

Elevating advancement marketing and communications: A strategic imperative for higher education institutions

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Abstract

Advancement Marketing & Communications (Advancement MarComm) is often undervalued in higher education institutions, despite playing an increasingly critical role in donor engagement, institutional reputation and long-term philanthropic success. With financial pressures increasing across the sector, institutions must transition Advancement MarComm from a reactive service function to a proactive driver of engagement and revenue generation. This paper explores the misalignment between Advancement MarComm and institutional fundraising strategy, outlines the challenges that prevent institutions from leveraging these functions effectively and provides a structured roadmap for repositioning Advancement MarComm as a strategic function. Using data-backed insights, real and illustrative case studies and an implementation framework, this paper demonstrates how institutions can maximise the impact of Advancement MarComm to build stronger donor relationships and ensure

*long-term financial sustainability. This article is also included in **The Business & Management Collection** which can be accessed at <https://hstalks.com/business/>.*

Keywords

advancement marketing and communications, Advancement MarComm, donor engagement, philanthropy, fundraising strategy, marketing integration, campaign planning

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INTRODUCTION: THE URGENCY OF REPOSITIONING ADVANCEMENT MARCOMM

The financial reality facing higher education

Higher education institutions are confronting an era of unprecedented financial challenges. By 2025–6, 72 per cent of universities are projected to face a budget deficit.¹ At the same time, philanthropy is shifting, with donor participation declining and institutions becoming increasingly dependent on fewer high-net-worth donors.

Institutions that fail to modernise their donor engagement strategies risk financial instability and weakened philanthropic pipelines:

- Alumni participation has declined nearly 50 per cent over the past two decades, even as overall charitable giving has grown.²
- Only 18.5 per cent of first-time donors renew their gifts, signalling widespread deficiencies in donor engagement and stewardship.³
- Education's share of total philanthropic giving has dropped from 32 per cent in 2015 to under 24 per cent in 2022.⁴

This financial reality highlights an urgent need for institutions to rethink their approach to donor engagement and ensure that Advancement Marketing &

Communications (Advancement MarComm) is positioned as a strategic driver of philanthropy.

The overlooked strategic role of Advancement MarComm

Despite its direct impact on donor engagement, fundraising and institutional reputation, Advancement MarComm remains underfunded, underutilised and siloed in many institutions. While leaders acknowledge the importance of branding and alumni engagement, the teams responsible for these efforts are often excluded from fundraising strategy discussions and campaign planning.

This misalignment has serious consequences as follows:

- Fragmented donor messaging weakens campaign effectiveness and alumni engagement.
- Siloed operations between Advancement and Central MarComm lead to missed opportunities and inconsistent storytelling.
- Transactional donor outreach fails to cultivate long-term philanthropic relationships.

For philanthropy to become a sustainable revenue stream, institutions must elevate Advancement MarComm from a reactive support function to a proactive, revenue-driving team that plays a central role in donor engagement strategy.

Case study: A US\$10m proof point

At Drexel University, the Advancement MarComm team played a pivotal role in securing a US\$10m gift to establish a new real estate institute within the College of Business. The team was fully integrated into institutional and donor strategy, ensuring that engagement efforts were personalised and aligned with the donor's philanthropic priorities — far beyond simply providing marketing materials for gift officers.

Key strategic elements that contributed to the gift's success are as follows:

- Highly tailored donor proposals that demonstrated how the institute would fulfil the donor's philanthropic priorities.
- A compelling storytelling framework that positioned the real estate institute as a unique, transformational initiative for the business community.
- A strategic engagement plan that reinforced key messages across multiple channels to sustain donor interest.

This was not just marketing execution — it was a strategic, data-driven donor engagement approach that played a direct role in securing a transformational gift.

The need for a new approach

This example illustrates why Advancement MarComm must be repositioned as a central component of fundraising strategy rather than a tactical service provider. As institutions navigate financial uncertainty, those that integrate and leverage Advancement MarComm into donor engagement strategy will be better positioned to build stronger donor relationships, increase giving

participation and ensure long-term philanthropic success.

