

TALENT DEVELOPMENT

If we continue to ignore the need for developing academic fundraising programs to properly train and accredit future fundraisers, we cannot expect giving to budge beyond its current level, which for decades has remained stuck at the incredibly low level of roughly 2 percent of the GDP. As the authors put it, “Participation is not the same as achievement,” and if we wish to bring fundraising into the twenty-first century, it is up to us as a sector to bring fundraising education to a level that reflects—and evolves—how fundraisers operate today.

Fundraising Education: *A Fork in the Road?*

by Adrian Sargeant, PhD, and Jen Shang, PhD

IN EDUCATIONAL TERMS, THE PROFESSION OF FUNDRAISING is currently where the profession of marketing was some thirty years ago.

Employers rarely demanded a formal marketing qualification of their new recruits, and the one or two degrees that were then available were seen as somehow unnecessarily academic, “ivory tower,” and completely divorced from the realities of professional practice. All you needed to be an effective marketer was to be a good “people person,” and any training you might require could either be provided on the job or at the occasional conference, because there was no formal or agreed-upon knowledge base that you’d be expected to master.

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Marketing has come a long way. Employers now recognize and value high-quality degree programs that expose their graduates to the latest examples of best practice. In addition, some of the truly great ideas that have shaped the profession have come not from marketers but rather the research conducted by the academics that serve that profession and help shape its thinking. Individuals with degrees from the top schools are now highly sought after, not only because of what the degrees say about the individual’s qualities but also because employers are eager to leverage what graduates have learned, in order to benefit their organizations. The days when you could just walk in off the street into a senior marketing role are, thankfully, gone forever.

The picture in fundraising isn’t so rosy. There are only a handful of institutions offering relevant master’s level courses, and, quite incredibly, there is nothing at the undergraduate level. It beggars belief that there is now nowhere in the United States that a talented young person,



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eager for a career in fundraising, can pursue a dedicated degree with that focus. There are a plethora of institutions that offer an occasional course module, but none that offers a dedicated degree that would prepare a bright young person for entry to our profession.

Why? Well, just as with marketing thirty years ago, fundraising isn't looked upon as a proper profession. It's viewed as "easy"—something that pretty much anyone can do, irrespective of educational background or attainment. If we are serious about our claim to a profession, that perception is something we need to change, and change swiftly. Just as with any other profession, there should be a substantive bar to entry—one that can be surmounted (at least in part) by progression through a properly accredited degree program.

Not only do we lack a depth of academic provision, our sector is also awash with low-quality training programs based largely on fundraising folklore and the illusion of best practice. To raise the level of what is on offer, trainers need guidance from our professional bodies with respect to what they should teach and to whom. Certification is also an issue. Certificates that proudly proclaim "knowledge" to employers are routinely awarded for mere participation in a class rather than genuine achievement, with the resulting confusion in the marketplace. Participation is not the same as achievement, and we must facilitate employers' ability to easily distinguish between the two.

The issue of systemically poor-quality provision is tougher to address. Unfortunately, none of the major professional organizations in the U.S. fundraising field have as yet delineated an up-to-date and detailed body of knowledge that they would expect every competent member of their profession to know. As a sector we do, of course, have the Certified Fund Raising Executive (CFRE) credential, but in truth this too fails to provide an adequate level of detail. The credentialing body, CFRE International, expects fundraisers to demonstrate a knowledge of giving behavior and direct mail, for instance, but nowhere are these standards defined, leaving trainers the scope to sink back to the lowest common denominator in what they choose to deliver.

What, for example, would we expect a competent grantwriter to know—what skills should this knowledge underpin? What would we expect a direct-response fundraiser to know, and again—what skills should this knowledge underpin? No one is specifying this level of detail. Little wonder, then, that fundraising education and training is of such variable quality, and that fundraisers are still being exposed to the same tired old ideas now well past their sell-by date.

It is long past time for the sector to move on. Giving in the United States has remained stubbornly static, at around 2 percent of GDP for as long as anyone can remember. Americans are routinely generous with their resources, but they are apparently no more generous today than their parents, grandparents, or even great-grandparents were. Upping the quality of fundraising education could make a tangible difference in this pattern of behavior by dramatically improving the quality of the experience that donors have when they give and by ensuring that they optimize the utility of their giving.

So what needs to happen? In our view we should begin by mapping out the variety of roles that fundraisers typically perform. Over the past fifty years, fundraisers have increasingly begun to specialize, and that needs to be reflected in the routes to our academic qualification and certification. We now have fundraisers who specialize in grantwriting, community fundraising, major gift, direct response, new media, etc. The skills these individuals should possess and the knowledge that would allow them to perform these roles are very specific. They must all be defined and then updated on a regular basis, integrating emerging new ideas from professional practice, but also drawing on the very latest academic research. The resulting standards could then form the basis of job descriptions, appraisals, and reward/recognition systems, and—critically—could also be used to identify individual training and development needs.

