ONLINE DONATIONS AND SUPPORT GROUPS ON ACADEMIC LIBRARY WEBSITES IN FLORIDA

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Abstract
This study examined two research questions. How many academic libraries in Florida offer an online donation option on their library website? How many academic libraries in Florida have “Friends of the Library” type groups? Other relevant issues included the growth and trust of online donation systems, as well as the ease and convenience of locating them on university and library websites. A total of 67 university websites and academic library websites of four-year colleges and universities in Florida were examined, comprising 38 public and 29 private institutions. This study found that 22 percent of academic library webpages and 90 percent of university webpages featured a link to an online donation system for year-round giving. The number of library websites featuring information about “Friends of the Library” or similar groups was 13 percent. Looking ahead, academic libraries must invest in resources and strategic planning for effective fundraising. Despite funding challenges, practical solutions exist within current frameworks. By utilizing university online donation systems, creating targeted appeals, and fostering community support through advisory groups, libraries can more effectively secure resources to sustain and enhance their educational mission.

Online Donations and Support Groups on Academic Library Websites in Florida
During a previous research study of academic libraries’ websites in Florida, researchers noticed that a few library websites offered online donation opportunities.[1] This observation invited a follow-up study. Many academic libraries have faced budget and staff cuts within the past five years, necessitating the raising of funds through various means. Online donations through a link on the library website appear to be an easy way to supplement budgets.

Review of Relevant Literature
This literature review aims to examine why academic libraries might consider online donations as a viable means to raise funds. Other relevant issues are the growth and trust of online donation systems and the ease and convenience of locating them on university and library websites.

Current Funding Challenges Facing Academic Libraries
Since 2010, Ithaka S+R has conducted a survey of library directors of four-year colleges and universities in the United States. A special 2020 survey was done to assess the impact of COVID on academic libraries. The study, completed in September 2020, found that 75 percent of library directors were operating with reduced budgets, while an additional 20 percent were dealing with expenditure limitations and freezes.[2] The majority of directors made cuts from three areas: collections, staffing, and facilities and operations. Doctoral-granting institutions made cuts to staffing more than master’s and baccalaureate-granting institutions. Public universities made higher cuts to both staffing and operations. An article by Adler, the library director at Georgetown College, explained how staffing was cut four years in a row, starting during COVID.[3] Berg et al. did a study that explained how austerity measures, which were implemented during the pandemic, continued to affect staff and their morale in New Jersey academic libraries.[4] The 2022 iteration of the US Library Survey by Ithaka S+R indicated that some progress was being made to repair budgets that were cut during the COVID-19 pandemic.[5] The positive findings from the report showed that: 25 percent of library directors expected an increase in the collections budget; 44 percent expected it to stay the same; a 22 percent increase and 52 percent status quo in the staffing budget; and a 13 percent increase in operations and 63 percent expected to stay the same. Master’s granting institutions had the highest percentages of decreases in budgets, with 40 percent expecting decreases in collections budgets and 35 percent expecting staffing cuts. Continued decreases in funding for many academic libraries showed the ongoing impact of spending freezes, austerity measures, and staff cuts that were meant to be temporary solutions during the pandemic. These cuts have significantly impacted the services that libraries can provide, raising concerns about the potential loss of resources.

1. Woods and Stoupenos, 2024
2. Frederick and Wolff-Eisenberg, 2020
3. Adler, 2024
4. Cara Berg et al., 2022
5. Hulbert, 2022

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Decreased Federal and State Support for Public Universities and Programs

Recent legislation, specifically the H.R.1 One Big Beautiful Bill Act, became a law on July 4, 2025. According to Attridge and Johnson on the Best Colleges website, this bill will impact the funding of some universities, potentially leading to layoffs or hiring freezes, and will affect graduate students due to cuts in federal funding for research grants and financial student aid.[6] Recent Florida legislation has approved education funding for the 2025 to 2026 fiscal year, with $1.8 billion allocated for the Florida College System and $3.9 billion for the State University System.[7] It is unclear how these different funding sources will affect academic libraries. Universities will likely have to scramble to cover expenses that were cut from federal funding with state funding. The increases to library budgets reported in the 2022 Ithaka S+R survey may not continue, and the decreases, primarily affecting master's-granting institutions, may continue to worsen in the current funding crisis.

