

Fundraising is now considered a profession and it has achieved a legitimacy, but during challenging times when its status is questioned, professionals must be able to monitor, defend, and continually improve its position.

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Measuring professionalism

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LIKE MEMBERS OF other occupations, fundraisers have an ongoing interest in improving their work and seeking recognition as professionals. However, practitioners and researchers are reluctant to grant fundraising the status of a fully matured profession. In the literature on fundraising as a profession, the conventional perspective is that the occupation is an emerging profession but has not yet obtained acceptance as a status profession (Carbone, 1989; Bloland and Bornstein, 1991; Duronio and Tempel, 1997; Hossler, 1999).

The in-between position of fundraising and other occupations aspiring to be professions has led to great interest in what constitutes a profession, and an extensive literature has developed on professions and professionalizing processes. At the beginning, interest centered on the gentlemanly professions: medicine, law, ministry, the military, and academia. Over time, these professionalized occupations accumulated so much prestige, legitimacy, and control over their work that other occupations sought the recognition and power that these status professions had acquired.

Lists were made of their most important characteristics, with the prospect that acquiring the central attributes of these professions would result in the professionalization of other occupations. Since the 1960s, commentators, led primarily by sociologists, have used a more or less standard list of professional traits to track the level of professionalization that occupations have attained.

The customary list of characteristics of a profession includes a body of applicable expert knowledge with a theoretical base, acquired through a lengthy period of training (preferably in a university), a demonstrated devotion to service, an active professional association, a code of ethics, and a high level of control over credentialing and application of the work. Other characteristics often cited are full-time work, a long-term commitment to the profession, and a strong sense of community within the profession.

The impact of change on the professionalization of fundraisers

The organizations we inhabit and the occupations and professions in which we work are profoundly influenced by continuous and rapid change: changes in culture, the economy, and communication technology; the advent of terrorism and war; perceptions of identity and the self; and the swift pace of a constantly globalizing world. Professions are susceptible to such change, since even subtle modifications in the environment may change the status of work lives and the nature of work. Changes in the environment have helped bring about changes in the status of fundraising for nonprofit organizations and modified how we perceive fundraising as a profession and how we understand the professionalization process.

In the twenty-first century, business perspectives and business methods permeate and dominate the economic, social, and political scene. In this environment, nonprofit organizations are being challenged to apply business-like management principles to their operations. The past decade has seen the rise of nonprofit management programs at colleges and universities across the United States, and some internationally as well. Research on best practices and the

application of management principles based on this work have permeated all aspects of nonprofit organizations, including fundraising.

Two results of change affecting fundraisers and the nonprofit organizations in which they work are that fundraisers exist in a climate of insistent demands for accountability from donors and legislators and for increased emphasis on productivity. Both generate interest in, if not preoccupation with, measurement. Stakeholders are increasingly interested in assessing the outcomes from funds invested and policies and actions taken. Productivity augments fundraisers' desire to determine where they are in the professionalization process and furthers their need to compare themselves with others in their same circumstances.

Measuring accountability

Interest in measurement pervades our society. Accountability measures are an increasing part of the landscape for nonprofit organizations as they are for business and government. These measures are applied everywhere in the third sector, where legitimate and reliable means are sought for evaluating foundations, colleges and universities, elementary and secondary schools, charitable organizations, and community foundations.

Measuring professionalism

Occupations aspiring to professional status seek to determine how far along the road to professionalism they have traveled and how much further they need to go to achieve professional status. As occupations aspiring to professionalization seek measures that would indicate their progress and allow them to compare themselves with other occupations and already arrived professions, they want to acquire the acceptable characteristics and to measure and compare the progress of each trait.

The typical method of measuring professionalism is to take the standard list of characteristics and assess how many of these traits actual occupations possess, thus allowing for a rough measurement of professionalism (Goode, 1957). A variation on measuring professionalism is provided by Wilensky (1964), who asserts that occupations go through a five-step process that begins with doing the

work full time and culminates with the creation of a formal code of ethics. The standard traits are encompassed in the steps. Since he sees the steps occurring in a particular sequence, measurement occurs by determining which steps the occupation has completed.

Although these general measures are helpful, verifiable and quantitative measures are considered more desirable. In the late 1960s, Hickson and Thomas (1969) constructed a Guttman scale from a sample of forty-three “qualifying associations” to measure degrees of professionalism along a continuum, which they assumed would allow for comparisons among professions and aspiring professions.

