A powerful discriminator between the good and the exceptional biomedical institutions is the availability of resources to move in new directions rapidly and seamlessly. Large amounts of expendable funds and/or payouts from substantial endowments make it possible for the great institutions to attract the best students, recruit and retain the best faculty, and support innovative research. Although federal and foundation research dollars have been and will continue to be major components of the equation, the extreme wealth and heartfelt and intellectual entrepreneurial interest of the super-rich make philanthropy a fundamental part of the calculus.

As we approach the $1.1 billion dollar mark in the Feinberg School of Medicine’s $1.75 billion dollar target—as part of the Northwestern University $3.75 billion dollar “We Will” campaign—we have learned from our successes as well as our shortfalls. Our strategies and tactics may be of general interest.

First of all, my recruitment as Vice Dean for Development is unusual. I am a physician-scientist with more than 25 years of continuous funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). I served as Associate Chair for Research in the Department of Pediatrics and Associate Dean for Children’s Health at Stanford School of Medicine before moving to serve as a Deputy Director of the NIH and director of the then new Office of Portfolio Analysis and Strategic Initiatives (OPASI). This is the background I brought to Northwestern in 2012. Heads of development, even in medical schools, are generally trained in fundraising. I brought my experience as a scientist, faculty member and scientific administrator to the development office at Feinberg.

The first step was to develop a strategic plan that would serve as the roadmap for the campaign. The guiding principle was that institutes would link the various missions and units of the medical school and university in seemingly seamless umbrella organizations that would include clinical care, research, education, community service and advocacy. The

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE
Focus was on crossing boundaries and enabling collaboration. The 10 areas selected for intensive investment were: heart, cancer, neuroscience, diabetes/obesity/metabolism, mothers and children, genes and environment, transplantation/tissue engineering/regenerative medicine, public health and medicine, clinical and translational science center (NIH CTSA), and medical education.

These ten institutes were highlighted in a 60-page “coffee table” publication that received an award from the AAMC for publications. We followed up with four-page descriptions that delved deeper into constituent centers, programs and units within each institute. The overarching and inclusive strategic plan excited both our gift officers and our donors and provided a framework and enabler for faculty involvement in the campaign.

The development office’s job is not only to raise money, but also to raise money that will have maximum impact on fulfilling the institutional mission and goals. Therefore, the monies raised have been aimed at five major needs to maximize the efforts of the school of medicine:

1. A tuition-free medical school
2. Endowed professorships
3. Innovation grants
4. Fellowships
5. Space

The emphasis was to build endowments to permit sustainability rather than emphasizing expendable funds that might “seed” programs that often had to be sun-downed for lack of ongoing resources.

1. A Tuition-Free Medical School

Wouldn’t it be great if students left medical school without debt, could choose their specific medical career without worrying about how to pay for it, and would choose Northwestern over other institutions because it was affordable? We think so. Tuition represents only one piece of the financial obligation shouldered by today’s medical students. Other expenses nearly double the cash outlay required. Scholarships enable students to follow their passion rather than financial obligations. We currently have a scholarship endowment of $132 million dollars, but we require $800 million dollars to make the medical school tuition-free. Obviously, this is an aspirational goal but it greatly energizes our alumni and non-alumni donors alike. We have several new scholarships, some based on need and others on merit, that have brought students to Northwestern who claim they would have gone elsewhere if not for the financial support they received here.

2. Endowed Professorships

Today’s financially driven medical schools depend on income streams that largely determine where faculty members spend their time. Faculty endowments, not just for the most senior and accomplished, but also for new recruits and mid-career faculty “whose income streams don’t add up,” provide the ability for faculty to be faculty. They can embark upon innovative projects, expand their teaching, and obtain preliminary data for large, external funding.

3. Innovation Grants

By having funds to competitively support innovative ideas, the institution is able to support preliminary research aimed at attracting larger, external support. External funding sources often shy away from the most novel ideas. These internal awards, enabled by philanthropy, can help provide data regarding proof of principle and required preliminary data and results.

4. Fellowships

In addition, trainees are the life-blood of any academic enterprise. In medical schools, postgraduate fellows with MD, PhD, and/or combined degrees seek advanced training before obtaining faculty positions. Although government and foundations generally support such students, there is a greater need and particularly the requirement to have funds in hand to make an offer of acceptance. To this end, institutional funds to support fellows are a powerful academic support. Although endowed funds guarantee these positions in perpetuity, this is an area where expendable funds, covering a multi-year commitment to a specific fellow, are also valuable.

5. Space

Lastly, academic space for all of the missions is a requirement. Our immediate need was to expand our laboratory research space as Northwestern was small by comparison to our peers in our number of research faculty. By obtaining support of a new biomedical research center, our strategic plan is aimed at doubling the size of our research enterprise over a ten-year period.

Conclusion

In summary, the path to medical school greatness requires major financial resources. The impact of a well devised strategic plan and concerted fundraising effort can provide the modern medical school with much needed resources to attain its institutional vision.