

What is the value of a Development Office?

Written by Becki Mckinlay, Managing Consultant for Graham-Pelton Consulting, sponsors of the strategy and leadership stream at the IDPE 2019 Annual Conference

I was facilitating a workshop recently with John Cloughton, former Chief Master at KES, Birmingham and under whose leadership the school raised some £20 million. He was talking to a relatively new Head, and he made a point that really resonated with me: As a Head, you'll have a lot of things you want to achieve during your headship. The reality of leading a school means you'll only be able to fully achieve two or three. Work out what those things are, what your impact will be, and how you will achieve them. As the conversation continued, it occurred to me that, to achieve many objectives of note, the Head would need his community to support him on that journey. In most schools, the window to that community is the Development Office.

Leadership teams (Heads, Bursars, Governors) have to keep their focus on two key things: education and the business of running a school. Student numbers, attracting and retaining staff, the upkeep of the estate, finances (including the significant pension implications on the horizon), the welfare of the pupils – there is a huge amount to think about, so it is no surprise that the purpose and impact of a development function is sometimes brought in to question. Here are two extremes that we've seen in the sector:

- 1) Development Office as a 'bolt on': Seen as a 'nice to have' or 'quick win' to save some budget on the latest building development, or to plug an unexpected hole in the finances. We're frequently asked what the ROI of the development function is, or why engagement with the community matters. A broad picture of seeing another school raising funds for the sixth form centre or performing arts space and wondering why their new Development Director can't go and raise £5m for them too.
- 2) Development Office as 'integral': Focussed on delivering the school strategy through bringing the community together to help in three ways: maintaining the ethos and environment of the school, providing access to excellent education, and supporting every student to succeed. The community is given opportunities to engage, build, and sustain continued relationships with the school, and to be philanthropic – to give back through donating time and money, for which the impact is measured and celebrated.

Not every school will have a community with large amounts of disposable wealth and the ability to raise millions of pounds. However, you do have a community, and if your community is engaged, involved, and can see how they can support you, and the impact of that support, there is a real opportunity for Development Offices to play a role in supporting

the strategic objectives of any school. We believe that to create the step change we know so many schools are looking to achieve – based on feedback to the benchmarking report – there are four elements for success and critical questions to consider:

- 1) Strategy: Does the school have a strategy and is the Development Office integral to delivering it? Does the Development Office have clear, measurable objectives to achieve positive outcomes for the school? Have you asked your community for feedback to ensure your strategy is refreshed and fit for purpose?
- 2) Leadership: You have to make what you do accessible to your leadership team. It is not an event with a start and finish, but a continuum based on relationships. Listing events, communications, and other activities without talking about the impact of what you are doing can sometimes lead to that feeling of the Development Office being a ‘nice to have’ rather than fundamental to the school’s purpose. Leadership must equally support the Development Office in defining the strategy and ambition, empowering them to engage the community.
- 3) Ambition: We know that alumni associations can play a powerful role in the school, but it’s important to raise the ambition of your Development Office. Does the event support your strategic objectives? Does it build meaningful, mutually beneficial relationships? Is your fundraising ambition aligned with the capacity of your community and has it been tested?
- 4) Sustainability: Establishing a programme takes time. Fundraising is a combination of science and art, and momentum builds gradually as relationships are developed. A poorly handled change in leadership or Development Director can undo years of work, and it is vital Schools prepare for change. Sustained and sustainable investment is vital to build meaningful partnerships with the community. Over time, this will result in philanthropy becoming not just a growing, alternative income stream, but a process which aligns all members of the School behind a shared vision and which allows leaders to facilitate positive change more quickly.

Whilst there are many variables to success for both fundraising and engagement, Development Offices could and should be integral to the future of the Independent School sector. At a time when access to an outstanding education has never been more important, and when Heads have to focus their time on the running of the School, we, as fundraisers, have to step up to the challenge of paving the way for our community to make an impact. What we do can sometimes seem complicated and, at times, overwhelming. But put simply, it’s about relationships. It’s about finding a way to connect and inspire someone to make a difference.