SECURING EXTERNAL RESOURCES TO ENRICH PROGRAM QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: HOW ONE COLLEGE ACTS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effort of one higher education college in China to see how it secures external funding resources to enhance its educational programs. The college is known for its success in getting external funding in addition to public revenue appropriations. The researchers took a case study approach by first reviewing the current literature to find out what has been done by other universities worldwide to secure external funding. Data in this study were retrieved by reviewing relevant documents in the college files. Additionally, five college administrators were interviewed to solicit their experiences in seeking external funding for the college. The findings of this study disclosed that the college administrators and staff have contributed tremendous effort to secure external resources to help achieve the college goals. The findings were also discussed relating to the current literature and the implications for educational planning.

INTRODUCTION

The funding in support of higher education usually comes from two sources: internal and external. Internal sources are mainly generated from academic fees paid by students. External sources of funding come from different channels. While the increase in academic fees could generate more revenue for a university, it would also decrease the degree of affordability of the university. On the other hand, the external funding sources are almost unlimited to the university. Therefore, intelligent higher education planners strongly encourage university administrators to develop plans and strategies to secure external funding in support of university programs.

This paper is the report of a case study developed to explore the approaches and strategies employed by a higher education college in China to secure external resources for the university's long-range development. A literature review was first performed to examine effective ways and strategies for securing external financial resources in other higher education institutes.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Program Quality in Higher Education

Assurance of quality in programs of higher education is the key element of program survival. Therefore, before an academic program is delivered to the public, in-house and/or external auditors are invited to check on the processes of production to assure program quality (Zhang & Su, 2016). Beza (1984) claimed five essential elements to support the teacher education programs: entry screening, increased program competencies, mentoring student teachers, exit evaluation, and probation for beginning teachers. Beza was followed by many scholars who developed their approaches to improving teacher education programs. Meek and O'Neill (1997) proposed to improve teacher education programs from the perspective of policies and procedures. Sutherland (1997) also took a practical approach to assess the program quality of higher education by examining the quality of program graduates. Furthermore, Leong (2000) created six indicators to measure program quality: institutional mechanisms for course approval and monitoring, course design and delivery

methods, staff qualifications and appointment procedures, student support services, assessment procedures and criteria, and course management. Daniel (2000) also recommended that these six indicators should be developed into criteria to assure program quality.

Pursuing for External Funding Resources

For public colleges, state and local fundings are generally not enough to support the daily operation of the colleges. Insufficient funding support will certainly deteriorate the quality of the educational programs (Kudła, Stachowiak-Kudła & Figurski, 2014). Therefore, all public higher education institutes need external funding to subsidize their financial needs. For private colleges, besides the student tuitions, their revenues are solely dependent on external support for survival. Even though many institutes of higher education have their revenues mainly coming from public sources, they still work hard to seek for external sources of funding to enrich their programs (Liu, Chen, Wang, & Wang, 2020). However, when external sources of funding are increasing, they begin to dominate the direction of policy changes of the colleges (Speck, 2010). In some instances, it could even upset the balance of graduation rates among ethnic groups (Wekullo, 2022).

Types of External Resources to Support University Programs

All the institutes of higher education, whether public or private, depend on external resources of funding support for daily operations. There are four main categories of external funding: city, provincial, and central government funding; private business funding; alumni donations; and crowdfunding. Most universities encourage their faculty to submit applications to complete for all the qualifying funds to win a chance for acquisition.

City, Provincial and Central Government Funding

In many countries in the world, public universities of good standing are supported by both provincial and central government funding. Some city universities are supported by tax revenues of individual cities. The formulae of funding appropriation are usually approved by legislation based on student enrollment and academic programs. In addition, city, provincial, and central government grants for research and academic activities are also available for application on a competitive basis by public and private universities. In recent years, public funding in support of higher education has been unstable. Because of economic recessions, all levels of government, city, province, and central, have been experiencing budget balancing problems (PEW Charitable Trusts, 2019). In some situations, even appropriated portions of public funding for higher education have shrunk to meet balanced budgets.

Private Business Funding

Private businesses provide strong support for higher education through direct funding because of common interests and tax reduction allowances. Some of the support is also provided through partnership programs, such as businesses providing support by offering universities advisory services and training opportunities. Businesses also work closely with institutions of higher education in offering scholarships and preparing graduates to suit the job market needs. Additionally, working with local universities helps promote the products of businesses in local markets. Some large businesses even offer to support higher education by donating educational equipment and facilities. (Harnisch, 2022)

Alumni Donations

Alumni are generally very faithful and loyal to the higher education institutes they graduated from. Therefore, alumni associations supported by the universities could serve as an excellent channel of communication with them. Through alumni associations, universities could launch their fundraising campaigns by encouraging alumni donations. Many universities have worked with the government to make alumni donations tax deductible. Recent data analysis shows that approximately one-fifth of the total university donations come from alumni. In addition to the university-wide alumni associations, college or program alumni associations are also established to draw closer relationships with the alumni. As a matter of fact, alumni consider it an honor to make donations to their alma mater because their contributions would help build the programs and prestige of the universities they are proud of (Berman, 2019).