The trait lists

Despite the monumental changes affecting professionalism, the core professional trait list is still serviceable. Nevertheless, that list has flaws as a means of measuring professionalism. First, the relative importance of the traits is not addressed. Some of the characteristics are more important than others. Professional expertise and a service orientation appear to be more basic than the others, even if all are required. Measurement of professionalism would need to be weighted to account for this.

Second, “profession” is not a stable, unitary concept. At times, professions have been viewed by scholars with great respect and admiration. At other times, there has been a strong sentiment that professions are monopolistic conspiracies that operate to the detriment of the public.

Over time, as the work conditions under which fundraising and other professionals change, measures of what is considered professional may change in importance. For about fifty years until the 1960s, service orientation was the leading ideology of professions. In the 1960s, control over work characterized the professional ethos, and beginning in the 1970s, expertise began to emerge as the dominant feature of professionalism. One consequence of the rise of expertise as a major identifying characteristic of professionalism is that it has increased the universe of professions. Occupations of many kinds can now assert professional status based on their legit-

imate claim that they use expertise in solving a wide variety of problems. Fundraising is among them.

Fundraising is a profession

It has become apparent that the standard list of characteristics of professionalism is inadequate and some reinterpretation is in order. Many methods and purposes of the business world have been adapted in the third sector, and nonprofit organizations have been infused with the culture of professional management, incorporating much of the terminology and many of the practices of corporations. Fundraising executives have taken advantage of this process of incorporating aspects of the external environment, which has been called isomorphism, by avidly and successfully adapting skills and perspectives from business and developing standardized best practices that are commonly understood and taught to others. The professional trait of expertise is enhanced for fundraising executives since they have isomorphized a particularly prestigious knowledge: productivity based on business expertise. Based on the changes that have taken place in society, organizations, and occupations, Boland (2002) has proposed that the fundraising environment has been so modified that fundraising now needs to be viewed in its changed context: a new environment that has greatly enhanced the claim of fundraising to be a profession. The changes have produced a modified definition of professionalism for fundraising as new dimensions associated with fundraising have emerged. Thus, there is a need to add to the conventional list of professional characteristics these contemporary traits of fundraising and offer them for measurement: location in and centrality to an organization, which is where most professions now work; expertise in standardized methods and business and nonprofit ideologies; and substantial increases in income (Boland, 2002).

Adding to the claim by fundraisers to professional status is the exchange taking place between status professionals (such as physicians and lawyers) and managers in business organizations. Status professionals are becoming more managerial in their work, and

managers are undergoing a professionalization process (Leicht and Fennell, 2001). General acceptance of administrators as professionals provides a larger universe of professionals, adding to the fundraisers' claim to recognition as a profession. For the most part, the additional characteristics are beneficial for fundraising practitioners because each of these new characteristics of professionalism constitutes an additional basis for the measurement of fundraising as a profession (Bloland, 2002).

Complications of trait measurement

Some of the individual traits of professionalism need methods of measurement different from others. For some of the traits, it is desirable to determine the level of progress along a continuum and compare that level with other occupations and professionals. Traits falling in this category include autonomy, expertise, altruism, education and training, and level of income. With such characteristics as having a professional association, a code of ethics, and an organization work site, measurement would appear simple: a profession either has each of them or does not. However, the measurement of such traits can be complicated. For example, professional associations are better and worse at furthering an occupation's quest for professionalism, and measures might be enlisted that would go beyond the mere existence of the association to assess the level of influence of the association or how well it serves its membership. Fundraising practitioners are served by a variety of associations, including some that are focused on subsector type, like religion, health care, museums, higher education, and ethnicity.

The service orientation is most concretely expressed in a written code of ethics, approved at the level of the professional organization and distributed widely, not only to the membership but to other stakeholders. Here again, having or not having a code of ethics would seem to be a simple but complete method of measurement of a professionalization trait. However, codes of ethics can be badly or well written. They may be too general or too specific, too stringent or too lax. They may miss the most significant

measures of ethical behavior. More than twenty-six thousand fundraising practitioners have signed the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP) Code of Ethics, which provides for sanctions for unethical behavior. But it is unclear how widely the code is understood beyond the membership or whether the public understands the sanctions.

