

Fundraising for Special Olympics on College Campuses: Guidelines for Campus-Level Fundraising

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Abstract

Several studies have reported on general fundraising techniques; This research paper attempts to find the best way to fundraise for Special Olympics on a college campus. Research was done by analyzing academic sources and organizing interviews with leaders of collegiate Special Olympics programs (Unified Colleges) from around the nation. Based off this research, I suggest that planned events, social media, social networks, and university athletics are all important aspects of a successful fundraiser. The fundraiser that I executed at Colorado State University (CSU) indicates that my research was accurate. The fundraiser described in this paper raised over \$300 for CSU Special Olympics and supports that an effective way to fundraise for Special Olympics on a college campus is to create an event-driven fundraiser that takes advantage of social networks, social media, and the university's athletic department.

I have been a member of CSU Special Olympics since my freshman year of college, and I have cherished every moment. I have held almost every position within the club, working my way up from a regular member, to assistant, to director, to vice president, and am currently the president of the club. Athletics have played a large role in my life and have allowed me to make some of my best friends. This has led to my interest in providing opportunities for everyone to play sports regardless of physical or mental disabilities. I am grateful for Colorado State University (CSU) Special Olympics and want to do everything in my power to make the club prosper in the future.

The research question in this paper is “What is the best way to fundraise for Special Olympics on a college campus?” I address this question by researching fundraising methods and performing analysis on fundraisers conducted by Collegiate Special Olympics Programs (Unified Colleges).

Background on Special Olympics

Special Olympics is a worldwide organization that promotes inclusion and community for individuals with physical or mental disabilities. Special Olympics aims to provide high quality competition through Unified Sports. Unified Sports creates an inclusive culture where people with and without disabilities play on the same field.

The Colorado State University (CSU) Special Olympics program started in 2018 and has since participated in the USA Summer Games in 2022 and is recognized as an ESPN Unified Champion School. CSU Special Olympics plays football, basketball, and soccer over the course of every academic year. Furthermore, CSU Special Olympics practices every Wednesday and competes in regional and state tournaments.

CSU Special Olympics is a Unified College with guidance provided by the Unified Champion Schools branch of Special Olympics Colorado Headquarters. A Unified College is a university that has its own student-led Special Olympics program. Since CSU Special Olympics is student-led, they must raise their own funds to stay operational. Raising funds on a college campus has proven to be difficult, thus it is critical to evaluate campus-level fundraising to find an effective way to fundraise for Special Olympics on a college campus. This research will be a toolkit of guidance for campus-level fundraising that can be passed down to future CSU Special Olympics leaders. The following sections of the paper will include research from academic journals, interviews with Unified Colleges, and a description/results of a fundraiser conducted by CSU Special Olympics.

Academic Research

Event Driven Fundraising

The main goal of fundraising at CSU Special Olympics is to gain something of monetary value that can be used to enhance the activities of the club. Fundraising can be accomplished in many different ways, but an article that sheds light on fundraising efforts at a Romanian university has concluded that campus-level fundraising should be “Events driven” with its focus being more geared towards short-term outcomes. Students relied on their relationships and the university brand in their fundraising which allowed them to come off as more entrepreneurial. The Romanian students were able to get numerous donations and sponsorships from corporations and found success in their fundraisers (Năstase, 2018).

The Romanian students in this article targeted their fundraising at both students and businesses (Năstase, 2018). While this research paper focuses on targeting individual donors, the

previously mentioned Romanian students showed that the power of fundraising with the help of a local business should not be ignored. Creating an event-driven fundraiser with assistance from local businesses is an area where more research could be beneficial.

Nevertheless, these successes among Romanian students are likely to transfer to other college campuses around the world. It is typical to find college students who are “last minute” and are focusing on the fun of the moment. Therefore, events-driven fundraising capitalizes on this commonality among college students and makes these fundraisers very popular and successful on a college campus.

The Romanian students discussed previously unlocked the first step in a successful fundraiser by creating event-driven fundraising opportunities. However, there are many more steps in a fundraiser that lead to success. Creating strong relationships with donors and utilizing social networks/social media are important steps in all fundraisers (Nageswarakurukkal et al., 2020).

Building Long-Term Relationships

Scholars believe that retaining past donors will save costs when compared to attracting new donors in every future fundraiser (Nageswarakurukkal et al., 2020). Building a stable relationship with a donor can lead to reoccurring financial contributions to a cause. Reoccurring contributions add up over time and are more impactful than a single-time donation. However, The Fundraising Effectiveness Project has shown that the average donor retention rate over the past 10 years is below 50% (Nageswarakurukkal et al., 2020). This low donor retention rate is a huge opportunity for improvement. Reaching out to different social groups and organizations is costly in terms of time and money. Building a long-term relationship with donors is crucial as it allows these costs to be avoided or reduced.

