Asking more produces wealth of benefits beyond fund growth

By NATE DOUGHERTY

When he came to the University of Rochester in 2005, James Thompson had an idea. Rochester had a long history of philanthropy, so why not generate support for the university by emulating the man who started it all?

Thompson, the university’s senior vice president and chief advancement officer, established the George Eastman Circle, a society of supporters who pledge to give the university at least $1,500 annually for five years. The concept was new among universities—one that required a high level of annual giving but also gave donors a chance to specify where their money would go.

“There were two things overall that we lacked—lots and lots of successful fundraising initiatives, and a greater sense of community and pride in the institution among donors,” Thompson says. “People miss the traditions and lore and history, and we had all those things; we just weren’t talking about it.”

The group was a way to allow donors to follow the leadership of George Eastman, he says.

“He made the University of Rochester into the modern university it is, and was very hands-on,” Thompson says. “When there was new construction he funded, he was there meeting with the builders each week.

“We know that none of us can do exactly what George Eastman did, as none of us have the resources, but we wanted to recruit a whole generation of George Eastmans who feel just as invested as he was.”

By the university’s standards, the group has been a rousing success. It now has more than 2,100 members, who collectively have contributed more than $38 million since its inception.

The numbers alone are remarkable, says

James Thompson set out to change two lacks in UR fundraising: “lots and lots of successful fundraising initiatives, and a greater sense of community and pride in the institution among donors.” His achievements are shown in the numbers.

Photo by Kimberly McKinzie
Philip Saunders, chairman of the university’s Rochester Regional Leadership Council, but even more impressive considering how fast they have grown.

“When this started in its charter phase in 2008, there were 1,000 members,” he says.

The group quickly met and surpassed benchmarks that university officials set, Thompson says. By the end of the second year, membership was above its goal of 2,000, and Saunders says he believes the rate of growth is still picking up.

“I actually think it’s going to grow faster,” Saunders says. “They’ve added a couple hundred members in the last six months. They’ve got a good staff working on it, and people are really getting behind it.”

As it grew, the George Eastman Circle also built important momentum for the university’s comprehensive campaign, the Meliora Challenge, UR officials say. The $1.2 billion campaign, which entered its public phase in the fall, receives much of its support from the university’s annual fund.

The fund brought in $130 million, much of it due to the success of the George Eastman Circle, officials said. The annual fund is now the fastest-growing among UR’s peers, Thompson adds.

But the George Eastman Circle is doing a lot more than raising money for the university, Saunders says. It has also built a community around the university and its affiliates, creating a group of stakeholders that extends far beyond alumni alone, he says.

“The thing I like about it is that it can allow people from the community who aren’t necessarily graduates of the university to get involved,” Saunders says. “It makes people feel like they’re part of the whole situation—with the university and Strong (Memorial Hospital). I emphasize Strong because a lot of people didn’t think of UR beyond the university.”

By allowing members to earmark their donations, the university also pulled together supporters of its various entities into one body, Thompson notes. Those who never thought of themselves as supporters of UR—instead giving or volunteering at the Memorial Art Gallery or the Eastman School of Music—are now together in one group, he says.

“We need people who see themselves as stockholders in a way,” Thompson says. “A private university doesn’t have stockholders in the way companies do, but instead it is all the stakeholders who need to feel like they own the institution.”

It also has galvanized the university’s supporters in the Rochester area. Though there are members in 44 states and 12 countries, roughly 40 percent live in the Rochester area. Last year the university established the Rochester Regional Leadership Council to further develop support in the region.

The five-year requirement is a pivotal part of the George Eastman Circle, Thompson says. By asking for such a long-term commitment, UR is ensuring that the members will be more involved and more likely to continue giving after their commitment has ended.

“There are studies that found people who give once have about an 8 percent chance of giving again,” Thompson says. “But people who give each year for five years are 89 percent more likely to continue giving. These people are more involved, too, just like how people who put money in the plate at their church or synagogue are more likely to pick up trash in the parking lot.”

Saunders, a philanthropist who supports a number of organizations locally and in 2010 pledged $5 million for a challenge grant at Rochester Institute of Technology’s E. Philip Saunders College of Business, says he has never seen anything quite like the George Eastman Circle.

“It’s a pretty unique way of giving and one I hadn’t really seen or experienced before,” Saunders says. “Jim Thompson is sort of a visionary in the area of college advancement. He brings a different way of marketing it so people feel like they’re part of something.”

Building a community benefits not only the university but the entire region, Thompson says. Many of the urban areas that have experienced a renaissance in recent years—like Baltimore or West Philadelphia—have been centered on universities, he notes.

“If you look at the list of the oldest institutions in the world, the majority are universities,” Thompson says. “So we’re not going anywhere. In 10,000 years, if there are still people living in Rochester, there will still be the University of Rochester.”