



CLIENT SPOTLIGHT

BWF & Stony Brook University



STUDENT-LED, REMOTE DONOR ENGAGEMENT DURING COVID-19

In early 2020, Stony Brook University was preparing to launch their second annual giving day. Following a successful first year, the pressure was on to increase the results of the giving day in a meaningful way. The SBU team knew this meant experimenting with new tactics.

This search for innovative tactics led the SBU team to partner with BWF Groundwork Digital in the winter of 2020 to hire, train, and work with a group of student gift officers for the institution's April 30 giving day.

Soon after retaining BWF Groundwork Digital, COVID-19 swept the planet into a pandemic, forcing the Stony Brook team to adjust the approach for their new student gift officers, or **"Donor Experience Ambassadors (DXAs),"** as they are called at SBU.

Working with BWF Groundwork Digital, the SBU team canceled the planned on-site work, pivoted to a fully remote program, conducted Zoom-delivered training workshops, and deployed the Donor Experience Ambassadors from their homes. Through weekly guidance, clear expectation setting, and a thoughtful and creative marketing plan, the SBU DXAs performed exceptionally well in every quantifiable way. The DXAs produced a substantial amount of authentic, donation-driving video

- Stony Brook University (SBU) retained BWF Groundwork Digital to grow the online giving day with a Student Gift Officer (SGO) program, or "Donor Experience Ambassador" (DXA) program, as it is called at SBU.
- COVID-19 led SBU to cancel its giving day, and it threw all spring fundraising into jeopardy.
- BWF Groundwork Digital and SBU pivoted the DXA program to meet the ever-changing demands and uncertainty caused by the pandemic.
- Student-led, video-driven fundraising allowed SBU to continue fund-raising during a turbulent time.



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content; conceived and executed novel, effective social media engagement campaigns; and helped elevate the Student Emergency Fund (SEF) online campaign. The SEF fundraising results are especially compelling, as SBU has been focused on growing scholarship fundraising.

While in-person program development is preferred under normal circumstances, the COVID-forced pivot allowed SBU and BWF Groundwork Digital to experiment with a fully remote program, which achieved successful results. These results showed great promise for this remote-led method of project delivery, which will impact SBU's strategic planning for their fall student-led fundraising efforts. With increased uncertainty regarding the availability of phone calling centers in the fall of 2020 and even into 2021, having a strong precedent set with the fully remote DXA program will help inform decisions about the next endeavor. The Stony Brook Donor Experience Ambassador case shows that fully digital, video-driven campaigns can be both a short-term solution to meet an immediate need and a key mechanism for higher education fundraising well into the future.

Building Stony Brook's DXA Program

Student-led donor engagement work requires a special set of skills and talents. The right students for the job need to be comfortable with all aspects of videography, serving as the star in front of the lens and the editor working behind the scenes. They need a blend of confidence and charisma to engage alumni and ask for fundraising support, and they also need to understand and be inspired by the mission of fundraising.

Much of this can be trained, but the student-led engagement programs can be immediately successful when the students arrive on day one with most of those skills already intact. Our process ensured that this was the case for Stony Brook's Donor Experience Ambassadors. For the SBU program, together we developed a job description to use in seeking the uniquely qualified individuals needed to make the program work. Our teams then worked together to interview candidates and ultimately

decided to hire six DXAs who started in mid-March. Instead of the year-long approach underway at some institutions, Stony Brook's DXA effort involved a concentrated SGO program specifically focused on growing the Stony Brook University Day of Giving scheduled for April 30. Then, the giving day plans, and life on and off campus and throughout the country, came to a sudden halt. By March 12, most sports teams at the college and pro levels had suspended or canceled their 2020 seasons. Bars and restaurants nationwide were closing. K-12 schools shuttered their doors, performing arts centers cleared their spring calendars, museums turned out the lights ... for all but the most essential services, the planet was closed for business.

At Stony Brook, the phone calling center was also shutting down temporarily, which thrust the DXA program into the spotlight. Since students had the ability to produce video from their homes, SBU doubled down on the newly hired, but still untrained, DXAs.