Crowdfunding

Crowdfunding, as elaborated by Tomasis (2023), is the practice of collecting money from multiple individuals or sources for the purpose of initiating a proposed task. The crowdfunders usually seek social media to share their innovative ideas and inspire interested partners to contribute to the crowdfunding drive. Sometimes, the goal of crowdfunding is for charity or events for the common good. Regardless of the reason for seeking funds, the trend of crowdfunding has become more and more popular. In starting a crowdfunding process, a fundraising goal and the project amount must be well stated. Setting a time limit for the campaign and keeping the contributors informed are important steps in crowdfunding implementation.

Horta, Meoli and Vismara (2022) studied the employment of crowdfunding as a measure of soliciting external funding for higher education programs. The findings of their study indicated that crowdfunding was used to secure external funding more by universities that have fewer resources. These universities usually have a student body largely from lower socio-economic families. The study suggested that crowdfunding could complement the funding of higher education from many other sources, but concerns are brought about the use of crowdfunding to finance university activities instead of university administration having to seek for resources to begin with.

Why External Resources

Tetrevova and Vlckova (2018) studied the external resources for higher education in the Czech Republic. The findings of the study indicated that higher education managers considered the available external funding to contribute to the development of knowledge and experience of students, academics, and researchers of the universities participating in the study.

To evaluate the benefits of securing external sources of funding, Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning (2021) summarized the reasons for encouraging higher education institutions to seek external funding. First, external funding facilitates research impact. Second, the amount of externally funded support is used commonly as a measure to rank research universities. Third, the increase in externally funded research is an indication of the return on investments the universities make. Fourth, externally sponsored projects contribute to the regional economy mainly through discoveries and innovations with commercial value and through the application of research findings to policy and practice.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to examine the effort of one higher education college in China to see how it goes about securing external funding resources to enrich its educational programs. The college in this case study is a public college supported by city tax revenues. In addition to public funding support, the college is also known for its success in getting external funding. In investigating the approach and strategies employed by this college to apply for external funding support, the researchers also reviewed the current literature to find out what has been done by other universities worldwide to secure external funding. The findings of this study are discussed with reference to the current literature.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions are developed to guide the direction of the study:

1. What strategies are employed by the college in this case study to secure external resources to enrich its educational programs?
2. How are the strategies of this college compared with those of other universities mentioned in current literature in securing external resources to enrich their educational programs?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

As described by Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun (2011), "What case study researchers have in common is that they call the objects of their research cases, and they focus their research on the study of such cases." (p. 435) This study takes a qualitative approach and is particularly focusing on the instrumental type of case study in which the researchers are interested in studying the case to some larger goals (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2011). The researchers intend to investigate how the college in the case study could secure opportunities for external resources to achieve its program goals. Therefore, this study's purpose and setting suit the instrumental case study design well.

Case Setting

In this case study, a teacher education college in the southern region of China was cited as a typical example of utilizing external resources in support of the college programs. The college is financially supported by public funding of the city government based on the formula calculated by enrolment and program factors. Even though the public funding support of the college is generous, it is not sufficient to cover all the general expenditures of the college. The fiscal report of the college in FY 2022 indicates that approximately 60% of the revenues come from public funding appropriations. The external resources in this study go beyond the basic public funding. The college administrators understand that the external resources are rich, and the faculty and the staff of the college are strongly encouraged to explore strategies to reach out to these external resources in support of the college.

Procedures

The researchers first reviewed the current literature on external funding support for higher education. Then, the available documents of the college were reviewed to identify the established goals the college is trying to achieve. It was found that the accomplishments of many goal-related tasks of the college were supported by different sources of external funding without which the goals would not be able to be achieved. The researchers further analyzed the orientations of the different

kinds of external financial support and their significance to the development of the college. Five top administrators of the college were also invited for interviews to solicit their experiences in securing external funding. The findings of this study were discussed with reference to the current literature reviewed.

Data Analysis

The data collected through the review of college documents were examined by using a documentary analysis approach in which relevant contents are highlighted and coded accordingly into themes (Creswell, 2009). The data collected from interviews were transcribed into scripts which were sent back to the interviewees for checking and verification. The process of triangulation was performed between the data collected from the documents and the data collected from the interviews. The commonly agreed emerging themes were then matched with the college academic goals by category.

