



Advancement Leaders Speak 2020

The pulse of higher education
fundraisers during a challenging year



FUNDRAISING





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ABOUT THE SURVEYS USED IN THIS REPORT

This 2020 *Advancement Leaders Speak* report is compiled from three surveys conducted by RNL.

SURVEY 1: KEY CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIC SHIFTS

238 responses

May–June, 2020

SURVEY 2: FY21 PLANNING AND LESSONS LEARNED

225 responses

July–August, 2020

SURVEY 3: FY21 STRATEGY SHIFTS AND RESOURCES

120 responses

September–October, 2020

RESPONDENT PROFILE

95% HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDRAISERS

53% public institutions

42% private institutions

1/3 VICE PRESIDENTS OR CHIEF ADVANCEMENT OFFICERS

Most common additional titles: Director of Annual Giving, Annual Giving Officer, or Gift Officers.

We released the results of each survey via webinars that included panel commentary by chief advancement officers from a diverse group of institutions, along with blogs and video recordings. To view this expanded content, head to **RuffaloNL.com**.



INTRODUCTION

Inspiring philanthropy in a trying year

2020 will go down as one of the most challenging years ever for fundraising. A serious global pandemic, an important national focus on social justice, a contentious election, and significant ecological emergencies made engaging donors effectively a real challenge.

Amidst the stress, there was also inspiration. We witnessed incredible response from donors to address immediate philanthropic needs. In the first two weeks of setting up student emergency funds on our RNL Crowdfunding platforms, we saw \$2M in instant contributions. This grew to more than \$50M over the course of the year. We saw institutions successfully seek support for social justice and for the crucial needs of students such as food insecurity and mental health. We saw record giving days, annual giving, and comprehensive campaigns amidst political and economic uncertainty. And when we returned to calling donors, we saw call conversation lengths with donors jump by 20 percent. Donors want to be engaged and make an immediate difference.

We normally survey fundraisers every year as part of our *Advancement Leaders Speak* series on key topics in our field. We usually ask about new fundraising tactics, the challenges of gift officers, and emerging technology. We were about to press “send” on our annual ALS survey when the pandemic hit. So we pushed pause on our plan (just like you probably did) and shifted to a series of surveys that could provide instant feedback to the fundraising community every few months. We held webinars and recorded video interviews to add personal perspectives from advancement leaders.

There are several trends that are clear from this year’s ALS surveys.

- Fundraisers had new success in communicating immediate and current needs to donors during this challenging time.
- The shift to digital donor engagement accelerated rapidly this year.
- There is a careful focus on return on investment by fundraisers.

None of these developments were surprising, given the realities of this year’s budgets and donor engagement opportunities

There were some surprises, however. The most common regret from early in the pandemic was pulling back from donor contact, or canceling giving days, and virtually no one reported donor distress at being asked this year. Socially conscious cause-based fundraising was much more common this year—in contrast to the common reticence to engage volatile issues. And many fundraisers embraced the value of remote donor communication, by both gift officers and student engagement ambassadors.

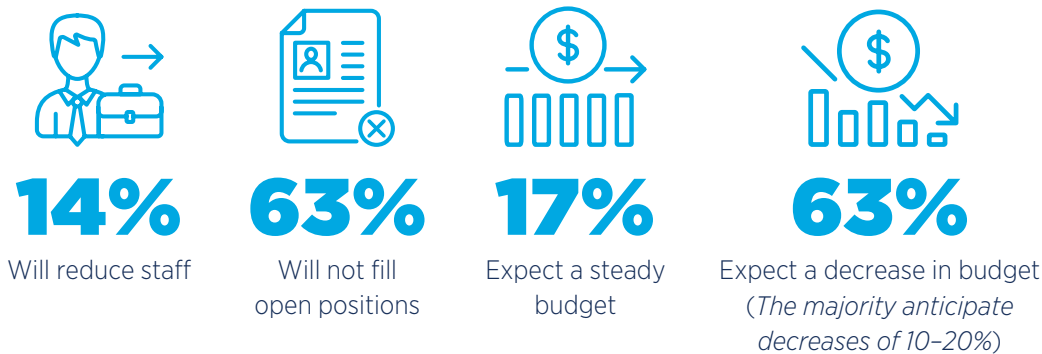
2020 changed donor engagement. Some of the changes, like lack of in-person events and donor contact, will shift back. But the pivot to digital, remote engagement and the focus on causes of passion and immediate needs will stick this coming year and beyond.

