says. “It is something you learn by doing and by watching others do, both well and badly. You can learn from both.”

Students engage in hands-on projects, such as fundraising assessments for community nonprofits, writing letters of intent for grants and creating nonprofit fundraising media spots. Final projects often include writing a grant proposal for a nonprofit, preparing a fundraising plan or planning a special event. These hands-on projects provide a better teaching tool than only reading textbooks and learning theoretical fundraising would.

A vast majority of the nonprofit master’s alumni surveyed through the University of San Diego’s Nonprofit Leadership and Management Program in 2008 experienced some type of career change since attending the program. Fifty-nine percent received an increase in income since graduation, 33 percent applied for a position at a different type of nonprofit organization and 15 percent assumed a leadership role within the nonprofit sector. Often nonprofit management programs offer discounted tuition to help more nonprofit employees gain a graduate degree. While the results of a master’s program are very valuable, be prepared to assume the extra work and time commitment.

Also, to gain specific fundraising skills, many development officers pursue a fundraising certificate. There are 91 programs that offer noncredit courses, such as fundraising, governance and managing your nonprofit organization. Many of the 73 programs with courses offered through continuing education have similar courses designed for the nonprofit manager, including strategic planning, human resource management and financial management (Nonprofit Management Education: Current Offerings in University-Based Programs).

As a development officer, Julie Denman entered the fundraising certificate program because she felt she lacked mastery of some of the fundamental principles of fundraising. She wanted to gain a better understanding of philanthropy and refine her skill set. The program exposed her to areas of fundraising with which she was less familiar, such as estate planning and grant writing, ultimately making her a more well-rounded development professional. In addition, she felt that completing the certificate would strengthen her résumé and make her more marketable. Not surprisingly, Denman recently accepted a position as the director of philanthropy of the western region for the American Heart Association—a promotion in title, responsibilities and salary from her previous position.

Professional development skills and opportunities are helpful in strengthening a development officer’s leadership capabilities. Whether it is a master’s degree, certificate, CFRE or additional fundraising workshops and conferences, every fundraiser can benefit from continued education.

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Demystifying the ACFRE Process

BY LINDA LYSAKOWSKI, ACFRE, AND ALICE FERRIS, ACFRE

Every year at the AFP international conference, one or more fundraising professionals are recognized for becoming the latest to attain the coveted ACFRE designation, an achievement held by fewer than 100 people worldwide. Many in the audience may be wondering, “AC … what?” Or, “What’s the difference between this and the CFRE?” A few who may be involved in the process themselves may think, “Oh wow! It is achievable!” And those seated in the front of the audience, the rest of the ACFREs, wearing their medallions proudly, are cheering on a colleague who is now among their ranks.

To the general public it is even more confusing. They ask, “What is an ACK-FREE?” Like the charity that Linda stopped contributing to when it began addressing her as “Ms. Lysakowskacfre,” most people are clueless about what the initials mean.

So what is the ACFRE and is it worth all the trouble to gain the designation? The Advanced Certified Fund Raising Executive designation is awarded to those who have submitted an approved application listing their accomplishments over at least 10 years in the profession, passed a rigorous written exam, prepared an extensive portfolio and, finally, engaged in an even more rigorous oral review process. In many respects, the process echoes the stages of obtaining a Ph.D., with the portfolio taking the place of the dissertation and professional and life experience taking the place of years of academic study. Sometimes to help a lay person understand, you can use an analogy from the accounting profession: A CFRE is like a CPA, in that it is a certification based on current professional practice, while the ACFRE is like a Ph.D. in accountancy, determined by a person’s overall body of knowledge in the field.

Is it worth it? The answer is a resounding “yes!” For some, it opens the doors to a promotion and a higher paying position. For others, it means the respect of their peers. However, at the core it is truly a sense of individual accomplishment that drives most people to attain the
ACFRE. In fact, you really must have a desire to achieve this for your own personal satisfaction. The process is rigorous, and if you do not have the passion for the end result, you will likely find reasons to put the application aside.

