

Washburn McGoldrick

Advancement Moving Forward: The State of Advancement and Alumni Relations

Volume XII

March 2025

For additional information, please email info@wash-mcg.com



INTRODUCTION

The WASHBURN McGOLDRICK March 2025 *Advancement Moving Forward* survey of advancement professionals is the twelfth in our series on the state of the profession. This series began in April 2020. Since then, we have tracked how alumni relations officers, gift officers, senior advancement staff, and chief advancement officers (CAOs) have kept the momentum of their advancement efforts moving forward.

These surveys explore timely issues of importance to advancement professionals in US universities, colleges, and independent schools. The topics in each survey are suggested by CAOs and their senior staff to provide information that allows them to respond in a timely manner.

The March 2025 survey focuses on five topics:

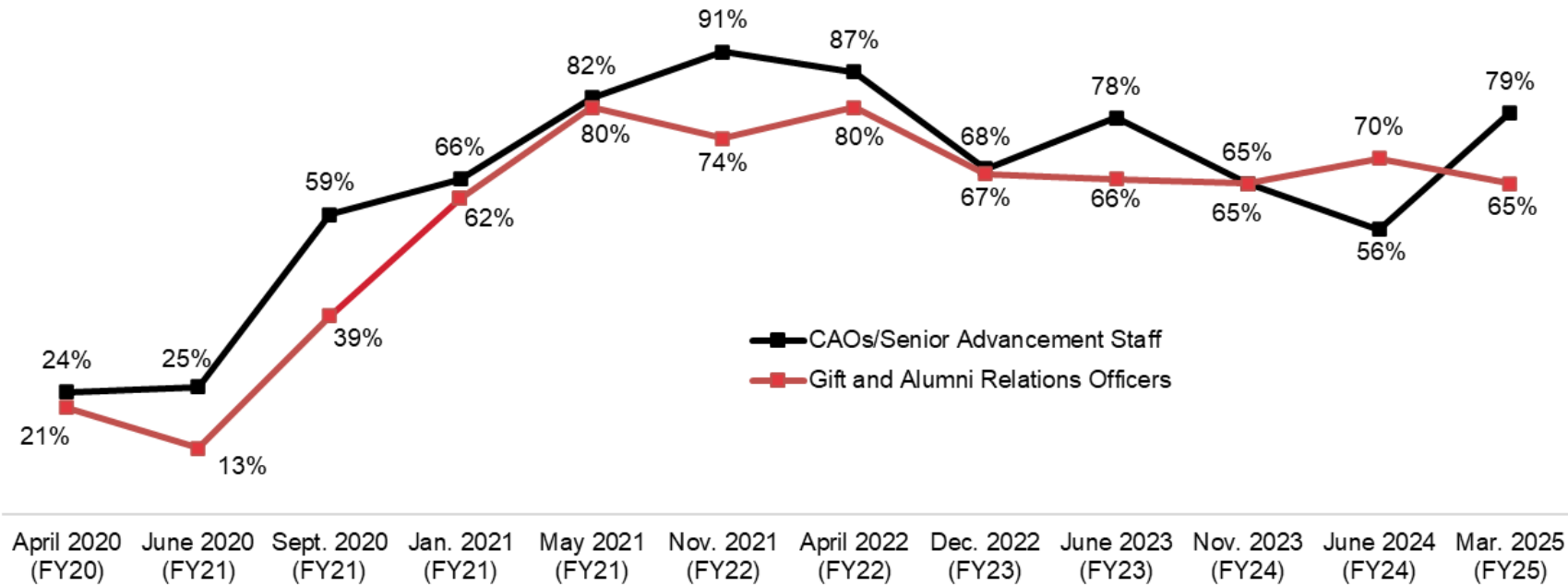
- ❖ Confidence in achieving FY25 goals,
- ❖ Job satisfaction,
- ❖ Use of artificial intelligence in advancement (AI),
- ❖ Anticipated changes to budget and fundraising outcomes in the coming year, and
- ❖ Open-ended discussion of key challenges.

Confidence in achieving fundraising goals for each fiscal year has been explored in every survey. More recently, we have also addressed staff turnover, fundraising priorities, the use of technology to engage donors and alumni, videoconference fatigue, and institutional responses to DEIB issues, among other topics. Many of our changes to the question theses reflect a stabilization of certain issues related to the pandemic, and we feel this is an opportunity to address other current and pressing issues. A full list of topics appears in the methodology section of this report.

