

# For the Newbie: Breaking into Fundraising

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What does it take to break into Fundraising as a profession? I assume you are considering doing this, because you're reading this article. What personal and professional qualifications does one need? We won't focus on the different types and phases of fundraising (annual giving, major gifts, capital campaign, planned giving, direct marketing, special event management, grant research and writing, and web-based marketing), but instead about skills that underlie success in the various areas.

First, let's look at fundraising as a profession. The field is broad, and people with many different educational backgrounds, work experiences, and personal traits can find a niche, while feeling a powerful motivation of benefiting important social concerns. A fundraiser can earn from \$20,000 a year as a development assistant to \$150,000 or more a year as a development director in some of the largest non-profit organizations, to well above that as head of a successful private fundraising consulting firm working with large institutions. Salaries depend greatly on the local market, the size and annual budget of the non-profit in which one works, and of course the individual's talent, ability, experience and expertise. *The Non-Profit Times* publishes an annual salary survey ( [www.nptimes.com](http://www.nptimes.com) ), as do other organizations. A particular and refreshing facet of the development field is that there is much sharing of ideas and programs between and among organizations. This occurs through professional organizations, meetings of development officers in a particular field or in a geographic area, and through informal networking.<sup>[2]</sup>

The non-profit sector has grown steadily in significance as part of the U.S. economy in recent decades, and there is a push led by donors to encourage non-profits to become more business-like in their operations. In conjunction with this trend, many fundraisers now obtain degrees, certificates or other acknowledgements of their training and experience, or may belong to professional associations such as the Association of Fundraising Executives (formerly the National Society of Fund-Raising Executives). Yet others, including some of the most successful, lack that background. People still enter the field by being "in the right place at the right time," parlaying experience as an administrative assistant to become a development officer and then moving on. Another common entry point is serving in a volunteer capacity with a non-profit organization; many a volunteer assisting in running a special event has gained the experience needed to do the job professionally. And even where there is a professional fundraiser or development director on staff, the role of an organization's president and board may remain key to resource development success.

Fundraisers' skills can include writing, research, "people skills", organizational and management skills, computer software and web-design, and marketing and publishing. The fields of fundraising, public relations and communications often intersect, and some positions require all of the skills listed above. Probably the best fundraisers – those who bring in the greatest amounts of support to non-profits – are those with people skills who can communicate their love of a program or institution to others, and who can identify and nurture in potential donors their passions, whether latent or blatant. (See People Skills, below.) Two truths govern the field: "People give to people, not to programs," and "The goal is not fundraising, but friendraising."

Let's take **writing skills**. These include such varied abilities as grant-writing (from one-page letters of inquiry to 300-page proposals), thank-you notes, and the ability to communicate through letters and simple transmittals with a wide variety of people, from the president of your organization to the federal government to a donor who faithfully gives \$15 annually. The grant-writer needs to communicate clearly how an organization's mission and programs fit into a donor's priorities. Writing skills start with an excellent background in English, a good vocabulary, and an eye to the deadline.

**Research skills:** Research includes anything from being a pro at Lexis-Nexis<sup>[4]</sup>, doing prospect research on a list of people identified through your own research or by others, to keeping abreast of the local, national and international news that may impact an organization or its potential contributors. It may include developing sophisticated charts, graphs and needs analyses, or keeping simple files on potential donors – their contact information, their interests, and whether they have done anything newsworthy. On the grant-writing side, it may require significant technical knowledge and the ability to communicate in the sciences or other specific areas. Another aspect of research involves evaluating all fundraising activities, tools, materials, budgets and events, using the past to guide the future. Preparation for research may include a master's degree and sometimes a doctorate in a social or scientific research field, or a master's degree in business, but many can participate at a less sophisticated level.

**People skills:** A little more than a decade ago Jerold Panas wrote an excellent book on the people skills side of fundraising: [Born to Raise: What Makes a Fundraiser Great](#).<sup>[5]</sup> One of the top fundraisers he mentioned, Vartan Gregorian, exemplifies the people skills that made him a top fundraiser for the New York Public Library. Gregorian has moved on from his post as President of the New York Public Library to President of Brown University, where he is renowned for having added a dozen new departments and a million additional library holdings, to President of the Carnegie Corporation. People skills cannot be underestimated – a deeply committed, energetic, focused leader who is willing to reach out to potential donors is invaluable to a non-profit. How does this relate to fundraising? Non-profit board members, executives, senior staff and others who are committed to their organizations have the opportunity to reach out and bring others in. We must remember though that they seldom work alone, and are frequently backed by well-organized development staffs.

**Organizational skills:** According to Wayne Loosigian, Director of Annual Giving for Phillips Exeter Academy, arguably the premier independent school in the country, the first quality of a good development executive is meticulous organization. No detail is too small or too unimportant in organizing staff and volunteers to reach out to the potential community of donors. Here's where the meticulously updated address lists, the giving history, the personal interests, the recruitment of volunteers and acknowledgement of their good work (with thank-you notes, t-shirts or engraved pens), and the careful evaluation of the results of the past year's annual giving results, converge in creating a successful giving plan. Exeter's Annual Giving Fund in recent years has brought in over \$5 million per year, about 11% of the total budget. The development executive must develop or refine existing systems that will support and track donors' giving over a period of years, while cultivating volunteers who will both assist in the development effort and themselves become staunch supporters.

