

## Washington & Lee University

Uses Peer Screening to  
Identify Major Gift Prospects



For 23 years, Debra Darling has been conducting prospect research—full-time or on her own as a major gift officer. Currently Director of Prospect Development at Washington & Lee University, Darling has found that the ratio of proactive research (identifying and researching new prospective donors) versus reactive research (developing information on previously identified/known donors and prospects) she chooses to use depends on the stage of a campaign, current fundraising priorities, or maturity of the fundraising program. While she believes that all research shops should be proactive at least 50% of the time, certain stages require a higher degree of activity to ensure campaign success. “When we were at the beginning of our capital campaign, our greatest need was to screen our constituents and identify those most capable of major giving to begin strengthening those relationships. Those electronic screening results, combined with our peer screening and gift officer feedback, was one of the critical components in changing our preliminary campaign goal of \$400-450 million to our current goal of \$500 million. Now that we are in the middle of our campaign, our proactive goal is focused on qualifying prospects so that gift officers are meeting with prospective donors who have the most capacity to give and have the strongest relationship to W&L. This work also has fed our discovery process among newer and/or younger alumni,” says Darling.

### Recruitment Strategy

Their proactive research method includes peer screening to identify new prospects with a high capacity to give who haven't yet been approached for a major gift. “To hold true to a multi-pronged approach for prospect identification, peer screening is important. We feel that one-on-one sessions with peer screening volunteers, rather than group sessions, is the best way to get great information, especially given the size of our school. The approach facilitates close relationships among classmates and alumni,” notes Darling.

To identify peer screening volunteers, Washington & Lee targets:

- » Alumni from specific professions with affluence and strong social networks:
  - » Finance professionals
  - » Corporate and philanthropic board members
  - » Attorneys who graduated from their law school
- » Alumni or parents with gift histories and volunteer involvement:
  - » Class agents who have previously been solicited for the annual fund
  - » Reunion committee members

*“Our first six months of peer screening resulted in the identification of 284 completely new prospects with validated gift capacity ratings over \$100,000. We were also able to confirm and/or upgrade known prospects at equally high levels.”*

- Debra Darling,  
Director of Prospect Development,  
Washington & Lee University

From these sources, the research staff has initially identified 500 potential screening volunteers, of which more than 300 participated and another 185 were removed from the list entirely. Of those invited to participate, less than 10 declined. Once screening volunteers agree to be interviewed, she begins a careful coding and tracking process in her donor management system as the volunteers hold tremendous potential both in identifying new donors and in increasing their own contributions to the school. The volunteer's own name is included in their list of people to review and they are asked to rate their own gift capacity.

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- Debra Darling,  
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Darling says, “We see peer screening as a huge cultivation step in the campaign. It reconnects us with people in a way that allows them to be helpful to our school without having to make an outright donation and plants the seed for our campaign message.”

## Interview Approach

Development officers conduct the peer screenings; each lasts approximately one hour and includes a maximum of 400 names. The goal is to get “very good” information on individuals on the list who are close associates of the screener thereby creating a circle of friends. In those cases, they are asked only to suggest gift capacity but often provide additional clues regarding inclination to give and attitude towards philanthropy. For acquaintances, general information is collected on current employment, home address, family relations, friends, etc. The peer review list is generated from:

- » Fellow alumni
  - » Profession (i.e. fellow investment bankers)
  - » Undergraduate/graduate major
  - » Student activities and clubs (fraternity/sororities, athletics, etc.)
  - » Geography of friends and parents, including seasonal addresses
- » Parents of current students
  - » Profession
  - » Geography of alumni, fellow parents and student's friends, including seasonal addresses
  - » Fellow students from their child's high school who have or are attending Washington & Lee

Post interview, Darling takes the data collected and reviews four separate gift capacity ratings to determine the best rating for each prospect.

The ratings come from:

- » Personal opinion of the peer screening volunteer
- » Knowledge of the prospect by the participating development officer
- » Validation from the prospect research department
- » WealthEngine's wealth and hard asset screening results

"Looking at all four ratings is a powerful tool—there is more confidence and immediacy for action when all are at the same level. I know to dig deeper when there is a variance," says Darling. "While peer screening can be a labor intensive process, the results are impressive when you consider that we found more than 400 new major gift prospects while informing key alumni and parents of the campaign and our goals (and often raising their sights for gifts during the campaign period). During the current phase of our campaign, our peer screenings are focused on the 25th and 50th reunion classes. We conduct peer screenings two years ahead of the actual reunion so that we can better identify reunion committee members, as well as identify alumni with potential so that staff can begin the cultivation well in advance of each reunion. The bottom line is that peer screening gives us better knowledge of our prospects and their capacity, as well as who knows them and is willing to help cultivate and solicit these individuals."