

August 15, 2010

Hiring Market for Fund Raisers Heats Back Up



Jay Premack

Fund raisers in the growing development office at the U. of the District of Columbia see the campus's unnamed, numbered buildings as a prime opportunity.

Fund raisers in the growing development office at the U. of the District of Columbia see the campus's unnamed, numbered buildings as a prime opportunity.

Just as jobs are coming back to Wall Street, hiring has returned to the college fund-raising office.

After a period of budget tightening and uncertainty, search firms, consultants, and fund raisers are seeing an increase in hiring, for both existing positions and new ones. And while it's nowhere near a return to the go-go years preceding the recession, the moves represent a significant thaw.

In the past three months, the Council for Advancement and Support of Education saw a 66-percent jump in job postings compared with the same period a year ago. Between 80 and 90 percent of the openings are for fund raisers. Among the dozens hiring are the University of California at Santa Cruz, the University of Michigan, Miami University (Ohio), and Winona State University. The University of Rochester alone hopes to bring on 20 new people.

But colleges aren't rushing to refill the same positions that were vacated or frozen during the downturn. They're assessing the fund-raising landscape and rethinking where to put their resources.

One growing area: international fund raising. Though such programs can be expensive and challenging to start, colleges are seeing opportunity with foreign donors who may not have lost much—if any—of their wealth. Also, an increase in enrollments of international students provides institutions with more international alumni and parents to ask for support.

"This is the direction we need to go," says Scott G. Nichols, vice president for development and alumni relations at Boston University, which is planning to hire dozens of fund raisers and other staff members for a forthcoming campaign. Most will be dedicated to domestic fund raising, but the international area is steadily growing. "It's not for the faint of heart or budget," he says.

Many current campaigns are among the first to have international goals and prospects, says Bruce Flessner, a consultant with Bentz Whaley Flessner, fund-raising specialists. Most of the hiring that colleges are doing is still for domestic fund raising, but the number of hires for overseas work is growing. Michigan is planning to hire a fund raiser to lead its international effort, while Boston expects to hire a handful of development-staff members as it goes after more international gifts.

Colleges are also hiring more senior fund raisers to go after smaller gifts, says Lois L. Lindauer, chief executive of an eponymous Boston firm that specializes in advancement positions. Hiring started heating up in spring and early summer—her firm is now conducting searches for Harvard University, Spelman College, the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business, and the University of Rochester—and many of the colleges are looking for major-gift officers.

The era of one or two megagifts making a campaign is fading or gone, Ms. Lindauer says, with more colleges going after six-figure donations instead of seven- or eight-figure gifts. They are also focusing more on annual giving. That shift in strategy requires more people to meet with the widening pool of prospects and to build up a pipeline of potential donors. She is also seeing colleges adding to their staffs even when they're not in campaigns.

"It's a sales force," she says. "To get more revenue, you've got to get salespeople out there."

Overseas Focus

Boston University just finished its biggest fund-raising year, raising \$85-million, or 16 percent more than the year before. As the university gears up for its campaign, with a goal that may reach \$1-billion, the Board of Trustees gave its OK this spring to add more frontline and back-office fund-raising staff members to its team of 140.

The university now has at least four full-time staff members who work exclusively with international prospects—including three fund raisers focusing on Asia, India, and the Middle East, and one alumni-relations staff member who works with international clubs. The challenge in adding to its international operations, Mr. Nichols says, is finding the right person—someone who has proved to be an exceptional fund raiser and can navigate a foreign environment alone.

As Boston becomes more global and deliberately expands its number of international students, Mr. Nichols expects the fund-raising staff to follow. "I'd be surprised if it's not doubled by the end of the campaign," he says.

Other institutions are thinking along the same lines. At a CASE conference last month, where Mr. Nichols spoke to a packed room about international fund raising, a third of the audience members raised their hands when asked who was planning to increase hiring in the international arena. Another panel member, Jerry A. May, vice president for development at Michigan, said the university was getting ready to hire its first director of international fund raising, which it started focusing on about three years ago.

"The only losing move is not to play," Mr. Nichols says.

Staffing Up Campaigns

Other colleges are keeping their focus on domestic donors, and hiring more staff members to reach them.

At Fordham University, which is more than halfway through a \$500-million campaign, hiring started again in July, after a freeze that left eight positions open during the previous fiscal year. Roger A. Milici Jr., interim vice president for development and university relations, has recently filled three senior positions and expects to hire a few more people this year. Not all the open positions will be filled, but Fordham will add new jobs, including one in alumni relations. Mr. Milici also expects to spend more on compensation packages to attract top candidates.

Rochester, too, adjusted its hiring plans after the recession. It never stopped hiring—and now has about 20 positions open—but it did slow the pace of the expansion plan that it developed five years ago, says Jonathan Schwartz, senior associate vice president for advancement. The current openings are about half existing positions and half new ones, and the majority are for frontline fund raisers who will raise money in different regions of the country and for the university's medical center.

Building a Team

Some institutions on the market for fund raisers are just putting together their programs. The University of the District of Columbia is tripling its advancement operation, hiring a head of development and a team of four others to start raising private money for the public university, which depends largely on the government for financial support but needs major renovations.

"The realization that the district is not going to enhance its contribution to the university is very clear," says Allen L. Sessoms, the president, who is trying to help the university overcome its dismal graduation rates and become an attractive option for students who could go elsewhere. The new advancement staff will reach out to corporations and foundations to solicit support for the university and its new programs, including work-force development in its community college. "If we don't get significant community buy-in, it's not going to work," Mr. Sessoms says.

Fund raisers will also try to raise money for a number of physical improvements planned for the campus. UDC, situated on prime Northwest Washington real estate, is an eyesore of water-stained cement buildings situated around a mostly empty cement plaza. (The university broke ground on a plaza renovation this month.. Rather than memorial halls or libraries named after famous alumni or major benefactors, its buildings are known by numbers.

Mr. Sessoms and Alan Etter, the new vice president for university relations and public affairs, see that as a fund-raising opportunity. The new advancement team will try to sell naming rights to the buildings, perhaps for as much as \$10-million each. "If you have your name on a building blazing over Connecticut Avenue," Mr. Sessoms says, "people will notice."