Rising Costs of Academic Resources and Technology

Budgets are frozen or decreasing in most academic libraries, but the costs of materials, especially subscription services, continue to increase. According to the 2023 State of U.S. Academic Libraries Report, the average percentage of the budget allocated to subscription services is 35 percent.[8] The average amount spent on one-time purchases for materials, such as books, is 8 percent. Romaine et al. examined 65 years of serial inflation. They explained that the average increase in subscription services, such as those from EBSCO, is expected to rise 4 to 5 percent for the 2025-2026 academic year.[9] Coping with increasing costs often means attempting to unbundle or cancel subscription services. Unbundling involves analyzing large subscription packages to create new contracts with subscription providers for only the necessary databases.[10] Although they do not provide an exact number of cancellations, SPARC has a cancellation tracking webpage that exhibits a substantial number of universities cancelling or unbundling.[11]

Building a case for support

Academic libraries continue to struggle to gain recognition for their value, despite numerous studies linking them to improved student performance. A recent study by Jung and Choi notes a correlation between academic library spending and student graduation rates.[12] Another important discovery finds that there is a "statistically significant association between academic library spending and graduation rates for Black students, even after considering the full range of other characteristics and effects" (p.1). The authors conclude that budget cuts to academic libraries may have an impact on the success of minority students. A study by O'Kelly et al. finds a positive correlation between library instruction and student retention rates.[13] A similar study by Rowe et al. finds a positive correlation between library instruction and GPA, pass/fail rates, and retention.[14] Researchers Scoulas and De Groote note a positive correlation between the use of library resources, such as articles from databases, and students' GPAs in a 2018 study.[15] In their subsequent study, they find a positive relationship between using library space and academic success as defined by the students they interviewed. A study by Mullins and Boyd-Byrnes finds a higher student success rate in information literacy instruction modules taught by librarians compared to those taught by faculty.[16] Academic libraries and librarians must continue to research their impact on student success and actively promote their findings to administrators making financial decisions.

Donor Identification and Cultivation

Budget cuts and a lack of support have led academic libraries to seek donations. The first step is to identify potential donors, including alumni, faculty and staff, community members, corporate partners, and foundations that support the university or have been created specifically to support the library. Griffith and Kealty theorize that students who are involved in the library as students will become alumni who are more likely to donate to the library.[17] Therefore, budget cuts that affect outreach and student programs may harm future connections with alumni. An article by Monnier and Kelly recommends reaching out to alumni with programs and events, creating relationships rather than immediately asking for money.[18] Cultivating relationships with potential donors, developing special programs, and organizing events require time that library deans or directors might lack.

6. Attridge and Johnson, 2025
7. Executive Office of the Governor Ron DeSantis, 2025
8. Goek, 2023
9. Romaine et al., 2025
10. Ivanov et al., 2020
11. SPARC, 2025
12. Jung Choi, 2023
13. O'Kelly et al., 2023
14. Rowe et al., 2021
15. Scoulas and De Groote, 2022
16. Mullins and Boyd-Byrnes, 2024
17. Griffith and Kealty, 2018
18. Monnier and Kelly, 2022

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Organizational and Staffing Considerations

Many libraries employ staff or librarians whose role is to manage marketing, outreach, or fundraising. A study by Dilworth and Heyns reported that 74 percent of the respondents to their survey had at least one person in a role dedicated to fundraising.[19] According to the Ithaka S+R survey in 2020, almost all library directors had to cut staffing.[20] About 75 percent of doctoral-granting universities experienced a reduction in staffing; those numbers are reflected in about 50 percent of master's-granting universities, and about 40 percent of baccalaureate universities. Librarians and staff were decreased through several different ways, including hiring freezes, not filling open positions, and eliminating those currently employed. Librarians or staff in finance or business, student success, engagement or outreach, development, or fundraising positions were furloughed or experienced reduced hours at about 20 percent of universities and eliminated at about 10 percent. The 2022 Ithaka S+R survey found that decreases in staffing were still occurring at 22 percent of Baccalaureate universities, 35 percent at master's universities, and 19 percent at doctoral universities.[21] Reduced staffing for roles responsible for relationship building, event planning, and collaboration with university fundraising foundations also diminishes the capacity to raise funds.

