

# The Role of Advocacy and Community Relations for Foundation Boards

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**INSTITUTIONALLY RELATED FOUNDATION BOARDS** provide a variety of support functions for colleges and universities. In addition to their fiduciary responsibility to manage the endowment and stewardship of its donors, directors also serve as advocates and ambassadors of the university. The California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB) Philanthropic Foundation's Advocacy and Community Relations Committee is charged with building relationships with elected officials and advocating for state resources by creating awareness of the university's mission and impact on the region and state. This article provides an overview of the committee's role working in tandem with city officials, state legislators, community organizations, and the CSUSB Philanthropic Foundation to secure \$79,000,000 in state funding for a student services building at the university's Palm Desert Campus in the Coachella Valley and offer suggestions for effective advocacy.

## The Role of the Advocacy and Community Relations Committee

Historically, public colleges and their institutionally related foundation boards have focused on opportunities for leveraging both philanthropic and state resources by building relationships with elected officials at the local, state, and federal levels. Foundation board members are natural partners and passionate voices in advocating on behalf of the university in the state capital, Washington D.C., and, of course, locally. The term "advocacy" as used in our work is defined as engaging directly with elected officials and giving voice to the institution and the students we serve. The advocacy and community relations committee also manifests the concept of "total resource development," which focuses on advocating for three core funding sources: (1) state funding, (2) federal support and sponsored research, and (3) philanthropic support.

All foundation board committees serve important purposes in advancing the institution's fiduciary responsibility and board priorities. However, the work of the advocacy and community relations committee to build awareness and relationships at the local level helps position the institution to protect and enhance state and federal support by engaging and educating elected officials and

key constituents about campus priorities, ultimately building a coalition of campus and mission supporters. As former House Speaker Tip O'Neill and others reminded us, "All politics is local." The purpose and work of the advocacy and community relations committee cannot be understated as the state legislature remains the largest donor for most public colleges and universities.

### Case Study in Advocacy: CSUSB Palm Desert Campus, Coachella Valley

The Coachella Valley was founded on the promise of opportunities and improving the quality of life for its diverse and vibrant communities. A natural extension of that promise was to fulfill the shared goal of its citizens for access to higher education.

In the early 1980s, the citizens of the Coachella Valley came together with a grassroots campaign to create a public four-year campus in the desert. With the support of the California State University system and with the approval of the state, the CSUSB Palm Desert Campus opened in 1986 with an inaugural class of 80 students seeking access to an affordable and excellent four-year university education in the desert. The Palm Desert Campus (PDC), located 70 miles east of the CSUSB main campus, operated for years without



state capital support for new buildings. Yet, expansion is a critical and inevitable step in accommodating the growing enrollment, which is now at approximately 2,000 students, with 87 percent being first-generation college students and 87 percent receiving financial aid.

In 2021, the California state budget surplus provided a window of opportunity to seek capital funds for a much-needed student services building. The budget surplus also resulted in intense competition from state agencies seeking the available funds. This one-time opportunity to secure funds was a call to action for a large coalition of city officials, business leaders, and PDC students. The CSUSB Philanthropic

Foundation Advocacy Committee and the PDC Advancement Board partnered with local Assemblymembers Chad Mays and Eduardo Garcia, Priority-One Coachella, the City of Palm Desert, and the CSUSB Associated Students to develop a grassroots strategy to secure funds for the student services building. Committee and community members called and met with their state legislators in their district offices, and a delegation traveled to Sacramento to advocate for the building and to ask for support for the project. Our collective efforts resulted in securing \$79,000,000 for the new building. State funding for the building was secured outside of the traditional budget process and will be the first state-funded building on the campus.

This was a significant step forward in expanding the physical footprint of the Palm Desert Campus to better serve the needs of our students and community in the Coachella Valley. The new 32,000-assignable-square-foot building will open in 2027 and will serve 4,000 students. Through the advocacy of our stakeholders and resulting state support, our students will be provided enhanced services including an advising and tutoring center, a career center, an expanded campus library, group study space, a cross cultural center, a campus bookstore, food services, a student health center, and a recreation and wellness center.

### Approaches for Effective Advocacy

- The work of the advocacy and community relations committee should align with institutional priorities and efforts. The work of the committee and its members should be coordinated and well planned, with no surprises.
- The foundation board should have board study sessions regularly on state and federal policy and budget impacts on the university and foundation to be prepared when opportunities and needs arise.
- The board must anticipate and understand key legislative proposals and

unfunded mandates that may impact the university, such as Title IX, Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act processes, enrollment challenges, and graduation metrics.

- The board must understand the constraints on a 501(c)(3) charitable entity and the distinction between lobbying and information efforts.
- The board must continue to build relationships with businesses and non-profit organizations to help advocate on behalf of the university at the local, state, and federal levels.

### Conclusion

In the post-pandemic environment, public colleges and universities operate in a difficult fiscal and public policy environment. Nationally, with diminishing public trust of higher education institutions and the value of a degree, more state legislatures are questioning the state return on its investments in higher education. Foundation boards and their advocacy committees will play an increasingly important role in speaking with a clear and unified voice informing elected officials, their staff, and voters of the value of higher education, the needs and aspirations of the institution, and benefits to the state. The advocacy and community relations committee's efforts to create awareness of institutional needs and build trust at the local level ensure that when issues or opportunities arise, there can be proactive and timely responses to challenges and opportunities. ■



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