Our thanks to everyone who responded to the ALS Pulse surveys this year, especially for all the time you spent providing commentary in open responses. Your engagement helped your peers navigate an incredibly challenging year for donor engagement.

RESOURCES TIGHTEN, GOALS REMAIN HIGH

As the pandemic hit, fundraisers described a situation we were expecting—immediate budget tightness combined with little relief on goals. As campuses wondered what the revenue outlook for tuition, room, and board would look like in an interrupted academic schedule, the need for giving increased. Students faced serious emergency needs including travel home, job loss, and the disruption of family income.

First months of the pandemic: Most institutions predicted tighter staff resources

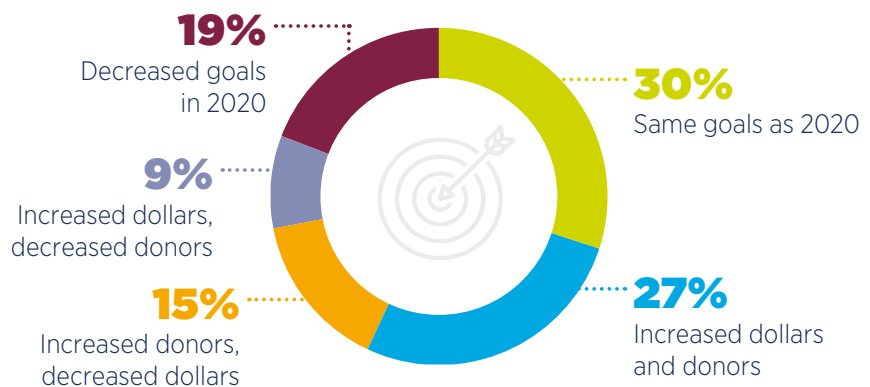


Most institutions saw greater goals

81%

EXPECT THE SAME GOALS OR AT LEAST ONE GOAL INCREASE

Average of responses over three surveys, April 2020 to October 2020. Total responses: 576



WHAT CHANGED OVER THE COURSE OF THE YEAR?

Over the three separate surveys, we found more fundraisers likely to report that budgets were flat and for the concerns about extreme budget cuts to moderate over the course of the year. Over the year, slightly more fundraisers indicated that goals were “steady.” Our conversations with fundraisers tell us that this represents a general crystallization of budgets and outlook as campuses determined fall enrollment.

We also heard that emergency fund solicitation was widely successful, and while fundraisers reported delays in contacting or receiving commitments from leadership and major givers, there was still a strong willingness and eagerness to give at leadership levels.



FUNDRAISERS MAKE A DIGITAL PIVOT

Over the course of 2020 there was an acceleration in the shift to digital tactics, including texting, personalized video, and video calls with donors. When we talked with fundraisers, they expressed concern about both the reliability and flexibility of direct mail—with the rapidly changing national situation, fundraisers wanted to be able to shift messaging quickly. Initially, engagement centers (what we used to call phonathon) were largely disrupted, moving to a remote model by the end of the year.

How do you anticipate adjusting the use of the following engagement channels/tactics in the first part of the 2021 fiscal year?

| TACTIC | WILL REDUCE | WILL MAINTAIN | WILL INCREASE | DO NOT USE |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|---------------|---------------|------------|
| Video meetings with donors | 0% | 4% | 88% | 8% |
| Video greetings | 0% | 7% | 71% | 22% |
| Social media | 1% | 32% | 65% | 2% |
| Texting | 1% | 18% | 46% | 35% |
| Crowdfunding | 3% | 37% | 41% | 20% |
| Digital advertising | 2% | 34% | 37% | 38% |
| Giving day | 2% | 58% | 31% | 9% |
| Volunteer peer solicitation | 4% | 32% | 29% | 35% |
| Direct mail | 20% | 59% | 20% | 2% |
| Phonathon | 33% | 40% | 10% | 17% |
| Face-to-face meetings with donors | 74% | 19% | 6% | 2% |

238 responses to May–June 2020 survey

Advancement Leaders Take Action



Over 7 million texts sent via RNL platforms, with a 99% positive response rate. University at Buffalo secures \$44k in gifts for giving day with texting.