Working with University Development or Alumni Departments

Due to concerns about donor fatigue, universities often regulate the frequency and identity of contacts with potential donors, such as alumni. A study by Dilworth and Heyns found that 71 percent of library deans or directors were required to ask permission to contact alumni.[22] Another finding from the survey was that alumni donations accounted for almost 35 percent of total donations. In comparison, non-alumni donations comprised 28 percent, faculty and staff donations were around 15 percent, and donations from foundations were approximately 15 percent. Restricted access to alumni and limited time during annual giving campaigns have an adverse effect on library fundraising.

Role of "Friends of the Library"

"Friends of the Library" and other groups focused on supporting the library, as volunteers can assist with fundraising efforts. A study conducted by Dilworth and Heyns reported that 29 percent of the survey respondents had a friend group, but only 15 percent reported it was active.[23] One of the advantages of having a friend group or advisory board is involving members in fundraising activities. Collaborating with these groups is essential. Involving the library dean, director, or a staff member helps manage communication with university development offices and library personnel.[24] Three objectives for library support groups have been identified as fundraising, advocacy for the library, and providing guidance.[25] Friend or advisory groups can make connections within their communities and extend the reach of fundraising efforts.[26] Time and patience are recommended for libraries working with existing groups or trying to establish new ones. Cuts in staffing may hinder the operations of current library support groups or the energy and effort required to establish a new one.

Fundraising Strategies and Campaigns

There are many fundraising strategies academic libraries may employ: annual giving programs, major gift solicitation, capital campaigns for renovations and new buildings, endowment building for collections and services, crowdfunding and online fundraising platforms, and grant writing for federal and state funding.[27] According to Giving USA's 2024 report, individual giving accounts for approximately 66 percent, while corporate giving accounts for about 7 percent.[28] There are advantages and disadvantages to all fundraising strategies, and each should be considered carefully by library deans or directors. For libraries with reduced staffing and a lack of a designated person in charge of fundraising, online donations may provide an easy way to raise funds.

19. Dilworth and Heyns, 2020
20. Frederick and Wolff-Eisenberg, 2020
21. Hulbert, 2022
22. Dilworth and Heyns, 2020
23. Dilworth and Heyns, 2020
24. Dilworth, et al., 2016
25. Dilworth and Heyns, 2020
26. Rust and Stringfellow, 2018
27. Dilworth, et al., 2016

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Increase in Online Giving

Online giving increased by 21 percent in 2020 and has continued to grow, with a 9 percent increase in 2021, followed by no growth in 2022 and 2023, and finally an increase of 2 percent in 2024.[29] Blackbaud Institute also reports a 1.7 percent increase in online giving to higher education in 2024. According to Double the Donation, in 2023, 63 percent of donors to non-profit organizations preferred giving online with a credit or debit card, and 75 percent of these donations were made from desktop devices.[30] According to Give Campus, a company that provides online donation programs for colleges and universities, for the first time in 2024, more transactions occurred using mobile devices (42 percent) than using desktop/laptop computers (39 percent).[31] Give Campus also reports that alumni contribute the highest number of gifts, the highest number of individual donors, and the highest amount of money.

