
'Stirring up other men's benevolence': library fundraising in Oxford



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FUNDING AND PHILANTHROPY IN OXFORD: A MIXED ECONOMY

As an ancient institution whose beginnings were based entirely on the personal generosity of kings, queens, princes and bishops – the wealthy of medieval times – it is hardly surprising that the University of Oxford still exhibits many of the features of a private foundation. Its older colleges, certainly, are generally well-endowed, and its resource-hungry tutorial system, together with the sense of 'privilege' that typically accompanies life in an Oxbridge college, are some of the more obvious survivals of an earlier, more well-provided, standard of 'student experience' which is rarely available in more recently founded (and less well-funded) public universities.

What is less well-known about Oxford is that the early twentieth-century advent of national public funding for universities served largely to develop the funding base, not so much of the college system, as that of the central university which, until that time, had been the small administrative 'creature of convenience' of the colleges themselves. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, therefore, the University of Oxford as a whole now exhibits a complex mix of funding dependencies, in which many of the older colleges are as well-endowed as some wholly private US universities, while the central university itself is much more like a 'normal' UK publicly-funded university: inadequately endowed and facing all the financial challenges arising from the unwillingness of successive governments to provide

what is necessary, from the taxpayer's pocket, to sustain the provision of high-quality education.

This 'mixed economy' situation in Oxford gives rise to a further surprising feature of the university in relation to fundraising in its more modern forms. For, while most of the colleges have long been able to benefit from the spontaneous generosity of former members, it is only during the last 15 years or so that the central university has 'set out its stall' to underpin its increasingly tight finances with overt and systematic efforts to raise private funds. Thus, while it may be true that 'Oxford' is today generally recognised as one of the leading fundraisers among UK universities, its central Development Office is, surprisingly, only 16 years old, and its first 'Campaign for Oxford' dates from as recently as 1989. And, even now, only about 5% of Oxford's alumni give on an annual basis to the university (the Princeton figure, by contrast, is over 50%).

LIBRARY FUNDRAISING IN OXFORD: FROM BODLEY TO VAISEY

The Bodleian Library – Oxford's principal research library – was itself founded on private benefaction, and on a scale virtually unknown in modern times. In today's terms, Sir Thomas Bodley's 1602 refounding of Oxford's university library would probably be worth close to £1 billion. Such was Bodley's generosity towards his alma mater that, had it not been for the subsequent maladministration of his endowments, the Bodleian might today have been the only UK university library (except perhaps for Buckingham) not needing to rely at all on public funds. For over 150 years also, the Bodleian was a *de facto* national library (a position underpinned by Bodley's far-sighted arrangement, in 1610, for 'his' library to have the right to claim a copy of every book printed under royal licence in the UK). For several centuries too, the Bodleian was a focus for the generosity of book-lovers and of great collectors, who consistently plied the library with gifts and materials of outstanding quality and value.

Yet, by the late twentieth century, with only a relatively small endowment (around £18 million), the Bodleian found itself seriously under-endowed by comparison with its North American university library peers, such as Harvard, Princeton and Yale. Forced to rely increasingly, like most UK university libraries, on recurrent (and largely public) funds from the central university, and facing annual running costs rising way beyond the general levels of inflation, the Bodleian became one of the first parts of the central Oxford system to set

about trying to 'plug the gap' by raising private funds on a systematic basis. This was largely the work of David Vaisey who, when he became Bodley's Librarian in 1986, made it his personal goal to improve the library's funding base by taking explicit steps, almost four centuries after Thomas Bodley, to stimulate private philanthropy to support the library's work.

So it was that, several years before the university itself set up a central fundraising organisation, Vaisey established a Development Board of well-placed external volunteers; he hired a professional fundraiser; and he began to devote up to 50% of his own time to Bodleian fundraising activities. The result of all this dedicated effort, over the ten years of his librarianship, was the raising of more than £20 million from private external sources.