GETTING HELP FROM DATA

We asked fundraisers about their interest in utilizing AI and predictive analytics-driven tools, and also saw an increase in adoption this year. In follow-up conversations, we heard that this was as much about staff resource constraints and the understanding that fundraisers need to “get in the game” with these marketing tools that are used daily in the commercial world.

Have you used any of these tools to amplify your results?

| SOLUTION | CURRENTLY USING | PLAN TO USE | DON'T USE OR PLAN TO |
|--|-----------------|-------------|----------------------|
| Predictive analytics | 41% | 24% | 35% |
| Targeted digital advertising | 31% | 30% | 39% |
| Marketing automation/ triggered campaigns | 13% | 31% | 56% |
| AI-driven personalized communications | 9% | 28% | 64% |

238 responses to May-June 2020 survey

Advancement Leaders Take Action



- Personalized messages outperform general messaging by 20%.
- AI-driven personalization maximizes ROI and is simple to set up.

LET'S TALK DONOR ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Find out more about RNL's data-driven solutions for donor engagement and fundraising. Schedule a quick strategy chat with our experts.

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TACTICS AND MESSAGING CHANGES FOR FY21

As fundraisers moved into the new fiscal year, they told us that they would rely much more heavily on technology, remote engagement, and digital tools.

How will your fall 2021 solicitation plan change in comparison to your initial FY20 plan?

| STRATEGY | INCREASE | STAY THE SAME | DECREASE |
|------------------------------------|----------|---------------|----------|
| Use of remote engagement | 93% | 7% | 1% |
| Use of digital tactics | 84% | 16% | 1% |
| Use of analytics to drive strategy | 63% | 36% | 1% |
| Focus on participation | 62% | 33% | 5% |
| Focus on leadership giving | 57% | 39% | 4% |
| Volume of solicitations | 40% | 48% | 12% |
| Use of volunteers | 33% | 51% | 16% |
| Use of student ambassadors | 24% | 54% | 23% |

225 responses to July–August 2020 survey

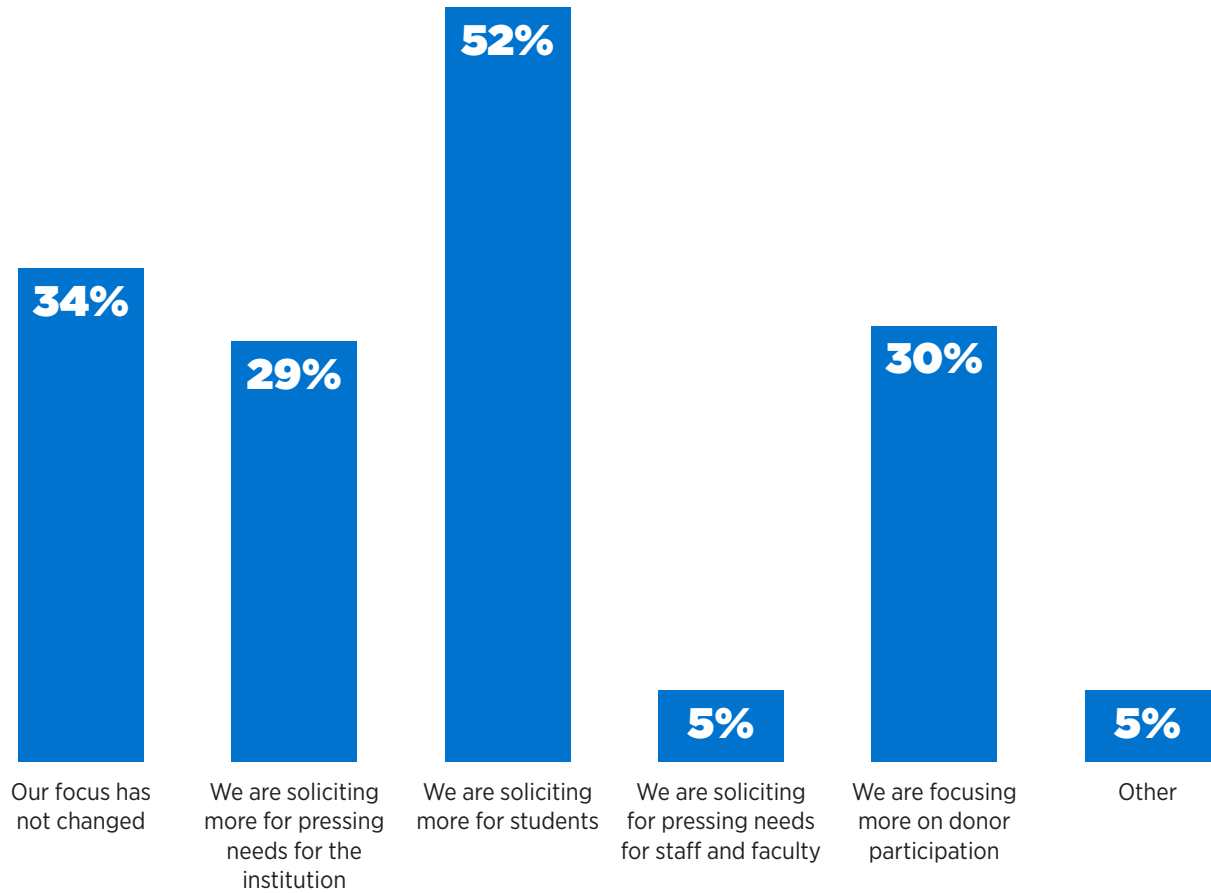
And as the planning for the fiscal year continued, a shift to focus on immediate needs was top priority. Here are the most common responses to a question we asked about messaging changes in the coming year.

