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# Donor Recognition and Cultivation Through the Use of Digital Bookplates

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*Article*

## **Donor Recognition and Cultivation Through the Use of Digital Bookplates**

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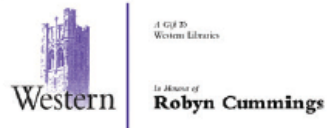



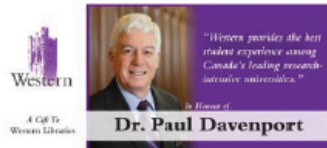

### **Abstract**

A digital bookplate program that recognizes all levels of gifts provides the library fundraiser with a flexible platform from which to steward and cultivate donors. Digital bookplates can be used to recognize donations to library priorities beyond collections and are a useful tool for establishing collaborative relationships with other campus fundraising units. As libraries move further into the digital world, digital bookplates provide new opportunities for donor engagement.

Academic fundraising has recently taken on new urgency given a decline in government funding, a dip in the next-generation donor pool, and the loss of funds from endowments experienced as a result of the recent financial crisis (Reid, 2010; Taylor, 2010). Budget cutbacks threaten academic libraries' ability to maintain existing services and to move into the future by investing in staff, technology, and facilities. There are a number of challenges associated with raising money for academic libraries, including the lack of a natural alumni base and the fact that libraries are often seen as being in direct competition for funding with academic departments (Martin, 1998). When Western Libraries at Western University, Ontario, Canada, hired an Alumni and Development Officer in 2009 there were few formal collaborative fundraising programs between the Library and faculties and no obvious means of forging mutually beneficial relationships. Donors to the Libraries had received little attention and the donor pool was stagnant. The only active means of donor recognition issued directly through the Libraries was a traditional print-based bookplate program, which was becoming burdensome for library staff and was impossible to apply to a growing digital library collection. Introducing digital bookplates at Western Libraries was seen as a solution for revitalizing fundraising while at the same time acknowledging the digital future of the library.

### **Developing the Program**

The concept of digital bookplates has been deployed in academic libraries for years with many successful implementations, especially in the United States (Carrico, Fleming, & Simpson, 2010). The digital bookplate program at Western Libraries began as a result of investigation into best practices at universities such as Duke, Harvard, and the University of Las Vegas. Digital bookplates have been utilized largely to steward current major donors, often related to endowment funds. Western Libraries expanded and evolved the concept to not only steward and honor major donors, but to drive donations from new, existing, and lapsed donors at all giving levels. Various Gift Levels were established; starting at \$150, the average cost of a book purchase, including administrative costs; and a number of bookplate designs, unique to each level, were produced. This design concept is updated annually and ensures that existing donors can look forward to a fresh tribute crest as they continue to give and move up through the donor cycle (see Figure 1).

Gift Level	Impact	Design
\$150-\$999	Standard bookplate and standard tribute wording for <b>one</b> highest-priority book within Western Libraries general collections.	 A Gift To Western Libraries In Honor of <b>Robyn Cummings</b>
\$1,000-\$9,999	Specialized bookplate design* and standard tribute wording for <b>five</b> highest-priority books within Western Libraries general collections. Donors receive recognition through our Leaders' Circles, which honour Western's leading annual supporters. <i>*Bookplate design changes on an annual basis. Bookplate to the right depicts the 2010 design.</i>	 Western A Gift To Western Libraries  <b>Aaqilah Amin</b>
\$10,000-\$24,999	Library-specific bookplate design and personalized tribute wording in consultation with Western Libraries for highest-priority books or small collections within the library of the donor's choice. Donors receives recognition through our Leaders' Circles, which honour Western's leading supporters.	John & Dotsa Bitove Family Law Library  Western A Gift To Western Libraries  <b>Sven Atkins</b>
\$25,000 and over	Personalized bookplate design and personalized tribute wording for highest-priority books or special collections within the library of the donor's choice, in consultation with Western Libraries. Donors receive recognition through Western's 1878 Societies, which honour Western's most significant donors.	 Western A Gift To Western Libraries  "Western provides the best student experience among Canada's leading research-intensive universities." In Honor of <b>Dr. Paul Davenport</b>

**Figure 1.** Gift level descriptions for digital bookplates (Western Libraries, 2011a).

While the digital bookplate program was conceived as an opportunity to rejuvenate giving to Western Libraries, the program also acknowledges the continued move of library collections online. As print-based collections decline, digital bookplates provide a mechanism for continuing to recognize donors for collections-based priorities. Unlike traditional paper-based bookplates, digital bookplates exist virtually and are linked to library catalog records. This makes it possible to associate bookplates with new types and formats of material. In extending the digital bookplate concept in this way, Western Libraries further determined that digital bookplates could play a role in recognizing donations for key priority projects beyond collections. Consequently, a donor supporting physical library space enhancements was provided with a bookplate linked to books on space planning while a donor wishing to support a mobile library catalog interface was provided with a bookplate linked to books on library technology. The books linked to the digital bookplates are symbolic of the impact of the gift.