Vaisey raised funds by direct appeals to Bodleian readers and select groups of university alumni; by carefully-targeted applications to potentially sympathetic foundations; and by devising projects likely to attract the support of private individuals with some connection to Oxford. Personal contacts were pursued, across the globe, especially among the more active members of the Friends of the Bodleian – an 'arm's-length' charitable organisation founded in the 1970s by a previous Bodley's Librarian. Directly assisted by the central university during the 1989-94 Campaign for Oxford, Vaisey's pioneering efforts did much to ease the pressures on the Bodleian's funds during the difficult 1990s, and served to develop a library capacity for mobilising private philanthropy – what Sir Thomas Bodley, 400 years before, had called 'stirring up other men's benevolence'.

But despite all this success, Vaisey admitted to being personally disappointed that much of the money he raised had to be used to support the routine running costs of the library, or its project-based costs, rather than to strengthen its endowment base. Ironically, the largest addition to library endowment came after his retirement in 1996, when the 'David Vaisey Endowment Fund' appeal raised over £1 million as a mark of the respect in which he was held. It was all the more surprising, therefore, when the present writer was appointed as Vaisey's successor, that the only reference to library fundraising in the contract of employment was the throw-away line that 'Bodley's Librarian may expect from time to time to advise the university on fundraising for library purposes'!

But at least, when the present Bodley's Librarian came into office in January 1997, he was fortunate to 'inherit' an experienced library fundraiser, as well as the 'in principle' support of the university's Director of Development. But, faced with the major challenge of organising the managerial integration of the university's many centrally funded libraries, including the Bodleian, it was clear that he was not going to be able to devote as much of his time to fundraising activities as his predecessor had done. The first move, therefore, was to re-engage Vaisey himself as a part-time consultant, and to use his vast experience, and his wide-ranging personal contacts, as a means of maintaining the fundraising momentum established over the previous decade.

With Vaisey's help, and the energetic support of the library's own professional fundraiser, it proved possible to raise the level of external fundraising beyond the previous annual average of about £2 million. The bulk of those funds were again raised for specific projects (such as the completion of the £1.2 million for the Incunable Catalogue project, or the \$1 million required to establish the Oxford Digital Library), obtained through grant applications or approaches to private individuals (including a £250k gift from a Singapore businessman to upgrade the Lower reading room of the Radcliffe Camera), and c.£300k per annum was raised for general running costs, by direct appeals to library users and targeted groups of alumni. (Such appeals, however, were not always made with the wholehearted support of the colleges, who inevitably regarded the alumni as 'theirs'!) Explicit fundraising events were arranged also, including visits to the Friends of the Bodleian in New York and Washington, where Bodley's Librarians past and present featured as a 'double act' in selling the message about the library's continuing needs.

At the same time, a major £7 million application was being prepared for the newly-formed Heritage Lottery Fund, to support a range of physical renovations and an imaginative Visitor Programme for the old library. Having spent almost two years, and c.£250k, completing the various stages of the application, the failure of the bid in 1998 came as a heavy blow, not least because, notwithstanding the approval of the Fund's officers along the way, the millions were awarded, instead, to an *ab initio* football museum project that has since failed! (More than one member of Bodleian

staff was heard to reflect ruefully on the mysteriously shifting definition of 'heritage' ...)

It came as a pleasant surprise, therefore, to find that the high-profile 'failure' of the bid attracted the sympathy of a number of individuals and foundations, who were prepared to offer substantial support for elements of the bid involving the refurbishment of historic parts of the Old Bodleian. Thanks to this wave of sympathy, £4.5 million was raised in less than six months to renovate the fifteenth-century Duke Humfrey's Library and both the Upper and Lower reading rooms of the Bodleian. Contributions included major grants from the Wolfson Foundation, the Garfield Weston Foundation, the Pilgrim Trust, and Oxford's own Rhodes Trust; and the work appeared all the more appealing because it was undertaken exactly 400 years after Sir Thomas Bodley's own reconstruction of the library, from 1598 to 1602.