Online Giving Website and Link Design

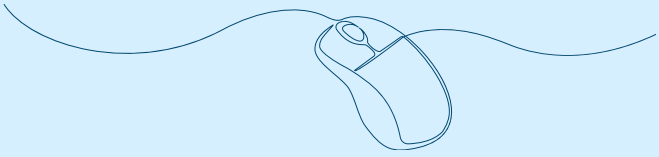
Although mobile device usage for donations is increasing, desktop computers continue to be the primary means of giving. Therefore, website design and button or link design for giving are crucial factors to consider. Several recent studies have highlighted the importance of website design in influencing online donation intentions. Hou et al. found that factors related to online donation intentions included trust in the online donation system, peer influence, and positive feelings about helping.[32] Kwak et al. discovers a connection between the consistency of the website design and the appeal of human images, which in turn affected donation intentions.[33] Consistency in website design means that consumers expect navigation and presentation to be understandable and similar over time, making it easier to find information with repeat visits. A study by Lin and Hsiung finds that donors value quick and easy methods for donating.[34] Websites that present information about donating in an easy-to-understand manner, with fewer steps to complete donations, reiterate the importance of the convenience factor in online giving. Trust in the organization is the most important factor in online giving according to Küchler et al.[35] With carefully designed mobile-friendly websites and links, online donations can be a convenient method for donors to connect with academic libraries.

Research Questions

- How many academic libraries in Florida offer an online donation option on their library website?
- How many academic libraries in Florida have “Friends of the Library” type groups?

Methodology

A list of 72 colleges and universities in Florida that offer four-year programs and have an enrollment of at least 1,000 students was obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics’ College Navigator.[36] Three for-profit universities were excluded from the study because the researcher was unable to access the websites of those libraries. Two universities were excluded from the study because, although NCES had listed them under slightly different names, they shared the same library and university websites. A total of 67 university and library websites were examined, comprising 38 public and 29 private institutions. The size of the university was determined using the total student population reported by NCES, which included undergraduate, graduate, and online students. There are 26 small universities with a student population of 1,000 to 5,000; 22 medium universities with a student population of 5,000 to 15,000; 11 large universities with a student population of 15,000 to 30,000; and eight huge universities with a student population of more than 30,000. The Carnegie classification of size was adjusted because there are a variety of residential characteristics within four-year institutions in Florida (See Table 1).



28. Giving USA, 2025
29. Blackbaud Institute, 2025
30. “Nonprofit Fundraising Statistics to Boost Results in 2025,” 2025
31. Give Campus, 2025
32. Hou et al., 2021
33. Kwak et al., 2023
34. Lin and Hsiung, 2024
35. Küchler et al., 2020
36. National Center for Education Statistics, 2025

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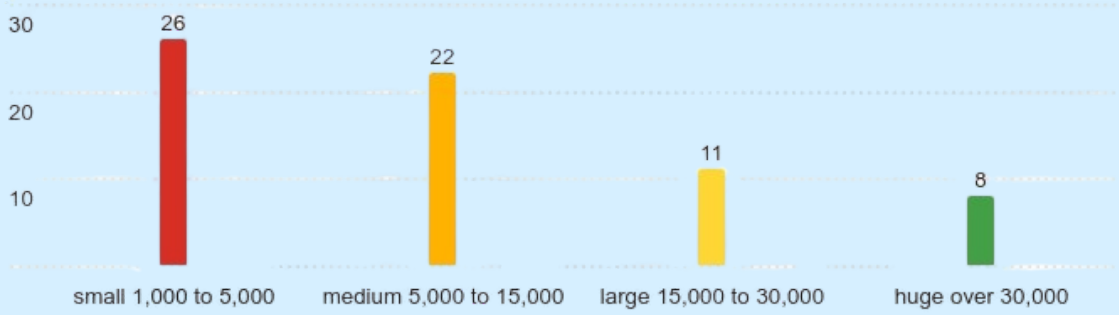
Table 1: Size of Four-Year Colleges and Universities in Florida



Note: N=67

This study is empirical, non-experimental research because it is based on observing and describing existing links and pages on the university and library websites at the time of the study in July 2025. IRB approval was not required for this study as no human subjects were involved. Quantitative data was analyzed for the mean, total counts, and percentages of responses. Data is publicly available at these two links: Academic Libraries in Florida Online Donation Links, Universities in Florida Online Donation Links

Data was collected for the first part of the study using a private Qualtrics survey, which was used to compile and analyze data. The first part of the study collected data on the following questions:

1. Was there a link on the library website for completing an online donation?
2. If yes, where was the link located?
3. Was there a “Friends of the Library” or another group that helped with library fundraising?
4. Was there anything else on the library web pages that indicated fundraising of some kind?
5. Was there an online donation option on the college or university’s website?
6. If yes, was there an option to donate to the library?