## Donor Engagement

The digital bookplate program was designed to provide donors with a permanent, personal connection to the Libraries. As a donor honoring his late mother noted: "The linked items in the catalogue would mean something special to her, as some were books she had in her own collection and she knew two of the authors personally. That is why I chose to donate in this way." ("A Gift That Never Forgets", 2011). When a group of graduate students honored their faculty mentor with a digital bookplate the enduring

nature of the gift was indicated as an attraction of the program: "Perhaps in the years to come, her son will call up that book and read the tribute to his mother when he is a graduate student at Western..." ("Heydon's Scholars", 2011, para. 4). For donors seeking a physical connection to their gift, digital bookplates are easily printed and framed for an attractive keepsake. Many donors have opted to print and frame digital bookplates for presentation to a friend or colleague at a retirement, birthday or other milestone event. At more formalized tribute ceremonies, framed bookplates are often paired with a virtual visual presentation to enhance the experience. For higher-level donors, personalized bookplates have become an effective opportunity to further relationships by working together to develop a unique bookplate design reflective of a donor's personal interests and achievements. Another strategy for engaging with donors through digital bookplates is through the creation of virtual donor walls, which have been developed as a way to showcase supporters of specific fundraising projects. A virtual donor wall was created for the Vintage Football Film Digitization Project (<http://www.lib.uwo.ca/support/football/donors.php>), undertaken to save hundreds of reel-to-reel football films of the Western Mustangs football team. This proved to be an effective development tool in motivating donors, mostly former football players, to give at a higher level in order to be recognized publicly alongside their former teammates.

### **Collaborative Relationships**

Collaboration with key campus partners was a necessary step in developing the digital bookplate program. Rather than viewing the library as a competitor, it was hoped that the digital bookplate program could attract partners in fundraising to the mutual benefit of all, a key goal for the library fundraiser (Pritchard, 2011). The digital bookplate program was presented to departments within Western Advancement as an opportunity to increase and/or introduce a collaborative approach to campus fundraising. Support was accomplished by respecting and working within established branding and program-based policies and procedures, anticipating the particular needs of each group, and demonstrating how the digital bookplate program could help everyone realize shared goals; i.e., raise funds to support priority projects campus-wide. With the support of Western Advancement, various partnerships were realized. Development Western incorporated the digital bookplate program into a pilot annual fund appeal focusing on parents of graduating classes, graduating classes, and a test segment of non-donor alumni. The Bookstore @ Western promoted the digital bookplate program during convocation through point-of-purchase distribution of marketing materials aimed at graduating students and their families. The Alumni and Development Officer was invited by University Administration to speak about the digital bookplate program to over three hundred campus leaders to broaden awareness of the initiative. In Spring 2012 the digital bookplate program will have successfully transitioned to partnerships with specific faculties whereby a digital bookplate is presented to acknowledge donations to the Libraries received as part of a broader cross-disciplinary gift.

Since the launch of the first bookplate, the digital bookplate program has achieved many milestones, including attracting almost 200 new donors. In addition the program has:

- Successfully transitioned print-based bookplates to “green” permanent digital versions, resulting in a less staff-intensive process while maintaining a valued tradition. Savings in staff time is estimated at .50 FTE or approximately \$25,000.
- Provided for a virtual means of recognizing library donors and donor honorees that is visible 24/7 from anywhere in the world through a virtual donor wall accessible on the Library website (Western Libraries, 2011a).
- Disseminated over twenty-five positive donor stories relating the motivation of giving through the Digital Bookplate Program via the Western Libraries website.
- Generated cross-campus media interest: The Digital Bookplate Program was profiled in the *Western Alumni Gazette*, with a readership of more than 175,000 Western graduates (Scott, 2010).

The online nature of the digital bookplate program has also allowed Western Libraries to extend relationships with donors around the globe. The Richard Ivey School of Business has helped the digital bookplate program go international through targeted marketing of the program to its Hong Kong campus. This initial partnership has paved the way for the introduction of multilingual bookplates in the future. Special condolence and tribute bookplates to honor the passing and recent milestones of Western's special friends and donors have also been developed for use by the Office of the President.

In 2012 libraries face new challenges and opportunities in fundraising related to technology, including cultivating and recognizing donors through social media such as Facebook and YouTube. Keeping donors “energized and engaged” as well as feeling “part of a community, no matter our physical location” requires creative solutions (Silverman, 2009, p. 141). The digital bookplate program has inspired new ways of reaching out to current and potential donors. For example, as part of the Vintage Football Film Digitization Project referenced above, the Alumni and Development Officer created a webpage for the project that includes a history of the initiative, a YouTube video with clips from preserved films, media news stories and podcasts related to the project and a link to the virtual donor wall paying tribute to project donors (Western Libraries, 2011b). This comprehensive page provides project stakeholders with a one-stop ongoing connection to the project and is used to cultivate new donors by showcasing a highly successful initiative.

## **Conclusion**

As university budgets shrink, the importance of fundraising for academic libraries grows. The challenges of cultivating a loyal base of friends and donors for the library demand creative approaches that leverage relationships with key campus partners all working toward a common goal. A digital bookplate program provides a unique and flexible platform for the library fundraiser to recognize and cultivate donors in a way that also acknowledges the increasingly digital world in which libraries operate.

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