THE CASE FOR ELEVATING ADVANCEMENT MARCOMM

Higher education financial landscape demands a strategic shift

Philanthropy has always played a crucial role in institutional financial stability, but its significance is expanding as other revenue sources decline. The traditional model of tuition-driven revenue is under pressure, forcing institutions to rethink their donor engagement and fundraising strategies.

Institutions that continue to rely on outdated fundraising and engagement models will struggle to remain competitive. Key indicators highlight this urgency as follows:

- Alumni participation rates have declined nearly 50 per cent over the past 20 years, making it harder for institutions to cultivate long-term donor relationships.⁵
- Major gifts are increasingly concentrated among fewer donors, creating greater vulnerability to economic fluctuations and donor attrition.⁶
- Philanthropic support for higher education has decreased as a percentage of total USA giving, requiring institutions to work harder to compete for donor dollars.⁷

Yet, despite these shifts, many institutions still fail to align Advancement MarComm with their overall fundraising strategy, treating donor engagement as an operational function rather than a strategic revenue driver.

Advancement MarComm as a revenue driver, not a cost centre

When Advancement MarComm is positioned as a strategic asset rather than a service provider, institutions see measurable improvements in fundraising outcomes.

Institutions that prioritise data-driven storytelling, personalised donor engagement and integrated fundraising communications experience:

- Higher donor retention rates, as tailored engagement strategies foster sustained philanthropic relationships.
- Increased major and planned gifts, with targeted donor engagement improving the quality of philanthropic pipelines.
- More successful capital and comprehensive campaigns, where cohesive, strategic messaging ensures donor alignment with institutional priorities.

Illustrative example: A university's failed capital campaign

A regional university launched a US\$250m comprehensive campaign, but Advancement MarComm was excluded from early-stage planning. As a result:

- Campaign messaging was not aligned with broader institutional goals, leading to weak donor resonance.
- Donor engagement strategies were siloed, preventing a unified outreach approach.
- Fundraising materials lacked an emotional connection, leading to subpar participation rates.

After restructuring Advancement MarComm's role, the university saw a

25 per cent increase in major gift commitments in the final campaign phase, proving that donor engagement strategy must be embedded from the outset.

The role of AI, data and digital engagement

The rise of AI-driven donor segmentation, behavioural analytics and personalised engagement strategies is transforming the way institutions build long-term donor relationships. Recent reporting by *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* confirms that institutions across higher education are increasingly experimenting with AI tools to combat donor fatigue and improve engagement efficiency.⁸

Institutions leveraging AI-powered donor engagement tools report:

- Thirty-five per cent higher donor retention rates due to hyper-personalised outreach strategies.⁹
- A 20 per cent growth in mid-level donor giving, as predictive analytics optimise upgrade opportunities.¹⁰
- More efficient fundraising teams, as automation tools free staff to focus on relationship-building rather than administrative tasks.

Illustrative example: AI-driven donor engagement success

A large public university integrated AI-powered predictive modelling into its annual giving programme. By analysing donor behaviour trends, the institution was able to:

- Identify lapsed donors with high engagement potential and deploy targeted re-engagement campaigns.

- Automate stewardship touchpoints, ensuring that donors receive customised impact reports based on past giving patterns.
- Optimise outreach frequency based on donor responsiveness, reducing message fatigue.

The result was a 17 per cent increase in donor reactivation rates and a 12 per cent rise in mid-level giving, demonstrating that AI can enhance — not replace — relationship-driven philanthropy.

Key takeaway: Elevating Advancement MarComm is a competitive advantage

Institutions that fail to integrate Advancement MarComm into fundraising strategy will struggle to retain donors, secure major gifts and execute high-impact campaigns. Conversely, those that treat MarComm as a revenue-generating function will strengthen alumni and donor relationships, improve fundraising outcomes and build long-term philanthropic success.

SHIFTING FROM REACTIVE TO PROACTIVE: HOW ADVANCEMENT MARCOMM CAN LEAD

The reactive versus proactive model

Historically, Advancement MarComm has been positioned as a service provider,

responding to requests rather than shaping donor engagement strategy. This misalignment has prevented institutions from maximising their philanthropic potential. To truly drive engagement, increase donor retention and amplify fundraising outcomes, institutions must transition Advancement MarComm from a reactive function to a proactive leadership role. Table 1 provides a comparison of these reactive and proactive models, illustrating key differences in their strategic approach and impact.