The researcher examined library homepages and further investigated main menu options to locate links related to giving opportunities, “Friends of the Library” or similar groups, and fundraisers. The researcher did not examine current or past news or event pages. The scope of this investigation did not include social media. If there were more than one library, the researcher examined the main library or an interdisciplinary library, and did not examine specialty library website pages, such as those for music, law, architecture, special collections, or archives. Research extended to gather more information about online donation links available on university homepages, because many libraries utilized the same online donation system. Data was collected for the second part of the study using an Excel spreadsheet. The researcher examined the location, visibility, and labeling of “donate” or “give” links on university homepages.

Results

Academic Library Online Donations

Online donation links are available on 22 percent (15) of the library websites. The link to give or donate is immediately visible on the library homepage for nine institutions. The other six are located by looking in the main menu under the menu item “About.” The location of the link to give or support is positioned at the top of the page, in the main menu, or above the main menu for 80 percent of the links. The most common labels are “give,” or “giving,” or something similar, such as “give to the library,” “give now,” and “giving opportunities.” Symbols, icons, or graphics are used in place of or in addition to labels, such as a gift (picture of a box with a bow), a heart in an open hand, or simply a heart for six links. (See Table 2).

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Table 2: Online Donation Link Locations, Labels, and Graphics

Online Donation Link Locations N=15			
Page Top Main Menu	Above Main Menu	Left Side Main Menu	Page Bottom
8	4	2	1
Online Donation Link Labels N=15			
Give/Giving	Support		
11	4		
Online Donation Link Graphics N=5			
Gift	Heart in Hand	Heart	
3	2	1	

Huge universities with a total enrollment of more than 30,000 students were more likely to have an online donation option at 75%, which was six out of eight. Thirty-six percent of large universities, 14% of medium universities, and 11% of small universities offered an online donation option. 76% (or 52) of the library websites did not include any links to facilitate online donations (See Table 3).

Table 3: Online Donation Link Availability by School Size

	All Universities	small 1,000 to 5,000	medium 5,000 to 15,000	large 15,000 to 30,000	huge over 30,000
	67	26	22	11	8
No	51	23	19.0	7	2
	76%	89%	86%	64%	25%
Yes	16	3	3	4	6
	24%	11%	14%	36%	75%

The number of library websites featuring information about “Friends of the Library” or similar groups was 13% (9); five were public and four were private institutions. Similar groups featured were “Circle of Friends,” “Library Advancement Board,” and “Library Associate Membership.” Huge and large universities were more likely to have support groups, with 37% of the huge and 36% of the large institutions reporting such a presence. One medium and one small institution had support groups for their libraries (See Table 4).

Table 4: Friends of the Library and Other Support Groups by Size of the University

	All Universities	small 1,000 to 5,000	medium 5,000 to 15,000	large 15,000 to 30,000	huge over 30,000
	67	26	22	11	8
No	58	25	21	7	5
	87%	96%	96%	64%	63%
Friends of the Library	6	0	1	3	2
	9%	0%	4%	27%	25%
Other	3	1.0	0	1	1
	4%	4%	0%	9%	12%

The number of library websites that included information about donating to specific projects or programs was 15% (10). Information was located on separate pages within library websites and accessed after selecting a link labeled “Give, Support, or Donate.” In some cases, the link was in the main menu labeled “About.” Online donation systems typically offer a variety of options through a drop-down menu within the donation system. Because there were often several options per library, the number of options does not equal ten. Donating to a student research award or scholarship was an option for four libraries. Other options for donating included purchasing library materials, supporting events or programs, or building and renovation funds (See Table 5).

