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Introduction

In this international collaborative case study, American and Italian authors applied a hypothetical philanthropic case scenario to the recent graduation of the first student with nonverbal autism at the University of Central Italy in order to examine the potential impact a private donation would have on various institutional constituents. A series of questions was developed to prompt further discussion at institutions of higher learning that could lead to efforts to better assist students with disabilities. The goal of these questions is to initiate a dialogue with constituents about institutional capacity to receive a generous donation and for the constituents to consider the potential impact said donation could have on university administration, faculty, and students, as well as on the donor.

Background

The University of Central Italy is a medium-sized, public, urban, Italian university with national recognition for its research excellence. The university was established by a group of students and professors in 1222. Today, it is

home to over 64,000 students and can now boast its commitment to students with disabilities. The university recently conferred a Master's degree in Human Sciences and Pedagogy to the first student with nonverbal autism, Leonardo Moretti. Although Leonardo is not the first student with a disability to receive a degree from an Italian university, it is the first time a student with a disability and the granting institution have received national media coverage. It is possible that public attention surrounding Leonardo's graduation was a necessary step to begin changing the current Italian cultural perception of autism and other disabilities and to encourage more students with different kinds of disabilities to continue their education and attend university. Considering that the majority of students with disabilities in Italy do not continue on to university studies after secondary school (G. Artico & S. G. Pomini, personal communication, May 21, 2014), Leonardo is an extraordinary example of what can be achieved when services and support are provided at an Italian institution of higher learning.

Students with Disabilities & Disability Services

There are a number of explanations for why many students with disabilities do not pursue a higher education degree. It is not necessarily due to a lack of initiative or desire on the student's behalf, but often results from family influence and tradition. Families generally do not encourage children with disabilities to continue university studies for a variety of reasons, and students with disabilities commonly remain at home with their families or work in factories. Factors that influence this decision may include: the level of parental education, the family's socio-economic condition, a lack of knowledge and awareness about the availability of support services at the university for students with disabilities, a lack of confidence in the child's ability to succeed at the university, the presence of architectural barriers, and even shame associated with requesting information about support services (G. Artico & S. G. Pomini, personal communication, May 21, 2014).

Recent national media coverage and publicity of Leonardo's graduation may direct more attention toward the University of Central Italy's Disability Services. Currently, Disability Services offers a variety of support services and assistive technologies for students with disabilities, all of which are available to students during their time at the university. Tutoring and administrative support are just some of the services available to students. Support aims to take into account each individual's specific needs; for example, sign language interpreters and shorthand

typing services are offered to students with hearing, visual, and mobility impairments to assist with note-taking during lectures. Additional accommodations, such as extended exam times, are also available for students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities. As students with disabilities get closer to graduation, Disability Services also offers a variety of support services aimed at assisting these students in transitioning into successful work placement after graduation. Administrators and staff members in Disability Services meet with students regularly throughout their academic career to assess each student's needs for additional support.

A Possible Private Donation

The national media coverage of Leonardo's recent graduation as the first student with nonverbal autism at the University of Central Italy could spark private donor initiatives and catapult discussions toward a new era of university stewardship. After reading about Leonardo's achievements, a private donor could be inspired to contact the University of Central Italy and donate as much as one million euros specifically designated to Disability Services with the intention of expanding support services for students with disabilities. If asked about the generosity of the donation, the donor might refer to the importance of providing greater access to higher education for all students in Italy, the potential impact the donation could have in generating greater awareness for Disability Services, and the hope that this donation might inspire additional private donations towards increasing services for students with disabilities

in higher education. The donor's commitment would mark a new era of university stewardship, and with it, the hope that this generous donation will increase communication between administrators, faculty, and students.

This hypothetical case scenario yields a series of complex questions, but addressing them in depth could potentially strengthen and improve services to students with disabilities at Italian institutions of higher learning. What are the current and future considerations needed to encourage and support private donations to a public institution for a specific student population?

Case Questions

Leadership Administration

1. What additional obligations will the university assume with a donation of this size?
2. How will university officials respond to these new responsibilities?
3. Who is involved in the decision-making process regarding how to expand private funding? Who should be involved?
4. How does the university respond to a donor request that the institution may not be able to accomplish or that does not align with institutional priorities?
5. Is the university prepared to manage and how shall it manage donor stipulations?
6. Does the university have the infrastructure to accept, distribute, and monitor donation outcomes?
7. Does the university have the resources to monitor and assess the distribution of funds?

Faculty

1. What impact does the donation have on faculty morale if this sizeable donation creates inequitable departmental resources?
2. How do university faculty members view the decision to accept or decline private donations?
3. Does the decision to accept or decline private donations impact faculty teaching in the classroom if, for example, faculty members need to provide accommodations not previously required or must abide by other requirements that possibly impinge upon faculty choice?

Donors

1. Does the university have a mechanism to report the fiscal allocation of funds?
2. Who is involved in the decision-making fund allocation process? Who should be involved?
3. Are there opportunities for student/donor interactions?
4. Which power levers can the donor utilize to influence the government, university, and the community to also address the needs of students with disabilities?

Students

1. Is there an impact on student learning if the institution accepts or declines the funds?
2. How does the university market its disability services in such a way that it protects students' privacy while encouraging students to ask for assistance?

Conclusion

While the University of Central Italy sets the stage for possible in-depth discussions to a hypothetical philanthropic case scenario applied to Leonardo's graduation, these questions are in no way limited to only the University of Central Italy. The national media attention given to Leonardo's accomplishment brings to the forefront the need for ongoing conversations about support services for all students with disabilities attending other Italian institutions. A

generous institutional donation specifically designated to this population could shift institutional or department priorities. We hope this paper serves as a tool to engage in this important dialogue.

References

Institutional website

Sara Giulia Pomini: Master's degree in Developmental and Educational Psychology; Voluntary in Psychologists without Frontiers, Italy O.N.L.U.S.; Internship Student at U.O.S. Equipe Adozioni (Team adoptions) U.L.S.S. 16 Padova.

About the Authors

Giulia Artico holds a master's degree in Developmental and Educational Psychology from the University of Padova in Padova, Italy, and is currently involved in a one-year clinical internship in Venice and Bruxelles.

Sara Pomini holds a master's degree in Developmental and Educational Psychology from the University of Padova in Padova, Italy. She is also a volunteer for Psychologists without Frontiers, Italy.

Tiffany Pugh is a PhD student in the EPPL Higher Education Administration program at the College of William & Mary. She works at the System Office for Virginia's Community Colleges and is passionate about bridging the achievement gap for students from underrepresented student populations, particularly first generation college students and other student groups who are considered high-risk.

Debi Butler, Diana Hernández, and Molly Baseshore are graduate students in the EPPL program at the College of William & Mary.