The March 2025 survey was conducted in February 2025. Responses were received by 227 individuals from 107 colleges, universities, independent schools, and museums. These include two Historically Black Colleges and Universities and four Hispanic-Serving Institutions. Details about the methodology and a list of participating institutions can be found at the end of this report.

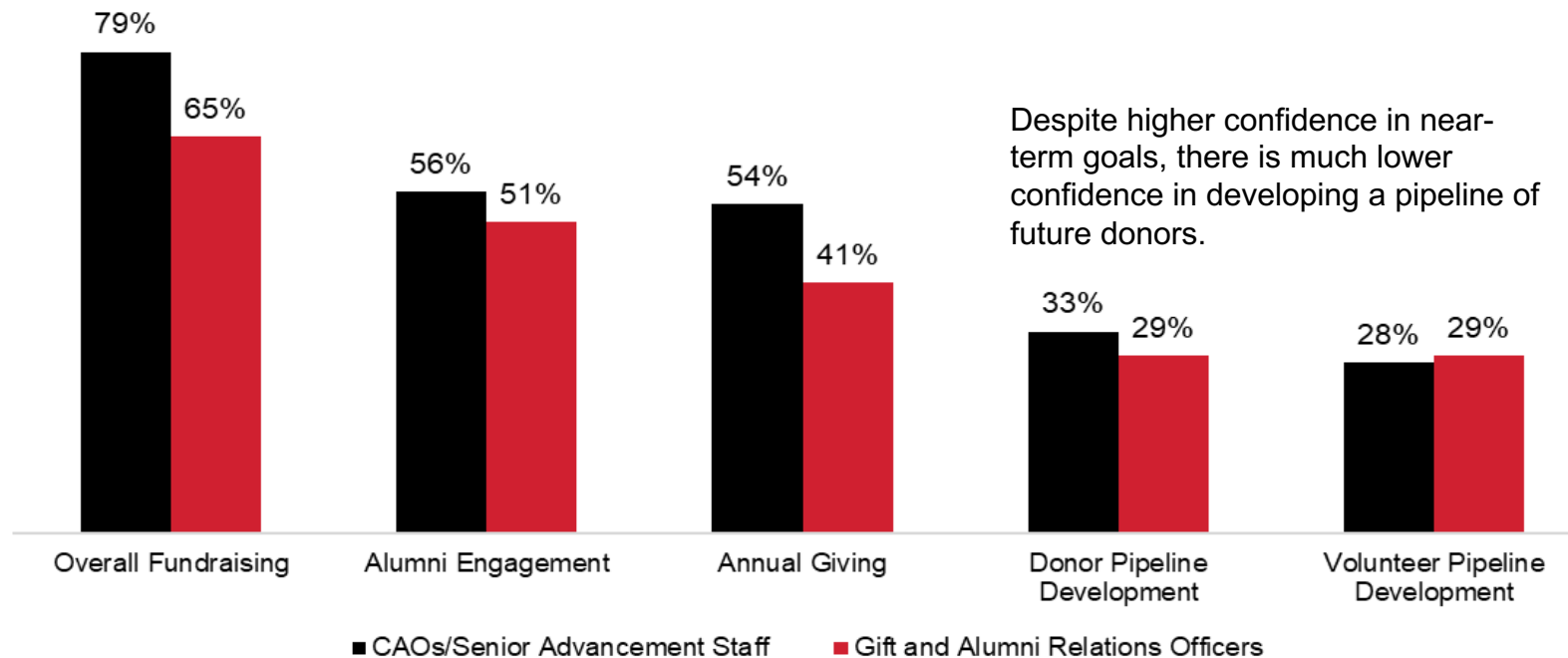
We invite conversations about the survey results, and we encourage you to contact Bonnie Devlin (bonnie.devlin@wash-mcg.com) or Carla Willis (carla.willis@wash-mcg.com), Managing Principals of WASHBURN McGOLDRICK, with questions or comments.

