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Stepping Out

As Australian institutions increase fundraising efforts, experienced professionals are in high demand

In Australia as elsewhere, changes in funding patterns by government has spurred the rise of institutional advancement. This article explores the fundraising situation at Australian institutions of higher education.

By [Frankie Airey](#)

Although fundraising is a familiar venture within Australian higher education, institutional advancement is still very much a new profession.

Like many things in life, the emergence of institutional advancement has been driven by economics. During the past 20 years, Australian governments of all stripes have pulled back from things they used to fund: health, welfare, arts, and education. The expectation was that philanthropy would naturally flow in to bridge the gap, but for many years growth failed to keep pace with aspiration. Universities and other institutions had to learn that the old school of fundraising—characterized by short, sharp campaigns for an injection of additional funding that was the icing on the cake—was no longer sufficient. Fundraising had become a key ingredient of the cake itself.

A cultural shift

While some universities have been running fundraising and alumni relations activities at a low level since the 1980s, the initial, tentative steps to raise the bar, and with it the profile and impact of the profession, were taken during the 1990s. During that decade, the University of Queensland launched its first major campaign, the University of Sydney recruited a director of development from the United States, and the University of Melbourne established its development office, to name but a few examples.

It's important to bear in mind that of the 41 universities in Australia, 39 are public institutions. So the shift in funding has required a substantial change in culture. That distinction was not often taken into account when vice chancellors and university councils pointed to the stellar examples of Harvard and Stanford universities in the United States and asked why such results could not readily be achieved in Australia. Thus, pioneers in the profession faced some major challenges to win the support of their academic and administrative colleagues. As a result, these early years witnessed a high turnover of staff, and some good people were lost to the profession.

However, the faith and perseverance of those pioneers bore fruit in time. The past five years in particular have seen a dramatic upsurge in the level of investment in advancement. A 2007 Survey of Fundraising and Alumni Relations, conducted by the Australian Centre for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Studies at Queensland University of Technology, found that most universities now have a permanent advancement office of some form and expected that many more advancement jobs would be created. In the first quarter of 2008 alone, seven institutions have advertised 10 new roles on the Web site of the national Association of Development and Alumni Professionals in Education to augment their advancement teams.

Skills shortage

The labor market in Australia is very tight across all sectors, so it's not surprising that there are not enough experienced advancement professionals available within Australia to meet the demand. Advancement embraces a number of marketing-related disciplines, including communications, alumni relations, and fundraising. Australian universities have world-class marketing and communications operations, and many top-ranked professionals work in the sector. Alumni relations is also growing in popularity. Melbourne University had more than 20 qualified applications for the role of manager of alumni and community relations. Finding people with transferable skills is proving far more difficult for fundraising positions, however, especially for major gifts.

Recruitment of the most senior roles often involves an international search in addition to advertising nationally, although currently a majority of the senior roles are held by Australians. A number of institutions have encouraged faculty general managers or senior administrative staff to take the leap into advancement, preferring to hire someone who knows how universities work to recruit fundraisers from outside the education sector.

The University of New South Wales has found an innovative solution to the recruitment challenge. When David Gonski, one of Australia's leading philanthropists, became chancellor, he brought with him as CEO of the university foundation the former chief executive of the Australia Council for the Arts, whose network has proved invaluable for building a strong team of marketers and fundraisers.

Meanwhile, the most seasoned university fundraisers are in great demand. The smart ones recognize that much of their success is due to loyalty and longevity within one institution at a time. So, for example, Macquarie University in Sydney poached the longstanding director of development from the University of Western Australia, and Melbourne Business School secured the transfer of its director of advancement from Trinity College (Melbourne University) only after she had planned, launched, and managed its AU\$26 million campaign—the largest in the college's history and one of Australia's most successful to date.

Not surprisingly, salaries are on the rise as universities compete for the best and brightest from around the globe. Increasingly, special contracts are being struck outside the standard university salary grade levels, as

they are proving a poor fit for alumni and fundraising positions.

Yet pouring money into salaries is not the only solution. Training and professional development opportunities are on the increase, not only for advancement professionals but also for the academic leadership to help them understand the role they must play in ensuring success. CASE Asia-Pacific is leading the way with a planned fact-finding study tour of Canadian universities in 2009 for Australian vice chancellors to meet their counterparts and share war stories about driving culture change within their institutions to support philanthropic investment. This also demonstrates that we are learning to benchmark ourselves against Canadian and British universities—as well as U.S. public institutions—as their experience of responding to changes in government funding is closer to our own.

Turning point

One of the most interesting developments is the AU\$6 billion Higher Education Endowment Fund, an initiative of the previous Coalition government under John Howard in 2007 and endorsed by the current Labor administration. This fund was conceived in response to calls from vice chancellors to assist their fundraising efforts and encourage continued growth in private giving across the nation.

The universities were hoping for a matching-fund scheme, on the lines of that introduced in the UK. This does not quite fit that bill, but it is a huge boost to the sector, as it will support capital expenditure and research facilities through a competitive grants process. Applications to the fund will be considered more favorably if they are supplemented by philanthropic contributions.

The profession has responded warmly to this initiative, recognizing that this could be the long-awaited turning point in the funding partnership between the public and private sectors. Advancement at Australian institutions of higher education is at a crossroads today with increasing needs, aspirations and opportunities ahead.

About the Author

Frankie Airey is principal and founder of Philanthropy Squared, a management consulting firm specializing in development and marketing for the nonprofit sector.

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