To build a relationship with a donor it is important to communicate the impact of each donation and thank them for their contribution (Nageswarakurukkal et al., 2020). The relationship-building aspect of a fundraiser is important and allows for continued support of a cause. Building loyalty and trust is always important but is even more important among students on a college campus where disposable income is low.

Social Media to Build Relationships

As mentioned earlier, relationships are an essential part of fundraising. A way to build relationships and connections is through the use of social media. While social media affects all demographics, it is effective on a college campus due to the younger audience of a college campus. In a Swiss study about donor behavior and their support of non-profit organizations, 42% of the participants shared content related to a charitable campaign on social media and people under 30 years of age were most likely to interact with the posts (Nageswarakurukkal et al., 2020). Additionally, 33% of the people who engaged with the posts said that they wanted to interact and contribute directly to the fund-raising campaign (Nageswarakurukkal et al., 2020). The statistics from this study show the influence that social media has on the younger population. The study makes it easy to see that social media is facilitating a massive spread of information to wide-ranging audiences.

Furthermore, social media can be used to give live updates about projects, ask questions, and allow donors to see the outcome of their donations. Social media encourages an organization to demonstrate their commitment to accountability and uphold their values which then builds trust over the long term (Nageswarakurukkal et al., 2020). These are all ways for social media users to connect with the organization that they donate to. Social media facilitates transparency which is an essential part of a lasting relationship.

Lastly, a community of non-profit organization (NPO) supporters can play a critical role in fundraising. Individuals often encourage their personal network of family, friends, and coworkers to donate and join an NPO's community. When people are engaged in a community, it is quite common to experience peer pressure with donations. This type of social pressure is called the "Social Network Effect" (Nageswarakurukkal et al., 2020). All NPOs, but especially NPOs that are on a college campus, should be taking advantage of the social network effect because it often increases the amount of donations given towards a cause.

Fundraising at a Unified College

To understand how other Unified Colleges raise funds, I reached out to a number of universities from around the nation. Colorado State University, Colorado University at Boulder, and Regis University are examples of Unified Colleges that are located within Colorado. In this section, I report the information I gathered from the leaders of the Special Olympics programs at Regis University, Colorado University at Boulder, St. Catherine University, and Texas Tech University.

Fundraising at Regis University

Nia Andricopoulos is the leader of Regis University's Special Olympics program. The following information was obtained from a phone call with her on September 13th, 2024. Special Olympics at Regis University performs a variety of fundraising activities. Some of the fundraising activities include:

- 1. Polar Plunge** – Hosted by Special Olympics Colorado
- 2. Plane Pull** – Hosted by Special Olympics Colorado at Denver International Airport or Rocky Mountain Metropolitan Airport in Broomfield

3. T-shirt sales – Club-made shirts for promotion and selling

4. Collaborations with campus athletics

- Dunk tanks on campus – During sports games with the athletic department
- Athletic department – Galla/Draft night where tables are sold
- Basketball halftime – Shots to raise money

The Polar Plunge and Plane Pull are both fundraising events that are hosted by Special Olympics Colorado. These fundraising methods are effective due to the professionalism that Special Olympics Colorado conducts themselves with when organizing a fundraising event. Furthermore, it takes pressure off the students that are running Special Olympics on their campus to plan their own fundraiser. Events hosted by Special Olympics Colorado are a great way to get funds for Special Olympics, but it does not answer the question of how to fundraise on a college campus.

Nia and Regis University stand out because of their partnership with the universities' athletics department. A relationship with the athletics department is valuable due to the school's resources and student outreach, therefore it is important to build rapport between Special Olympics and the school's athletic department. Nia and Regis University expect the events with their athletics department to be a huge success. These events will allow Regis Special Olympics to fund its unified program for the upcoming year and integrate its school's varsity and unified sports teams "N. Andricopoulos (personal communications, September 13, 2024)".

Fundraising at the University of Colorado at Boulder

Rachel Gaydos is one of the leaders of the University of Colorado at Boulder's (CU Boulder) Special Olympics program. Rachel and I have a good relationship and communicate

frequently about each of our Special Olympics programs. The last time we spoke about our clubs was during the CSU vs. CU rivalry flag football game on September 9th, 2024.

Special Olympics at CU Boulder is much smaller than it is at CSU. CU Boulder has about twelve athletes while CSU has over forty “R. Gaydos (personal communications, September 9, 2024)”. Due to the differing sizes of the programs, it leads to different fundraising techniques. Rachel and CU Boulder Special Olympics are primarily focused on the following activities for their program:

1. **Raising awareness** – Communicate with athletes, families and CU Boulder’s student body
2. **Collaboration** - Partnering with other Unified Colleges to create opportunities for games and competitions
3. **Utilizing professional staff** - Participating in Special Olympics Colorado fundraisers

CU Boulder is in a growth phase where the most important action they can do is increase their social network and number of relationships. As mentioned previously, social networks and awareness in a community are some of the most important aspects of a successful fundraiser. The actions that CU Boulder is taking now will set them up well to grow their club and eventually start leading their own event-driven fundraisers.