How confident are you that your institution will reach its advancement goals? (% confident)



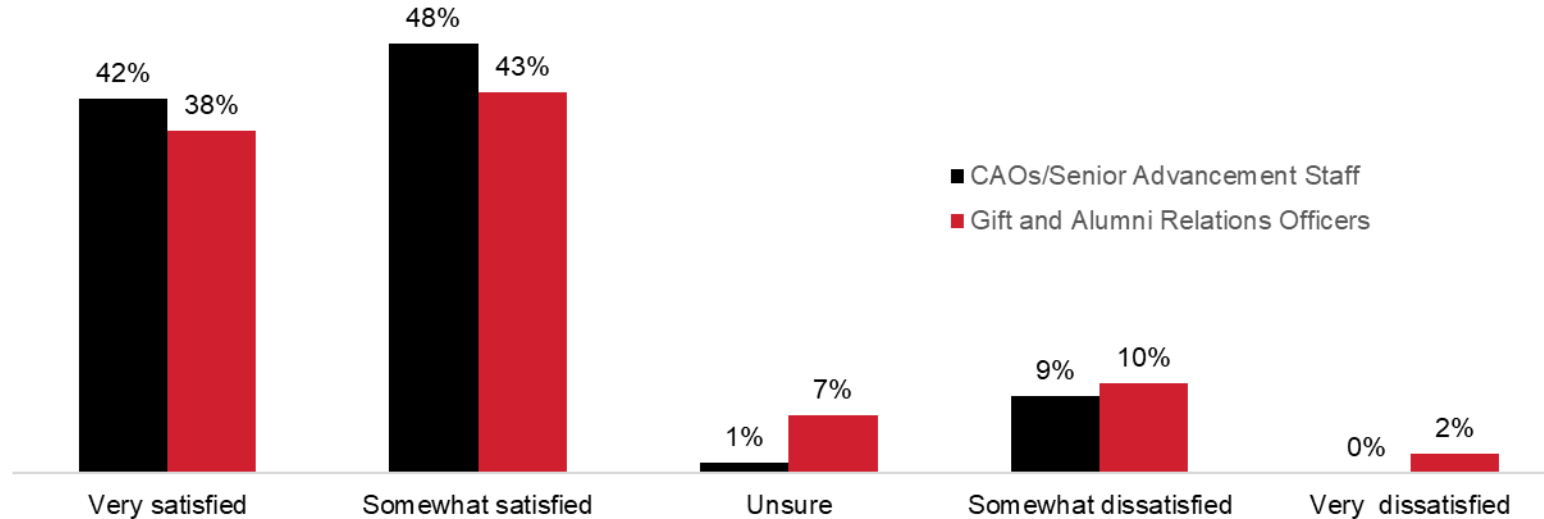
- ❖ WASHBURN McGOLDRICK's *Advancement Moving Forward* survey reveals that among CAOs/AVPs, those confident in reaching their fundraising goal has **rebounded considerably since June 2024, with 79% feeling confident. This represents a 23-percentage-point increase over nine months.**
- ❖ In the context of five years of survey data for this question, the results have been volatile. Following a sharp recovery in confidence following the end of COVID restrictions, CAO/AVP confidence has vacillated from as high as 91% in November 2021 to as low as 56% in June 2024.
- ❖ Gift and alumni officers have been somewhat more stable over the past two years, and 65% indicate confidence that their institution will reach their advancement goals this year, down slightly from June 2024.

Confidence in Reaching Goals in Other Areas of Advancement (% confident)



- ❖ While confidence in achieving fundraising goals is quite high, especially among CAOs/AVPs, **confidence in meeting goals in four other advancement-related goals is not as strong**. Slightly more than half of CAOs/AVPs (56%) are confident in meeting alumni engagement goals, which is consistent with the confidence of other staff (51%).
- ❖ CAOs/AVPs are more confident than gift and alumni officers on meeting annual giving goals, though both show fairly low confidence compared to overall giving (54% for CAOs/AVPs and 41% for gift and alumni officers).
- ❖ Smaller numbers of both groups (less than one-third) are confident in meeting donor and volunteer pipeline development goals, which was also the case in the June 2024 survey. This finding demonstrates an underlying anxiety about prospect pools at many respondent institutions.

