

Advancement: Connecting to Constituencies Inside and Out

By President Christopher R.L. Blake, Mount Mercy College

There is a statue at Iceland’s Keflavik International Airport that commemorates Leif Ericson, the 10th century Icelandic Norse explorer, who is generally accepted as the first European to land in North America. History now credits Ericson and his Viking pioneers with establishing “Vinland” and other early European colonies in modern-day Newfoundland and Labrador. The statue is a powerful reminder of Iceland as the “gateway” nation between Old and New Worlds, and the extraordinary power of pioneering campaigns.

Effective campaigns connect advancement operations with educational purpose.

The Ericson story is interesting in several ways. The Viking desire for land and riches inspired daring and grueling expeditions in a cold, menacing ocean wilderness. Their goal was land and colonization, and the abundance of seafood was a key resource to that end. Having achieved their goal, the Vikings then forgot their mission. Colonization meant adoption of new ways of living, not simply expansion. Within three centuries the Viking campaign in the New World was finished

because Ericson’s successors dogmatically held to their old ways of living, and failed to recognize that the Icelandic or Nordic ways of doing things – agrarian and fishing – would not support thriving communities in a different environment.

There are some valuable lessons for life in this haunting Viking saga for college and university advancement campaigns. Losing sight of their mission was the death knell to their story. The Vikings mission of colonization meant using what they found in new ways, rather than repeating what had worked back home. Even more so, the Viking failure to adapt to their environment left them figuratively adrift in the North Atlantic. They had the information – the data – from trying to live for two centuries alongside Native Americans who clearly had succeeded there. But sadly for them, they failed to learn from that information or data, and in so doing, they opened the doorway for Christopher Columbus to take over the story and make it his own in later centuries.

This short chapter explores how mission, connections, purpose and data are crucial in our advancement endeavors, be they less bold or daring than earlier Viking ones. Particularly crucial is the intriguing connection between facts and relationships, head and heart, intuition and information. The best campaigns are those which never lose sight of either ends of this continuum, and make sure they connect them at all stages.

Our first point must be that of mission: Effective campaigns connect advancement operations with educational purpose. The common ground of mission is one that needs to prevail in university campaigns at all levels, connecting the distinctive educational mission with campaign purpose and philanthropic instinct. Mission drives the campaign and unites the community, enabling internal and external constituents to find agreement and excitement around campaign goals. This is crucial since the nature of a campaign includes a range of factors that lend themselves to complications, including planning and implementation, diversity of stakeholders, strategic decisions, multiple voices, donor fatigue, ego and emotion, and community expectations. That connection between campaign design and campaign action can test the best of relationships within the campus and the larger community to a breaking point. Equally, it can cement the deepest loyalty, harness the most altruistic impulses and unite the strongest creative energies of a campus community. Yet the paradox remains that although academia is an environment that is accustomed to slow change, when dollars and fundraising programs are concerned, patience tends to be shorter. Navigating these choppy waters calls for staying the course, trusting the compass and remembering the purpose of the mission.

Data serves as the compass to guide the ship across the ocean. The availability of sophisticated data tools like Wealth Engine which, for example, provides a range of prospect management techniques for tracking fundraising progress and informing decisions. In an unprecedented age of web information and public data, this use of data-informed campaigning is as essential to fundraising as segmentation is to marketing. This is culturally challenging for many small colleges and universities where historically a small pool of long-term donors and loyal alumni have galvanized major giving and annual fund support. Why is it helpful to use complex data analysis and operations, when the relationship is more akin to an extended family? This is where the world of fundraising has recently surprised many of us, whether we are a modestly sized and endowed Midwestern college, or a fabulously wealthy East Coast Ivy giant. For data mining shows us that even when using the Midwest family style approach to fundraising, relationships and instinctive judgment alone will not suffice. We need to evaluate how far we can apply reliable data-informed processes to help create a sustainable donor base that truly gives to capacity and inclination. Indeed, since our donors are themselves stakeholders in a culture where data-informed decision-making is the norm, we need to make sure that we can speak the same language of analysis and accountability. As Dove (2000) notes, this cultural shift is necessary in fundraising long before any dollar gifts are actually obtained:

The concept of prospect management is a relatively recent trend in development, made possible by the widespread use of technology in fundraising. Data-processing technology, which has revolutionized gift processing, acknowledgment, and record keeping, will play now an important role in shaping development activities on the front end – long before solicitation occurs (p.110).

Historically this is a bigger and more comprehensive cultural shift for using fundraising data. The continued use of prospect management data throughout the implementation stages of a campaign is going to be a litmus test of success or failure, even when we think we know our donors well. The interplay between technology and human operations is critical, and data will be meaningless unless the organizational structure and personnel roles are defined, understood and managed. A fundraising campaign with clear steps and clear dollar goals illuminates the effectiveness of the human factor and its interplay with technology. It depends on a dynamic interplay of team members who have assigned functions and who constantly monitor the campaign in order to make tactical and strategic decisions – almost like a classic data feedback loop. In short, using our Viking analogy, build a crew that will row together or your campaign longboat will not even get out of the harbor.