THE GOALS OF THE TEACHERS' COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

In its long-range development plan, the college has established goals to achieve in gaining public support. These goals are targeted toward growth in two major areas: Teaching and Learning and Scholarly Activities. The details of these two goal areas have become the conditions for public funding and are presented in the following:

A. Teaching and Learning

1. Curriculum Review and Updates

   The curricula of all the college programs will be constantly reviewed to assure that they respond to the changing societal needs and community demands. All curricula will be updated as needed.

2. Pedagogical Innovation

   The faculty will prepare future educators and social leaders by introducing and practicing innovative teaching methodologies.

3. Technology Implementation

   The administrators and faculty will follow up on the latest development of technology and integrate it to facilitate the management and academic activities of the college.

4. National and International Connections

   The college is aimed at building strong collaborative relationships with other national and international institutes of higher education through different formats of partnership.

B. Scholarly Activities

1. Strong Scholarship Positioning

   The college is aimed at building the college to become a strong hold of leadership in the major areas of academic research and activities.

2. Application of Scholarly Production

   The college faculty will engage in scholarly activities resulting in scholarly production to benefit the community.

FINDINGS

The data of this study were obtained through detailed review of the college documents and interviews with the college administrators. After data analysis, it was found that the college has employed many different strategies to seek external resources to achieve its educational goals. These strategies are categorized in the following to answer Research Question 1:

What strategies are employed by the college in this case study to secure external resources to enrich its educational programs?

1. **Internationalism**: Strategies are used to connect with international scholars and institutes of higher education.
   - To initiate exchange programs with other international universities
     (To achieve Goals A1, A2, A3, A4 and B1)
   - To invite international scholars to serve as honorary professors
     (To achieve Goals A1, A2, A3, A4 and B1)
   - To invite international scholars to serve as external markers
     (To achieve Goals A1, A2, A3, A4 and B1)
   - To invite international scholars to serve as judges on program benchmark exercises
     (To achieve Goals A1, A2, A3, A4, B1 and B2)
   - To recruit international students to help finance and diversity
     (To achieve Goals and A4)
   - To secure new program innovations through attending international conferences.
     (To achieve Goals A1, A2, A3, A4 and B1)

2. **Schools and Educational Organizations**: The college works closely with local K-12 schools and educational organizations to ensure that the college is graduating students to maintain high professional standards to suit the market needs. The following strategies are used:
   - To invite veteran teachers and school administrators to serve on program advisory councils. (A1, A2, A3) (B1, B2)
   - To work with external education organizations to develop internship programs for student field practice. (A1, A2)
   - To offer professional services to help with field organizations. (B1, B2)
   - To offer training programs to help prepare current teachers to meet with new challenges (B1, B2)
   - To work with schools/educational organizations to secure a field to try out new program initiatives. (B1, B2)
   - To support program graduates in their new positions and seek feedback to current students in the program. (A1, A2, A3)
   - To secure recognition of program external accreditation. (A1, A2, A3, A4) (B1, B2)

3. **Business and Community:** Local community representatives and businesses and industries support the higher education institutes with substantial funding and help develop up-to-date programs for the institutes. Therefore, the college has assigned staff specifically working on strategies to secure financial resources from the business groups.
   - To work with technology-developing entities for the advancement of program efficiency and effectiveness. (A1, A2, A3) (B1, B2)
   - To invite businesses and industries as partners/donors (A1, A2, A3)
   - To invite community representatives to serve on the program advisory councils (A1, A2, A3)

4. **External Grants and Public Funding:** Staffs in the finance department of the college are assigned with the special responsibility to see that the programs of the college are positioned in ways to secure the equitable public funding appropriation by the funding formula. Additionally, strategies are placed to seek opportunities to apply for all other available external public or private grants.
   - To encourage the faculty to apply for external grants for research and scholarly projects. (A1, A2, A3, A4) (B1, B2)
   - To apply for public funding appropriations in support of college programs (A1, A2, A3, A4) (B1, B2)

   The strategies for securing external resources to achieve the college goals are also tallied in the following Table 1 to facilitate convenience of references.

   In reviewing these strategies of securing external resources, it is found that the college administrators are exerting a balanced effort in each of the strategy categories. These strategies are characterized by their special features:

1. The resources the college is seeking are not always in terms of dollars. It could be in the format of expert assistance or equipment facilitation.
2. The college is smart enough to assign special groups of staff to manage external funding affairs. These staff will keep their eyes open to take advantage of each funding opportunity.
3. Seeking external resources could be under mutual exchange terms. The college could offer some other services to other partners in return for obtaining the needed external resources.

