hundreds of millions of dollars are becoming routine. Recent news headlines touch on just how intense the pressure remains to raise funds and

how much campaign results can vary — from big visions with bold plans, to failed campaigns with ineffective fund-raising results, to perfecting the Midas touch for world class results:

Headlines:

“When \$26 Billion Isn’t Enough”

“4 years after he arrived, President leaves behind a budget deficit and an ineffective fund-raising operation”

“President has perfected the Midas touch”

“What Should a Board Expect of Its CEO As a Fund Raiser?”

“An Advancement career suddenly seems to be the perfect springboard to a college presidency.”

When it comes to planning capital campaigns, great strategy and vision are important. Still, practical

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experience shows that knowing how to implement a great strategy is vital to success. Developing and implementing a capital campaign is the heavy lifting that produces top results.

So how does one both develop and implement a great strategy for a successful Mega Campaign? One key ingredient is experience. Experienced, talented Advancement, leadership will produce winning campaign formulas.

I had the great opportunity to speak with an individual possessing this winning combination. A top talent and advancement professional known for results.

Jim Thompson was a key architect in the Washington University campaign that passed the \$1.55 billion mark and was the sixth largest campaign in history when completed. Jim has recently taken the lead role for planning his next billion-dollar type campaign.

On his first day in office, Joel Seligman, the new President of the University of Rochester, announced plans for a significant effort to advance the University, including an eventual comprehensive University campaign. As a key strategic move President Seligman appointed nationally respected development leader Jim Thompson as Senior Vice President and Chief Advancement Officer. Jim is charged with helping build and reorganize the University development staff into an integrated centrally coordinated development operation that will ultimately have several hundred staff.

The following is an excerpt from an interview with Jim on the strategies to build a successful campaign. In this exchange we begin to touch the surface of several key issues important to Jim.

Interview with James D. Thompson, Senior Vice President and Chief Advancement Officer, University of Rochester - July 6, 2006

Tom: Jim, you have taken on the planning for what looks like yet another billion-dollar campaign! Where do you start with laying the groundwork for such a striking goal? How do you hit the ground running?

Jim: I thank you start with a clear vision, great leadership, and top talent. Our vision is clear, "We are seeking people who want to 'change the world'." For leadership, we will reorganize to build on talent we now have. For talent, we will hire senior level professionals for our team to drive this campaign effort. We have partnered with a proven top search firm, Lois Lindauer & Associates to accelerate this expansion.

Tom: The vision is clear, but what would you say is the driving force for the campaign?

Jim: A top priority for President Joel Seligman in his new administration is to acquire the financial resources to enable Rochester to soar in quality, reputation and impact. Explaining this to the University community we must prepare ourselves for our next leap forward, and conduct our largest capital campaign in history, creates enormous drive and force! But we must have our entire University family fully engaged in this process. We must have compelling projects of International importance.

Tom: What is your time line for the campaign?

Jim: We will hire, build and train our team over three to four years in preparation for this campaign. Achieving extraordinary results, that can lead to transformational change across the board for the university, could take a full decade or more.

Tom: What are you looking for in your key hires?

Jim: First and foremost that they share our vision as people who want to “change the world.” Deep and successful experience and finally a strong belief in the mission of private higher education.

Tom: Tell me more about your focus on seeking people who want to change the world and a commitment to private higher education.

Jim: We are looking for consummate development professionals who truly believe that what we do in private higher education has an eternal nature. They will believe that what we do on a daily basis for this university is something larger than all of us. They will believe that our collective work will have a long term, enduring, and perpetual nature. Our personal work and lives may be time bound, but the work and life of the University of Rochester can truly continue almost in perpetuity. We are looking for people with an altruistic streak who believe that a university founded in 1850 is still young, vital, and has its greatest contributions in years ahead. That is who we are looking for!

Tom: What specific positions will be added first with your team building and new hires?

Jim: Along with my two most senior staff, a Deputy Vice President and a Senior Associate Vice President, we will start with an Associate Vice President for Advancement Services to build superior operational support. Priority skills will be planning and building systems which are effective and donor-centric. The primary focus will be to free fundraisers to build meaningful relationships with our best supporters. We need national leadership and experience in key areas of management controls, gift processing, database integrity, prospect research, learning and development, stewardship, and business practices will be essential.