Level of Job Satisfaction by Role

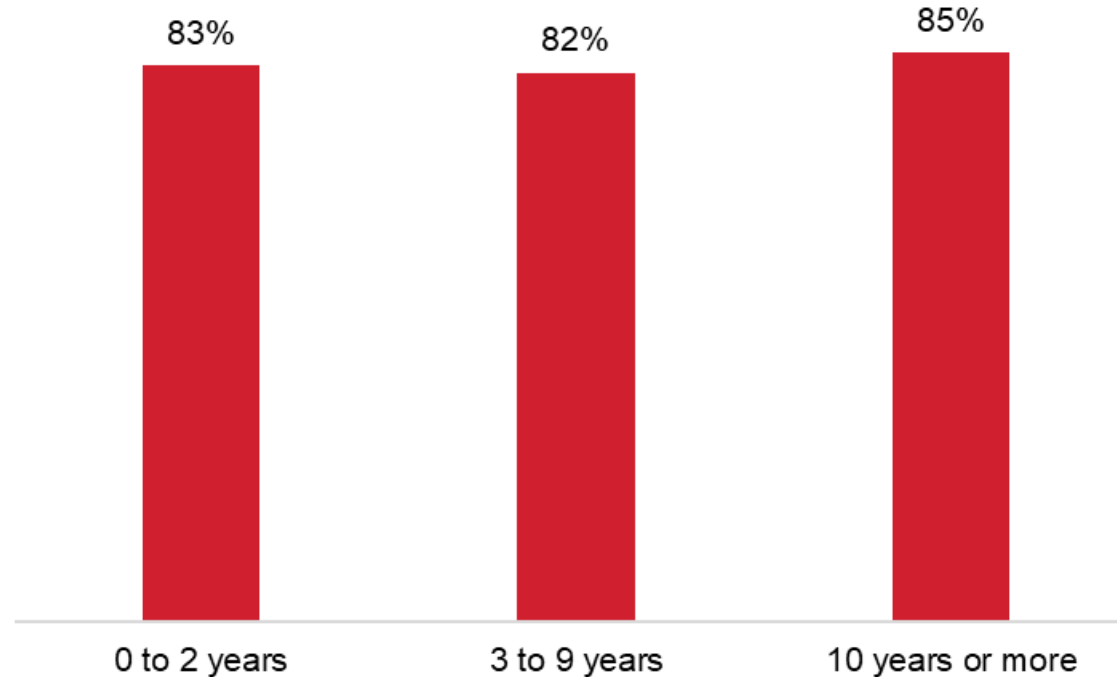


- ❖ WASHBURN McGOLDRICK's March 2025 *Advancement Moving Forward* survey finds that **advancement professionals are satisfied with their jobs**. Ninety percent of CAOs/AVPs and 81% of gift and alumni officers answer that they are very or somewhat satisfied
- ❖ **Levels of satisfaction do not vary widely between the two types of roles.** This represents a change from the June 2024 survey, when CAOs/AVPs were more likely than gift and alumni officers to be very satisfied.
- ❖ A 2024 Gallup study reported that 18% of American workers were extremely satisfied with their jobs*. A late 2023 Pew survey found that 51% of American workers were satisfied with their jobs**. Nevertheless, **it appears that American advancement workers report considerably more job satisfaction than workers in other sectors**, an important data point especially as it relates to advancement staff recruitment.

* *The Great Detachment: Why Employees Feel Stuck* (2024). Published by Gallup. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/653711/great-detachment-why-employees-feel-stuck.aspx>