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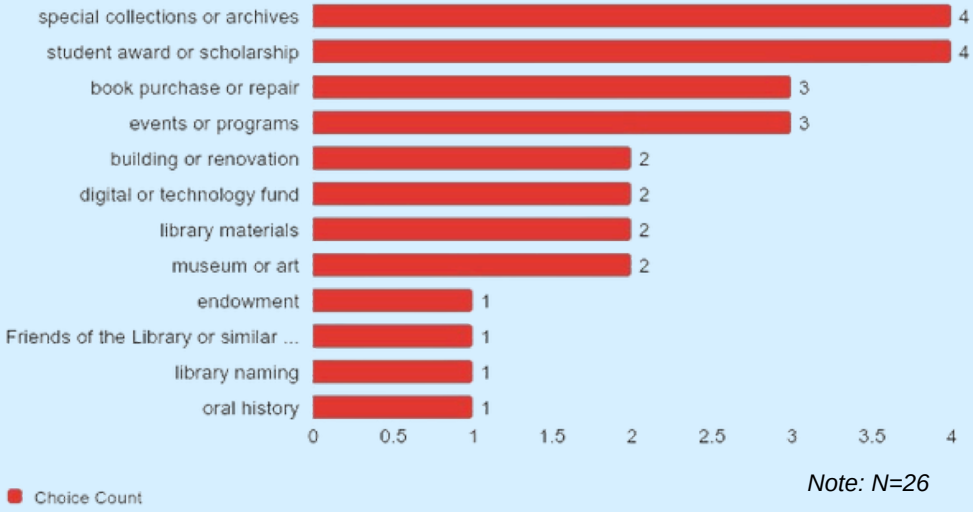
Table 5: Giving Opportunities in Academic Libraries

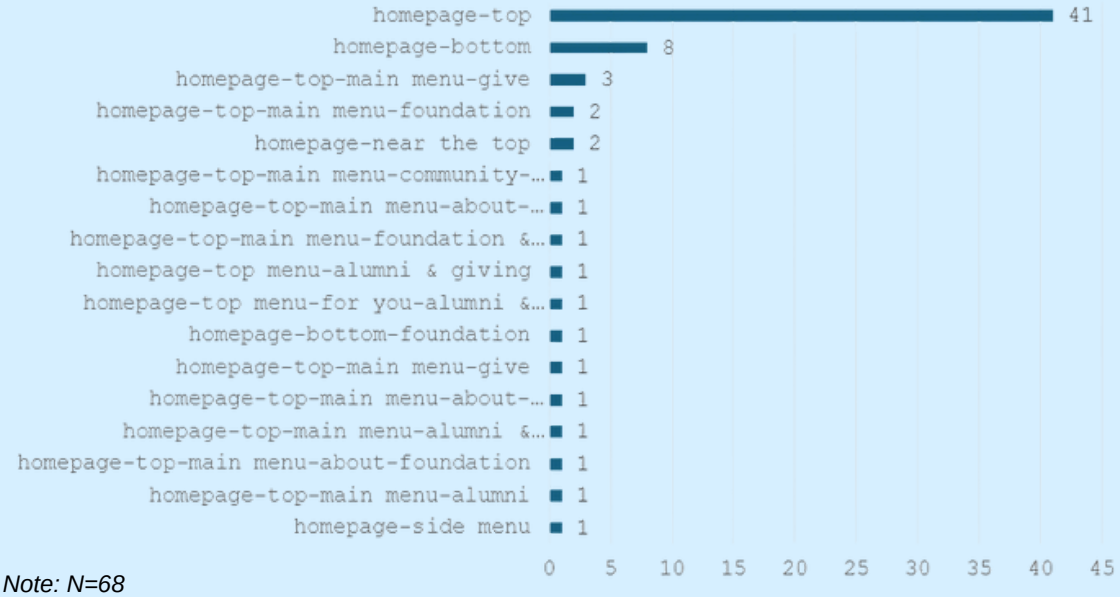


Note: N=26

University Online Donations

Ninety percent (61) of college and university websites had an online donation option. Seventy-nine percent (48) of the links to donate were immediately and easily visible on the college or university's homepage. Most of the links, 41, were located at or near the top of the website, while nine were positioned at the bottom. Fifteen links were visible after selecting different options in the main menu. Some colleges and universities had links located in two different places, which is why the location count differs from the link count (See Table 6). The most prevalent label for links leading to online donations was "Give." Other common labels were "Foundation," "Giving," "Give Now," "Give to," and "Donate." Interestingly, one website featured the symbol for money combined with a heart without any words (See Table 7).

