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Fundraising for the University Libraries at Oxford

Impressed by the various printed publications and online representations serving the purpose of the “Building for excellence campaign” which started 2002 and wherewith the Oxford University Libraries aim at fundraising the enormous sum of £ 57 million I was very interested in learning how fundraising works. This was one of the reasons why I wanted to visit the Oxford University Libraries.

Therefore I was very happy when “Bibliothek und Information International” declared their willingness to fund my travelling expenses to England and my staying in Oxford for a week. Gratefully I acknowledge the financial support of this institution without which I would not have been able to accept the invitation I received from OULS (Oxford University Library Services).

My curiosity was instigated by the observations I have made in the State and University Library of Göttingen: Whereas ever more money would have been needed to keep up high quality scientific book collections and especially to build up holdings of e-resources according to modern research standards the financial support deriving from public funds is rather decreasing since some years. As this trend seems to continue I wondered whether one could not try private fundraising in Germany to improve the financial situation of University Libraries.

I was lucky enough to be met with Sarah Catliff, head of development of the OULS. She told me a few essentials about fundraising while inviting me to a visit in the café of the Ashmolean Museum.

The first thing for me to understand was that fundraising is not done with the consciousness of begging. It is done with the gesture of an invitation: One is offering the opportunity to join in a project and in Oxford one welcomes people to become part of a prestigious and world famous institution.

Fundraising I was told starts with a vision. That means on the one hand one has to fix needs by analysing the status quo. This may be the need to overhaul a used machinery for example a book conveyor system which is basically necessary for the daily supplying of books to all readers. It may be the need for PC-equipment in reading rooms to offer scientists and students the standard tool for information retrieval. Or it may be the need for the cataloguing of a collection of incunables to inform scientists and librarians worldwide about the library's collection in detail. On the other hand one has to think about how one wants to develop one's library and library services. What shall be the future needs of the scientific community one serves? What are competitors going to offer their costumers?

Therefore any fundraising project starts with a “quiet phase”. In this respect the fundraising process resembles the developing of a project proposal to a research foundation in Germany. It may easily take two years.

In this period the aim, the project schedule, the costs, the work procedures must be fixed and reliably described. This must be done very carefully. If it should turn out later that one has estimated costs or time wrongly the library can easily loose its reputation as a reliable partner. This work is done by the library and/or university staff involved. At the same time the fundraising staff starts working on the project. As fundraising is seen as a major tool in the overall process of the development of the Library the department dedicated to this purpose is

called “development”. Whereas the first group is mainly responsible for identifying the project the second is concerned with its future mediation to the public. They prepare the corresponding web-publication, design leaflets or booklets about it and organize the printing. To put it in a nutshell: They produce the literature about the project.

The most important aspect of a successful brochure is that it should be strategically convincing and thought through. The texts of the fundraising booklets in Oxford are very often similarly structured: Firstly the status quo is described. Thereby the relevance of the collection, building, service or whatever is to be improved is very strongly emphasized for example by pointing out that it is the most important in the world or the second greatest. Secondly the present needs are defined and it gets explained how much it would cost to fulfil them. Thirdly readers are informed in what way they would get gratified if they supported the cause and lastly potential supporters are invited to contact either the person responsible for the project or the person responsible for the fundraising. In Oxford this literature gets designed very elegantly. It attracts attention because it is pleasant to look at and it rouses confidence because it looks very reliable and expensively made. Photographs of rooms, buildings, books or book pages convey the impression that whatever is represented is of the first class.

Only when all details are worked out and the information materials are ready one starts to inform the public and contact people. In order to facilitate the encouragement of private donors one tries in the first phase to secure capital from one’s own institution. This funding functions psychologically as a proof for potential donors that the project is important and worth its money.

During the second phase several activities run simultaneously as well. The best start for a fundraising campaign is to find a major donor. As soon as you can claim that a generous gift has already been promised people have the impression that the campaign and with it the project is going to be a success. To generate this feeling is very important as experience has proven that people don’t give generously to “desperate causes”.

Another step is to identify a potential audience for special sums of money needed. If for example one wants to buy chairs for a reading room one might invite a relatively broad audience to subscribe for donating one chair each. One would then develop a corresponding promotion campaign. If on the other hand one needs a large sum of money to finance the refurbishing of a whole building one must try to find potential donors with far greater financial possibilities.

Also one has to think what kind of a person or institution or foundation would take an interest in the project one tries to finance. There may be very obvious connections. Pharmaceutical industries might very well consider it as profitable long term investment to support the training of students of medicine or chemistry. They might therefore be ready to help updating the equipment of a library for those. But there may also be merely kind of metaphorical similarities. For example one might ask airlines or transportation enterprises to help financing a book conveyor system.

At the same time it is important to use the personal connections of the senior staff of Oxford University. If any of them knows a potential donor one would ask him to try and rouse the interest of this person for a project. Another possibility is the involvement of volunteers, that is, influential people who know potential donors and encourage these to support a project.

Equally important is the organization of social events for former and/or potential donors: concerts, dinners, exhibitions for example. On these occasions one may report about the achievements which were facilitated by gifts or represent projects for the future which need financial support.

The last years of fundraising at Oxford University have shown that the most important financial sources for its libraries are wealthy individuals with a passion for the particular area.

Most of these are over fifty years of age. Important to note is also that people who have given already once are very often prepared to donate a second or third time. This observation testifies again on the importance of careful project planning and project dealing. It also shows how very relevant for future campaigns it is to inform donors what their money has effected. University alumni and foundations are further possible donors.

A very important part of a fundraising campaign is the reciprocation. One way or other the gifts should be publicly recognized. One possibility to do this is the naming of things, rooms or even buildings with the name of the persons who funded them. According to Sarah Catliff these offers are very gratifying to donors who have in this way the possibility to buy the membership of a highly reputed institution or even – if they give very much money – “to buy immortality” by being enlisted on the Bodleian’s benefactors’ panel next to celebrities of bygone ages.

To reward donors one might also invite them to visit the library or to attend meetings which might interest them or get especially organized for them.

Thinking about what I learned from Sarah Catliff two major differences between the usual conception of a University library in Germany and the one of Oxford strike me.

Firstly: Oxford University fulfils one prerequisite for successful fundraising very easily: It is far from being a “desperate cause”. The Oxford University Libraries have the indisputable advantage to be part of an institution with a long and prestigious tradition whose fame is anything but local. Consequently fundraising for these libraries needs not start by arguing about the sense and meaning of the institution. People from a whole range of countries feel flattered and honoured if they get the chance to become part of it.

Secondly: In Oxford private funding is part of the concept of the institution whereas in Germany the state is held responsible for University training and therefore for University libraries. Even the historical understanding of libraries starts – as far as my impression goes – from two different perspectives.

In Oxford library history is told as the result of the activities of a long row of individuals with either brain, money, a high social rank or all of these characteristics. X did this and y did that and their deeds are remembered by the names which buildings, collections and rooms bear.

In Germany library history is told as the effect of political, economical and social changes. The deeds of individuals vanish in developments which they don’t cause. Before this background it is far more difficult to invite individuals to engage themselves for University Libraries. On the one hand German librarians would shrink from emphasizing the personal merit of an individual donor with the feeling that this would be undemocratic. On the other hand wealthy individuals can feel little interest in donating large sums of money without getting any further gratification than a good conscience. And both parties would feel anyway that it is a public task to keep up a high standard at university libraries.