



Education

Fundraiser: That's the VC's job description

Subsidy cuts and rising unemployment as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic means how to finance higher education is the most significant challenge

COMMENT
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A boxer, a minister, a police officer, a psychologist, a beggar, and a Nobel laureate walk into an inauguration ceremony at a university auditorium. The chairperson of the senate says: "What is this, some kind of joke? Where is our new vice-chancellor?"

The head of the appointments committee replies: "No joke. We couldn't find one person who could fit the leadership profile, so we hired them all and we stayed within budget."

This is a story often told, and one that rings true.

As the leader of an institution of higher learning, university vice-chancellors are charged with countless responsibilities, among them to ensure the highest standards of scholarship and teaching excellence at the institutions they lead.

But today, globally-focused universities are large and complex organisations that require substantial leadership. Modern universities can be characterised as having a global vision or perspective, being geographically and culturally dispersed, being internationally renowned, playing a national flagship role, being research-intensive, and often (though not always) "world-class".

As a result, vice-chancellors' job descriptions have increased precipitously in recent years. Recruiting vice-chancellors with the range of skills required, and staying in budget, has become challenging.

After the successive issues of the student fees crisis, the pace of transformation, the emergencies of droughts and load-shedding, student victims of gender-based violence, the future affordability of government's student fee support (National Student Financial Aid), and now Covid-19 and the shift to online learning, it is evident that vice-chancellors cannot simply stay in their academic lane.

Both academics and professional support staff had to adjust quickly to the new online mode of teaching. Although this transition had been under discussion for some time, the necessity to implement was fast-tracked in response to the pandemic.

It was challenging, but human capacity to implement these changes rapidly was not our greatest challenge. Rather, the real issue of how to finance higher education remains the most significant difficulty.

This has been as a result of subsidy cuts (given state finances having to accommodate huge health-care expenses) and the inability of students to pay fees (because of the economic crisis). We see a growing "missing middle" cohort as a result of job losses countrywide. Providing financial support to these students is now more crucial than ever.

And this brings me to what is probably the most important role of vice-chancellors: that of chief fundraiser. The financial viability of our universities depends on the ability of vice-chancellors to raise money.

Fundraising is one of the most demanding and visible roles of university leaders, and they should



Graphic: JOHN MCCANN Visual ref: FILE PHOTO

expect to spend an inordinate amount of time raising private funds. A 2012 study in the United States showed that university presidents there spend on average 3.85 days each month away from campus to raise funds, but as many as 20 days in a month when time allows it.

Fundraising is both difficult and demanding. When vice-chancellors sit down with potential donors to have discussions about the future of the university, they must have a clear view of the overarching strategy of their universities and be able to articulate their university's priorities, why they had chosen certain philanthropists and why investment in their university would have positive outcomes.

Most potential donors are usually successful in their field, and their questioning is rigorous, penetrating and occasionally quite daunting. If vice-chancellors don't know their university's script backwards, they could be in serious trouble.

This means we cannot only have a clear institutional strategy; our fundraising must be directly aligned with our strategy.

By going out and asking individuals and organisations for support, we introduce them to the university and

hopefully bring them closer to our institution.

Universities benefit from donors' advice and gain substantially from their networks and connections too. Some of them even volunteer their time at the university, on advisory boards, in mentorship roles, and in academic-industry discussions. Their support is a great booster for the university's morale and — here is an insider's tip — most of the donors are great fun to spend time with.

At Stellenbosch University, we have raised R1.7-billion in philanthropic funds since our vice-chancellor, Professor Wim de Villiers, started his term in 2015. Of this amount, donations by trusts and foundations, individuals, and corporates account for more than three-quarters of all donations received.

The involvement of our vice-chancellor has contributed to doubling the number of national and international alumni hubs since 2015, which effectively means the opening up of networks to our graduates. De Villiers led our peer-to-peer fundraising initiatives by running and cycling in various races to raise funds for food insecurity on our campuses — our #Move4Food campaign.

More than a third of the R1.7-billion

has gone towards bursaries and student support, while other funds have been directed at teaching, infrastructure, research and community service. We have built new research centres and teaching buildings on our campuses and increased the diversity of our academic and research staff through strategic funding.

Since 2015, our international donors have begun to account for a larger share of total donors; we have gone from 13% of all donors being international to 19% prior to the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This is the significant effect made by vice-chancellors in leading universities' fundraising efforts both locally and internationally. Universities tackle the world's most pressing problems through education and research and to do this, donations provide critical funding.

As their universities' chief fundraisers, vice-chancellors can be at the forefront of providing access to students and ensuring they lead their institutions into the future — and, in Nelson Mandela's words, provide the next generation of leaders with a powerful weapon.

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