

Reframing Higher Education as a Cause Worth Supporting

A Guide to Strengthening Your Case for Support

Higher education changes lives, strengthens communities, and advances knowledge every day. But in a crowded charitable market, loyalty and tradition are no longer enough to keep colleges and universities at the top of a donor's list. To sustain donor growth, advancement leaders need a stronger case for support that makes giving to their institution feel relevant and compelling.

The Opportunity Is There, But Standing Out Remains a Challenge



\$617.2B

Total charitable giving
in the U.S. in 2025



1.55M

Registered **501(c)(3)**
organizations in the US



72%

Of Advancement leaders believe
donors do not view giving to
higher education as a priority

Source: Giving USA, The Annual Report on Philanthropy for the Year 2025, 2026; EAB, What's Shaping Advancement in 2026 and How to Keep Pace, 2026.

Translate Institutional Priorities Into Donor-Relevant Causes

A stronger case for support is built from how institutional priorities are framed for donors. Most institutions already have powerful examples of impact happening across campus. To stand out, teams must be able to connect those priorities to the people, needs, and outcomes donors care about.

Internal priority	Cause-based framing	Why donors care
Student success	Help a first-generation student cover an emergency expense that threatens to derail their degree	Expands access to opportunity and helps more people build a stable future for themselves and their families
Research	Fund a student-faculty team testing low-cost water filters for rural communities without reliable access to clean water	Supports clean water access, a basic human need with immediate health and quality-of-life implications
Campus infrastructure	Update classroom technology so nursing students can practice real patient scenarios before entering local hospitals	Strengthens the local health care workforce and helps more patients receive skilled, prepared care

Pressure-Test a Priority in Your Case for Support

Use this guide with your team to take a closer look at one institutional priority. How each priority is framed for donors shapes the strength of your overall case for support. Where is that priority already connecting with donors? Where could it be more compelling? Use the prompts below to identify what needs to change.

Institutional Priority:		Primary Audience:	
	Questions to Consider	Where We're Strongest	Where We Can Improve
1  Relevance Does it connect to what donors care about?	- What cause, issue, or donor passion does this priority connect to? - Are we showing student, community, research, public, or global impact? - Would a donor understand why this matters beyond the institution?		
2  Specificity Can donors picture what their gift makes possible?	- Do we tell the story of who benefits from donor support? - Do we show what changes because of giving? - Are we balancing specific examples with the broader impact of this priority?		
3  Credibility Do we have proof donors can trust?	- Do we have current proof points, outcomes, or examples tied to this priority? - Can someone outside the institution understand the evidence quickly? - Are we showing results donors can trust?		
4  Consistency Are donor-facing teams telling a consistent story?	- Are annual giving, major gifts, stewardship, and leadership reinforcing the same points about this priority? - Are campus partners and advancement aligned on the stories and examples that support this message? - Do teams have access to current stories, examples, and shared language?		

Ready to build a stronger case for support?

Visit eab.com/AMS or email AMS@eab.com to learn how EAB helps advancement teams connect with donors and inspire them to act.