A proactive Advancement MarComm function ensures that donor engagement efforts are strategically aligned with institutional priorities, fostering donor loyalty, increasing participation and strengthening long-term philanthropy.

From execution to influence: Key leadership shifts

For Advancement MarComm to evolve into a strategic growth driver, institutional leaders must embrace several fundamental shifts in how these teams operate as follows:

- *Integrating MarComm early in fundraising strategy:* Advancement MarComm must be embedded in campaign strategy from the outset, ensuring that donor engagement efforts are aligned with fundraising priorities rather than treated as an afterthought.
- *Prioritising engagement over content production:* Success should be measured not

TABLE 1: Comparison of reactive versus proactive Advancement MarComm models.

<i>Reactive (Service Provider)</i>	<i>Proactive (Strategic Partner)</i>
Responds to content requests	Shapes donor engagement strategy
Produces materials without strategic oversight	Develops content with fundraising objectives in mind
Measures vanity metrics (e-mail opens, likes)	Tracks donor conversion and retention rates
Works in isolation from fundraising teams	Embedded in campaign planning and donor strategy discussions

by the volume of marketing materials produced but by how storytelling and engagement efforts drive donor retention and giving increases.

- *Leveraging AI and data for personalisation:* Institutions can enhance engagement by using AI-driven donor segmentation, behavioural analytics and predictive modelling to craft personalised donor experiences.

Illustrative case study: Transforming donor engagement through Strategic MarComm

A mid-sized public university was struggling with donor attrition and low participation in its annual giving campaign. Advancement MarComm was historically treated as a content production team, producing materials on request rather than actively shaping fundraising strategy. Without a clear role in donor engagement planning, its efforts had little strategic alignment with fundraising objectives, leading to underwhelming campaign performance.

Challenges faced

Several structural and operational barriers hindered the effectiveness of Advancement MarComm's efforts:

- *Late-stage involvement:* The team was engaged only after campaign goals were set, limiting its ability to influence donor messaging or strategy.
- *Lack of segmentation and personalisation:* Messaging was generic and broad, failing to engage different donor segments in meaningful ways.
- *Misaligned success metrics:* The team's performance was evaluated based on

content volume rather than measurable fundraising impact, reinforcing a transactional, output-driven approach instead of an engagement-focused approach.

Without strategic integration, the university's annual giving efforts failed to generate sustained donor interest or effectively nurture alumni into long-term contributors.

Strategic shifts implemented

To address these challenges, the university repositioned Advancement MarComm as a proactive driver of donor engagement strategy, implementing the following key changes:

- *Early-stage fundraising integration:* Advancement MarComm was embedded in campaign planning from the outset, ensuring that messaging and engagement strategies were designed to align with donor motivations.
- *AI-driven segmentation and behavioural analytics:* The team leveraged predictive analytics to segment donors based on giving history, engagement patterns and likelihood to give, enabling more targeted and personalised outreach.
- *Impact-driven stewardship communications:* Instead of sending broad updates, the team developed customised donor impact reports and personalised follow-ups, reinforcing the significance of each donor's contribution and encouraging sustained giving.

Within two years, the university saw measurable improvements in its donor engagement and retention efforts:

- A 14 per cent increase in donor retention rates, demonstrating stronger long-term donor relationships.
- Higher participation rates in targeted annual giving segments, as personalised outreach resonated more effectively with specific donor groups.
- Advancement MarComm evolved into a core strategic function, contributing to donor engagement strategy rather than simply executing content requests.

This transformation highlights the value of integrating Advancement MarComm into campaign planning rather than treating it as a downstream function. By shifting from a reactive content producer to a proactive engagement strategist, the university strengthened its donor pipeline, improved fundraising outcomes and established a more sustainable philanthropic model.

The role of AI- and data-driven donor engagement

AI-driven engagement tools are revolutionising how institutions approach donor engagement. By analysing donor behaviour and engagement history, institutions can optimise outreach, messaging and stewardship communications to maximise fundraising results.