REDOUBLING THE EFFORTS

Meanwhile, the process of managerially integrating the first group of 30 centrally-funded Oxford libraries was taking shape; and by 2000 the 'Oxford University Library Services' (OULS) was formally established, with Bodley's Librarian as its first Director. With all of the large research and faculty libraries, and many of the larger departmental libraries, under the new organisational umbrella, it became possible, for the first time in the university's history, to take a strategic overview of library provision. Systems support, technical services operations, conservation and binding processes, staff development and training activities, and the many all-important elements of reader service provision – all these key library issues could be addressed 'across the piece'. But the changes necessary to introduce tangible improvements in these areas were never going to be cost-free (in the initial stages, at least), and the full value of the integrated approach would only be achieved, over time, on an 'invest-to-save' basis. But if it was clear that additional resources would be needed 'to make integration work', it was equally evident that the central university itself was too cash-strapped to find all the upfront costs needed for the new library service organisation to deliver on its potential.

Internal steps were therefore taken to achieve early savings wherever possible, and to redistribute existing resources. But it was only by redoubling the library fundraising efforts that the OULS was going to be able to make the major improve-

ments that were possible to envisage within an integrated service. And nowhere was this more obvious, and significant, than in the area of physical accommodation. A first strategic overview of the library space issue had been undertaken in 1999, even before the OULS was formally created; and this revealed that over £60 million would be required to bring the accommodation up to standard conditions, to resolve the pressing materials storage problems, to introduce modern service facilities (including networked information provision), to improve back-room production processes and, ultimately, to reconfigure the library estate to achieve recurrent running and space costs. By the time the OULS came into being, therefore, the Director and his senior staff had already begun to persuade the university that nothing less than a major capital campaign was necessary to meet the overall funding requirement.

It took almost 18 months to convince the university that such a major fundraising effort would be necessary to achieve a new paradigm of modern, cost-effective, library operations; but the argument was won more easily because of the existing track-record of fundraising success within the Bodleian. By 2002, therefore, with the personal support of the Vice-Chancellor, and the willing involvement of the Oxford and New York Development Directors and their staff, the OULS was able to launch a five-year capital campaign, with an overall fundraising target of £57 million. And, as an earnest of its support, the central university had put £17 million towards this figure, with £10 million to help renovate the New Bodleian, £6 million to purchase an off-campus library operations centre, and £1 million to refurbish the eighteenth-century Clarendon Building.

EXPLOITING A LANDMARK DATE: THE BODLEIAN'S 400TH ANNIVERSARY

One of the most important features in any fundraising campaign is the choice of the 'hook' on which the whole thing is to be hung. 'Stirring up other men's benevolence' is not easily done in a vacuum: any appeal needs a convincing and attractive 'storyline' to give it the substance to stimulate the willingness to give, to persuade donors that 'joining in' is a worthwhile thing for them to do, and to make them feel that their contributions, great or small, are an integral part of a greater whole. And in Oxford, it was the historic example of Sir Thomas Bodley that provided the underlying message for the 2002 libraries capital campaign.

2002 was, conveniently, the 400th anniversary year of the Bodleian Library in its refounded existence. The £57 million capital campaign was therefore 'branded' as a re-run of Bodley's earlier mission: to provide a world-class university with a new and greatly improved library service. With this aspect prominently featured, the campaign was launched at a New York gala dinner, where a 'one-night-only' display of Bodleian treasures was staged, where tables were sold at exorbitant prices, where three distinguished honorees from the worlds of literature, computing, and the media were awarded facsimiles of the seventeenth-century Bodley Medal, and where the venue (Sotheby's main saleroom) was fitted out like the interior of an Oxford dining hall. The message was one of renewal, and of honouring the outstanding philanthropy of a historic Oxford library donor by the ongoing emulation of his example. And, with over \$1.3 million raised on the night, the campaign was off to a flying start!