The characteristic of expertise seems straightforwardly open to measurement, a body of knowledge understood and demonstrated by the number of professional courses taken, years of apprenticeship, certification, licensure, and degrees. In addition, the new emphasis by practitioners on business and nonprofit management expertise also requires measurement. However, professional expertise has some odd qualities that make several aspects of expertise difficult to measure. If the expert knowledge appears to be too concrete, either the whole or parts of the knowledge base can be taken over and used by other occupations. If the knowledge base of theory is too abstract, it will appear to have little to do with practice and will be unpersuasive to clients and other stakeholders. Both extreme concreteness and extreme abstraction threaten a profession's credibility (MacDonald, 1995).

To find legitimate measures for this in-between status of expert knowledge is not easy. Despite the perils of excessive concreteness and abstraction, a viable profession needs both. The concreteness and abstraction problems can be usefully addressed by promoting a constantly changing body of knowledge and a diversified repertoire of skills that do not stray far from the purposes of the profession and the services it offers. It becomes apparent that the concept of profession is an ideal, which means that one can safely say that no profession ever fulfills all the requirements of that ideal.

Theory and judgment in professionalism

For a busy and successful fundraising professional, theory may seem obscure and hard to connect with practice. Yet theory that is generated through research is so significant that it is a major means

for marking the difference between professions and nonprofessions. According to Abbott (1988), “only a knowledge system governed by abstractions [theory] can redefine its problems and tasks, defend them from interlopers, and seize new problems” (p. 9). Theories give professions flexibility, a means for acquiring and defending professional turf, legitimacy in the academic world, and a means for defining for the professionals in a field and others the scope and limits of the professional work. The fundraising profession has not paid extensive attention to theory building and does not have elegant and practical theories to apply to its work. Nevertheless, some interesting and promising starts have been made: Adrian Sargeant, Robert Payton, Paul Schervish and John Havens, Kathleen Kelly, and Bruce Cook and William Lasher have constructed theories of fundraising using the behavioral and social sciences as a foundation (Bornstein, 2003).

In order for expertise to count for something, it will contain aspects of judgment on the part of the professional that do not lend themselves to standardization or measurement. There are areas of indeterminacy that can be dealt with only by using judgment (MacDonald, 1995). Such a condition of indeterminacy in the fundraising profession occurs in the application of best practices to organizational circumstances and the timing and circumstances appropriate for asking a donor for a gift. In the ambiguity of the occasion and the potential consequences of success or failure, a fundraising professional may recognize a level of indeterminacy that calls for a good deal of experience, intuition, and tacit knowledge—in other words, a high level of judgment.

Fundraising's bottom line

One of the problems in measuring the professionalization of fundraising has to do with the financial results. Established professions tend to reward those who demonstrate professional knowledge and professional skills. At the same time, they tend to give less judgmental scrutiny to the outcomes of applying professional pro-

cedures. For example, in some kinds of surgery, there is a low success rate (brain surgery, for example). In some especially intricate and difficult legal cases, the attorneys may have a fairly low rate of winning. Yet in both instances, the professionals involved may enjoy high prestige and honor. In fundraising, the bottom line appears to be so objective and concrete that it may obscure the significance of the fundraising professional's skill and knowledge. Success in raising funds is so important that it threatens to be the primary or only real measure used, even though it may have relatively little to do with typical professional characteristics.

The emphasis on measurement in the professionalization of fundraising, the problems and ambiguities associated with measurement like return on investment, the volatility of the concept of profession, the changes that may take place in the relative importance of professional characteristics, and the impact that changes in the environment may have on the definition of profession all introduce uncertainty surrounding questions of how fundraising should proceed and what its goals should be regarding professionalization. Two perspectives on professionalization that are helpful for clarifying direction for the field are viewing professionalization as a project and emphasizing the central importance of building and maintaining the respectability of the fundraising profession.

The professionalization of fundraising as a project

The ideal of profession is often portrayed as a concrete, unchanging social entity composed of stable characteristics that, once acquired, result in allowing an occupation to call itself a profession. The world of work has many occupations that have the standard professional characteristics but whose claims of professional status are not honored by their constituents. No profession can be said to have reached an ideal state where it can rest on its laurels. There are always improvements to be made and occupational borders to guard and extend. Professions did not come into existence full blown and operational. Members of the profession had to create the occupation through hard work, and there is no end to the necessity for acting to maintain and enhance the profession. Thus,

it would be helpful to conceive of the professionalization of fundraising as a project, which means continually working on actions and policies that will maintain or broaden the jurisdiction of the work and raise the status of the profession in the wider community (Larson, 1977; MacDonald, 1995). The professional project assumes that an active program of professionalization will go on indefinitely, even if it is agreed that the goal of professionalization has been achieved. Bloland's assertion (2002) that fundraising is no longer an emerging profession but has acquired professional status in no way diminishes the need for continuous efforts to improve the profession, defend its borders, and sustain its enhanced position in organizations.