Key AI applications in Advancement MarComm

- *Predictive analytics for donor segmentation:* AI identifies high-propensity donors, allowing for more strategic engagement.
- *Automated stewardship and impact reporting:* AI-driven personalisation enables institutions to deliver customised impact updates and donor recognition.

- *Data-driven fundraising decisions:* AI helps teams track which engagement strategies correlate with increased donor participation and gift upgrades.

Illustrative example: AI-powered engagement at a Research Institution

A large research university implemented an AI-powered donor engagement strategy to improve re-engagement efforts among lapsed donors, which are as follows:

- Segmented lapsed donors based on past interactions, allowing for highly targeted outreach.
- Deployed dynamic e-mail campaigns with customised messaging based on past giving history.
- Used machine learning models to predict which donors were most likely to increase their giving.

Outcome

- A 17 per cent increase in donor re-engagement rates.
- A 12 per cent rise in mid-level giving within one fiscal year.

This example demonstrates how AI enables institutions to scale donor outreach while maintaining the personalisation essential to relationship-driven philanthropy.

Measuring the impact of a proactive Advancement MarComm function

To maintain leadership buy-in and secure long-term investment, Advancement

MarComm teams must track and report on the metrics that matter most to institutional decision makers. CASE benchmarking data reinforces this shift, highlighting that institutions tracking donor conversion rates, retention and pipeline influence outperform those focused solely on volume-based outputs.¹¹ Table 2 highlights the key differences between traditional metrics and the more strategic, high-impact metrics essential for demonstrating Advancement MarComm's true value.

By focusing on meaningful key performance indicators (KPIs), institutions can demonstrate that Advancement MarComm is not just about brand visibility — it is a critical driver of donor retention and philanthropic outcomes.

Key takeaway: Advancement MarComm is essential for fundraising success

Institutions that continue to treat Advancement MarComm as a reactive function will struggle to build strong donor relationships, secure major gifts and execute high-impact campaigns. Conversely, those that elevate MarComm as a strategic revenue-generating function will see:

- Stronger donor engagement and retention rates.
- More successful fundraising campaigns with aligned messaging.

- Greater collaboration between fundraising teams and marketing leaders.

By embedding Advancement MarComm in fundraising strategy, donor engagement planning and campaign execution, institutions can unlock greater philanthropic potential and long-term financial sustainability.

OVERCOMING INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS TO ADVANCEMENT MARCOMM SUCCESS

Even when institutions recognise the need to elevate Advancement MarComm, organisational barriers often prevent it from reaching its full potential. These barriers include siloed operations, lack of leadership buy-in, outdated success metrics and insufficient investment. Overcoming these challenges requires structural, cultural and strategic shifts that reposition Advancement MarComm as a core driver of institutional success.

Breaking silos between Advancement and Central MarComm

One of the biggest barriers to effective Advancement MarComm is institutional silos. At many universities, Advancement and Central MarComm operate separately, with little collaboration on donor messaging, engagement strategies and institutional storytelling. This separation

TABLE 2: Traditional versus strategic metrics for Advancement MarComm effectiveness.

<i>Traditional Metrics (Less Effective)</i>	<i>Strategic Metrics (High Impact)</i>
E-mail open rates, social media likes	Donor engagement-to-giving conversion rates
Number of marketing materials produced	Major gift pipeline influence
Event attendance	Donor retention and gift upgrades over time

creates inconsistent donor experiences, diluted messaging and duplicated efforts.

Common consequences of a siloed approach

- Conflicting donor messaging between Central MarComm and Advancement results in alumni and donors receiving incoherent narratives about institutional priorities.
- Duplication of efforts leads to wasted resources, as Advancement teams often create separate engagement strategies that are not aligned with broader institutional branding.
- Missed opportunities to leverage the university's full storytelling power in philanthropic efforts, weakening donor trust and campaign effectiveness.

Illustrative example: A university's disconnected campaign messaging

A large public university launched a US\$500m capital campaign but failed to involve Central MarComm in the planning process. While Advancement focused on fundraising appeals and donor messaging, Central MarComm was prioritising branding, admissions marketing, and faculty achievements. As a result:

- Alumni and donors rarely saw campaign-related content on institutional channels.
- The campaign struggled to gain broad engagement, despite strong individual outreach efforts from Advancement.
- The institution missed an opportunity to integrate campaign messaging into larger institutional narratives.