PLANNING ON SUCCESS

But raising £40 million, even over a five-year period, and even for the Bodleian Library, is no mean target. The euphoria of a major launch can pass very quickly, and the follow-up, and the ongoing work, can be very labour-intensive and costly. 'Counting the cost' of a major fundraising effort, and ensuring that the resources are both available and cost-effectively deployed, are key. The 'received wisdom' in the development world suggests that the ratio of fundraising cost to fundraising target was of the order of 1:10. It might therefore 'cost' Oxford as much as £4 million to reach the capital campaign goal.

With resources of this magnitude to find and deploy, it was clear that the campaign effort needed to be professionally planned and managed. (Not only so, but it is also the case that many foundations will only assist a campaign if they can be shown that the effort itself is being properly conducted.) For this reason if for no other, it was important, not simply that the initial launch of the campaign should be followed up systematically, but also that a campaign plan should be produced, mapping out fully the course of the five-year fundraising effort. Much attention and care was given, therefore, to the elaboration of what has proved to be a key document in the campaign: 'The University of Oxford Libraries Capital Campaign Fundraising Plan, 2002-7'. With eight separate projects in the overall campaign portfolio, and a variety of individual needs within each of them, it was important that the whole

thing should be seen to 'hang together' as a coherent and achievable plan, and that the individual elements should be both compelling and strategically beneficial.

The campaign plan itself, therefore, was tightly and professionally produced. It contains an overview of the projects, an outline of the campaign strategy, its accountability within the university, its budget, an account of Oxford's development infrastructure and of the publicity and communications support, a spreadsheet of the five-year timetable of campaign-related events, and an explanation of the campaign's reciprocation and gift acknowledgement mechanisms. Appendices include a copy of the 'counting document', by which the campaign income is plotted in various categories; a 'gift pyramid and table', where a plausible estimate is made of the range of gifts to be sought; and a list of 'acknowledgement opportunities', illustrating the ways in which gifts are publicly recognised.

But, whatever the original reason for producing such a plan, it quickly became clear how crucial such a systematic approach really is in maintaining control of the fundraising effort. At all stages of the campaign, the document provides a 'road-map': it keeps the campaign on course; it makes it possible to know where things are up to at any given point; and it sustains both a sense of direction and of momentum. At a practical level, the plan enables reporting on progress, both internally and externally; and it helps to identify the next priority 'push' which needs to be made. For example, at the time of writing, it is possible to say that 43% of the funds have been raised in 48% of the five-year period; that two of the eight projects have already been fully funded; and that, because of cash-flow issues and the timetable of works, the new medical research and information centre needs to be the highest priority for current activity. 'Planning on success' would be virtually impossible without the prior formulation of the plan itself...

KEEPING THE RIPPLES ROLLING: AN OVERVIEW OF THE FUNDRAISING ACTIVITIES

Two of the lessons most quickly learned were that 'friendraising must precede fundraising', and that 'people give to people' - by which is meant that close personal engagement is the key factor in stimulating potential donors to give. And these extremely time-consuming activities require the ready availability of the most senior Oxford staff - the library Director (especially), the Directors of

Development and, on occasions, the Vice-Chancellor and the University's Chancellor, Lord Patten of Barnes, who graciously serves as Patron of the campaign. Such high-level involvement often makes all the difference between success and failure in individual approaches to donors.

There is, ultimately, no substitute for the painstaking 'cultivation' of individuals – involving meetings, personal visits, individual library tours, formal and informal presentations, letters, phone calls, and reports of every conceivable kind. But a carefully constructed framework of events serves to maintain the overall momentum, and to target particular approaches. For this reason, in addition to the often long-term cultivation of individuals and corporations (of which the recent mass-digitalisation deal with Google – which took almost two years to finalise – is a prime example), and the detailed preparation of formal applications to trusts and foundations, the fundraising effort is underpinned by an ongoing programme of campaign-oriented events. Designed to raise the profile of the Campaign, and to provide occasions for prospect cultivation, such events include lunches, dinners and receptions (in Oxford, London, and various parts of the US), Bodley Medal award ceremonies (in New York, San Francisco and Oxford), Friends of the Bodleian gatherings, displays of Bodleian Library treasures, exhibition openings, book launches, lectures, and concerts.