Table 6: University Online Donate Link Location



Note: N=68

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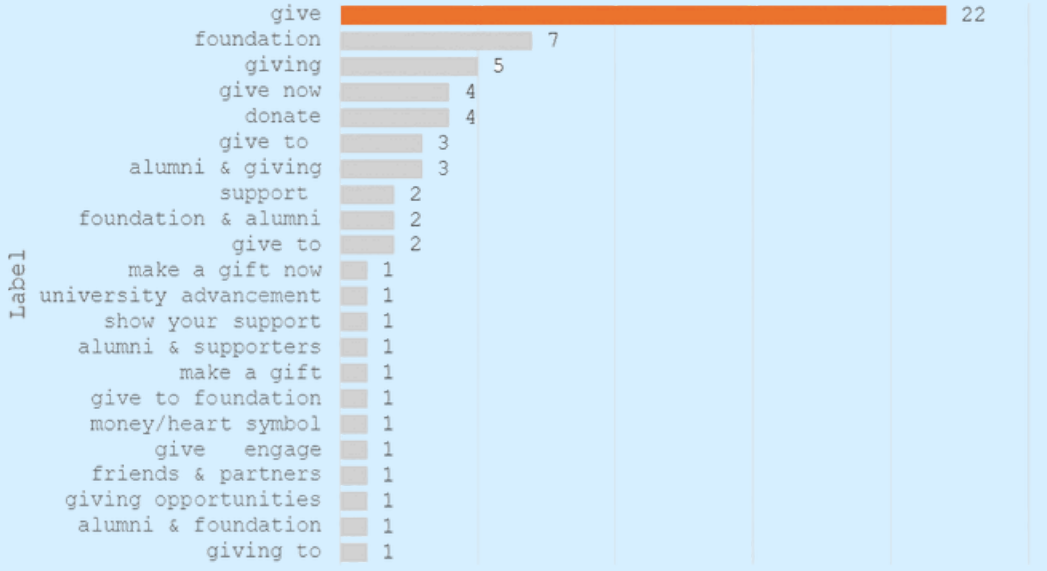
Table 7: University Online Donation Link Labels



Note: N=66

Out of the 61 colleges with links to online donations, 20 percent (13) have a straightforward method for donating to the library. Almost half (31) have a way to designate or specify an option not listed through a drop-down menu by selecting “Other” and entering a text response. It is unclear if someone specified “Library” that the donation would go to the library or into a general fund. Twenty-eight percent of the online donation systems do not include the library as an option, and there is no way to specify it by entering text.

Discussion

Considering the prevalence and convenience of online donations for non-profits, as well as the results of this study, which shows that 90 percent of four-year universities utilize online donation systems, academic libraries are falling behind in taking advantage of an easy way to raise funds year-round. An examination of giving in higher education conducted by Shaker and Borden in 2018 showed that giving to academic libraries has declined over the past 30 years (1988 to 2018).[37] Donations to support libraries decreased from $105.2 million to $76.4 million over a ten-year period (2008-2018). Which means that as prices for library materials and operations have increased, the amount of support they have received through fundraising has dropped. The most important finding from this study is that academic libraries need to work harder to garner the attention of donors amongst a sea of options. Connecting to the online donation system already used by 90 percent of universities is one way to increase fundraising. Therefore, it is recommended that library deans or directors become “the squeaky wheel that needs to be greased” by working harder to collaborate with university development teams and foundations. Librarians and library staff can also advocate for library funding by highlighting the impact libraries have on student performance and retention.