For example, next could be an Assistant Vice President for College Advancement who will serve as the primary fundraiser for the College of Art Sciences and Engineering. This AVP will work closely with the deans and other academic leaders to conceive and execute fundraising plans, managing a portfolio of key prospects, and overseeing a staff. We will hope for substantial growth far beyond the current giving level in this College. The position will require some one with proven strategic, fundraising and management skills, along with the ability to relate closely with the academic leaders.

Tom: Jim, you say this AVP will work closely with the deans and academic leaders. In what ways do you expect the deans and academic leaders to participate in achieving this campaign goal? What will be the special

challenges they face in reaching the goal?

Jim: My approach to development is highly relational and very team oriented. The full-time development staff must see the administration, and Deans as valued clients and partners, and serve diligently. The deans carry the primary responsibility for developing and driving compelling visions for the future of their respective programs. They will lead their faculties and key advisory boards in shaping these visions into viable strategic plans. Of course, each dean must serve as the primary spokesperson for their programs, and it is important for all deans to take a leadership role in developing friends and building key relationships.

In major campaigns for a large university, one of the special challenges I relish is the give and take of melding multiple visions and plans into a comprehensive cohesive university-wide strategy. We need to have shared values, vision, and objectives. Ideally, I like to see this university-wide strategy come together through the active engagement and outright leadership of the university Board of Trustees. Having the Trustees, Deans, and others come together in a productive strategic planning process is a powerful experience that produces terrific results.

Tom: Beyond leadership from the Deans, your existing staff and key new hires of the Associate VP and Assistant VP, where will you build the team?

Jim: There will be several crucial 'Executive Director' positions,

including ED for Major Gifts, ED for Leadership Gifts, ED for Principal Gifts, ED for Annual Giving Programs, ED Capital and Special Projects, ED Foundation Relations, ED Corporate Relations, and ED Volunteer Management and Boards. The Advisory Council position builds on the success of prior billion-dollar campaigns. Regional volunteer groups will also be added and engage with the University. To give you an idea of the scope of work, in one campaign I was privileged to be involved with advisory groups who helped us recruit and manage a network of over 600 regional campaign volunteers. We will be using the same concept with this new campaign.

We will also be adding positions to build and manage new University programs in Principal, Leadership, and Major Gifts, Donor Relations, Stewardship, Alumni Relations, and Communications.

Tom: Jim, your formal title Senior Vice President also includes the term "Chief Advancement Officer." Give us a few of your insights into making a "Mega" Campaign work. How do you achieve success with a billion-dollar campaign?

Jim: Obviously, you must have a constituency who cares deeply for the university. But, to succeed with campaigns, you must also have a constituency that has been appropriately engaged in the life and future plans for the university. The capacity of donors to give is very important, but having donors properly engaged is imperative. When you scratch the surface of failed campaigns, you often find that capacity often existed, but the donors simply were

not properly engaged. They did not have “skin in the game,” so to speak. Our plans need to resonate with their hopes and dreams. Conversely, when you examine campaigns that work, you find a community that found a way to properly engage its constituencies, especially prospective major donors. A primary step in properly engaging donors is having a process in place to intensely listen, really listen, to the donor’s true interests. Donors can potentially have a wide range of interests and opportunities. They can be challenged to move up the level of their giving when they are connected and matched to their true interests. Discovering the donor’s interests and true passions is what can really fuel success.

Tom: Jim, a number years ago we were looking at raising a few million dollars for a small college, and now you are embarking on your second billion-dollar type campaign. Whether it is a few million, or the next billion, what are the secrets of success you

can share with our readers — the secrets that have consistently contributed to your results and the secrets that can inspire the newest development officer or challenge the most seasoned pro?

Jim: The secrets of success in development are known to the top professionals, and the sooner those new to the field learn them, the better for all. There are no magic bullets. Just the hard work of honest assessments, building relationships, building a team, intensely listening to donors, developing all the constituents in the organization, expanding the base of donors, challenging individual donors with reasons to give more linked with their particular interests, and developing compelling visions that will challenge the donors to stretch in giving. Those are a few of the basic secrets to success.

Tom: Jim thanks for sharing. I appreciate your wise insights and wish you every success with your second billion-dollar Mega campaign.