

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

DONOR RELATIONS

Fundraisers Band Together to Find Practical Solutions to the Giving Crisis

By *Drew Lindsay*

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One day each month, scores of fundraisers from around the United States and even a few outside the country gather on Zoom at noon on the East Coast. Sometimes they are joined by experts — Russell James, for

instance, the Texas Tech scholar who mines behavioral science for insights about giving. Most often, however, practitioners step forward to discuss practical solutions to the declining number of donors to charity.

These sessions — called “lunchtime analyses” — are the work of the [Donor Participation Project](#), a community of advancement professionals trying to shore up weakening support for American nonprofits. Louis Diez, a 10-year veteran of fundraising, started the group in August 2020 with a Zoom call that featured maybe 30 colleagues and peers connected to him via LinkedIn. Within a year, he had 1,000 members and a grant from LinkedIn to build out the community.

Diez left his job as Muhlenberg College’s executive director of annual giving in May and now splits his time between the project and consulting, with gigs including work with [Almabase](#), which creates software for community management and fundraising among college alumni. Today the project has expanded its offerings, attracting some 2,000 people. The monthly calls can include as many as 150 fundraisers, and there are forums dedicated to a single topic, an experimental effort to help groups implement new ideas, and a virtual conference.

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Heather Thompson, an early member of the project, says members are testing whether time-honored fundraising conventions still work in the new giving climate. “We challenge ourselves and each other to preserve the best of what was and shake off the dust and be willing to try new things,” says Thompson, chief development officer for [Norwescap](#), a social-service agency in northwestern New Jersey. “A lot of learnings and conversations center around not just the ‘why’ but around what can we do about it.”

“We read the reports. We see the data,” says Franklin Guerrero, vice president of philanthropy at the [AARP Foundation](#) and one of the first participants in the project. “Now we’re looking at what are the things at the microstrategy or tactical level that are really improving outcomes.”

Fraying Connections

Data stretching back to the Great Recession document the fraying connections between Americans and charity, resulting in what some see as a [giving crisis](#). Rates of volunteering and giving have declined over the past decade, with experts finding explanations in everything from the shrinking middle class and declining religiosity to transactional fundraising approaches.

The philanthropic world is throwing lots of intellectual firepower at the problem. Several national grant makers created the [Generosity Commission](#) a year ago and earmarked \$2 million to efforts to “reignite generosity.” Next month, nonprofit leaders and analysts Nathan Chappell, Brian Crimmins, and Michael Ashley will release a book, [The Generosity Crisis](#), that outlines how they believe declining support threatens the very idea of the nonprofit.

Diez, however, wanted to bring development professionals into a conversation about changes in fundraising to address the problem. He has focused on everyday donors throughout his career, which began with an internship at New York’s Lincoln Center, where he rubbed shoulders with Reynold Levy, its famous CEO and a peerless fundraiser.

Apart from stints with symphony orchestras in Baltimore and Knoxville, Tenn., Diez has worked in college and university annual-fund shops. He earned a business degree in college and found himself drawn to using technology with large sets of donors.

“I told my dad, who’s a professor in finance: ‘This is like you’re running live experiments every day,’” Diez says.

At every organization he joined, Diez found dollars donated typically increased each year even as the number of donors declined. This prompted him to consider challenges facing higher education broadly. The number of alumni has increased threefold in 40 years, he wrote in a [2017 white paper](#), yet any given institution’s capacity to build relationships with those individuals has remained the same. Annual-giving offices, he said, are too focused on “pushing out information without necessarily engaging in a listening mode.”

At Muhlenberg, Diez studied the work of the 10 colleges with the largest growth in donor participation over a decade to divine their secret sauce.

With the Donor Participation Project, he has broadened his study to the nonprofit industry and invited the fundraising field to join in. In that first Zoom session, Angie Thurston, a graduate of the Harvard Divinity School and now the co-founder of the [Sacred Design Lab](#), discussed her research about how organizations can meet the needs of millennials seeking community. Most sessions focus on more nitty-gritty subjects — advice when buying technology, donor-experience mapping, automated marketing, and the like.

Technology is a big part of Diez's solution for the fall-off in donors, as it gives organizations the power to personalize communication and create relationships with infinite numbers of donors. Communications can be segmented and automated, with a fundraiser drawing on data about individual donors to customize as needed.

Boards and leaders are often reluctant to invest in donor engagement, Diez says, because their rock-hard belief in the organization blinds them to the fact that some supporters may not share such deep loyalty. That has to change. "There has to be awareness from the top that there's a strong link between giving and engaged groups of givers."

He adds: "I'd much rather have someone engaged with us as a nonprofit for 10 years without seeing a dollar than having them throw 10 bucks at us every five years."

To flesh out practical applications, the project has begun to offer deep dives into specific topics such as marketing automation. Diez recently put together a four-part forum with officials from the USO, Make-a-Wish, and other organizations to teach how to use video games and e-sports in engagement and fundraising — a strategy to connect with young adults. A group of fundraisers with the project are doing pro bono work to help raise funds for the [Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Park](#) in Corvallis, Ore., through a "welcome" series of communications for new donors. Others are developing training for volunteers and board members of [T1International](#) to discover and qualify donor prospects.

Both are pilot efforts. Eventually, Diez hopes to expand such task-specific consulting and pay its members to advance successful donor-participation strategies.

'Trusted Friends'

Norwescap's Thompson discovered Diez before the project began, when he and others were discussing fundraising challenges and sharing ideas on LinkedIn. She was impressed with the thoughtful dialogue designed to help everyone in the conversation.

"They were freely sharing what they learned — what they had tried, what had worked, what didn't work," she says. "It was so refreshing and inspiring."

Thompson also has benefited from meeting fundraisers in the project from other social-service organizations. Each monthly gathering includes breakout sessions where individuals who work on the same causes meet to discuss the day's topic and their daily challenges. The 15 or so fundraisers in the social-service group also swap ideas on LinkedIn at other times and ask for problem-solving help.

They have become a go-to resource for Thompson, who's building Norwescap's first fundraising operation. "There are people I've never met in person, but they've become trusted friends and colleagues," she says. "They became my sounding board on how to build a culture of philanthropy within the organization."

A version of this article appeared in the [November 1, 2022, issue](#).

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Drew is a longtime magazine writer and editor who joined the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* in 2014.

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