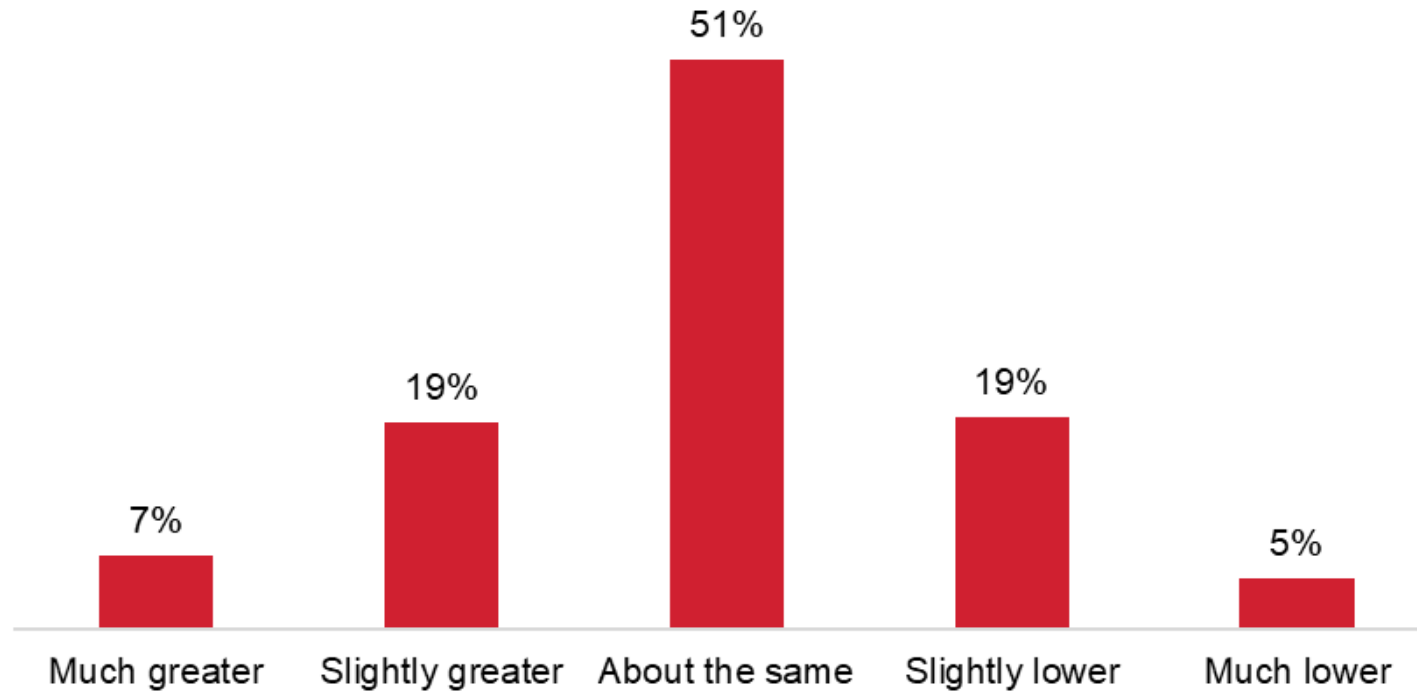
** *How Americans View Their Jobs*. Published by Pew Research Center (2023). <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/03/30/how-americans-view-their-jobs/>

Level of Job Satisfaction (cont'd) by Years in Advancement (% very or somewhat satisfied)



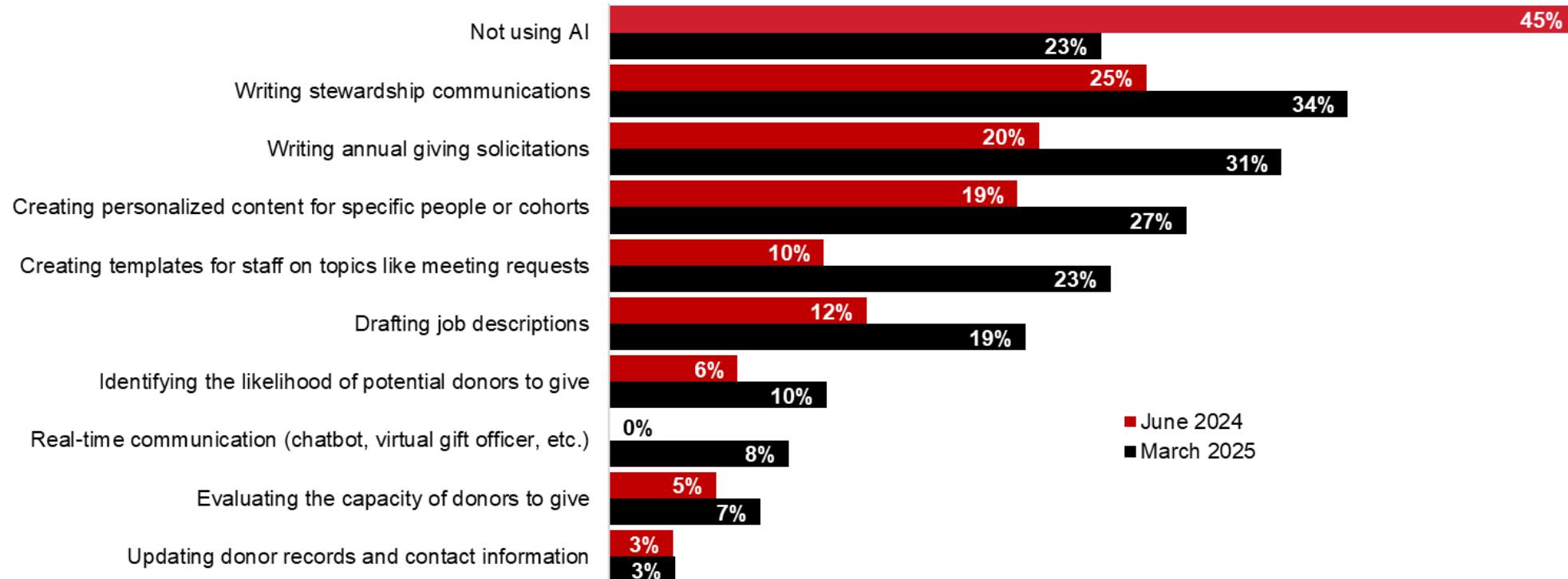
- ❖ WASHBURN McGOLDRICK's March 2025 *Advancement Moving Forward* survey finds that **advancement professionals are satisfied with their jobs regardless of their length of advancement experience.**
- ❖ This represents a small change from the June 2024 survey, which found that respondents with intermediate experience levels were slightly less likely to very or somewhat satisfied. This difference has been erased in this survey and there is no statistical difference based on tenure in the profession.