Training and Deploying DXAs for Donor Engagement



Most DXA programs launch with an on-site training workshop that covers the fundraising fundamentals for higher education, an overview of the strategy behind and importance of SGOs to fundraising programs, basic video

editing tips, and other details specific to the program. The training workshop takes the strategic focus on the advancement operation into account, then grounds the students in the fundamentals of fundraising. For SBU, the areas of focus included determining if the DXAs would be focused solely on the annual fund or if they would also be engaging mid-level donors and prospects and would have a pool of major gift prospects to qualify and move into development officers' portfolios.

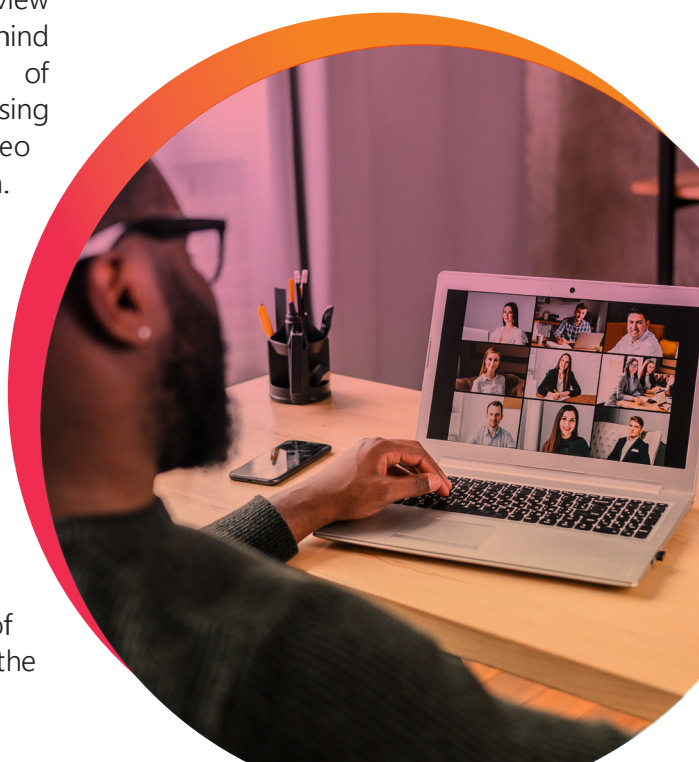
Additionally, the workshop serves as the first in-person interaction among newly hired DXAs, many of whom are meeting for the first time. Because of the



"The Donor Experience Ambassador program came about after consulting with

BWF Groundwork Digital while thinking about what we wanted our second giving day to look like. Our first giving day was in 2019, and we had already incorporated a lot of the best practices; our goal was to figure out how to significantly improve the first year's results."

**—PAUL MUIITE,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
SBU ANNUAL FUND**



ensuing quarantine, BWF could not host an in-person training workshop. Although the six new DXAs were mostly unfamiliar with one another, the team-building launch workshop took place via Zoom with great success.