For many the challenges of going through the ACFRE process include the costs, the time and the rigorous testing procedures. To be honest, it’s tough. You likely will have to re-do at least one section of the process. Alice openly confesses to trying three times to pass the written exam. Linda admits that the orals were the most terrifying part for her, and it took her two times to complete.

At the same time, in many respects the process is actually a benefit. As you proceed through the ACFRE steps, you have an opportunity to step back from the day-to-day grind, walk away from what’s on fire today and really assess the progress you have made as a fundraising professional. In addition, should you choose to let people know that you are pursuing the credential, you gain a “cheering squad” who will try to get that medal—and the ACFRE is a lifetime designation—the camaraderie among the ACFRE group is a valued asset.

Here are our tips for pursuing the ACFRE:

• Start building your portfolio well before the portfolio stage. If you have a case statement, development plan, fundraising materials, etc., that you are really proud of, pull the samples now so you don’t have to hunt them down later.

• Read as much of the reading list as you can, especially in the areas where you think you might not be as strong as you could be.

• Keep track of all the courses you’ve attended and taught. Pay particular attention to the ACFRE-approved sessions at conferences, particularly in ethics.

• If you’re panicked about taking a test, consider a test-taking refresher course at a college- or university-level tutoring center.

• The best advice? Build your support network. Find a current ACFRE to be your mentor to help you through the process, and tell at least one person that you are doing this. As much as people sometimes want to keep things quiet for fear of failure, it’s better to have others to comfort you through the difficult parts, urge you on when you want to give up and celebrate your victory when you finish the process.

Congratulations for considering the ACFRE—now go get it!

For more information on the ACFRE, visit the AFP website, www.afpnet.org, and click on “professional advancement” and “certification.”

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Senior Professionals ‘Around Town’ Round Tables

Two challenges many chapters face are keeping experienced fundraisers engaged in chapter activities and enabling as many members as possible to attend sessions.

“Every year we did a senior round table where you would walk in, read the headers at each table and then pick the one you were interested in,” says Diane B. Ludwing, CFRE, senior professionals chair of the AFP St. Louis Regional Chapter. “There would be between 15 and 20 topics, and that would be the meeting for the day. We had been doing that for a few years, and we decided we needed to do something different.”

St. Louis covers a large geographical area, and it is not easy to get from one side of town to the other to attend meetings. Ludwing and others asked seasoned fundraisers for feedback. The result? The senior professionals “around town” round tables. Rather than having one meeting in a central location, they decided to decentralize meetings and to:

• hold short 45-minute learning sessions in various parts of town
• engage senior professionals (those with at least 15 years of experience) in sharing their expertise
• discuss current books, articles and topics relevant to fundraising and nonprofit management outside the regular monthly program format
• provide networking opportunities

Senior professionals can hold a variety of sessions in their part of town; they can read a current fundraising book and have a book review session, read and discuss a current fundraising article or white paper or pick a popular fundraising topic from those identified by chapter members and hold a session—whatever they want. The senior professionals committee chair and the education committee chair approve and track the session topics, and CFRE credits must be applied for in advance.

Experienced fundraisers are very enthusiastic about the around town round tables and delighted that they can pick the topics. Initially, the plan is to hold two or three sessions each month in various area locations. If chapter members (the sessions are open to AFP members only and are free of charge) wish to attend a session, they simply RSVP directly to the speaker.

The first session on “Annual Fund Tips of the Trade: Five Documents and 10 Websites to Make Your Work Easier,” was held May 6 at a local coffee shop. At press time, the next session, on “Major Gifts and the Donor—Getting Everyone Ready,” was scheduled for the afternoon of May 18 at an agency’s conference room, and the third session was scheduled for the morning of June 8 at a restaurant, with a book discussion of The Story Factor by Annette Simmons.