Expected Changes to Advancement Budget in FY26



- ❖ **WASHBURN McGOLDRICK's March 2025 *Advancement Moving Forward* survey finds that half (51%) of respondents anticipate little change to their FY26 advancement budget compared to this year. One-in-five (19%) expect a slight increase, as do 19% expecting a slight decrease.**
- ❖ Small shares anticipate a significant increase (7%) or significant decrease (5%).
- ❖ Differences between CAOs/AVPs and gift/alumni officers are negligible regardless of the expected degree of change.

Uses of AI in Fundraising and Alumni Engagement



- ❖ WASHBURN McGOLDRICK's March 2025 *Advancement Moving Forward Survey* reveals substantial increases in the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in advancement with 77% saying they are using AI for work purposes. **The share of respondents not using AI fell by half in the period between the June 2024 survey and this survey, from 45% to 23%.**
- ❖ The most significant growth is seen primarily in writing tasks like writing stewardship communications (from 25% to 34%), writing annual giving solicitations (from 20% to 31%), creating personalized content (from 19% to 27%), and creating templates for meeting requests (from 10% to 23%). This suggests that natural language model varieties of AI, such as ChatGPT, Copilot, and Gemini, are increasing their foothold for those types of tasks.
- ❖ More analytical/quantitative tasks, such as identifying donor likelihood to give (from 6% to 10%) and evaluating donor capacity (from 5% to 7%) show some modest growth between surveys but remain toward the bottom of the list as far as actual application in advancement offices.

Anticipated Changes to Giving in Various Areas



Most Positive		Most Consistent		Most Uncertain		Most Negative	
Scholarships & financial aid	62%	Faculty and academic programs	53%	DEI	22%	DEI	39%
Endowment	42%	Unrestricted	49%	Capital	12%	Unrestricted	19%
Charitable giving overall	40%	Endowment	45%	Charitable giving overall	11%	Capital	12%

- ❖ The maxim “change is the only constant” characterizes responses to this question, in which respondents are asked to indicate if they anticipate positive, negative, or no changes, or if they are uncertain. **Scholarships and financial aid are the only area where a majority (62%) of respondents anticipate positive changes.** This was followed by endowment (42%) and overall giving (40%).
- ❖ **Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is seen as the most likely to experience negative change, by 39% of respondents.** This is followed by unrestricted giving (19%) and gifts to capital (12%).
- ❖ **DEI is also ranked #1 in terms of uncertainty** around giving for DEI purposes (22%).
- ❖ **Only one area was selected by a majority as unlikely to change significantly, faculty and academic programs (53%).** This is closely followed by unrestricted giving (49%) and endowment (45%).

COMMENT ANALYSIS: IMPACT OF ECONOMIC & POLITICAL ISSUES

Summary

The overall sentiment in the comments reflects a mix of **uncertainty and resilience** in higher education fundraising. While institutions with active campaigns remain optimistic, broader economic and political concerns weigh heavily on donor behavior. Inflation, enrollment declines, and anticipated policy changes are driving institutions to rethink fundraising strategies, with an increasing reliance on large donors as small donor participation declines. Additionally, universities are facing staffing challenges, making it harder to sustain fundraising momentum.