More intimate lunches and dinners, personal visits to the Bodleian and one-to-one meetings with the Vice-Chancellor are also used at key stages in prospect cultivation. An attractive range of publicity literature (booklets, brochures, stationery), a campaign video/CD, and a dedicated website (www.ouls.ox.ac.uk/campaign), are used to raise the profile of the Campaign, and these have proved particularly valuable both in the early stages of cultivation and in supporting formal funding requests. Much input and help is provided by senior members of OULS staff, by the university's development offices in Oxford and New York, and by the Libraries Development Board, chaired by Sir Robert Horton, whose members provide both material support and a steady stream of introductions to prospective donors, both in the UK and in the US.

Finally, legacies have been encouraged by creating a 'Bodley's Circle' for those who make testatory provision for any OULS library during their lifetime (the Circle now numbers over 100 members); and a direct-mail appeal to alumni on behalf of the campaign is currently being organised by the

university's Development Office. Based on past performance, the Director of Development estimates that up to 2,000 alumni may be expected to make gifts totalling around £750k.

MEETING THE RISING TIDE OF ENGAGEMENT

By the summer of 2004, it became apparent that the growing calls of the campaign on the Director's time were becoming unsustainable in conjunction with his other duties. Recognising the importance of the campaign, the University Council approved an arrangement whereby the Director would free up his time to concentrate almost wholly on his fundraising activities. With effect from August 2004, therefore, the Deputy Librarian, Ronald Milne, took on the rôle of Acting Bodley's Librarian, with the Head of Library Administration, David Perrow, as Acting Deputy. The new arrangement has proved effective in intensifying the fundraising efforts, making it possible to engage with a wider range of potential donors, and to plan a more intensive series of fundraising activities. (Library fundraising activities outside the campaign have continued also and, during the last few years, more than £8 million has been raised for non-campaign purposes, mostly associated with major acquisitions or support for library project work.)

The Director now has two full-time fundraising staff, who work closely with him on an expanding database of campaign prospects containing the details of almost 150 individuals, trusts, foundations, and corporations. These prospects are all being actively pursued, with individual cultivation strategies either being implemented or in the process of development. The 'yield' from these sources during the calendar year 2005 is expected, with a reasonable degree of confidence, to be of the order of £10-15 million.

ATTRACTING AND REWARDING GIFTS: THE IMPORTANCE OF NAMING OPPORTUNITIES

During the course of the Campaign, as in fundraising activities more generally, it is important, either in helping to secure major gifts, or in recognising them appropriately, to be able to offer naming opportunities to major donors. Within the Oxford campaign, such opportunities take the form of named posts, named funds, named rooms or spaces within library buildings, or even, in the case of very large gifts, named buildings within the library estate. The use of the Bodleian benefactors' panel is also a routine attraction for major donors, and is almost invariably a source of great satisfaction to those whose names are featured on it.

In the case of naming opportunities for posts, rooms and buildings, the process has recently been formalised, principally because the number of major donations is expected to increase over the remaining years of the campaign. For the naming of OULS posts and rooms within the OULS estate, approval is sought from the Curators of the University Libraries (the OULS governing body) on the recommendation of the Director after appropriate consultation. In the case of naming OULS buildings and of library areas within university buildings, approval is sought from the Buildings and Estates Committee on behalf of Council. Given the confidential and often sensitive issues involved in discussing these matters with donors, both before and after the making of major gifts, these are issues which require, and which usually receive, the sympathetic support of the university bodies concerned.

CONCLUSION

Only time will tell if the campaign's overall fundraising goal will be reached by October 2007. But it will not fail for lack of effort and, at the very least, a considerable number of the Oxford library service's key development needs will be met. And, in drawing into Oxford's 'circle of philanthropy' so many new donors, the effort can already be said to have made a significant contribution to providing a platform for library support for many years to come.