



A Series on Engagement, Part I:

It's Not About You, It's About Them: Community Engagement

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I was recently asked to review a proposal to a foundation whose goal is to strengthen communities. In my assessment, I noted that the request was all about what the organization did - its successful projects and programs - without any mention of how their activities both engaged and improved the neighborhood. That got me thinking - preservation projects, conservation treatments, museums, historic houses, etc. contribute on a larger scale, but if we are to attract community-minded donors to our projects, we need to determine the measurable impact and tangible results of those contributions in the community, not just in our institutions. In other words, you need to think beyond advancing the mission and instead think outwardly about how your organization can better serve the local population.

First, we need to define what community engagement is. One of my favorite blogs is Doug Borwick's [Engaging Matters](#). Last May he did a series of postings that really summed it up. For him, community engagement is "a long-term strategy to build community ownership, participation, relationships, and support for your organization." You have to be in it for the long-haul and not expect a the token activity to result in a substantial relationship. As with donor cultivation, community engagement takes time.

The next question is how, and there are a variety of avenues you can use to start. For example, determine community needs and potential responses through surveys, gatherings, and partnerships or collaborations with a variety of community groups. Ask these constituents to outline the issues, but also help to

envision the solutions. Then develop programs and initiatives that address the needs to be attended to. (More on the "how" of engagement in the next issue.)

How does this help you make the case for preservation funding in a request to a community-centric donor? By making preservation something that everyone benefits from. The obvious example is the economic impact of preservation in the community - restored structures can become low-income housing or spaces for new businesses, fostering neighborhood growth. Preservation can be used to create or maintain public spaces, creating parks that improve quality of life. Volunteer programs can teach important job skills that can be applied elsewhere. The possibilities are endless once you start thinking about it!

How do you benefit? Besides the warm and fuzzy feeling you'll get, your project or organization will gain prominence and become a resource that people are involved in and will want to protect. In addition, it will expose you to a variety of untapped resources you may not have known were available. This includes the obvious, like new stakeholders, but also facilities, materials, and networks you might not have discovered otherwise. In your fundraising, it will open you up to a whole new set of prospects - those who fund community initiatives, a group that far outnumbers those who fund preservation. As I have stated in the past, you need to think creatively about fundraising for your preservation or conservation project, and thinking outside of your organization is one example of how you can accomplish this.

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