One way of reducing this risk is through careful use of communications, and here technology can be an essential ally. The availability of multiple sources of communication tools can be critical in maintaining information, focusing on mission and target, and ensuring broad support. Indeed, the most 'savvy' fundraisers are aware that technology is essential to heightening awareness and disseminating information on fundraising. By showing the case, eliciting support, and explaining multiple ways of support, the technology interfaces the communication and solicitation aspects of fundraising. When it works well, the effect is powerful. When it works badly, the effect is chaos. Campaigns are faced with this stark reality.

Like many others focused on capital needs and annual fund support for scholarships, Mount Mercy has begun to bring these contemporary realities together in a new multi-million dollar campaign. And like many others, we are doing so in the worst recession since the Great Depression and with a history of less than robust fundraising aspirations. The point of this campaign is that it is as much internal transformation as in any transformation of our landscape or financial aid system. Worth (2005) observes this opportunity in campaigning:

Campaigns have become communication and marketing vehicles as well as fund-raising efforts, and their public goals may be intended to help position the institution among peers and competitors, mobilize volunteers, and raise the sights of donors (p.84-85).

The development of our campaign has pushed us to reframe our sense of vision, our approach, our outcomes and our practices in several areas:

- ❑ Annual phone solicitations, with increased use of advanced demographic segmentation.
- ❑ Mailing solicitations, with increased use of demographic segmentation and differentiated frequency for those segments.

- ❑ Data mining, searching large databases for specific attributes and patterns that increase likelihood of donor matching, rather than focusing on specific individuals and their attributes.

These data-informed practices are also influencing our solicitation of smaller donors and those who might become donors. By sifting through databases for specific factors and key patterns, a prospect management exercise becomes an operation in data mining, enabling the advancement staff to aggregate prospects more effectively. Mount Mercy has made real progress in:

- ❑ Data screening and using vendor services, particularly in developing major gifts. The rise of electronic databases has made it possible to compile, from a variety of sources, public data that is useful for flagging prospects with significant wealth indicators, such as real estate records, public stock holdings, top executive compensation, and aircraft or boat ownership. Data screening companies now offer to compare a school's entire database against those sets of public records, allowing fundraising staff to identify prospects for whom certain levels of wealth can be definitively established, as well as others who fit the profile of major donors.
- ❑ Alumni and donor surveys. While not necessarily new, surveys of a college's constituents have become much easier to coordinate with the use of email and internet surveys, and the data can be used to create new strategies and directions for the advancement office as a whole.

In a real sense this panoply of traditional relationship building, technological advances and data-informed operations mirrors the broader trends of higher education itself. Advancement and philanthropy should never operate in isolation from the rest of academia. Now fundraising speaks the same language and requires the same skill-sets that infuse the university as a whole. Fundraising is a key component of mission-based education, arguing the point that philanthropy and learning are absolutely entwined. It shows that data track, as much as data assessment of students, provides evidence of learning outcomes for the institution. The parallel holds powerfully between fundraising campaign and academic programming, and that parallel is helpful to an understanding of both. Fundraising requires relationships, and so do classrooms, both real and virtual. Fundraising requires a complex interaction between people and technology, and so does the 21st century learning experience. Fundraising relies on data and its usage in the same way that educational outcomes need to be measured by student assessment. We are truly working now in the same academy and embarking on the same journey.

The Vikings were good at realizing something essential about a voyage of discovery. When people with imaginations use devices and tools that work powerfully, and rely on essential information, they can reach to the ends of the earth. The Vikings actually did that, and so changed Western history. There is something in their saga that can help us keep sight of our own advancement dreams and ambitions, but unlike them, not lose sight of how to live once we have achieved those ambitions.

About the Author



Christopher R.L. Blake
President, Mount Mercy College

Christopher R.L. Blake ushered in a new era at Mount Mercy College when he began his duties as president on July 1, 2006. He is the College's eighth president in its 80-year history.

President Blake received his Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts degrees in theology from the University of Oxford, Keble College. He received his Ph.D. in education from the University of London, King's College. Before coming to Mount Mercy, President Blake served as provost of Mount Saint Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

Upon his arrival at Mount Mercy, President Blake formed a campus-wide committee to review the institution's mission, vision and values, which were adopted by the board of trustees in April, 2007. The highlight of the visioning process was the goal of transitioning the college to Mount Mercy University by 2015, and further transforming Mount Mercy to a distinguished regional institution in the Catholic intellectual tradition, recognized nationally for its academic life, student experiences, institutional resources and community outreach.

Under President Blake's leadership Mount Mercy has also implemented graduate programs, including a Master of Business Administration as well as two Master of Arts in Education programs. In addition to the new graduate programs, new majors have been added to meet the needs of transfer students, offering degrees with extensive application possibilities in outdoor conservation, applied management and human resource management.

President Blake has also overseen the addition of athletic scholarships in all 13 varsity sports, giving the athletic department a new and vital edge in recruiting talented and committed student-athletes. The president has also appointed a director of international programs, opening the door for international educational partnerships and immersion experiences for Mount Mercy students.

Currently, President Blake is leading the institution's strategic planning process, which focuses on five themes central to the Mount Mercy experience.

Works Cited:

- Dove, Kent E. (2000). *Conducting a Successful Capital Campaign*. Second Ed. Jossey-Bass Inc., San Francisco.
- Worth, Michael J. (2005). *Securing the Future: A Fund-Raising Guide for Boards of Independent Colleges and Universities*. Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, Washington.