As an overall framework, these standards might then inform the syllabi of educational and training programs, both at the undergraduate and the postgraduate level around the United States. Educational providers could certainly continue



to deliver whatever they wish, but only properly accredited programs would provide automatic access to the profession and its associated credentials. This would have the effect of compelling educational providers to “up their game” to meet the needs of our modern profession, and help reassure employers that sponsoring their employees’ attendance would genuinely benefit both the participant *and* the organization. Think what a difference it would make if every fundraiser knew the three key drivers of donor loyalty and/or drivers of trust in an organization, why they matter, and the practical steps that could be taken to build them. Think too about the difference it could make if every fundraiser understood the social context of fundraising and how, by simply changing the words in their solicitation to provide donors with social information, they could increase the value of giving by an average of over 10 percent.

Unfortunately, many practitioners have been burned by their experience of trying to learn from academics, discovering that their academic counterparts failed to understand their real-world situation, or simplified real-world situations to such an extent that their elegant theories were of no practical relevance. As a consequence, academic research has frequently failed to address the questions that frontline fundraisers urgently need answered. But things are changing.

The *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing* is one of a number of academic journals that now routinely publish fundraising research. Major academic conferences, such as the Academy of Management and the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA), now

have fundraising tracks that are accessible not only to an academic audience but also to fundraising professionals. There are highly specialized new fields beginning to emerge, too, such as philanthropic psychology, which has already generated results in increasing giving. All these developments have aided in the accumulation of a meaningful body of knowledge that, while academically rigorous, can now add genuine practical value for practitioners.

As a profession, we should be working to encourage educational providers to take an interest in our field and open up access to this knowledge. As a sector, we should also be raising our profile, campaigning for every nonprofit management program in the country to include at least one course on fundraising. At present, only around 40 percent of such courses in the United States offer this provision, which means that 60 percent of students in the field will graduate knowing nothing about the so-called “easy” topic of fundraising.

Increasing provision at the graduate level would undoubtedly be a positive step forward, but let’s also see what can be done at the undergraduate level to try to get to the point in the coming decade where at least a dozen or so campuses across the nation offer a degree that would promote entry to our profession. We can then encourage bright young people to consider what might be an immensely rewarding career, and steer them in the right direction.

We also need to draw a firmer distinction in the minds of employers between fundraising training and formal academic fundraising education. Both have their merits, but they are different. Take for the sake of argument a training session that is designed to explore the use of emotion in appeals. In most training scenarios, participants are not required to complete any specific readings before attending the class, so they will typically start from a zero base. They might begin by brainstorming all the emotions that could possibly be used in aid of fundraising. A list of ten emotions including happiness, sadness, and guilt are the usual suspects that would probably find their way onto most discussion boards. Depending on the instructor’s background or the audience’s

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experience, participants in these training courses might then share their own “best practice” experiences or anecdotes demonstrating the kinds of emotions that can generate higher revenue. Most of the time, details are highly simplified and few precise figures are provided. If the instructor is relatively experienced, participants might then go on to summarize the similarities of the successful cases in terms of the communication media used (for example, face-to-face or online), the people involved (for example, male or female donors), and the context (for example, raising annual gift or bequest). In many situations, however, even this low level of abstraction is not reached. There is rarely any discussion on:

1. Whether the reason why the fundraising practice worked was in fact due to the emotion being discussed;
2. The validity of the conclusion (i.e., what kind of control groups were in place to show that the superior practice was indeed superior); and
3. How generalizable the approach might be in other situations.

By contrast, academics do pose these questions, and are concerned that the research they introduce meet the requirements of high validity and reliability. With respect to validity, researchers must use experimental or other research methods to prove that what they say is causing the effect is indeed what is causing the effect, ruling out other possible factors. With respect to reliability, researchers must use statistical analysis to disclose the exact conditions under which each effect is found, and the probability that it can be replicated. When doing so, researchers

are laying out all the key factors that may prevent an outcome from being replicated. Since all the conditions are disclosed, students can monitor and modify the factors suited to their situation and replicate the outcome without necessarily replicating the procedure. This is so students will leave an academic program having the ability to create their own success rather than being able to articulate just the vaguest of generalizations.

Although we are only at the beginning of the push to design such educational programs, both within the professional fundraising community and within universities and graduate schools, the movement is underway. The Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University established the first academic chair in fundraising in 2005, graduated its first PhD in donor behavior and philanthropic psychology in 2008, and is now working with the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFR) to develop a new, knowledge-based Diploma in Fundraising qualification. American Humanics (the body that assists colleges around the United States with curriculum) redeveloped its fundraising syllabus in 2008, and there are now fundraising textbooks and associated web resources available to students. In Europe, the Institute of Fundraising is currently working on a new suite of qualifications, and it is already possible in the United Kingdom to access a set of occupational standards for fundraising as well as an associated body of knowledge.

These are just a selection of recent developments that should mark a turning point in fundraising education. As we said at the outset, we are only just now setting out on a journey begun by the profession of marketing over thirty years ago. We’ve a long way to go to catch up, but in our view it’s a journey well worth making. We owe it to our donors and to ourselves to provide the best possible experience that we can—and if we want to grow giving, the profession must evolve. Agreeing on standards and investing in rigorous educational programs is the logical first step toward bringing fundraising into the twenty-first century.

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