

PROFILE

She helps donors share their passion



For MCC Foundation executive director Diane Shoger, the key is knowing ‘how philanthropy works’

Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

By LORI GABLE

Asking for money is something many people dread. But Diane Shoger, executive director of the Monroe Community College Foundation, sees it as a way to connect donors to their passion.

That philosophy on philanthropy has led to the largest gift to MCC in its history—\$2.25 million in November 2013 to establish the Wentworth Family Scholarship program. Also under her leadership,

last year the MCC Foundation for the first time awarded more than \$1.1 million in scholarships to students. And in total, Shoger has helped the college secure more than \$27 million since she joined the foundation 16 years ago.

It all comes, she says, by knowing the right way to ask for contributions.

“People fear asking for money, but when you understand how philanthropy works—it’s about sharing the passion you have and the opportunity to support that passion

with others,” Shoger explains.

She adds that matchmaking is also vital. “I need to ask them about the difference they want to make and then match them with a program at MCC that helps them fulfill that vision.”

While many describe Shoger as very successful in her work, fundraising was never her career goal. She spent several years training to work in special education—earning bachelor’s and master’s degrees in that field from Illinois State University. For

13 years before joining MCC, she worked for the New York Special Olympics in Schenectady, where she rose to the position of chief operating officer.

New career path

It was when she moved to Rochester to marry her husband, Timothy Coughlin, that Shoger found what would turn into a whole new career path.

She met a friend of Coughlin's—the late Richard Guon, who was MCC Foundation director and chairman of the board of trustees. He insisted that she meet Brenda Babitz, the foundation's executive director at the time, to see if there were any work opportunities at the college.

"It wasn't until after I agreed to meet her that I learned it was a fundraising job," Shoger says. "I couldn't back out of the meeting gracefully, so I took it—and the rest, as they say, is history."

Shoger started at MCC in 1999 as director of development and major gifts. She was selected by the board to take over the executive director post when Babitz retired in 2008.

Today, Shoger oversees 12 full-time employees and manages foundation contributions averaging \$6 million annually.

In the fiscal year ended Aug. 31, 2014, the foundation finished with \$16.2 million in total net assets and \$12.8 million in investments. The annualized return on investments has been 13.2 percent over the last

three years and 11.2 percent over the last five years, Shoger says.

The MCC Foundation grades well in the annual Voluntary Support of Education survey conducted by the Council for Aid to Education. In 2013, it ranked No. 1 among SUNY community colleges for unrestricted gifts—for the fifth straight year—and sixth among public associate institutions. In total support, its rankings were third and 17th, respectively.

The foundation funds a wide range of causes—from capital projects like the Lou-

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is S. and Molly B. Wolk Center for Excellence in Nursing, the PAC Center Fieldhouse and the Richard M. Guon Child Care Center to department needs including specialized equipment for labs and a Steinway piano for the music department.

It also supports an internal competitive grant program that provides seed money for special projects and innovation across the campus.

Over the last 22 years, the foundation has dispersed \$7,939,250 for scholarships, \$10,090,569 for program and department support, and \$10,997,285 for capital needs.

Shoger says 2014 in particular was a remarkable year, with the foundation marking 31 percent growth in scholarship support to students.

While she would always wish for even more money for MCC students, the one thing Shoger wishes she had more of is time. She says she strives for more balance too.

"Developing a strategic plan and having the discipline to remain focused on your goals while at the same time remaining open to new ideas without becoming distracted or diverted takes an exceptional amount of balance," Shoger says.

The only other thing she would ask for is additional support for her staff.

"Everything from better software systems to mobile devices, increased support personnel to expert guidance on short-term or project-based needs—an unlimited budget could help us do more with more," she says.

Shoger knows she is not likely to ever have an unlimited budget, but she says there are other ways to expand the work of her relatively small team.

"When you're a small shop working for public education, you have to find a model that works," Shoger explains, pointing out that area private colleges have as many as 250 gift officers on staff. She turned to a resource that could help broaden her reach.

"She finds ways to utilize the board to help the foundation," says Daniel Burns, foundation board president and Rochester regional president for M&T Bank. He notes how Shoger is masterful at connecting board members to a cause at MCC, raising major funds because of it.

"That's 53 board members," Burns says. "For her to be able to juggle 53 bosses and cater to the needs and wants of each individual person shows the leadership skill she has."

Shoger has significantly increased the participation in the Gold Star Gala, MCC's largest fundraising special event, Burns adds.