Solution: Institutions that break down silos between Advancement and Central MarComm see stronger donor engagement and increased alignment between institutional reputation-building and philanthropy.

How to foster stronger collaboration

- Develop a shared engagement framework that aligns donor messaging with broader institutional priorities.
- Establish structured cross-functional collaboration, ensuring that Advancement MarComm and Central MarComm meet regularly to coordinate messaging.
- Create joint performance metrics that measure the effectiveness of donor engagement efforts in tandem with broader institutional communication goals.

Securing leadership buy-in for Advancement MarComm

Even when Advancement MarComm professionals understand the need for a more strategic role, institutional leadership often fails to recognise its full value. This results in underfunding, exclusion from high-level decision making and a lack of strategic influence in campaign planning.

Why leadership buy-in is a barrier

- Advancement MarComm is often seen as a support function, rather than a core component of revenue generation.
- Budget allocations favour Admissions and Central MarComm, leaving donor engagement efforts underfunded despite their direct impact on philanthropy.

- Metrics are outdated, with many leaders still measuring success based on volume of communications rather than donor retention and giving outcomes.

How to secure leadership buy-in

1. Reframe Advancement MarComm as a revenue driver
 - Present data showing how stronger donor engagement correlates with increased giving levels and donor retention.
 - Quantify the financial risk of disengaged donors — how much is lost when donor relationships are not nurtured properly?
2. Find internal champions
 - Identify key executive sponsors (such as the VP of Advancement or influential deans) who understand the strategic role of Advancement MarComm.
 - Use these champions to advocate for better integration of MarComm into institutional decision making.
3. Align messaging with institutional priorities
 - Position Advancement MarComm investment as an essential component of institutional brand, reputation management and revenue generation.
 - Showcase case studies of institutions that have successfully restructured their donor engagement strategies by elevating MarComm's strategic influence.

Overcoming internal resistance to change

Many institutions resist change due to entrenched practices and departmental

traditions. Advancement MarComm professionals may face internal opposition when advocating for greater strategic influence. Common resistance includes:

- 'We have always done it this way' mindset, where leadership is reluctant to change communication practices.
- Fear of resource reallocation, as departments worry that integrating MarComm into fundraising will take resources away from existing initiatives.
- A lack of clarity on roles, leading to tension between Central MarComm and Advancement on ownership of donor communications.

Strategies for overcoming internal resistance

- Provide data-driven justification for change, demonstrating the direct impact of Advancement MarComm on donor retention and giving outcomes.
- Pilot new engagement models in smaller initiatives before full-scale implementation, building internal confidence in MarComm's expanded role.
- Communicate the benefits of collaboration, emphasising how a unified approach to storytelling strengthens the institution's overall philanthropic success.

Key takeaway: Institutions must remove barriers to unlock Advancement MarComm's full potential

Institutions that fail to address these organisational barriers will continue to struggle with:

- Fragmented donor communications that limit engagement.

- A lack of strategic alignment between fundraising, donor outreach and institutional messaging.
- Limited investment in high-impact donor engagement strategies.

Conversely, institutions that break down silos, secure leadership buy-in and overcome internal resistance will position Advancement MarComm as a key driver of philanthropy, donor engagement and institutional reputation.

IMPLEMENTATION ROADMAP FOR ELEVATING ADVANCEMENT MARCOMM

Successfully elevating Advancement MarComm requires a structured, phased approach that ensures alignment with institutional priorities while addressing key organisational barriers. Institutions must move beyond reactive tactics and adopt a strategic framework that transforms donor engagement into a sustainable driver of philanthropy and institutional growth.

This roadmap outlines five key steps institutions can take to reposition Advancement MarComm as a proactive, revenue-driving function.

Conducting an institutional audit: Understanding the current state

Before implementing changes, institutions must assess how Advancement MarComm currently functions and where gaps exist.

