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THE FUND RAISER

Advancing Knowledge

People used to stumble into development careers, but new graduate programs make the decision intentional

By [MARK J. DROZDOWSKI](#)

About a dozen years ago, I was having lunch with a former classmate from graduate school. He'd earned a master's degree and had joined the rough-and-tumble world of academic publishing. I was still plugging along toward a doctorate while working as a fund raiser for a research university. At the time, I had only a few years of experience, but enough to make a bold prediction.

"I'm going to teach this stuff someday," I recall saying. He looked puzzled, so I explained: "You know, educational fund raising, advancement. There's a huge need."

My friend seemed skeptical, and for good reason. We were products of a top graduate program in the field of higher education, where the teaching of fund raising might naturally lie, yet we had been exposed to exactly zero courses on that subject. What's more, we had together written an "insider's" guide to graduate programs in education and had completed exhaustive research on various disciplines taught in ed schools. Development and fund-raising courses were practically nonexistent.

That, as they say, was then. These days you'll find several colleges and universities that offer courses and programs in fund raising, marketing, and other aspects of development. Many such programs are housed within departments of nonprofit management, which, in turn, exist within schools of business, social work, or public policy and administration. A growing number of fund-raising courses and programs are cropping up in education schools, while many others are on the academic periphery in continuing-education units. Often you'll find the latter offering certificate programs instead of degrees.

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compiled a list of programs in nonprofit management. While quite useful, the list doesn't describe the kinds of degrees and courses offered, only the school or department in which they are housed. I suppose you can guess based on that information alone or go online to learn more.

What I find most interesting about the list is the number of institutions offering online courses. Of the 264 programs mentioned, 37 feature some form of online instruction. I'm not sure if that's a healthy percentage or a meager one, but I suspect that it represents a growing number, and that institutions will increasingly put such courses online.

Or maybe that's just a wish. When I began in this business, almost 18 years ago, people were still getting into the development field the old-fashioned way: by accident. Nobody, it seemed, really aimed to become a fund raiser, and few outsiders knew exactly what a development office did. Some colleges, particularly public ones, didn't even have development offices.

Today many folks still stumble into development by default rather than design, but I sense (there's a scientific statement for you) a growing population that's intentionally tracking into the field. That sense comes from anecdotal evidence — mainly conversations with colleagues, conferencegoers and undergraduates — and from recent articles I've read in trade and mainstream publications. Advancement has become a bona fide profession, not simply something you do after you burn out as a professor, corporate executive, or lawyer. And fund raising is frequently mentioned among the "hot" careers on Yahoo and MSN, which no doubt spurs interest.

So the profession's growth continues, perhaps tempered by the global economic slide. With jobs still available and more people eyeing the field, it's important to groom the next generation of fund raisers eagerly waiting outside the gates or newly within them.

If you live near an institution that offers a relevant program in nonprofit management, you're in luck. But be sure to investigate the program thoroughly. Does it focus on fund raising and development, at least to some extent? How about marketing and communications? Not all of those graduate programs are created equal.

But if you don't live near one of those programs, or if you want more options, then go online. People with little or no experience can gain valuable knowledge that will eventually be tested on the job. And they'll also gain a credential that demonstrates their commitment to the field and gives them some advantage in the hiring process.

While you won't find a lot of online programs, you'll probably discover more than what's available within your commuting range. You'll also discover the beauty of asynchronicity — the convenience of taking courses on your own time, in your own place, and, to a certain extent,

at your own pace. For busy professionals, or people unwilling to drive 100 miles after work to sit in a classroom, that freedom is invaluable.

I know because, as I predicted a dozen years ago, I'm now teaching this stuff — online. As an executive in residence at Bay Path College, in Longmeadow, Mass., I'm teaching courses in its program of nonprofit management and philanthropy, which includes a track in higher education. My students dot the map, some of them local and others living in faraway places within the United States or overseas. I recently spoke at a fund-raising conference sponsored by the college and met a couple of former students I had known only as online personas, and vice versa. They raved about the quality and convenience of the program and wondered how many other institutions might follow suit.

That's my question, too, and perhaps my plea. I expect the program at Bay Path will continue to attract students eager to enter the fund-raising profession — enrollment is strong and growing — and I suspect that there soon may be more demand than the current market can accommodate. People will keep discovering the benefits of career in advancement — the opportunity to make a difference, the abundance of jobs, the relatively high salaries, the freedom to travel — and will occasionally see studies calling us a "hot" profession for the new millennium, as trite as that may sound. They'll seek knowledge and, in this credential-crazed society, will want to gain a head start in the hiring race.

Colleges might be wise to create programs to meet the demand, and may want to consider online-learning options as part of that strategy. They'll very likely find a willing audience and just may produce graduates who know a thing or two about giving back.

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