How will your messaging to supporters change in the new fiscal year?

focus on student support
focus on impact and immediate needs
 more stewardship and donor focus
acknowledge covid upgrade systems
 going digital **any amount matters**
 emphasize long term

Most common of 225 responses to July–August 2020 survey

As you move into the new fiscal year, has your fundraising focus and ask strategy changed compared to what you focused on for fall FY20?



120 responses to September–October 2020 survey

Advancement Leaders Take Action



RNL partners raised over \$22 million in the first weeks of the pandemic with targeted student and emergency crowdfunding campaigns.

See examples at RuffaloNL.com/Emergency



WHAT FUNDRAISERS LEARNED IN THE EARLY PARTS OF THE PANDEMIC

We asked fundraisers two open-ended questions in May and June as we were closing out the FY20 fiscal year, and most had significantly shifted their strategy. The first question was about what fundraisers learned from donor response.

What have you learned from donors in your experience engaging with them during these unprecedented times?

they step up **loyal donors still loyal**
 they respond to needs
quick response if we communicate
 appreciate transparency and sincerity
pauses on multiyear pledges
 willing to communicate remotely **stewardship is key**

Most common of 238 responses of May-June 2020 survey

We then asked about what they learned from their fundraising team and institution.

What have you learned about your colleagues?

creativity resiliency
adaptability quick to change/slow to change
feel closer to my colleagues
 remote working is going well
stress and need for self care
 need to connect one on one

Most common of 238 responses of May-June 2020 survey

“**Honest and open communication, empathy, and vision are more critical than ever.**”

—Advancement Leader



PERSONAL OUTREACH, AND A FOCUS ON NOW

When we asked fundraisers what they found most effective in the early period of the pandemic, moving to virtual communications, providing regular updates to donors, and focusing on immediate needs were the top responses.

What is the most effective way you've engaged alumni and donors during this crisis?

texting virtual happy hours
 personalized video **virtual meetings**
updates on fund use personalized direct mail
 phone calls day of giving refocused to current needs
crowdfunding for emergency fund

Most common of 238 responses of May-June 2020 survey

Overwhelmingly, fundraisers' regrets centered on not acting sooner to reach out to donors or not having emergency communication infrastructure in place. A number of institutions canceled or delayed giving days in the spring or summer, and a common feeling was that they should have instead refocused them.

What do you wish you had done differently?

