



GSA Network's first paid development staff person, Jackie Downing (far left), stands with GSA Network youth board members at their 10th Anniversary celebration (that's apple cider in the youth's glasses!).

The GSA Network Experience

Steps to Hiring a First Development Staff Member

by Ruth Herring

IN 1998, CAROLYN LAUB founded the Gay-Straight Alliance Network (GSA Network) in San Francisco. Its goal was to empower lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) and straight student activists to fight homophobia and transphobia in middle schools and high schools. Since then, thanks to GSA Network, the number of GSA clubs in California middle schools and high schools has grown from 40 to more than 775, and the Network has trained and empowered more than 10,000 student activists and won pioneering laws to protect all students from harassment and discrimination at school. As a respected leader

in the national safe schools movement, GSA Network created and now coordinates a network of 26 statewide organizations dedicated to empowering youth to create GSA clubs. GSA Network now has ten staff members and a budget of \$850,000.

As the long-term fundraising consultant to GSA Network, I worked closely with Carolyn, now executive director, to lay the fundraising groundwork at the organization and to hire its first Development and Communications Manager in 2008. This article describes how the organization expanded to include a staff person devoted to fundraising.

Two Years of Preparation

The decision to create the first staff position devoted completely to fundraising grew out of a larger organizational commitment to capacity building. In its first eight years, GSA Network relied on foundations as its primary funding source. As the network matured and programs expanded, Carolyn and the board of directors—made up of high-school-aged GSA club leaders and adults—recognized that they must expand their fundraising by building a constituency of individual donors.

They mapped out a multi-year process that became the basis for a funding proposal. As part of a larger capacity building grant that included funds for program, the California Endowment awarded GSA Network \$48,000 over two years to put in place the communications and fundraising building blocks for their individual donor program.

Carolyn notes: “We decided to invest first in strengthening my skills in individual fundraising rather than creating a new staff position. I was confident in my foundation fundraising skills, but I knew the board and I had a lot to learn about individual donor fundraising and communications. So I hired expert consultants to help with both the communications and the fundraising aspects. Our communications, design, and branding consultants helped us communicate our mission and niche in the social justice, safe schools, and LGBT movements and create professional, compelling, and engaging materials that would inspire support. When it came to fundraising consultants, I wanted to hire someone with a track record of building individual fundraising capacity in LGBT movement organizations.”

Carolyn understood from the beginning of our consulting relationship that excellent individual fundraising starts at the top, with the executive director and the board chair. From 2006 to 2008 we worked on development strategy and planning, direct mail, email marketing, newsletters, special events, and a sustainer program, created a board development committee, and strengthened the partnership between Carolyn and the board chair.

Carolyn and the board chair stepped into their roles as major gifts solicitors and strengthened the culture of fundraising and giving on the board. They worked together to nurture a group of donors who gave \$500 to \$5,000 and to support other board members in their fundraising. These two years of consulting were an organizational investment of about \$36,000.

Creating and Structuring the New Position

By mid-2008, the organization was ready to hire its first development staff person. Carolyn explains: “GSA Network

was celebrating its 10th Anniversary, and our programs were well known. We had lost a large grant very suddenly, which forced us to cut staff. This was a scary reminder of the risks of over-reliance on foundation funding. I had learned what was required of me and of the organization to continue to develop our individual donor fundraising. We had laid the groundwork, and the board and I were in agreement that it was the right time to hire. In the 2008-09 budget process, we worked out how much we could afford to pay, which helped me frame my thinking about how I might structure the job. I consulted the wage and benefits survey for organizations of our budget size in the Bay Area to get an idea of what kinds of positions were within the salary range we could afford.”

Carolyn’s next step was to meet with other staff to get their input and ideas and to share hers. GSA Network had recently developed its long-term strategic direction, and staff discussed how their new colleague could help advance that vision and how this person might relate to them and their work. Informed by staff ideas, Carolyn decided that the organization needed a Development and Communications Manager.