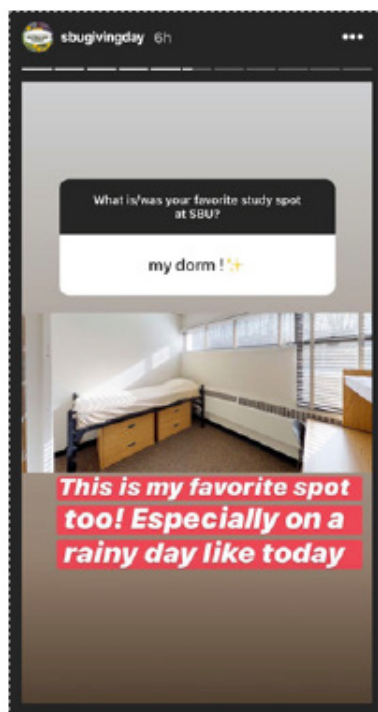
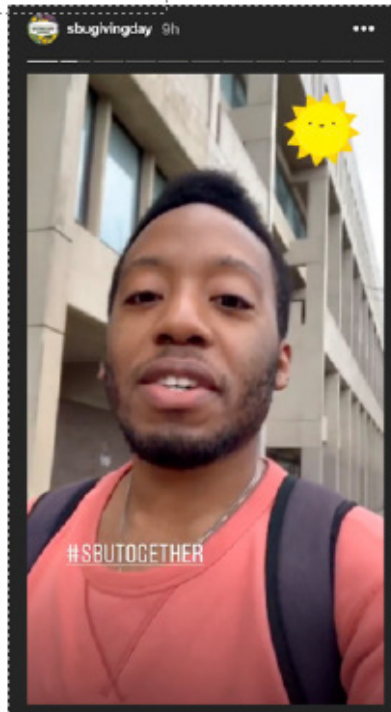
After the workshop is complete, ongoing coaching and leadership is key for any program. For the Stony Brook DXA program, given the entirely remote nature of the effort, extra emphasis was placed on frequent communication with students. Immediately after delivering the workshop, the SBU and BWF Groundwork Digital team scheduled weekly Zoom meetings and followed up with frequent (daily during busier stretches) email contact with the DXAs. Concrete video assignments were distributed every week, giving the DXAs the structure they needed to stay productive during a difficult,

uncertain, and otherwise disorganized time.

As the weeks went by, it became clear that Stony Brook University's original fundraising calendar would not apply to the spring 2020 semester. The April 30 giving day was canceled, as were multichannel communications such as direct mail. And, as mentioned earlier, phone calling was also significantly reduced and moved to remote-only calling conducted by a select few students. Given the circumstances, the new team of Donor Experience Ambassadors at SBU took on even more importance.

First, the DXAs conceived a social media-based engagement campaign. Using the hashtag #SBUTogether, the students brainstormed and led a 30-day "togetherness" challenge. Using primarily Instagram Stories, each student conducted an Instagram "takeover" every weekday through the month of April. The student assigned the "takeover" for a given day would pose a question to the greater SBU community via Instagram Stories.

Then came the user-generated content campaigns. In many cases, when a college or university requests "user-generated content" (i.e., content your audience creates for your mission), alumni and supporters hardly respond, if at all. When Stony Brook's DXAs appealed to their network of



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friends, the outcome was dramatically different. A large number of authentic, quality, user-generated submissions flooded the DXAs' inboxes. This content featured the real voices of a diverse student body and added an element of authenticity not often found in donor-facing communications.

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Throughout the entire process, the SBU and BWF Groundwork Digital teams carefully encouraged and guided the DXAs' work. By providing clear assignments, consistent feedback, and meaningful direction, the student DXAs remained on track and productive. This approach led to impressive online community growth and the establishment of key hashtags, like #SBUTogether, that would soon be transitioned from engagement-only to a fundraising deployment.

DXAs Drive Fundraising with Seawolves Helping Seawolves

Like many institutions, Stony Brook first led their COVID-19 fundraising effort with a campaign to provide frontline healthcare workers with critical personal protective equipment and other supplies. The Coronavirus Crisis Challenge was a match campaign that resulted in nearly \$750,000 raised online from 2,356 donors. The challenge was a strong effort that would be difficult to follow. Donor fatigue was a concern as the pandemic dragged into the second month of quarantine.