The measurement of the characteristics of professionalism is central to the professionalization project of fundraisers, and the two most significant traits are expertise and service orientation. Expertise currently dominates in the definition of professionalism, and much of the professionalization project is centered on improving expertise to better serve stakeholders, expand control over work, and gain and defend a desired niche in the organization. In this process, training, degrees, diplomas, certification, theory building, and experience loom large. Professional associations take much of the responsibility for this side of professionalization. However, expertise implies measurement, improvement, and the defense of traits, and it must be meshed with and directed toward another goal. The professionalization project is incomplete without serious attention to the enhancement and retention of respectability for the profession.

Building and maintaining respectability

The most general basis for respectability for a profession is its ability to be in tune with society's values and to demonstrate ethical behavior, honesty, sincerity, fairness, principle, and trustworthiness. Although all are important, trust in a profession stands out. Without a high level of trust, the status of a profession will be rapidly eroded. Part of the basis for trust will be found in the belief by stakeholders that professionals in the field are experts. But expertise

has no intrinsic purpose until professionals give it direction (Koehn, 1995). Fundraising executives have a potential problem in that they have enthusiastically embraced technical aspects of expertise and many are focused on career development based on expertise (Duronio and Tempel, 1997). Focus on productivity by nonprofit organizations could cause concern that fundraisers may become too focused on the bottom line and pay less attention to the ethical part of their work—to have less interest in serving their institution's mission and stakeholders' and societal interests.

The significance of trust for fundraising professionals is underlined by two concepts identified with the work of sociologist Everett Hughes (1971), "guilty knowledge" and "dirty work," and by two accountability measures, credentialing and reporting, that seek to assure stakeholders that fundraising professionals are capable and trustworthy.

Guilty knowledge. Hughes points out that physicians see patients at their worst and must have intimate knowledge of a patient's problems and background information leading to those problems. That means that physicians gather information about the patients that the patients would probably not want to be made public. The same is true of attorneys. Hughes calls this information "guilty knowledge" (1958). Both physicians and lawyers must persuade their clients that they will not make this knowledge public or use this knowledge for their own personal gain or for harm to the client.

Similarly, in doing their work, fundraising professionals gather information about donors and prospects that may be quite sensitive in that public knowledge of this information would be painful to the prospects. Some of the knowledge that fundraisers have may not be known by the donors. Fundraising executives, like physicians and attorneys, are in possession of "guilty knowledge." Because this is true, it becomes more important than ever before in this period of expertise dominance that fundraisers have a large reservoir of trustworthiness. That is, they need to have a high level of respectability that translates into complete trust that they will not use the "guilty knowledge" they have of donors in any way that will reflect negatively on the donors or on their institutions. The

professionalization of fundraising executives would be placed in jeopardy without this trustworthiness.

Dirty work. The task of asking for money does not have a long history of respectability. It is viewed at times as begging, and many persons find fundraising an odious activity. In higher education, for example, many presidents of colleges and universities, who are the institution's chief fundraising representatives, tend to be reluctant about that aspect of their jobs. They realize its importance, and studies show that their involvement in fundraising correlates with several measures of success and satisfaction (Rooney, Bouse, and Tempel, 2002). Nevertheless, they are quite outspoken concerning their dislike for fundraising. Bornstein (2003) found presidents referring to fundraising as "shaking the money tree," 'going hat in hand,' setting aside a 'begging day'" (Bornstein, 2003, pp. 126–127). Even fundraising staff members express dislike for asking for money (Duronio and Tempel, 1997.) This negative response to asking for money falls under Hughes's designation of "dirty work" (1958). Hughes, who often uses examples from opposite ends of the occupational prestige spectrum, compares physicians, who must engage in "dirty work" (such as the messiness of blood) as a central aspect of their profession, with garbage collectors, who do the "dirty work" of handling garbage. In both cases, the members of the occupation cannot shy away from the dirty work of what they do. By the same token, fundraising executives, having done the preliminary "clean" work of gathering information and cultivating prospects, must not avoid the "dirty work" of asking for money. Since asking for gifts and preparing volunteers to ask is the work of fundraising professionals, the concept of dirty work must be taken into account in their quest for respectability. Part of the professionalization project must be to make asking for financial support as highly respectable an activity as surgery is for physicians. Not only that, fundraising professionals have a responsibility for helping to educate their CEOs and volunteers about the pleasures of fundraising.

