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I Am Not a “Fundraiser” — I Build Bridges

By Curtis Proctor
UCF Forum columnist
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As a three-time Knight graduate, I am proud to work for UCF. Coming back to my alma mater as a professional is not only a dream come true, it’s being able to give back to the institution that gave me my start. From former classmates to new external relationships, I get excited to talk about where I work ... yet there is less excitement, even some apprehension on my part, when I have to explain what I do. It usually goes something like this:

“Oh great, you work for UCF! What do you do there?”

“I work for the UCF Foundation.”

“Oh? So you are a fundraiser. You ask people for money.”

“Well, it’s a little more complicated than just asking for money.”

Yes, it can get difficult but let me explain my rationale. Fundraising is the term that most people associate with the work that I do on a daily basis. It’s simple and people can relate to it quickly. I sometimes use it because it allows me to move past that part of the conversation when I need to explain my role with the university.

But the term “fundraising” doesn’t begin to describe what I do. Sure there are fundraisers: Selling candy for a worthy cause is fundraising, a local celebrity basketball game or raising money for the local PTA is fundraising. Those who lead these types of events and activities are fundraisers, and they work on such worthy causes in their local communities. But what I do is not fundraising.

If you asked any of my colleagues who work in this field, most would echo my sentiments. The work that we do on a day-to-day basis isn’t transactional, such as you give me this and I give you that.

No, the work we do is about transforming lives, communities, neighborhoods and regions. The work we do is about opening doors for individuals to think and dream outside the realm of current possibilities, to create a new reality for not only themselves, but their families and the generations to follow. We do this by cultivating relationships with our donors to ultimately align their passions with the needs of our students.

“These students are often determined to finish, yet lack the resources to close that gap between their reality and their dreams.”

When you hear stories of students who are homeless, living on a friend’s couch, not knowing where the next meal will come from, it is heartbreaking. Yet for some of these students there is one certainty: They know they must do what it takes to get to and through their next class. You see, the next class and others are the gateway to graduation. These students are often determined to finish, yet lack the resources to close that gap between their reality and their dreams.

This is where our work comes in. We help connect the resources of those who have made it, to those who are on their way. We help bridge that gap,

For me it’s about building relationships, storytelling, connecting individuals to the things that they are passionate about.

I remember one couple who for many years didn’t feel a deep connection to the university. They were involved, came to several university events a year and even gave on a regular basis, but they never felt like there was any meaningful exchange. One day we were able to show them the power of their gift and how their donation had directly transformed the life of a student in need.

We arranged for the family to meet the student, who shared more of a story than we expected. The student was working two jobs on top of an internship and just didn't know if it were possible to finish the semester. The student applied for and received their scholarship and was able to use it to cover the cost of school, which allowed a reduction of work hours and more time to get the most out of the internship.

We removed the details of the transaction from the process, and instead replaced it with people, ideas and dreams. We built a bridge.

As a minority male and first-generation college student with a terminal degree, I truly believe that education is the last great equalizer in our country. It's one place that no matter your background you can still have the opportunity to achieve something greater than yourself.

This is why I do what I do. I'm a teacher, a mentor and, yes, if you ask me, likely I will say that I am a fundraiser.

Yet, I know what I am. I am a connector, I connect passion to philanthropy.

I build bridges.

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