Book Reviews

The Kindness of Strangers: Philanthropy and Higher Education

By Deni Elliott, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Lanham,
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Deni Elliott opens her timely book, *The Kindness of Strangers*, with the interesting implication that a changed financial landscape in higher education is at least partially responsible for many of the perceived faults with American colleges and universities today. Higher education institutions increasingly must rely on procuring funds from private sources to maintain normal daily operations (Stringer *et al.*, 1999). As the book's title suggests, Elliott is particularly concerned with those donors without direct connections to the institution—strangers—and the ethical issues of attracting these donors' philanthropic interest. *The Kindness of Strangers* presents a broad spectrum of these ethical questions, with the goal not of passing judgment or solving the dilemmas but of prompting thought and discussion on such matters. Offering an expansive range of examples and practical points for professionals, Elliott effectively argues her point that while philanthropy is

an integral part of American colleges and universities, administrators must maintain institutional integrity when pursuing private donations.

Elliott uses the first chapter of the book to offer a brief but expansive historical review of the relationship between philanthropy and higher education. She suggests that Americans should have the right to a post-secondary education but that rising costs and decreased government funding threaten to make it an elite privilege. She also expresses concern over the increasing pressure colleges and universities feel to accommodate the prospective student, noting that many resulting expenses—such as palatial athletic or entertainment centers—are not relevant to higher education's mission of teaching and research. As she often does in the book, Elliott presents this ethical question without directly offering advice for how to change the situation. This broad opening chapter quite effectively gives the reader a sense of

the interconnectedness of different institutional functions.

She also introduces the reader to “the new philanthropist” (Elliott, 2006, p. 14), the American who makes his millions at a young age and who wants to give it away to a worthy cause. Slightly different from the traditional high-society Rockefeller or Carnegie, today’s philanthropist thoroughly researches his causes before endorsing them, wants to take big risks for visionary goals, and puts his own talents and creativity into the projects, remaining engaged with the cause for the long haul. Elliott cites the whimsical and inspirational example of Robert B. Pamplin Jr., who donated money to a college’s library fund every time a member of the campus community met certain fitness records that he himself once set. Institutional advancement professionals should find these descriptions and examples of today’s philanthropist very handy—after all, understanding the market or public is part of building a relationship with them (Vasquez, 1996). Competition for this money is stiff, however, since colleges, charities, and service groups may have equal claim to the philanthropist’s attention. Elliott shows discomfort with some practices that result as development officers identify these noteworthy donors and solicit their money.

An important strength of the author’s technique is that she consciously bases her argument solely on ethical grounds and not a lot of financial facts or statistics. She could easily and often make the case that administrators should refrain from particular actions because they could backfire and either cost them the donation or even prompt lawsuits.

For example, she states that some solicitation and prospect research practices are nearly invasions of privacy, but she preserves the muscle of her argument by maintaining only that those practices damage the institution’s integrity, not that they would end up hurting the institution’s bank account. Her worries seem common-sense—anyone would realize that admitting students for development reasons, offering honorary degrees, accepting donations from controversial people, and using deceptive marketing appear rather shady—and yet she shows that they occur fairly frequently.

The second half of *The Kindness of Strangers* contains a collection of five articles that address a combination of fund-raising techniques and ethical questions in higher education administration. It wraps up with an interesting, liberal commentary promoting more government support for social services, including education, so as to allow institutions to move away from their currently heavy reliance on fickle philanthropists. Although a few of these articles are dry reads, they all supplement Elliott’s own section very nicely. She concludes the book with two pieces from the Council for the Advancement of Education: the Statement of Ethics and the Donor Bill of Rights. The placement of these two items at the end, combined with a few other recommended guidelines for good practice in advancement, suggests that they should be the backbone of development operations, and therefore are quite applicable to fundraisers.

The Kindness of Strangers would prove very useful as an introductory ethical overview for individuals new to

higher education fund raising. It is limited, though, in that while Elliott broaches a wide variety of topics, she does not deal with them in great depth; it must then be treated as an introduction for new professionals or perhaps a reminder for those who have worked in the trade for a while. Because Elliott also spends a great deal of time debating the issues that arise with corporate sponsorship of faculty research as well as the use of professors as fundraisers, faculty members may also benefit from picking up this book. And because the functions of different campus activities all interconnect somehow, it could probably benefit almost anyone who works on a college or university campus. Whoever the reader may be, Elliott can effectively convince them that administrators risk institutional integrity every day. To lessen the

effects of such behaviors, campus community members must prompt discussion on the matter to ensure that the need for philanthropy does not lead American colleges and universities away from their mission of teaching and research.

References

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