The political landscape, particularly policies affecting DEI, federal grants, and international students, is creating additional instability. Donors are showing increased selectivity, with many shifting their giving to perceived more pressing social and global issues. Despite these challenges, some institutions report a strong donor base and are leveraging proactive planning to navigate the uncertainty.

❖ Economic Uncertainty & Inflation

- ❖ Concerns about inflation affecting donors' ability to give.
- ❖ Rising costs of education and household financial strains.
- ❖ Impact of the economy on unrestricted giving and participation.

❖ Political Climate & Policy Changes

- ❖ Concerns about the impact of the presidential administration on higher education.
- ❖ Worries about political hostility affecting DEI initiatives, climate/sustainability funding, and donor willingness.
- ❖ Potential cuts in federal student loan programs and NIH funding.
- ❖ Fear of increased taxation on endowments.

❖ Philanthropy & Donor Behavior

- ❖ Large donors remain committed, but small donor numbers are declining.
- ❖ Restricted giving increasing due to loss of trust in institutions.
- ❖ Donors shifting to support causes perceived as more urgent.

❖ Campaigns & Fundraising Strategy

- ❖ Institutions in campaign phases remain optimistic.
- ❖ Some are adjusting campaign goals due to early success.
- ❖ Major gifts are stable, but small gifts are declining.

❖ Enrollment & Financial Stability

- ❖ Enrollment declines leading to budget deficits, layoffs, and restructuring.
- ❖ Increased competition among nonprofit sectors for donor support.
- ❖ International student recruitment concerns due to political climate.

❖ Institutional Challenges & Staffing

- ❖ Difficulty in retaining staff due to high workloads and lack of career progression.
- ❖ Higher education instability affecting long-term fundraising momentum.
- ❖ Universities balancing financial constraints with their mission (e.g., DEI, scholarships).

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COMMENT ANALYSIS: ONE CHANGE TO POSITIVELY IMPACT YOUR ADVANCEMENT OFFICE

Summary

The most common themes highlight the need for **better staffing, improved technology, stronger donor engagement, and clear fundraising priorities**. Many respondents believe hiring and retaining staff—especially fundraisers—would have the greatest impact. Better data management and CRM systems are also critical for more effective outreach and donor stewardship. There is a clear call for **shifting from transactional fundraising to long-term relationship-building**, particularly with young alumni.

Leadership and structural changes within fundraising offices are another major concern, with frustration over internal resistance to change. Political and economic uncertainties also weigh heavily on institutions, with some donors hesitant to give due to shifting policies. Stewardship and impact reporting are seen as crucial in maintaining donor confidence and engagement.

Ultimately, respondents seek a **more strategic, data-driven, and relationship-focused approach to fundraising** that aligns with the evolving higher education landscape.

❖ Staffing and Retention

- ❖ Need for hiring more fundraisers, mid-level gift officers, and advancement staff.
- ❖ Reducing turnover and improving staff morale with better salaries and career growth.
- ❖ Importance of retaining experienced staff for donor relationships and engagement.
- ❖ Concerns about burnout due to understaffing and increased workloads.

❖ Technology and Data Management

- ❖ Calls for improved CRM systems, better database management, and AI integration.
- ❖ The need for reliable data and analytics to guide fundraising strategies.
- ❖ Investing in predictive modeling tools and better donor segmentation.

❖ Alumni and Donor Engagement

- ❖ Strengthening relationships with young alumni to ensure long-term philanthropy.
- ❖ Building personalized donor experiences and more targeted outreach.
- ❖ Increasing volunteer engagement and alumni participation through events.

❖ Fundraising Strategy and Prioritization

- ❖ Calls for a shift away from transactional fundraising toward long-term engagement.
- ❖ Importance of impact storytelling to demonstrate donor contributions.
- ❖ Focus on qualification of major gift donors and leadership annual giving.
- ❖ Avoiding distractions from secondary initiatives that dilute core fundraising goals.

❖ Leadership and Organizational Culture

- ❖ Need for stronger leadership to drive advancement success.
- ❖ Calls for restructuring to align with the modern higher education landscape.
- ❖ Frustration with middle management and resistance to new ideas.
- ❖ Desire for a more collaborative and communicative work culture.