“Even if we could have afforded a director-level person, I would not have hired one,” says Carolyn. “I was looking for someone with the aspirations to develop their own skills and fundraising leadership. I wanted a generalist with several years of individual fundraising experience, passion for our mission, and the maturity to manage up. Hiring an excellent writer was a bottom-line requirement; in my experience, good writing is not something you can learn on the job, and I needed a skilled writer I could depend on. I wanted someone who had at least some background in program work, but who did not want to do program work. I did not want to fall into the trap of silos—program work over here and development/communications work over there—so I hoped to find a person with the skills and experience to bridge those aspects of organizational life. I also needed someone to support me in doing my parts of the individual fundraising work.”

Thanks to a three-year award from the Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund’s Flexible Leadership Awards program, GSA Network was deeply engaged in building its capacity as a leader in the national social justice, LGBT, and safe schools movements at that time. Central to this effort was a focus on building strong and effective individual staff leaders and leadership teams.

Carolyn wanted to structure the Communications and Development Manager job to make it one that would grow in leadership responsibilities and encourage someone to stay with GSA Network for many years. This goal, along with creating a smooth transition, raised several important questions:

Advertising the Position

CANDIDATES LOOK for strong organizations, executive directors who embrace their fundraising responsibilities, specific indicators of fundraising accomplishments, opportunities for leadership and career advancement, clear minimum requirements to apply, and a fair salary and benefits. We highlighted all of these in our brief and longer listings.

The 50-word listing:

Gay-Straight Alliance Network seeks Development & Communications Manager to build existing individual fundraising and communications programs in partnership with fundraising-savvy Executive Director. Pioneering leader in LGBT safe schools movement for 10 years, \$850,000 budget, individual giving \$110,000, diverse fundraising activities, growing board.

Full description/application info: gsanetwork.org.

Key parts of the job description:

GSA Network seeks a candidate with 3-5 years of experience who is eager to help us build our individual donor and communication programs to help position the organization for its second decade of growth and success. This will be our first Development/Communications staff position and will work very closely with Executive Director Carolyn Laub, who will continue to serve as the agency's chief fundraiser and spokesperson. Carolyn, with the participation of the

board and the assistance of a fundraising consultant, has built an individual fundraising program that raised \$110,000 in 2007 from 387 donors through direct mail, e-mail, a monthly sustainer program, small events, and face-to-face solicitations for major gifts of \$1,000 and above....

We seek a candidate who is eager to play a leadership role, partnering with the Executive Director, in building GSA Network's individual fundraising and communications capacity for the long-term benefit of LGBT youth and their allies in schools across the United States.

Minimum qualifications included:

At least 3 years of experience in a nonprofit development office with an individual donor program, demonstrated writing and organizational skills and experience, and demonstrated commitment to social justice, anti-oppression work, and LGBTQ rights.

The complete text of the Compensation and Benefits section:

Full-time, exempt position reporting to the Executive Director, salary commensurate with experience, excellent vacation and medical, dental, vision, and retirement benefits, mentoring by experienced fundraising consultants, professional development training opportunities, and opportunity for advancement.

The application required a cover letter, resume, and two brief donor-related writing samples.

- What would the partnership with her new staff member be like for both of them, and how would it differ from the partnership she and I had developed?
- How would Carolyn share leadership in fundraising and communications when she had been accustomed to doing all these tasks herself for so many years?
- Even though the new person would not be director level, what authority would she have?
- How would Carolyn ensure that the new manager would be able to grow as a leader, and what was her own role in nurturing that leadership?
- What kinds of learning opportunities, support and leadership development would the new person need in order to succeed?
- How would they both get the advice they might need in the coming years?
- How would the new person juggle both the fundraising and the communications aspects of the job?
- Since the new person would have a key role in supporting

board members in their fundraising, what qualities and skills were most important?

- Knowing that she could not expect the new person to “do it all,” what did Carolyn see as the top priorities for the first year, and were her expectations reasonable?

Carolyn grappled with all these questions—consulting with her board chair, her leadership consultant, and me—before we drafted the job description.

