Researcher proposes adding scientific measures to boost financial support for higher education

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People regularly develop lifelong, sentimental connections to their alma maters, and it's no secret that colleges and universities rely on those feelings to garner financial support from alumni for everything from scholarships to new athletic uniforms. A University of Kansas professor has published research stating that most universities could benefit from comprehensive, scientifically based plans to identify the unique aspects of a university that alumni identify with and that doing so could lead to more successful and efficient fundraising.

Such targeted, scientifically backed efforts are increasingly valuable in an age of decreasing state support of higher education and tighter budgets in nearly all areas of academia, said Jordan Bass, assistant professor of health, sport and exercise science. Bass co-authored a study on organizational identification theory and a new measure, university identification, and how they can be applied to athletic and higher education fundraising.

"Organizational identity has been widely studied and tested, but the connection between that identification and fundraising in higher education hasn't really been explored," Bass said. "People obviously identify with winning, but it can be much more than that. It can be getting good seats at games, seeing games with their family or recognition. What part of the athletic department they identify with is an often unanswered or unexplored question. I think you can apply that to

higher ed fundraising as well."

Bass co-authored the study with Brian Gordon of the University of Wisconsin La Crosse and Yu Kyoum Kim of Florida State University, published in the Journal of Contemporary Athletics. Bass and Gordon also presented similar research at the North American Society for Sport Management Conference earlier this year.

In their research, Bass and colleagues surveyed more than 3,500 people who had made donations between $50 and $300 annually to a university athletic department but stopped. They asked why they decided to donate in the first place, why they stopped and what they did and did not like about the experience of being a donor. Many of the reasons given were specific to the institution; others were more specific to the donor's personality and experiences with the university.

If fundraisers are able to determine what their alumni and support base identify with, they could target that in their efforts without spending large sums of money on market data. Bass gives the example of a university with a highly rated school of education. If the school is regularly rated No. 1 in U.S. News and World Report rankings and supporters are proud of that achievement, taking the message and asking for donations around the time of the rankings' release could prove to be effective. Or if the number of graduates produced each year were a point of pride, efforts centered on the amount of new graduates and appropriately timed could be lucrative. The list of possibilities is great, but rather easily identifiable. In essence, Bass argues that universities should not assume why their donors are giving money when they can quickly and efficiently survey their alumni and community supporters.

"Organizational identification models have been tested rigorously," Bass said. "Through no fault of their own, many institutions haven't applied them because their fundraising departments are often understaffed or

don't have a large amount of resources. They could use these models to find out what part of the university people are connected to and it could be something that's not only going to work one year, it's going to work over and over. It's still surveying in a traditional sense, but it's adding scientific methods to make sure it's effective, and it can take the guess work out of the process."

Bass said he regularly hears from fundraisers and departments that one of their top concerns is keeping the cost of fundraising low. Using organizational and university identification models can help by reducing the amount of time and money spent on efforts that yield little return. They can also help increase efficiency by targeting those efforts on campaigns that are more likely to yield donations, even if they are small gifts. The approach could be especially beneficial to smaller schools that don't have as much money or staff dedicated to fundraising or athletic departments that make millions of dollars each year.

The approach is much more likely to work with small to medium sized donations, Bass said, as gifts of thousands of dollars or more would still be best approached by personally appealing directly to the donor. However, using identification models could not only help attract more first time donors, it could help retain them once people decide to start giving and move them to higher levels of donation. And the models could be used for purposes beyond financial, having potential in recruiting faculty and staff as well as highly talented students, Bass said.

Anyone involved in athletic fundraising could confirm that it's much easier to raise money when the team is winning. But taking a more scientific approach could help weather droughts in the win column as well as poor economic climates.

"In my view, most athletic departments relay too much on success for fundraising, whereas if you took a scientific view you could have a much

more consistent approach while still capitalizing on team success when applicable," Bass said. "If you know your base well enough you can take those lower-level donations and make them almost an impulse buy. And you can save a lot of time and expense by finding out what people are triggered by ahead of time."

Provided by University of Kansas