   Part of the data collection procedure is to invite college administrators for interviews to understand more of their experiences with the college strategies in securing external resources to achieve the college goals. A total of five college administrators were interviewed including the Vice-President for Academic Affairs, the Director of Finance, the Director of Public Relations, the Dean of the School of Business, and the Dean of the School of Education. The interviews were aimed at confirming with the interviewees what the researchers have found in the college-filed documents about the strategies for securing external resources. Additionally, the researchers would like to hear the direct voices of the college administrators as to how these strategies for securing external resources are implemented.

   During the interview with the Vice-President for Academic Affairs, she indicated that her main role was supervising the academic programs of the college to make sure that they contribute to achieving the college goals. Seeking external resources was certainly one of the significant approaches. She claimed,

   "I am playing a supervisory role as Vice-President of Academic Affairs to see that all the programs in the college work towards achieving the college goals. The program directors' report to me needs to demonstrate their strategies and achievements of securing external resources to enrich their programs and achieve the college goals."

   "Securing external resources is one of the significant items for annual program evaluation."

The Director of College Finance, who serves in multiple capacities, was interviewed. He watched for external funding opportunities and worked with the faculty in applying for them. He was also responsible for the management of funded programs. He declared,

> "Many public and private organizations are ready to work with higher education institutes to provide funding resources to help with program enhancement. You really need to watch for your available opportunities. I always call the attention of different program directors to make sure that their programs qualify for them."

> "How to position yourself in the application process to be more competitive is a task. I have completed enough fund applications to understand what is needed for submission. I work closely with the program staff in sending in the most aggressive applications."

> "The management of funded programs is the work of my office. I usually assign a person in my office to be responsible for managing one program. He/she needs to thoroughly understand the ins and outs of the conditions of funding of that particular program and to make sure that we are in full compliance."

Table 1: Strategies for Securing External Funding – Aligning with College Goals

External Funding Strategies	Goal A1	Goal A2	Goal A3	Goal A4	Goal B1	Goal B2
Category 1: Internationalism						
* To initiate exchange programs with other international universities	X	X	X	X	X	
* To invite international scholars to serve as honorary professors	X	X	X	X	X	
* To invite international scholars to serve as external markers	X	X	X	X	X	
* To invite international scholars to serve as judges on program benchmark exercises	X	X	X	X	X	X
* To recruit international students to help finance and diversity	X			X		
* To secure new program innovations through attending international conferences.	X	X	X	X	X	
Category 2: Schools and Educational Organizations						
* To invite veteran teachers and school administrators to serve on program advisory councils	X	X	X		X	X
* To work with external education organizations to develop internship programs for student field practice.	X	X				
* To offer professional services to help with field organizations.					X	X
* To offer training programs to help prepare current teachers to meet new challenges					X	X
* To work with schools/educational organizations to secure a field to try out new program initiatives.					X	X
* To support program graduates in their new positions and sought feedback from current students	X	X	X			
* To secure recognition of program external accreditation	X	X	X	X	X	X
Category 3: Business and Community						
* To work with technology-developing entities for the advancement of program efficiency and effectiveness.	X	X	X		X	X
* To invite businesses and industries as partners/donors	X	X	X			
* To invite community representatives to serve on the program advisory councils	X	X	X			
Category 4: External Grants and Public Funding						
* To encourage the faculty to apply for external grants for research and scholarly projects.	X	X	X	X	X	X
* To apply for public funding appropriations in support of college programs	X	X	X	X	X	X

The Director of Public Relations was interviewed saying that he focused on cultivating positive relations between the college and the local and international entities. He disclosed,

"The college needs to build a positive image in the local community and the international professional arena. The reputation of the college counts a lot in securing external sources of help as well as partnership development."

"Many public and private organizations are willing to help higher education institutes in developing their programs. They want to work with institutes with well established relationships."

"I serve as a liaison between the college and the external organizations to develop and maintain constructive working relationships. When the donors/external organizations contribute to help the college, they also want to see the outcomes of their effort. Therefore, we need to stay connected and keep them updated of the latest development of the programs resulting from their generosity."

The Dean of the School of Education stated that she worked closely with the K-12 schools in her effort to connect with external entities for assistance. Her staff also sought opportunities for grants for scholarships, research, and professional activities. She verified,

"We work with public and private K-12 schools to secure resourceful assistance not in terms of monetary values. The schools offer our students internship opportunities and provide veteran teacher guidance to our students. They allow our staff and students to perform academic research in their schools and also give us permission to experiment with innovative teaching methods."