In writing the job listing and job description, we imagined what the ideal applicants would be looking for and how we could speak to their needs and aspirations. To reach job seekers interested in small, social justice LGBT organizations, Carolyn advertised on Craigslist, Idealist, the Foundation Center Philanthropy News Digest, and on LGBT job boards. Thirty people applied. (See the listing and key elements of the job description above.)

The job itself, and the announcement and description, were very appealing to Jackie Downing, who eventually was hired for the position. Says Jackie, “I wasn’t even looking for a job, but

when I happened to see the ad I knew I could not pass up this opportunity. I founded the GSA club at my high school and I have always dreamed of working at GSA Network. I was happy that the job was a combination of individual fundraising and communications, which was a perfect match for my skills and experience. I recognized that this would be a move that would give me a chance to pursue a career as a fundraising leader. I was attracted to GSA Network's strong emphasis on leadership, and I could see that they were very serious about developing effective teams."

Preparing for and Conducting the Interviews

Carolyn, two program staff members, and I reviewed the applicant resumes and developed interview questions designed to elicit information not only about candidates' skills and experience, but also about values, the ability to tell a compelling story and ask smart questions, the ability to connect with a variety of people, and interest in both leading and learning. Carolyn conducted an initial 20-minute telephone screening with 10 of the 30 applicants, then she and two staff members conducted first-round interviews of four applicants, and I joined them for interviews of the two final candidates. Carolyn checked Jackie Downing's references before she made the job offer. Through this collaborative process, Carolyn and her staff deepened their understanding of each other's perspectives and experiences in their various roles at GSA Network.

Carolyn notes, "It was not difficult to decide whom to move forward from telephone screenings to the interview stage. If someone had fundraising and communications skills we were looking for, but our mission and values didn't resonate with them, or they didn't seem to understand how to talk about LGBT issues in a social justice framework, they didn't move forward. If they were passionate about our mission but didn't have the solid fundraising skills and experience we needed, they didn't move forward. There were strong indicators that the candidates we interviewed could do the job and that they understood and could promote GSA Network's mission around youth empowerment and social justice organizing."

The process also made an impression on Jackie, who noted that both the first conversation and the interviews were crucial in helping her decide that this position was a good match for her. "In my first exploratory conversation with Carolyn we talked mostly about GSA Network's commitment to anti-oppression work and youth empowerment. I could see that these were not just words on paper, but deep organizational commitments they had embraced and worked on since the beginning. For me, these are core values. In the interviews people were

really friendly, and it was clear they were passionate about the work. That impressed me," she says.

The Next Stage

In the fall of 2008 my role changed from development consultant to GSA Network to coach for the new staff person. "It was very important that I would have consulting and coaching from outside experts," says Jackie. "I was confident that if I didn't know something I would have the support to learn it." She is also receiving support through the consultants provided to her and the management team through the Haas Flexible Leadership Awards program. Jackie regularly discusses issues with peers at other small nonprofit organizations, attends workshops, and reads articles in professional journals, including the *Grassroots Fundraising Journal*.

What Matters Most to Fundraising Staff

When considering hiring your first development staff person, keep in mind the following principles, which are what matter most to fundraising staff:

- Structure the position to advance the mission and the organization's strategic direction
- In the search, communicate the benefits to applicants, not only the needs of the organization
- The executive director is your organization's chief staff fundraiser
- The executive director can and must learn how to fundraise from individuals
- The executive director-development staff leader team is core to fundraising success: developing this team requires time, energy and honest communication
- The executive director must give the development staff person real authority and support the person's leadership
- Demonstrate to program staff that fundraisers are their partners in advancing the mission and serving constituents
- Be clear about what is most important: don't expect someone to "do it all"
- Build in advice and support from professionals

We all continue to learn from each other's stories. If you are thinking of hiring your first development staff person, I urge you to speak to colleagues, to ask questions, and to listen. ■

Ruth Herring is a fundraising consultant and coach. She has held a variety of development positions, including major gifts officer and development director. She can be reached at ruthemilyh@earthlink.net.