Key questions for self-assessment

- *Strategic alignment:* Is Advancement MarComm involved in early-stage

- fundraising strategy discussions, or is it engaged only after decisions are made?
- *Collaboration:* How well does Advancement MarComm integrate with Central MarComm, Development and Institutional Leadership?
- *Resources and staffing:* Does the team have the right talent, budget and technology to execute personalised, multichannel engagement?
- *Metrics and impact tracking:* Is success measured by engagement-to-giving conversion, donor retention and campaign influence, or just content production outputs?

Action steps

- Conduct an internal listening tour, gathering feedback from fundraisers, institutional leaders and key stakeholders to identify strengths and areas for improvement.
- Benchmark institutional MarComm practices against peer institutions with high-performing donor engagement programmes.
- Identify critical weaknesses that may be preventing MarComm from functioning as a strategic driver of philanthropy.

Securing leadership buy-in: Making the case for Advancement MarComm

For Advancement MarComm to have a strategic seat at the table, institutional leadership must recognise its direct impact on fundraising and donor retention.

How to build a compelling case for investment

- Frame MarComm as a revenue-generating function rather than a cost centre.

- Present donor engagement data that demonstrates how targeted storytelling and engagement increase giving levels and long-term donor loyalty.
- Quantify the financial risk of disengaged donors, showcasing the revenue loss associated with weak retention strategies.

Illustrative example: A university's business case for MarComm investment

A private university facing stagnant donor retention rates successfully advocated for a 30 per cent increase in Advancement MarComm funding by:

- Demonstrating that institutions with strong donor engagement strategies see higher major gift conversion rates.
- Aligning MarComm initiatives with institutional priorities such as campaign readiness and alumni engagement.
- Implementing a phased investment plan for AI-driven donor segmentation tools and storytelling resources.
- Showing direct correlations between donor engagement activities and revenue outcomes.

Aligning with institutional priorities: Integration into fundraising strategy

Advancement MarComm cannot function in isolation from institutional strategy. To maximise effectiveness, its engagement efforts must be fully aligned with fundraising priorities and broader institutional goals.

Action steps for integration

- Ensure donor engagement is built into institutional planning processes, rather than treated as an afterthought.

- Develop a unified messaging strategy that ties donor storytelling to key university initiatives.
- Collaborate with academic deans, leadership and alumni relations teams to create a holistic donor engagement approach.
- Establish clear communication pathways between Advancement, Central MarComm and Development to ensure seamless messaging.

Investing in the right talent, technology and processes

For Advancement MarComm to function at the highest level, institutions must invest in skilled personnel, advanced engagement technology and efficient operational structures.

Key investment areas

- *Specialised talent:* Hiring donor engagement strategists, impact storytellers and fundraising content specialists ensures that Advancement MarComm is equipped with the right expertise.
- *AI and predictive analytics:* AI-driven segmentation tools can identify high-propensity donors, optimise engagement strategies and automate personalised outreach.
- *CRM and digital engagement platforms:* A modern CRM system should integrate donor data, engagement history and predictive analytics to enhance fundraising efficiency.
- *Cross-training between Advancement and Central MarComm:* Strengthening interdepartmental collaboration fosters a more integrated engagement strategy.

Illustrative example: A university's strategic hiring plan

A research university recognised that its generic alumni communications were failing to drive giving engagement. By restructuring its Advancement MarComm team, the institution:

- Hired a digital engagement strategist to optimise content personalisation.
- Created a donor impact storytelling role to craft mission-driven narratives for campaigns.
- Added a fundraising data analyst to track engagement patterns and optimise outreach strategies.
- Established a cross-functional working group to align donor engagement with broader institutional messaging.

Within two years, the university saw a 22 per cent increase in donor retention rates and stronger campaign participation.

Measuring success: Tracking the right metrics for institutional impact

To sustain leadership buy-in, Advancement MarComm must regularly demonstrate its direct impact on fundraising efforts. As outlined previously in Table 2, institutions should track KPIs that matter.

Action steps for data-driven decision making

- Implement a quarterly donor engagement impact report to assess how MarComm efforts drive fundraising outcomes.
- Track donor engagement trends over multiple years, ensuring that storytelling

and content strategies support long-term giving behaviour.

- Regularly present impact reports to institutional leadership to reinforce the value of MarComm's role in philanthropy.
- Ensure fundraising outcomes are tied to specific engagement strategies, allowing for continuous improvement in donor outreach approaches.