**Technical skills:** A fundraiser's technical skills can range from statistical analysis of sets of donor data, to understanding and communicating appropriate legal and tax implications related to donation of securities, annuities and other financial instruments. Some advanced training may be required, or a person with technical background, such as an attorney, may enter

fundraising either fulltime or part-time. The largest institutions (universities, hospitals, and the like) will have these technical people on staff. Many fundraising professionals regularly use fundraising software to track donors' giving records and other information.

**Internet skills:** Internet skills are not reserved for the techie. A successful fundraiser may use the internet to test new fundraising ideas, to ensure that opportunities for giving are housed on the organization's web site, to research the websites, programs and annual reports of competing or complementary organizations, to research the funding priorities of potential grantors (local, county, state, federal, corporate or private), or to communicate with other fundraisers through guided lists such as those supported by CharityChannel.com. Key development resource organizations such as the Foundation Center, the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and the *Non-Profit Times* publish on the internet, either for a fee or free.

The emerging area of E-Philanthropy requires a fundraiser to keep up with new approaches to a new generation of potential donors. It includes web-based appeals, including e-mails, social networking (for example on My Space and Facebook), and placement on such sites as [www.Guidestar.org](http://www.Guidestar.org), [www.networkforgood.org](http://www.networkforgood.org) which allow contributors to donate through a third party, Web-based marketing has its own set of rules, having to do with acquiring lists for emailing, best use of subject lines, frequency of mailings, rules for opting out, etc. Good resources include [www.marketingsherpa.com](http://www.marketingsherpa.com) (aimed at for-profits, but useful for non-profits), and [www.ephilanthropy.org](http://www.ephilanthropy.org).

**New opportunities and new skills:** With globalization and political shifts in many parts of the world, many US non-profits have begun to develop international chapters or affiliates. At the same time, they have begun to seek international funding for their activities. Cross-cultural and language skills as well as political sensitivity are useful in this arena. Who would have thought a decade ago that the nation of Qatar would donate \$100 million to U.S. non-profits after Hurricane Katrina? Donations were made to Habitat for Humanity, the children's hospital and several universities.

The population of some independent schools ranges from 10% to 25% or even more international students. The March of Dimes, Lighthouse International, the Junior League, and many universities and professional associations, have become involved in significant international programs. Fundraisers are now looking beyond U.S. borders to raise funds for their U.S. and international operations. This requires fundraisers who can work effectively cross-culturally, who can work with counterparts in other countries to develop culturally appropriate funding appeals, as well as those with special skills in international banking and monetary transactions. The United Nations and its agencies, including UNICEF, World Food Programme, UNIFEM and others have established non-profit arms to channel non-governmental donations.

**Exploring fundraising further:** You can attend appropriate courses; attend meetings of a local organization of fundraising professionals, and join them if you qualify; sign up for webinars, volunteer with an organization that will allow you to develop your expertise; join an online community related to fundraising; and read, read, read. Your local library is likely to have, or be able to get for you, books and periodicals on philanthropy and fundraising. As you explore specific areas of interest, there are excellent books and online sources in planned giving, direct marketing, non-profit financial management, web-based philanthropy, and other specialized areas. You can also join a local group such as the Westchester Association of Development Officers, participate in activities of Third Sector New England ( [www.tsne.org](http://www.tsne.org) ) or the New York or New Jersey chapters of the Association of Fundraising Professionals.

Courses in fundraising are offered at colleges and universities throughout the US, from the University of Washington Certificate Program in Fundraising Management, to Indiana University's famous Center on Philanthropy, to New York University's Center for Philanthropy and Fundraising. The Association of Fundraising Professionals, with headquarters in Virginia, ([www.afpnet.org](http://www.afpnet.org)) and CharityVillage, in Toronto, ([www.charityvillage.com](http://www.charityvillage.com)) offer training through workshops and online, and AFP offers a self-study manual. The cost of such training varies by institution. Much can be gleaned through self-study and on the internet. CharityChannel has excellent leads to resources, professional organizations and to online communities that given an opportunity for exchange of information with others, and provides a list of Canadians colleges and universities offering degree or non-degree programs related to fundraising. It also provides some helpful glossaries.

If you enroll in a certificate program, be sure to avail yourself of the opportunity to write a fundraising plan for an organization you know, and to take an internship with the type of organization and aspect of the field that most interest you. You'll soon be on your way to a position in the challenging, and rewarding, field of fundraising.

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<sup>[1]</sup> See <http://www.nptimes.com /Feb01/sr1.html> for the most recent available survey.

<sup>[2]</sup> I would like to thank Wayne Loosigian of Phillips Exeter Academy for reviewing this article and for some of the ideas in this paragraph.

<sup>[4]</sup> Lexis-Nexis is an online subscription research tool that provides an articles database and business and government information.

<sup>[5]</sup> Chicago, Ill: Pluribus Press, 1988.

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