Friends of the Library or other advisory groups can be a powerful ally in fundraising.[38] The results of this study show that only nine libraries have these types of groups. Although it is unclear whether they are involved in fundraising, these types of groups can help connect the library with individual donors and community organizations. Alumni and non-alumni individuals donate the most to libraries compared to organizations and corporations.[39] It is recommended that library deans and directors establish a Friends or advisory group if they don’t already have one.[40] As this study shows, large universities are more likely to have Friends-type groups, possibly because they have enough librarians or staff to work with them. Small to medium-sized universities may be working with reduced staff or librarians may already be doing many different jobs. The payoff seems to be worth the effort of assigning someone to work with or develop a Friends or advisory group, if possible.

37. Shaker and Borden, 2020
38. Dilworth, et al., 2016
39. Dilworth and Heyns, 2020
40. Rust and Stringfellow, 2018

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Dilworth and Heyns surveyed librarians and library staff from organizations focused on fundraising in academic libraries, including the Academic Library Advancement and Development Network, and the Development Officers of Research and Academic Libraries.[41] Survey results indicate that libraries tend to focus their efforts on obtaining funds for unspecified needs, such as programs and events. Dilworth and Heyns theorize that the lack of a specific urgent need meant that donors might be uninterested. The other top fundraising objectives for academic libraries are for building or renovation projects and library materials. The results of this study show that only ten libraries feature information on fundraising for specific projects, programs, events, student scholarships, or awards. It is recommended that libraries enhance their fundraising efforts by highlighting specific programs, events, scholarships, or awards, and explaining how they positively impact student learning and retention. Gone are the days when a simple appeal for giving to the library without a specific reason could be made. While it may seem simple to include a link to an online donation system that accepts credit cards, donors will be more engaged and willing to give when they have specific, compelling reasons.

Limitations

This study was conducted during two consecutive days in July to ensure that observations of different websites were as fair as possible, since they might be updated or changed over time. The researcher did not examine social media posts or past news events to determine all possible fundraising efforts. It is conceivable that July might be a time of lower activity for universities. One method of fundraising is through a limited-time annual giving campaign, such as a “Giving Day” or “Giving Tuesday,” which typically occurs on the Tuesday after Thanksgiving. Academic libraries may be included in these kinds of special donation events, which were not observable during the time of this study.

Future Research

The most recent studies on this topic were published in 2020, so newer data are needed. This study does not determine the effectiveness of online donation options. Further research is required to determine whether libraries raise more money after setting up online donations as an option. This study does not assess the effectiveness of Friends of the Library and other library advisory groups on fundraising. A study could be conducted to estimate the amount of money attributable to the involvement of these types of groups in fundraising. Website design and mobile-friendly website design are other potential areas of further research. The amount of funds raised, in relation to the location of the online donation link, could be further explored. The power of images, such as human images versus graphics, like hearts and gifts, could be an interesting area of study related to website design. The future of website design may include virtual reality or 3D images.[42] Avatars with realistic interactions powered by artificial intelligence are being used in customer service and have been shown to impact online donations.[43] The future of online giving may be affected by wearable technology, such as smartwatches or Apple or Google glasses.[44] There are many ways the study of fundraising in academic libraries could be expanded.

Implications

The implications of this study extend beyond individual institutions to the broader academic library community. As libraries continue to face financial pressures while continuing vital roles in student retention and academic success, the failure to capitalize on established online giving preferences represents both a strategic oversight and a missed opportunity for sustainable funding. The convenience and familiarity of online donation systems aligns perfectly with libraries' need for accessible, year-round fundraising mechanisms.

Conclusion

Looking forward, academic libraries must recognize that effective fundraising requires dedicated resources and strategic planning. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that while academic libraries face significant funding challenges, practical solutions exist within current institutional frameworks. By leveraging existing university online donation systems, developing targeted appeals, and cultivating community support through advisory groups, academic libraries can better position themselves to secure the resources necessary to maintain and enhance their critical educational mission.

41. Dilworth and Heyns, 2020
42. Kristofferson et al., 2022
43. Huang et al., 2024
44. Elgan, 2025

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