The Chief Advancement Officer & Director of Annual Giving: Stakeholder Engagement Guide

How to Use This Guide

This Stakeholder Engagement Guide belongs to the "Chief Advancement Officer Onboarding Center," an Advancement Forum initiative that helps incoming advancement leaders hit the ground running in their first six months and beyond. See the end of this document for further EAB resources on this front.

This document outlines key questions and metrics, relationship milestones, and mutual interdependencies that undergird the effective relationship between a college or university chief advancement officer ("CAO") and the senior annual giving officer ("director of annual giving"). Incoming CAOs should consult it to plan how they will provide direction to and collaborate with the annual giving director.

Initial Meetings

Either before they formally take office or in the first few weeks, CAOs should ask their incumbent annual giving director to prepare a set of thorough briefings on the function's strategy to date, calendar and tempo of appeals, and emergent challenges and opportunities, either as a written plan or a series of slides with accompanying documents. The reports or subsequent conversations should encompass the below baseline elements:

Organization and Strategy

- Who are the members of the annual giving team and what are their responsibilities? To whom do they report? How long have they been with the institution and what are their backgrounds?
- What is the overall philosophy of annual giving at the institution – what key performance indicators (e.g., participation, revenue, donors, retention) are we seeking to maximize and how did we arrive at these goals? Have these changed in recent years?
- What is the historical importance of unrestricted giving to the institution? What is the expectation of leadership for budget-relieving and fungible dollars, overall, or by school/college?
- What is the current operating budget of annual giving and its major components? How has it changed over time?
- Which vendors or technology platforms does annual giving use, what are their costs, and what is the level of satisfaction with them?
- Does the annual giving office run campaigns predominantly on behalf of the entire institution, or does it primarily partner with unit "clients" to run school, college, or area-focused campaigns?
- What are the funds for which annual giving runs campaigns? What are the designation/restriction options offered to annual giving donors? Do we employ "families of funds" or thematic semi-unrestricted options?
- Who has historically been involved in priority-setting (which fund to highlight and the associated case) for annual giving campaigns? What has this process looked like?

- How or to what extent has the workflow for approving appeals historically involved senior institutional or development leadership? Outside of annual giving, which teams review or sign off on copy and case?
- What team, office, or vendor does annual giving rely on for media production and content/creative? Does this vary between print and online/digital copy? Who "owns" the annual giving website?
- Is the annual giving director responsible for staffing any boards, councils, or committees?
- What was the role of the annual fund in the last/current campaign?

Historical Performance and Trends

- What are the key segments utilized by the team (e.g., institutional relationship, past giving levels, past giving frequency, past giving channels, etc.)? How regularly are the segments refreshed? What are the parameters by which key segments are defined (e.g., lapsed donor, "long lapsed" donor, non-donor)?
- By key segments and channels and for the past three years, what is our performance along key metrics: total revenue, total number of donors, average gift size, number of unique gifts, acquisition (new donors), retention/renewal rates, upgrade rate, reactivation rate?
- What are the key metrics utilized to assess overall effectiveness (e.g., cost per dollar raised, cost per donor acquired by channel, return on investment) and how are they calculated? How have performance on these metrics changed over time?
- What is the current alumni participation rate (APR) and how has it changed in recent years?
- What policies or practices does annual giving have in place to satisfy institutional or profession-wide compliance and data security standards? Are there standards for which we are still working towards compliance?
- How is the annual fund branded to alumni and donors?

Current Program and Strategies

- What regular and recurring campaigns do we do, by channel?
- How far in advance do we determine the next year's calendar and who are the stakeholders in that process?
- Is annual giving responsible for any special events? What are they and what are the fundraising returns and resources associated for them?
- To what extent do we run multichannel campaigns? For example, do we supplement mass solicitation tactics like direct mail or phonathon campaigns with e-mail marketing, or supplement e-mail marketing with texting, social media ads, or targeted ads on third-party websites?
- How or to what extent does the annual giving office partner with campus areas to run affinity- or segment-focused campaigns? What are the key, recurring partnerships across campus?
- Which giving societies are associated with annual giving?
- Do any individual schools, units, or causes on campus operate their own specialized giving societies? What do they reward (various giving levels, consecutive giving, cumulative giving)?
- What is the division of responsibility between annual giving and donor relations/stewardship or decentralized units for execution of annual fund retention and stewardship activities?
- Is athletics boosterism and athletic donation campaigns (i.e., athletics giving clubs, contributions made with the expectation or anticipation of tickets or seats) integrated with overall annual giving, or run separately?
- Does the institution operate any dues-based alumni societies or associations? How or to what extent do these annual contributions "count towards" or confuse/distract from annual giving appeals?