"We raised \$220,000 last year and \$370,000 this year. It's due to a lot of great support, but also due to her understanding of who to involve in events," Burns says.

Motivating donors

Motivating the desire to give has been another component of Shoger's success with board members, says Sandra Parker, former president and CEO of the Rochester Business Alliance and an MCC Foundation board member. Shoger included students in all four board meetings throughout the year so they could share their success stories—success made possible by foundation support.

"When you actually see the individual who is benefiting, it makes you want to help," Parker says.

The strategy works with outside donors as well, she adds.

"My husband is very generous, but he expects a measureable ROI for his contributions," says Parker, who is married to Rochester businessman John Summers. "Diane has been masterful in helping him understand where his dollars are going."

Roughly half of the contributions to MCC come from business, corporate and industry donors, Shoger estimates, which often result from simply asking about a potential donor's interests. That is exactly how MCC came to the recent expansion of one of its longest-running programs, the optical technician program, which Shoger says is the oldest such program in the country.

A board member had expressed an interest in optics, and Shoger believed he and the program could benefit from his involvement.

"Enrollment was down, labs were outdated. It wasn't the first-class program we wanted it to be," she says. She recruited that board member and others to form an optics committee. From there, they solicited funds from potential donors by offering a tour to show how their money could be used to make an impact.

Diane Shoger

Position: Executive director, Monroe Community College Foundation

Age: 54

Education: B.S. in special education, Illinois State University, 1982; M.S. in special education, Illinois State University, 1987

Awards: Professional of the Year, Council for the Advancement and Support of Education, 2013; Robert A. Clinger Outstanding Professional Fundraiser of the Year, Association of Fundraising Professionals, Genesee Valley Chapter, 2013

Family: Husband, Timothy Coughlin

Residence: Pittsford

Interests: Gardening, travel and golf

Quote: "You get the momentum going, and everybody wants to be on a winning team."

A business leader and MCC alum on the tour, James Sydor, president of Stefan Sydor Optics Inc., was so impressed he made an offer to the grant team of the Corning Inc. Foundation, who were also on the tour. Sydor said he would donate \$250,000 to the program if Corning made a \$500,000 grant. Corning agreed, and that day Shoger secured \$750,000—in part, she says, by helping a board member connect with an interest.

The funding was used to upgrade the labs and expand the optical program. Enrollment that once dipped to just six or seven students now stands at 40, Shoger says, and they are graduating with job offers. Sydor will benefit from the program he helped upgrade because he had a desperate need for skilled labor.

“We have strong public-private relationships like this,” Shoger says. “You get the momentum going, and everybody wants to be on a winning team.”

Roots on a farm

Those who know her say it is Shoger’s ability to talk to anyone that helps her reach so many. She grew up on a farm in the

small town of Oswego, Ill. She was the fifth generation to live in the house she grew up in; her one sibling— brother Gary—still lives there.

Shoger lives in Pittsford with her husband, who is first sergeant for Troop E of the New York State Police. Her hobbies include gardening, travel and golf.

“I would golf every day if I could,” Shoger says. “(But) my husband says the farm girl in me comes out when I garden and that I am happiest when my hands are in dirt.”

Her fundraising work is Shoger’s passion, though, and she is always trying to connect others to it. She says there is no time like the present to give, and she recently helped a generous couple realize that.

Saroj Viswanathan, a longtime MCC faculty member, told her husband, T.K. Viswanathan, that it was her desire to have money designated for the college upon her death one day. Shoger says he asked his wife why they should wait until she died. Instead, he made a contribution right then.

The money was enough to renovate the space used for the dental program, and

three years ago it was renamed the Viswanathan Dental Clinic in her honor. Viswanathan retired from teaching there last year.

“The new dental clinic is our first 100 percent paid project by a donor,” Shoger says. “This was her dream, and she was able to see it. What a wonderful gift her husband made to her, and what a tremendous difference it has made for MCC.”

Shoger says she is touched by the generosity of people who write that check, with just the knowledge it will benefit someone who needs it. She says it is the “secret sauce” that makes Rochester the very giving community it is. She feels people here appreciate the community and its diverse offerings, and they feel the responsibility to ensure their continuation.

Shoger makes it her job to see to that continuation, even by taking it back to the core beneficiary she serves—the students.

“I can tell students, if someone who never met you, who doesn’t know you but believed in you enough to put an investment in you—I hope one day you will be willing to pay it forward.”

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