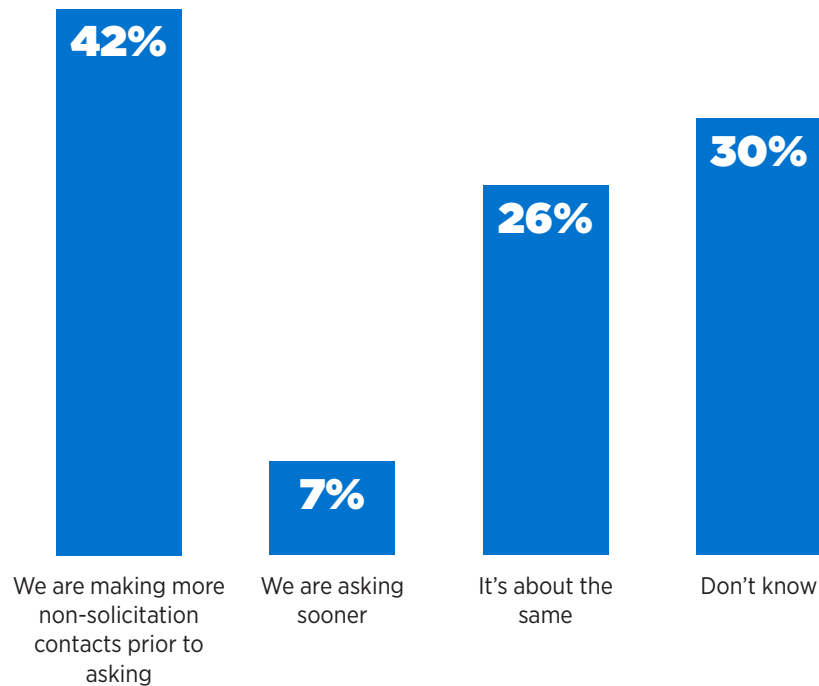
more IT resources enabled remote contact
 pivoted to emergency contact
using video sooner reached out sooner
 should have taken reigns not cancelled giving day
more public visibility of leaders

Most common of 238 responses of May-June 2020 survey

MAJOR AND PLANNED GIVING VELOCITY

Overall, fundraisers told us that leadership and major donors were willing to address current needs, but some paused plans as the economic situation developed nationally. Over a third of fundraisers told us they were making more personal, non-solicitation contacts to donors prior to asking.

How many substantial personal contacts does your development team generally make prior to making the ask to a major or planned gift prospect? Has the COVID pandemic impacted this?



120 responses to September–October 2020 survey

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FUNDRAISERS SPEAK: KEY CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

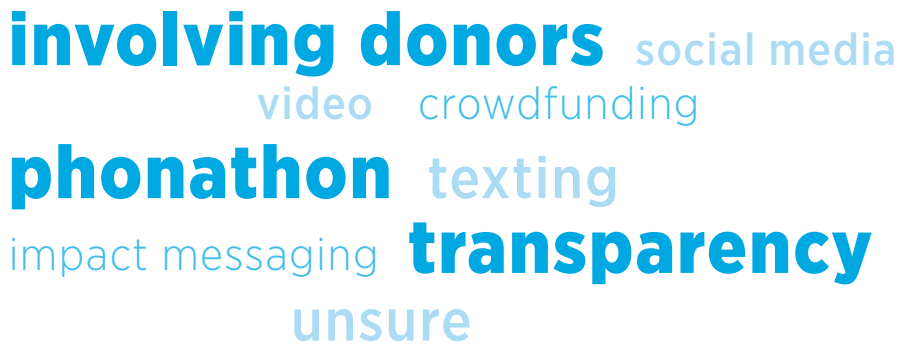
As we moved more fully into the FY21 fiscal year, budget challenges continued and many indicated contentious internal discussions about strategy.

What are your top challenges going into the fiscal year?



Most common of 225 responses of July–August 2020 survey

What do you believe will be the most effective in capturing donors in the new fiscal year?



Most common of 225 responses of July–August 2020 survey

“**Demonstrating impact in a more immediate and visceral way. Social service organizations are rightly seeing growing support. We need to frame educational impact as urgent and compelling as well.**”

—Advancement Leader



THE FY21 PLAN: MORE CHANNELS, FOCUS ON IMMEDIATE NEEDS

Fundraisers indicated a focus on engagement communications, thanking current donors, and adding more digital and data-driven resources. The shift for the end-of-year and holiday appeals was to focus on direct impact and provide more time for direct mail. Overall, fundraisers indicate an interest in investment for integrated, digital channels.

