EXECUTIVE THOUGHT PARTNER

“The Community Doesn’t Believe in Us Yet”

Case Study 06 • Small Institution Athletics • Revenue Strategy & Presidential Alignment

Representative case. Details generalized to protect confidentiality.

THE LEADER

A newly appointed Athletic Director at a small institution — stepped into a role that carried significant expectations and a quiet crisis underneath them. Two programs weren’t hitting enrollment numbers. Both were still receiving scholarship funding. The math wasn’t working, and the community — the donor base, the local relationships, the people who would need to believe in athletics enough to invest in it — wasn’t fully bought in.

He had the title. He had the vision. What he didn’t have was a revenue generation background, a warm donor network, or a quick path to either.

WHAT HE SAID THE PROBLEM WAS

> *“I need to start raising money and building relationships, but I don’t know where to start — and I can’t promise the president big numbers right away.”*
>
> **— The AD, entering the conversation**

WHAT THE PROBLEM ACTUALLY WAS

Three problems, layered on top of each other, all arriving at once.

- Structural: two programs bleeding scholarship dollars without enrollment numbers to justify them.
- Relational: a community that hadn’t been cultivated — not hostile, just unconvinced.
- Presidential: a leader above him who needed to see strategic thinking, not just activity.

You can’t fundraise your way into a community that hasn’t decided to believe in you yet. And an AD asking for patience without a plan looks like an excuse. An AD presenting a targeted relationship strategy with a realistic timeline looks like a leader.

The work wasn’t just building a fundraising strategy. It was building the conditions in which fundraising could eventually work — and communicating that architecture clearly enough that the president stayed in the room with him.

THE WORK

Program Narrative: They built an honest assessment of the two underperforming teams — not to make excuses, but to develop a narrative that was strategically defensible. If scholarship dollars were going out without enrollment numbers coming in, the president and any future donor needed to understand why the investment still made sense and what the plan was to right-size it. Transparency with a strategy is leadership. Silence is liability.

Community Mapping: They mapped the relationship landscape deliberately. Not a broad campaign — a deliberate sequence of conversations designed to build institutional credibility before any kind of ask. Who already had a connection to the institution, even a dormant one? Who had a personal tie to athletics, to student success, to workforce development in the region? They were looking for believers first, donors second.

Network Leverage: They leveraged both networks — Dan's advancement relationships and the AD's own community ties — to identify targeted entry points. Relationships that could be activated quickly, conversations that could build credibility without requiring a track record that didn't exist yet.

Presidential Communication: Every update to the president would be framed around strategic alignment — what relationships were being built, what partnerships were being explored, what the 12-to-24-month arc looked like. Not "we're working on it." A specific, sequenced plan that showed the president his AD was operating like a strategist, not a fundraiser in over his head.

THE STRATEGY ARC

01 BUILD BELIEVERS	02 BUILD NARRATIVE	03 ALIGN UPWARD	04 BUILD REVENUE
Identify and activate community relationships already adjacent to the institution	*Develop a transparent, defensible story around program investment and future vision*	*Frame every presidential update around strategy and sequence, not outcomes yet to come*	*Let gifts follow the foundation — trust, credibility, story, then the ask*

THE REFRAME THAT CHANGED THE TIMELINE

We are not behind. We are at the beginning. And the beginning, done right, is what makes everything else possible.

THE SHIFT

The AD stopped trying to solve a fundraising problem and started solving an alignment problem. The revenue would follow — but only after the relationships, the narrative, and the presidential partnership were in place.

Trying to close gifts before any of that existed wasn't just premature. It was the fastest way to damage the credibility he was still building.

THE OUTCOME

A targeted relationship strategy — not a broad fundraising campaign. A sequenced community engagement plan built around the networks they already had, with milestones measured not in dollars raised but in relationships opened, conversations had, and institutional credibility built. A presidential briefing framework that positioned the AD as a strategic partner.

The big numbers weren't coming in the first few months. Everyone understood that — and more importantly, everyone understood why, and what was being built in their place.

> *"I stopped feeling like I was failing because I wasn't closing gifts. I started understanding that what I was doing — the relationships, the strategy, the alignment with the president — that was the job. The gifts come after the foundation is built."*
>
> **— Athletic Director, Small Institution**

WHAT ETP DID

Helped an AD see that revenue generation isn't a skill you either have or don't — it's a system you build deliberately, starting with trust before you ever get to transactions. Reframed his timeline from a liability into a strategy. And gave him the language to bring his president along for the whole arc — not just the wins.

The foundation first. Always the foundation first.

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I create structured conversations for leaders who already carry the answers.

Not coaching. Not consulting.

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