Credentials. The Certified Fundraising Executive (CFRE) credential is located in CRFE International, which awards the certifi-

cate. Many fundraising executives do not see the CFRE credential as necessary for a successful career (Whelan, 2003). This may be partially because professionalism has a technical and a social side. The certification process is heavy on the technical side: five years of experience, continuing-education classes, an exam, an application that describes the details of one's career and charitable interests, and recertification every three years by demonstrating a continuing pattern of successful fundraising and continuing to attend classes.

Although practitioners say that experience and personal skills are the most important factors in their professional development, there is an added social dimension that must be taken into account. Professions aim for respectability, and they gain this partially from the institutions in which they are located. Fundraisers who are located in organizations that lack the visibility, economic resources, and prestige of universities and hospitals are especially in need of credentials that add to their respectability. The CFRE credential can be quite important in signaling that its holder is seriously committed to a professional level of expertise and trustworthiness. For fundraising executives in higher education, university degrees are the significant standards for legitimacy, even though the degrees may have little to do with fundraising professionalism. Perhaps the best solution is for colleges and universities to continue development of nonprofit management as degree-granting programs, thus combining high-social-status university degrees with education and training in fundraising.

Reporting. Of considerable importance to the fundraising practitioners in education has been the development in the 1980s and 1990s of voluntary standards that institutions of higher education and schools use for reporting fundraising results. These are measures designed to help institutions benchmark against others to provide standardization and transparency to fundraising. The standards are not a direct measure of professionalism, but they provide a solid contribution to the trust that donors, government officials, and others have in fundraisers and the work they do, adding greatly to the respectability and esteem of fundraising in

ways that contribute positively to the fundraising professionalization project. More work is under way to measure fundraising costs and productivity in other organizations (Rooney, Bouse, and Tempel, 2002).

The pressure for accountability that pervades society in all three sectors has affected the fundraising professionalization project. There has been a widespread insistence that the institutions in which fundraising staff are housed be accountable to their stakeholders, donors, and society at large. While the accountability movement is not directly a part of the professionalization project, it nevertheless has a large impact on professionalization. Accountability is related to trust. The greater the trust is in an occupation, the more likely it is that there will be less urgent demands by external stakeholders for strict accountability measures applied to the institutions in which professionals work. This would leave room for the profession to maintain a measure of autonomy and control over its work. Therefore, the fundraising professionalization project should include a major thrust aimed at continuing to build the foundation of trust that others accord to fundraising practitioners. This does not mean that accountability demands will go away, nor should they. But it does mean that if the trust is deep enough, fundraising professionals would have more to say about the relevant elements of accountability and measurement. When trust in the profession is strong enough, the generation of standards, measures, and processes of accountability will be in the hands of fundraising professionals. This is especially true in a climate of reduced funding for social needs, where increasing demands for explanation and justification accompany program planning and activities at every level of nonprofit organizations. Nevertheless, the conventional striving for independence and control over work that is a part of any professionalization project should include as much ownership as possible of the definitions of accountability measures. Another way of putting this is to see trust as the primary basis for accumulating and defending the respectability of fundraisers. Physicians in the 1960s had an enormous reserve of trust, allowing them so much control over their work that they could

define both illness and treatment and set their own standards for appropriate professional behavior. Physicians still have considerable social status. However, the advent of managed health care and the increased fear of malpractice suits has eroded the vast store of independence that they enjoyed forty years ago.

Conclusion

Fundraising today is respected as a profession despite the difficulties of this volatile social, political, and economic period. Nevertheless, it needs constant vigilance to improve, monitor, and defend its position. The fundraising profession must continue to define, refine, and redefine its characteristics and its social role in its institutions, the nonprofit sector, and society so that it is always identified with mission and service over status enhancement and aggrandizement.

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Additional Resources

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