A sustainable, growth-oriented Advancement MarComm model

Institutions that fail to implement this roadmap will continue to struggle with:

- Weak donor retention rates and disengaged alumni networks.
- A lack of strategic integration between fundraising, donor engagement and institutional storytelling.
- Limited institutional investment in high-impact donor engagement strategies.

For higher education institutions to thrive in an era of financial pressure and philanthropic competition, Advancement MarComm must be treated as a core revenue-driving function.

Final recommendations for immediate action

1. Conduct an internal audit to assess Advancement MarComm's alignment with the institutional fundraising strategy.
2. Advocate for increased investment in specialised talent, AI-driven engagement tools and digital infrastructure.

3. Shift measurement practices to track fundraising outcomes rather than content outputs.
4. Ensure that donor engagement strategies are integrated into campaign and leadership planning.

Institutions that take deliberate action now will be positioned for long-term philanthropic success and financial sustainability.

CONCLUSION AND CALL TO ACTION

Higher education at a crossroads

Higher education institutions face mounting financial pressures, shifting donor behaviours and increased competition for philanthropic support. Yet, many still underutilise Advancement MarComm as a strategic function, limiting its potential to drive donor engagement and fundraising success.

This paper has demonstrated why Advancement MarComm must be repositioned as a proactive, revenue-generating function — fully integrated into institutional fundraising strategy rather than confined to a support role. Institutions that fail to act risk donor disengagement, missed philanthropic opportunities and long-term financial instability.

Those that embrace this shift, however, will build stronger donor relationships, more effective fundraising campaigns and a more resilient financial future.

The consequences of inaction

Institutions that continue to treat Advancement MarComm as a passive, service-based function will experience:

- Declining donor retention rates due to ineffective engagement and a lack of personalised outreach.
- Lower campaign performance, as donor messaging remains fragmented and misaligned with institutional priorities.
- Weakened philanthropic pipelines, making long-term fundraising goals harder to achieve.

In contrast, institutions that fully embrace a strategic Advancement MarComm approach will see:

- Higher donor retention and lifetime giving levels.
- More effective major gift cultivation through targeted messaging and engagement.
- A cohesive donor journey that strengthens alumni relationships and institutional reputation.

Final recommendations for institutional leaders

To successfully reposition Advancement MarComm as a strategic growth engine, institutions must commit to the following actions immediately:

1. Integrate Advancement MarComm into institutional leadership
 - Ensure that MarComm professionals participate in high-level campaign and fundraising strategy discussions from the start.
 - Break down silos between Advancement and Central MarComm to create a unified donor engagement approach that supports fundraising goals.
2. Invest in data-driven and AI-powered donor engagement strategies

- Utilise AI-driven segmentation and predictive analytics to improve donor retention and personalise engagement.
 - Implement CRM enhancements that allow for more sophisticated donor tracking and relationship management.
 - Adopt multichannel engagement strategies that leverage behavioural data to drive stronger donor relationships.
3. Shift from measuring content production to measuring fundraising outcomes
- Move beyond traditional vanity metrics (e-mail open rates, social media impressions) and focus on donor engagement-to-giving conversion and donor retention trends.
 - Develop a standardised reporting structure that aligns MarComm performance metrics with institutional fundraising success.
 - Regularly present data-driven impact reports to institutional leadership to demonstrate MarComm's role in revenue generation.
4. Commit to structural and budgetary changes that prioritise Advancement MarComm
- Ensure that Advancement MarComm is resourced to operate as a proactive function rather than a reactive service unit.
 - Invest in specialised donor engagement personnel, content strategists and data analysts who can optimise donor outreach efforts.
 - Align Advancement MarComm's budget and strategic planning with institutional fundraising goals, ensuring long-term sustainability.

The urgency of elevating Advancement MarComm

Advancement MarComm is no longer optional — it is essential. Institutions must move beyond outdated models and commit to strategic engagement that deepens donor relationships, strengthens institutional reputation and drives sustainable fundraising success.

As competition for donor dollars intensifies, universities that elevate Advancement MarComm now will secure their philanthropic future. Those who hesitate risk falling behind in an increasingly competitive landscape.

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