

Cary Henderson, University of South Carolina

The University of South Carolina has several donors who have given tens of millions of dollars each. Cary Henderson was gracious enough to compare and contrast the relationships that have developed with these donors over time.

“They are our friends, it is as simple as that. We work to understand how they want to interact with us as people. For most of them, that means involvement with a specific person. One of the donors is most interested in spending time with the dean and the students in the school she’s named. We know she’s here, or going to be here, because I have a good relationship with her assistant who alerts me when she’s due to arrive. But I’m not actively involved; I try to make sure I get a report once her visit is over.”

Another donor family supports scholarships, so they are interested in interacting with current students. Cary and her team work to make sure that these donors are included in scholarship events and that they have personal communication with scholarship recipients. “We send them regular updates on the students. It wouldn’t be right of me to share them with you; they are personal communication between the students and the donors.”

Some of the donor families live in Columbia, which poses challenges of its own. “I never know just when I might run into them,” Cary says, “but it’s not a big deal. They are our friends. We speak, I help where I can, and I follow up with the dean or the director of development in that school to make sure I know that everything went well.”

University of South Carolina is currently in the process of standardizing public recognition of donors, using a program that indicates specific content and components based on gift amount. One donor felt strongly about an additional display, “So we did it,” Cary shared. The resulting story is part donor recognition and part narrative, which is appropriate to this donor. “He just really wanted people to understand why he made this gift. Through his eyes, current students now see the mission they’re charged with.”