

# Out of the Shadows

## Annual giving gains more respect as a career destination

By ROBERT A. BURDENSKI

**The time-honored progression from annual fund to major gifts officer is no longer a given.**

**T**he annual giving director has often endured the reputation of a mere supporting player in the development office—orchestrating dozens of appeals each year while more prominent colleagues solicit fewer but more notable gifts. Because the six- and seven-figure heroics of major gifts can steal the spotlight from smaller—but still important—annual fund operations, annual fund directors are often overlooked.

This neglect is short-sighted, considering that consistent annual giving is a reliable predictor of major giving and that annual funds provide campuses with much-needed unrestricted support. But the lack of respect is most likely grounded in annual giving's history as a proving ground for development professionals seeking to move up the ladder to major gift fund raising. The career track is familiar: Pay your dues by spending nights in the phonathon room and days delivering bulk-mail solicitations to the local post office and sooner or later you'll graduate to the loftier ranks of major gifts. One doesn't prosper in annual giving as much as escape from it.

In recent years, however, development directors have noticed that annual fund professionals have skills that are unique and valuable to the office. They are constantly proving their agility as statistical analysts, market researchers, plant managers, customer relations specialists, advertising executives, and therapists to volunteers.

### SPECIALIZED JOB SKILLS

The practice of annual fund raising has grown in sophistication as the results have grown in importance. For much of the 1970s and 1980s, annual giving programs achieved success by leveraging volume—soliciting more gifts from more people. The union of alumni databases and bulk mail enabled



development officers to solicit all of their known alumni every year. Computerized calling centers helped development officers increase the number of calls they placed to their alumni each year as well as track the job performance of their student callers. All of this helped to ensure that development officers would raise more dollars through more solicitations.

As that wave has crested, the search for further annual giving growth has created demand for a new and more targeted program. To succeed in this environment, today's annual fund director must have knowledge in the following areas:

**Statistics.** It's not enough to know "how many donors" and "how many dollars" any more. The best annual giving programs track donor retention rates (including the anxiety-inducing new donor retention rate), lapsed donor reactivation rates, donor attrition, and giving frequency, among other things.

**Data mining.** By studying the demographics and giving history of existing donors, an annual giving director can prioritize nondonor audiences and increase the cost-effectiveness of donor acquisition solicitation efforts.

**Market research.** Focus groups, surveys (online, mail, or phone), and other opinion-gathering methods have become crucial tools in understanding what motivates an institution's supporters to give. The annual giving director must increasingly test and refine appeal messages according to donor interests, motivations, and even objections.

**Plant management.** Annual giving programs remain highly process-driven. Whether managing 1,000 solicitations or 100,000, the director must plan, organize, delegate, and keep things on schedule.

**Customer relations.** At larger institutions, a central annual giving program can conduct phone and mail appeals on behalf of many campus units. The annual giving director must report results back to campus "customers."

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ILLUSTRATION BY HEINE PROFFITT FOR CASE

## CAREER PATH

**Advertising.** Increased segmenting of prospect audiences according to age, degree, giving history, and other characteristics has created the need for institutions to make many smaller appeals, each with its own distinct marketing message. The director can no longer rely on a single annual giving letter signed by the campus CEO.

**Volunteer therapy.** Volunteers remain an important part of many annual giving programs. Therefore, the annual giving director must serve as recruiter, trainer, coach, and cheerleader.

### NEW PROGRESSION

The real-world value of these annual giving skills means the time-honored progression from annual fund to major gifts officer is no longer a given. Today's annual giving directors may not be well suited to face-to-face major gift solicitation, and, frankly, many aren't interested. What was once regarded as a promotion is now considered a misplaced use of many talents.

Vice presidents are increasingly happy to reward annual giving directors financially for not jumping to other development positions. Although less than 1 percent of these professionals make more than \$100,000, according to CASE's 2002 salary survey, several public universities offered six-figure salaries in their search for new annual giving directors last year. In addition, annual giving tenures of 10 years or more are increasingly common.

Not everyone is convinced of the value and professionalism of this position, however. "We still don't see many searches for annual giving directors," says Dan Burns, director of executive search for the Chicago-based Campbell and Co. consulting firm. "And when we do, [the people hired] still move to other positions within the institution before too long, anyway."

Despite that opinion, more development managers are realizing the myriad specialized skills annual fund professionals bring to the development office are invaluable, and the funds they can raise have earned them a place at center stage. ■