Building relationships early in the life of a Unified College Special Olympics program will lead to long-term relationships, prospering social networks, and the ability to collaborate with the university’s athletic department. It is important not to forget about these steps when fundraising on a college campus. It is impossible to dive straight into an event-driven fundraiser

without building up a community of participants first. It is crucial to have people participate in a fundraiser, so all organizations must build their network of connections before hosting any of their own fundraisers.

Fundraising St. Catherine University

Katherine Lew is one of the leaders at St. Catherine's Special Olympics program. Katherine and I met during a national leader's call for Special Olympics. This call was aimed at connecting leaders of Unified Colleges around the nation. On this call we talked about what we are doing at our schools, the resources we are using, and how we are fundraising. Katherine's success with Special Olympics Minnesota at St. Catherine University stuck out to me and I wanted to learn more from her. We emailed a few times between October 13th and October 17th, 2024, so I could learn more about the fundraising at St. Catherine University.

After connecting with Katherine, I was able to learn that the main fundraising activities at her unified club are:

- 1. Polar Plunge and Move for Inclusion** – Hosted by Special Olympics Minnesota
- 2. General financial assistance from Special Olympics Minnesota** – Help from Zak Armstrong
- 3. St. Catherine University Student Senate Grant** – Offered to student clubs and organizations
- 4. St. Catherine University Campus life office** - \$145 per semester for being a chartered club on campus

St. Catherine University and Katherine excel in their connection with Special Olympics Minnesota “K. Lew (personal communications, October 13, 2024)”. The Polar Plunge and Move

for Inclusion are St. Catherine's largest revenue generators which are both hosted by Special Olympics Minnesota. St. Catherine University gets a portion of the revenue generated from both of these events and received about \$1,000 last year "K. Lew (personal communications, October 13, 2024)".

Neither one of these fundraisers are an explicit answer to finding the best way to fundraise for Special Olympics on a college campus, but they are an opportunity for future fundraising. Because St. Catherine University is connected with Special Olympics Minnesota, it is possible to collaborate and organize a fundraiser on the campus of St. Catherine University. An event-driven fundraiser that is led by the experts of Special Olympics Minnesota on the campus of St. Catherine University has the chance to be very successful. This opportunity would capitalize on the power of event-driven fundraising and lead to some great fundraising results for St. Catherine University's Special Olympics program.

Fundraising at Texas Tech University

Emilee Rodriguez is one of the leaders of the Special Olympics program at Texas Tech University. Emilee and I met during the same national leader's call that was described previously. I was impressed with the information that Emilee shared during the call and wanted to reach out to her and learn more about her Special Olympics Club at Texas Tech University. After exchanging a few emails between October 13th and October 20th, 2024, I learned that their main fundraising activities are:

- 1. Partnerships with food establishments** – Percentage of the night's earnings go to Texas Tech Special Olympics
- 2. T-shirt sales** – Sell custom shirts to athletes and university students

One of the best things that Texas Tech Special Olympics does is connect with its community. Maintaining and creating relationships with students and local businesses is extremely powerful. These relationships can lead to some large events that occur directly on the campus of Texas Tech University.

Partnering with local restaurants is a fantastic way to take advantage of a restaurant's existing customer base while expanding the reach of the Special Olympics club. Furthermore, Emilee mentioned that she shares the food fundraisers on Instagram and in a group chat with other sports clubs. Utilizing social media and long-term connections is a terrific way to enhance a fundraiser at a restaurant. The combination of social media, relationships, and fun events has allowed them to make about \$250 every time they partner with Capital Pizza "E. Rodriguez (personal communications, October 13, 2024)".

Additionally, Special Olympics Texas Tech is selling shirts on its campus. They raise about \$75 with every batch of new shirts "E. Rodriguez (personal communications, October 13, 2024)". The shirt sales have led to more awareness and money for the club. When students and athletes buy shirts, it directly supports the club and also serves as a form of free advertisement.

The fundraising at Texas Tech mirrors some of the main aspects of the research in section two of this paper. Texas Tech is great at using social media and creating long-lasting relationships. The current fundraising efforts at Texas Tech are successful and are allowing the club to continue to grow. All other student-led organizations can learn from the success that Texas Tech Special Olympics has had when partnering with local restaurants.