- How is reunion or class-based giving a component of the annual giving strategy? To what extent does the institution rely on peer-to-peer or class-based volunteer structures? What are the job descriptions of volunteers who help with annual giving?
- What do partnerships with marketing and communications offices look like (e.g. aligning the appeal case and alumni magazine content in a given month, or repurposing marketing communications for stewardship newsletters)
- What is our strategy regarding "culture of giving"-type initiatives (i.e., the acquisition of current students and renewal through to their first few years as alumni)?
- How are these responsibilities shared with alumni relations or student affairs? What types of priorities do these programs support (e.g., physical items like plaques or benches, named endowments, current-use priorities like food pantry or emergency aid)?
- What has our experience been with crowdfunding, days of giving, personal fundraising pages, and other increasingly popular strategies that feature time-limited, goal-oriented, digital and social media-first campaigns for specific projects and initiatives?
- What is our strategy for mid-level and leadership giving? How do we define gifts at this level?
- Which giving societies, specialized staff, special appeals, etc. cultivate and solicit donors at this level? What are such gifts used for?
- How do we identify donors who we believe are giving below capacity, or who would give far more than the standard annual fund level but not yet at the major gift level?
- Do we operate a faculty/staff giving campaign? What are its outcomes and how do we recognize campus donors?
- How are governing/foundation board members, leadership volunteers, or other high-profile or special prospects solicited for the annual fund in a bespoke way? What is their level of participation?
- Do major gift officers also bundle annual gift asks in with larger proposals?

Ongoing Collaboration

After the first few months, CAOs typically meet with their annual giving directors anywhere from once a week to once a month. Meetings usually involve discussion of personnel matters, a review of recently completed campaigns, preview of upcoming campaigns, and budget utilization to date. At some institutions where the CAO asks to edit outgoing copy, these meetings serve as a forcing function to proofread and finalize any upcoming appeals.

Because of the constant emergence of new trends and technologies in the field, CAOs and annual giving directors are also constantly exchanging ideas for new innovations and programs to expand annual giving or bring greater sophistication and discipline to the function.

Below are questions that CAOs might ask in ongoing meetings in addition to the above agenda items:

Pursuing Sophistication and Innovation

- Deep dive into channels and discussion of recent successful or notable campaigns, vendors, themes, or new ideas:
  - Direct mail (e.g., cost, ROI, outcomes by segment). For which constituencies does direct mail work best? Do we plan to use seasonal/holiday-oriented mailers?
  - Phonathon/telefund (e.g., vendor satisfaction, role of student staffers or volunteers, number of shifts or seasonality, training). To what extent do we deploy the phonathon beyond mass solicitation (e.g., event invitations, thank-you campaigns, volunteer asks, information updating or collection, alumni surveying)?
  - E-mail solicitations (e.g., conversion rates, open rates, click-through, opt-out rates, response rates, deliverability). How do we incorporate intentional testing into our annual giving program?

  What elements have we tested? What are the results of any A/B or multivariate tests (i.e., testing senders, subject lines, e-mail copy)?
  - Other online and digital fundraising initiatives (e.g., crowdfunding, days of giving, text-to-give, third-party banner ads, personal fundraising pages)
  - Unsolicited web page donations (e.g., page visits, conversion rates, level of form abandonment/drop-off)

- What does our data tell us about the length of time it takes to upgrade donors to the mid-level? What is our strategy/model to identify and solicit donors primed for upgrade? When do we refer annual gift donors to major gift portfolios for long-term personalized cultivation?
- To what extent does annual giving promote sustaining monthly or recurring giving options or campaigns for these options? How many donors or how much revenue is associated with such options? What challenges do we face in doing so (e.g., credit card expirations, lack of technology, donor resistance)?
- How complete, consistent, and accurate is our affinity data and coding? What other variables would we like to collect and which departments (e.g., admissions, student affairs, athletics) would we have to collaborate with to do so?

Planning for Future Directions

- What do we perceive about the primary motivations of our donors (e.g., gratitude, loyalty, duty, nostalgia, desire for impact)? How has this changed over time or by segment?
- Do we anticipate that any recent legal or regulatory changes (e.g., tax law) will affect us?
- How could we take our case for support, stories, and messages to the next level? Do they include new reasons to give? Compelling deadlines or reason for urgency? Have we ever surveyed or interviewed alumni or donors in a systematic way to assess their satisfaction with our annual fund program and perceptions of it?
- How or to what extent do we benchmark against peer/competitor institutions? Where do we stand relative to them?
- When the annual giving team looks back over the last few years, what were our most successful strategies? What worked with high-priority segments? In contrast, what did not work well?
- What kinds of stories and messages resonate with our alumni?

More Resources

Comprehensive Reports

- Creating a Culture of Giving Among Current Students (2014)
- Disruptive Innovations in University Fundraising: A Six-Part Study Series (2014)
- Optimizing the Campaign Pipeline: New Approaches to Mid-Level Giving (2015)
- Winning Donor Mindshare in the Attention Economy (2017) and the accompanying Donor Activation Center: Engaging the next generation of supporters

Short-Format Research Briefs

- Maximizing Annual Giving Campaigns through Mass Solicitation Methods (2012)
- Transitioning to Designated Donations for Annual Fund Giving (2012)
- Strategies for Annual Giving Donor Retention (2013)
- Telefund and Direct Marketing Operations and Strategies (2013)
- Mid-Level and Leadership Annual Giving: Program, Giving Society, and Campaign Operations (2015)
- Leadership Giving Programs (2015)

- Donor Acquisition through Direct Marketing Channels (2015)