❖ Political and External Challenges

- ❖ Concerns about the political climate affecting donor willingness and engagement.
- ❖ Impact of economic instability on philanthropy and university funding.
- ❖ Calls to balance DEI initiatives with fundraising priorities.

❖ Stewardship and Reporting

- ❖ Greater focus on donor stewardship and showing the tangible impact of gifts.
- ❖ Calls for better reporting and storytelling to maintain donor trust.
- ❖ Improving engagement with long-term donors beyond just soliciting gifts.

METHODOLOGY

- ❖ The **March 2025** survey was sent in February 2025 to 5,240 CAOs, Vice Presidents for advancement, AVPs, Directors of development, gift officers (school/center-based, central, and regional), alumni engagement officers, and alumni relations officers at universities, colleges, museums, and independent schools throughout the US. The survey closed on March 5, 2025.
- ❖ **The survey took five minutes to complete**, with a 98% completion rate. This includes responses to two open-ended questions. The margin of error is +/- 6.0% at the 95% confidence level.
- ❖ **Responses to the March 2025 survey were received from 227 individuals** (81 CAOs/senior advancement staff, 80 gift officers, 15 alumni relations officers, 35 “other,” and 16 advancement services staff), **representing 107 institutions**. Responses were received from three independent schools, two HBCUs, four HSIs, and two museums.
- ❖ **Topics April 2020 to March 2025:**

	April 2020	June 2020	Sept 2020	Jan 2021	May 2021	Nov 2021	April 2022	Dec 2022	June 2023	Nov 2023	June 2024	March 2025
Confidence												
Job satisfaction												
Artificial intelligence												
Budget and fundraising changes												
Office, hybrid, and remote work												
Using technology to engage donors												
Staff productivity												
Staffing vacancies												
Adjusting to remote/hybrid work												
Fundraising priorities												
Impact of the pandemic												
“Zoom” fatigue												
DEIB												
Alumni engagement												
Campus activism												
Advancement/Alumni Relations integration												
Making the case to give												
Future challenges												

PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS

American Jewish University
Appalachian State University
Ball State University
Berea College
Bowdoin College
Bryant University
Bucknell University
Carnegie Mellon University
Centre College
Claremont McKenna College
Colgate University
Colorado College
Connecticut College
Davidson College
Denison University
Duke University
Earlham College
Elizabeth City State University
Elon University
Franklin & Marshall College
Georgia Institute of Technology
Georgia Tech
Gettysburg College
Gonzaga University
Grinnell College
Haverford College
Illinois Institute of Technology
Immaculata University

James Madison University
Kenyon College
Knox College
Lafayette College
Le Moyne College
Lenoir-Rhyne University
Lincoln University
Macalester College
McDaniel College
Metropolitan State University
Michigan State University
Middlebury College
Miss Porter's School*
Mississippi State University
National University
New England College
North Carolina State University
Ohio State University
Ohio University
Ohio Wesleyan University
Providence College
Rhodes College
Rollins College
Saint Joseph University (NY)
Saint Joseph's University (PA)
Skidmore College
Smith College
St. John Fisher College

Smithsonian Institution
St. Lawrence University
St. Olaf College
State University of New York at Potsdam
Stonehill College
Suffolk University
SUNY College of Environmental Sci. and Forestry
Syracuse University
Texas Southern University
Texas Tech University
The Catholic University of America
The College of Wooster
The Governor's Academy*
The New School
Towson University
Trinity College (CT)
Trinity University (TX)
Tulane University
Union College
University of Arizona
University of Buffalo
University of Chicago Booth School of Business
University of Delaware
University of Maryland - Baltimore County
University of Maryland - College Park

University of Maryland Foundation
University of Missouri System
University of New Hampshire
University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill
University of North Carolina - Wilmington
University of Pittsburgh
University of Rhode Island
University of Richmond
University of South Carolina
University of Texas El Paso
Vanderbilt University
Vassar College
Villanova University
Virginia Commonwealth University
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts
Washington and Lee University
Washington University - Saint Louis
Wesleyan University
Western Michigan University
Wheaton College (MA)
Whitman College
William & Mary
Williams College
Woodberry Forest School *
Xavier University of Louisiana

* Independent school