Experiment and Results

Fundraiser Performed at Colorado State University

After considering all of the research and interviews, my guideline for Special Olympics fundraising on a college campus is to create an event-driven fundraiser that takes advantage of social networks, social media, and the university's athletic department. Due to this research, CSU Special Olympics conducted a fundraiser that can be broken down into the following steps:

1. Get signed footballs from multiple CSU Football athletes
 - a. Tory Horton (#14)
 - b. Jamari Person (#18)
 - c. Paddy Turner (#41)
 - d. Tanner Morley (#74)
2. Promote the fundraiser on the CSU Special Olympics Instagram
 - a. Special Olympics members repost the fundraiser on their accounts
3. Randomly selected donors can pick up their ball at CSU Special Olympics practice on October 23rd, 2024, or donate their ball to a random CSU Special Olympics athlete

Step One of the Fundraiser

Step one of the fundraiser capitalizes on CSU Special Olympics connection with the university's athletic department. Over the weekend of October 5th and 6th of 2024, CSU Special Olympics used their connections within the CSU Football department to get multiple signed footballs. Giles Pooler and Keegan Donjon were essential in getting these balls signed by the football team and creating the relationship between CSU Special Olympics and the CSU Athletics department.

By collaborating with the athletics department, CSU Special Olympics can reach a much larger audience than their own. The entire CSU student body, local community members, and college sports fans are familiar with a wide variety of CSU athletes. The large social network of the athletics department allows this fundraiser to reach as many people as possible.

Step Two of the Fundraiser

Step two in the fundraiser benefits from social media and the network effects that are present on a college campus. Due to the fundraiser being advertised through social media, the fundraiser is spread fast and seen by many individuals. There are minimal costs to running a social media campaign and maximum awareness is spread. Having as many eyes as possible on the fundraiser is the best way to increase participation. When students see that their friends are participating in the fundraiser, they will want to follow suit and join the cause. Lastly, the general benefits of social media are amplified when performing fundraisers on a college campus due to college students being frequent users of social media in their day-to-day lives.

Step Three of the Fundraiser

The last step of the fundraiser takes advantage of CSU Special Olympics' long-term relationships. Every \$10 donated to CSU Special Olympics provides a chance to win one of the signed footballs (if the donor wants). Winners of the signed footballs can pick up their ball in person or donate their ball to a random Special Olympics Athlete. Countless CSU graduates, parents, grandparents, and other relatives are not able to pick up their ball in person due to not living in Fort Collins, but the ability to donate the ball to a Special Olympics athlete allows them to still participate in the fundraiser.

The variety of ways to participate in this fundraiser allows donors from all over the country to participate. Over the years, CSU Special Olympics has built many relationships with long-distance supporters and the format of this fundraiser allows them to stay engaged and support CSU Special Olympics even though they are not on CSU's campus as often as normal students.

Results of CSU's Fundraiser

The fundraiser described above lasted from October 9th, 2024, through October 18th, 2024. This fundraiser was a success for CSU Special Olympics and is a good example of how to effectively fundraise for Special Olympics on a college campus. This fundraiser raised \$310 for CSU Special Olympics, which outperforms all other fundraisers that have been done on CSU's campus. This fundraiser not only succeeded in raising money for the organization, but it also strengthened CSU Special Olympics' relationship with the athletics department which can lead to improved fundraising opportunities in the future.

Discussion and Conclusion

Research on fundraising methods along with the execution of our fundraiser at Colorado State University, allowed me to confidently say that we have found one of the best ways to fundraise for Special Olympics on a college campus. By creating an event-driven fundraiser that takes advantage of social networks, social media, and the university's athletic department, CSU Special Olympics was able to find great fundraising success. Raising \$310 is a large accomplishment for CSU Special Olympics. This financial support can help pay for new jerseys, equipment, tournament registration fees, and travel.

With the newly established relationship with CSU's athletic department and football team, CSU Special Olympics will improve their fundraising and achieve greater success in the coming years. Hopefully this fundraiser will be seen as the start of many more important things between CSU Special Olympics and the athletic department.

Significance and Future Outlook

The fundraiser that was conducted by CSU Special Olympics was able to apply the research in this paper to find success and is an example of how to perform an effective fundraiser on a college campus. However, the application of this research and experiment is not exclusive to CSU Special Olympics. This research can apply to any other student organization on a college campus. The specifics of the fundraiser will have to be changed to meet the needs of the student organization, but the overall fundamentals can still be followed. Therefore, this research paper will serve as a toolkit of guidance that CSU Special Olympics and all other student organizations can reference when performing fundraisers on a college campus.

I believe that fundraising with the combined efforts of Special Olympics club members, university athletics professional staff, and college athletes can potentially lead to more effective fundraisers in the future. Utilizing the professional staff of the athletics department can help create bigger and more influential events that can draw in donors for Special Olympics. Continuing research with a focus on collaborative fundraising with university athletics would be very informative to future Unified College leaders around the nation.

Section Six: Acknowledgements

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