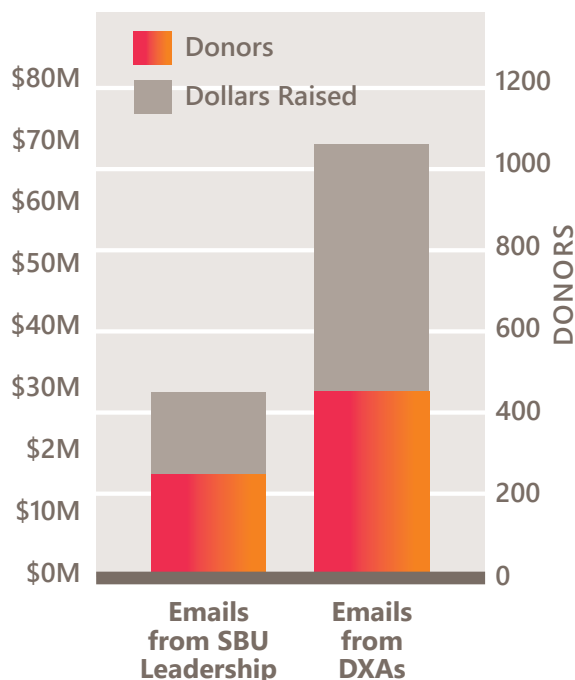
With the giving day off the calendar, Stony Brook concentrated their efforts on the #GivingTuesdayNow campaign in May and launched an additional campaign in support of the Student Emergency Fund. The SEF project was conducted online, but hardly performed alongside the much more pressing Coronavirus Crisis Challenge. That changed when the DXAs began sharing their authentic video work.

First, simply sending the emails from the student video personalities had a profound effect on email open

"We did notice a higher open rate for emails that were focused on a student rather than a faculty member. So if there was a dean sending an email, those did well considering the environment we're in, but those had an average open rate of 25 percent. Our DXA-centered content had an average open rate of 38 percent."

—PAUL MUIITE

EMAIL PERFORMANCE



A significant benefit of working with highly involved and talented Student Gift Officers is the idea generation. Today's students are steeped in knowledge about what makes for a viral digital campaign. And students know your institution as well as anyone.

Be sure your SGO program offers ample opportunity for student-led brainstorming. Whether for engagement, fundraising, or stewardship, student-originated ideas can lead to unique and compelling content that stands out among your donors and prospects.

rates. Those high open rates led to real fundraising results. In the first weeks of the campaign, just under \$25,000 was raised from 205 donors. In the final few days, when the student-driven emails and videos were released, more than \$70,000 was raised from 502 donors.

"I think the authenticity is the big piece," said Muite. "Students are a little more unscripted in what they say, and that can come across to the donor as real in a way that the content we create can't because we're so worried about 'do we have this in there?' 'are we saying this the right way?' 'are we including this particular initiative in the way it needs to be represented?'"

Creating a Student Gift Officer Program

The trust in BWF Groundwork Digital to build a Donor Experience Ambassador program paid dividends for Stony Brook University, especially during one of the most uncertain time periods in the institution's history. "The thing I'm excited about the most is that this is something that can work even if we're not back on campus in the fall," said Muite.

As fundraisers face the uncertain landscape in fall 2020, and as we consider the shift away from phone programs and toward digital and a true multichannel annual giving strategy, industry leaders like Paul Muite believe Student Gift Officers are a permanent fixture in the higher education advancement shop. "I would say it's necessary to continue this program and continue to invest in it." ■

ABOUT BWF GROUNDWORK DIGITAL

BWF Groundwork Digital has expanded to now offer full-service student-led donor engagement programs similar to the DXA program at Stony Brook University. The BWF Groundwork Digital team provides program development, training, implementation, video and content production, and an ongoing curriculum to students enthusiastically involved in the work. **To learn more, visit groundworkdigital.com.**

ABOUT BWF

BWF is an international fundraising consulting and services company headquartered in North America. As both experts in complex philanthropy and the leading innovator in the field, we bring both a global perspective and local know-how, providing deep cross-sector strategic and tactical solutions to advance our clients fundraising abilities. It's why clients turn to us as their trusted partner, expanding their knowledge and abilities through our panoramic view of philanthropy. Not only do we stimulate the industry through thought leadership, but we are an incubator of multidisciplinary "next practices," always testing new ideas and exploring innovative ways of doing things.

For nearly 40 years, nonprofits throughout the United States and across the globe have turned to BWF to empower philanthropy for their organizations. We're ready to do the same for you. **Contact us today at info@bwf.com or visit bwf.com.**