"Some of our educational projects are made possible with the support of external education grants. Allocated grants also provide funding for hiring additional staff and purchase of needed equipment."

"We also receive funding support from alumni of the School of Education with small research projects and professional workshops."

The School of Business has confirmed that the school received substantial financial support from local businesses and communities annually. During the interview, the Dean said that he maintained close connections with local commercial firms and influential community members. He stated,

"The local businesses often donate to the School of Business in terms of scholarship in support of students to successfully complete the business programs. They also pay the School to train their employees for innovative business initiatives."

"Two years ago, one of the industrial firms donated to the School a substantial amount of funding to upgrade all the equipment in the technology laboratory."

"We have established a panel of experts consisting of distinguished businessmen and community representatives to advise the School on program qualities and updated standards."

"In working with local businesses and industries, we recommend our honored graduates to them to fill their positions. So far, they are very satisfied with the good performance of our graduates in their companies."

In summary, the researchers found that the administrators and staff of the college understand the importance of having external resources in support of their programs. Therefore, they all work hard to catch every available opportunity to submit their applications for these competitive resources. The conversations with the college administrators have confirmed the strategies the researchers noted in the college document review. The researchers are impressed with the initiatives the administrators and staff have taken to actively seek external resources to enrich their programs to meet the college goals.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are significant. These findings disclose some of the major strategies the college used as means to secure external resources for program enhancement. They also show the administrators' and staff's positive attitudes and confidence in pursuing external funding to achieve the college goals. Some of the findings of this study deserve further discussion to provide answers to Research Question 2:

How are the strategies of this college compared with those of other universities mentioned in current literature in securing external resources to enrich their educational programs?

First, the college administrators and staff recognize the importance of program quality toward achieving the college goals. Therefore, they all work hard to seek opportunities to secure external resources, monetary or otherwise. The finding is in support of the same points of view as expressed by Beza (1984), Leong (2000), Meek and O'Neill (1997), Sutherland (1997), and Zhang and Su (2016), who emphasize the program quality to build the reputation of the higher education institutes.

Second, Kudła, Stachowiak-Kudła and Figurski (2014) and Liu, Chen, Wang, and Wang (2020) agreed that external funding was a main source of revenue for higher education institutes. Even publicly funded universities need to depend on additional external funding for survival. The finding of this study that all the college administrators and staff are anxious to seek external funding sources is in alignment with the findings of Kudla, etc. (2014) and Liu, etc. (2020).

Third, Tetrevova and Vlckova (2018) stated that successful external funding applications would help higher education institutes enhance student activities, faculty teaching, and research. Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning (2021) also listed convincing reasons for institutions seeking external funding. The findings of this study are in total agreement with Tetrevova and Vlckova (2018) and the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning (2021).

Fourth, in Berman's study (2019), alumni of universities enthusiastically participate in raising funds to support their alma mater. However, in this study, the college administrators admitted that alumni participation in college fund drives only happens at the school or program levels.

Fifth, Horta, Meoli and Vismara (2022) and Tomasis (2023) described crowdfunding as a very popular fundraising strategy employed by universities in support of small-scale projects. However, crowdfunding has not been used by the college in this study.

Sixth, the administrators and staff of this college are very interested in working with international higher education institutes. Through different formats of partnerships and exchanges, the programs of this college have been gaining strength by absorbing external resources.

Seventh, a unique strategy employed by this college is to work with K-12 schools and business organizations to offer expertise services to help train veteran teachers and company employees in learning new knowledge and innovative skills. In this way, the college, in return, has gained much popularity and support in monetary and non-monetary rewards.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL EFFORT

Since alumni's fundraising efforts have been so successfully employed by other universities worldwide, the researchers recommend that the college give this approach serious consideration. Many loyal graduates of the college would love to help support their alma mater in fundraising campaigns. Since some schools have already started doing it well, consider bringing it up to try at the college level.

It is further recommended that different programs of the college consider joining their effort in conducting collaborative projects which would benefit the faculty and the students of the participating programs. There are always common grounds in between programs for sharing purposes. Joint efforts in submitting external funding applications could strengthen the applications and increase the chances of acceptance.

CONCLUSION

The administrators and the staff of the college in this study have generated many strategies in securing external sources of funding support to achieve the college goals. They consider external resources to be significant revenues for the college even though it is a publicly funded institute of higher education. How the college administrators and the staff acted in this study could serve as a valuable lesson for other universities to learn. The findings of this study should stimulate the interest of educational planners of higher education to investigate many other possible strategies for securing external funding for program improvement.

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