Where would you like to be investing more this year?

stewardship **strategy**
artificial intelligence **video**
texting **infrastructure** engagement
more digital technology
additional staff **filling staff roles with tech**

120 responses to
September–October
2020 survey

What are your top challenges right now, following the start of the fiscal year?

economy hard to network donor retention
competition **staff morale/fear**
too many zooms furloughs/layoffs
cultural issues **going digital** virtual events
delays in strategy approval steps

120 responses to
September–October
2020 survey



How will you change your holiday and end-of-calendar-year plans compared to last year?

a strong push change in message
going digital asking earlier
no events **social justice**
targeted affinity additions—CARES/DAFS
move up mail **election-based strategy**

120 responses to
September–October
2020 survey

“With a hiring freeze and an understaffed team before the pandemic, the biggest challenge we face is on the staff front. We know we can’t control how our alumni and friends will respond to our solicitations, but they can’t respond at all if we can’t get the solicitation out the door. Our team is tired, overworked, and demoralized with rescinded promotions and little end in sight for the work from home ‘new normal.’ It’s hard to get the best out of the team when we are in Zooms all day.”

—Advancement Leader

Advancement Leaders Take Action: DePaul University increased fulfilled dollars by 54%.

✔ Shifting to digital engagement centers allows for remote student ambassadors to connect with donors across calling, texting, and personalized video, something DePaul University is now doing.

“Our year to date results are also out of the park, even with the disruptions of the pandemic this year. I have so much trust in what our RNL team is doing with us this year and it’s great.”

—Sarah Myksin,
Director of Annual and Special Giving
DePaul University



4 KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM A CHALLENGING YEAR

As we produce this research overview, the global pandemic remains uncontrolled, economic hardships widespread, and higher education disrupted. Institutions report mixed results on donor engagement this year, with some even setting records. While the impact of the pandemic remains uncertain for future giving, fundraisers agree that this is not a time to go silent with donors.

Here are our four key recommendations for the current environment.

- 1 **Pivot to digital.** When mail and personal meetings can be disrupted unexpectedly, a robust digital toolkit that keeps your giving message center of mind is crucial. RNL partners have seen great success with texting, personalized video, and digital advertising during this time. These communications boost not only giving response, but registrations for virtual events and stewardship.
- 2 **Remain agile.** You can keep fundraising campaign plans in place, but the messaging may need to shift as the situation on your campus (and the nation) changes. Having integrated tools in place that let you shift or augment messaging quickly is key. Sending email and text follow-ups to appeals to update donors is a great example of how you can adapt on the fly and stay present with donors.
- 3 **Optimize your channels.** Now more than ever, getting the most response from your communications is crucial. This is especially true when you have to cut outreach—making sure that you do this in the most effective way to maximize impact is important. The answer is in a careful review your data and a discussion of how appeals can work together. For example, you might be able to replace some reminder mailings with P2P texting outreach—saving money and providing donors a way to quickly give online, which lowers gift processing burdens as well.
- 4 **Go remote.** During the pandemic, RNL partners who moved to remote student ambassador engagement saw **an increase in average call length of 20 percent**. Donors clearly like the personal interaction. We've seen increases in the major metrics for outreach using remote engagement, which also keeps students employed. The best results come when the outreach is integrated across channels, with ambassadors delivering text follow-up and videos in additional to calling.

Remember, you don't have to do this alone. We've seen fundraisers reaching out to their networks for support in an incredible way this year, even when we can't be at in-person conferences. As a provider working with hundreds of institutions, many like yours, we're constantly watching what peers are doing and how the fundraising world is adapting to rapid change. Reach out to RNL today, tell us about your key goals and challenges, and we'll share the best new strategies and technology to help you meet them.

LET'S TALK DONOR ENGAGEMENT FOR A DIGITAL AGE

Our fundraising strategists are working with institutions to meet the challenges addressed in this report. Set up a time to talk with us and we'll discuss how you can reach your goals in the current environment.

Request now at RuffaloNL.com/DonorTalk

ABOUT THE RESEARCH SPONSOR

About RNL

RNL is the leading provider of higher education enrollment, student success, and fundraising solutions. The firm serves more than 1,900 colleges and universities through data-driven solutions focused on the entire lifecycle of enrollment and fundraising, assuring students find the right program, graduate on time, secure their first job in their chosen field, and give back to support the next generation. With a deep knowledge of the industry, RNL provides institutions the ability to scale their efforts by tapping into a community of support and resources.

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Find out how you can energize more alumni, engage more donors, and boost fundraising results.

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- Crowdfunding and giving days
- Personalized video
- P2P Texting
- AI-driven alumni engagement

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