Embracing Change
Marsha Grady | Alpha Chi Omega Foundation, Inc.

Let’s be honest. We are all reeling from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. College and universities have closed their doors and moved to remote learning; businesses have shifted to remote work, shut down, or moved their business online or curbside; states have ordered people to stay home and practice social distancing; travel has ground to a halt — and many of us have been forced to cancel fundraising events and conferences.

As the novel coronavirus began spreading across the U.S., the Alpha Chi Omega Foundation was seven months into what was already a record-breaking fundraising year. Guided for the past several years by a strategic plan which allowed us to invest in headcount and systems to help us significantly increase our fundraising capacity, we were prepared to offer another record grant to Alpha Chi Omega Fraternity to support new and improved programs and services that will allow us to remain relevant for our members of all ages.

Foundation staff were preparing for our annual Day of Giving on April 1, followed closely by our Star Booth fundraiser during our biennial Convention in June. Combined, those two initiatives were expected to raise around $400,000 which would blow our budget out of the water and exceed our previous year’s annual fund results by 25-30%.

For us, Day of Giving is 1 day 18 hours and 85 minutes (our founding was in 1885) of FUNdraising for our Real. Strong. Women.® Fund, which helps support our annual fraternity grant. Our goal for Day of Giving 2020 was to raise $188,500 as well as attract new donors through segmented email appeals, individual outreach, giving challenges, and social media.

As the pandemic picked up in mid-March, it became apparent that our high-energy, upbeat fundraising event was not appropriate to the somber environment. While our organizational need for those dollars had not changed, we felt what our donors and all of our members needed more than anything was to know that Alpha Chi Omega cares about them.

One week before the “go live” date, Day of Giving became Day of Caring — and #AXOCares was born. While we would leave our giving page open for those who wanted (and were able) to give, we repurposed our visual direction and messaging to focus on doing what we could do to live out two key phrases of our missions.
Through the Real. Strong. Women.® Experience, Alpha Chi Omega cultivates impactful communities where women are inspired to connect, lead, grow and serve.

The Alpha Chi Omega Foundation strives to realize and sustain the educational and philanthropic values of Alpha Chi Omega through successful fundraising and stewardship. Generous gifts from our members and friends enhance the Real. Strong. Women.® Experience and empower our members to impact their communities and world positively.

Challenges throughout Day of Caring encouraged our members to:
- Check-in on Alpha Chi Omega sisters, family members, and neighbors;
- Thank a helper;
- Reach out as a mentor or mentee (encouraging members to join our Women & Wisdom virtual mentoring platform);
- Help sisters in need; and
- Celebrate with a sisterhood social.

Our members responded to the call! Engagement increased 142% across all Alpha Chi Omega social media platforms. Facebook engagement increased 594%! We got 25% more new Facebook likes during Day of Caring than we get during an average month. Instagram story engagements were up 250%.

And, while we had planned not to ask for money at all, we did appeal for support of the Alpha Chi Assistance Fund, which provides grants to sisters facing financial difficulty due to life emergencies. Through our member assistance program, the Alpha Chi Omega Foundation typically awards 4-8 grants each year for less than $20,000. Thanks to additional funds raised during Day of Caring and a pool of restricted funds made available by the foundation’s board, we have been able to award more than $125,000 in grants to 250 women facing crushing financial need.

We are proud that the Alpha Chi Omega Foundation will be able to meet its commitment of more than $1 million in grants to Alpha Chi Omega Fraternity this year, in spite of the pandemic. While many planned fundable programs were canceled, our Education & Engagement department has been working overtime to pivot the Real. Strong. Women. Experience. We are offering a larger variety and quantity of virtual experiences for both collegiate and alumnae members, particularly during Sexual Assault Prevention Week in April and Mental Health Awareness Month in May.
One of the truly inspiring aspects of the past two months has been watching our collegiate chapters respond to needs in their own communities. In the midst of transitioning to online classes, closures of their residence halls and our chapter houses, and cancellation of extracurricular and co-curricular activities that play a critical role in the collegiate experience, our chapters have continued to promote Alpha Chi Omega’s national philanthropy of domestic violence awareness and prevention.

The Foundation’s Community Impact program allows chapters to raise tax-deductible donations through the foundation, and also provides them with an online crowdfunding platform that allowed many of the chapters to shift what had been planned as in-person fundraisers to virtual events. With themes such as “Now, More Than Ever” and “Virtual 5k,” chapters have raised thousands of dollars for local domestic violence agencies.

Recently, the executive director of one of those agencies called the foundation to thank us for the check they had received. They were used to having our chapter’s support but were surprised the chapter had been able to raise funds this year with the campus shut-down, and they were incredibly grateful since other donations have fallen during the pandemic, while the need for their services has risen drastically.

In the face of the COVID-19 crisis, many nonprofits are working overtime to adapt to the current environment and to an uncertain future. Fraternity and sorority foundations are no different. While our organizations are not on the front lines fighting the disease, we certainly have many members who are. And we are providing important support to our members who need a community of caring during what is an incredibly difficult time for all of us physically, financially, and emotionally. Lifetime sisterhood and brotherhood are more relevant than ever in a time when many are suffering through isolation.

As fundraisers, there are important lessons and reminders as we are forced to re-evaluate how we do our important work. Three key points stand out to me.

1) **Focus on your loyal supporters.** Fundraising isn’t about “selling” anything. It’s about building relationships between your organization and your donors. Perhaps more than ever, stewarding your most loyal and ardent supporters should be your first priority as you adapt to virtual fundraising. Let them know you care about them, but also let them know you need their help. Lead with mission and impact and talk about why what you’re doing is important during these challenging times. It’s okay to ask in a way that is sensitive and appropriate. Let the donor make the decision of whether they are able and choose to give.
2) **Pay attention to your data.** As you adapt the way you work to a virtual environment, pay attention to feedback and data as you adjust your messaging and practices and see what works – and be ready and willing to use what you’ve learned to adapt quickly.

3) **Embrace change, or at least don’t fight it!** With so much uncertainty in our world, any plans we make are sure to change. Our organizations will change as a result of this. So will our members. Be willing to rethink how you do what you do so you and your organization emerge stronger and better and ready to thrive in the new normal.

No one would blame any of us for not keeping a positive attitude during the current crisis. After all, every facet of our lives has changed. People are worried, scared, hurting, and frustrated. People are dying. But while the pandemic may feel like a punch in the face, it’s also a time to take stock and decide who you want to be as an organization. We will “come out the other side” changed — it’s up to us to determine whether we’ve changed for the worse or better.

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Marsha Grady (CFRE) has served the Alpha Chi Omega Foundation as chief development officer since January after five years as a major gifts officer. Prior to joining staff, Marsha served as a foundation trustee for twelve years while also serving as National Vice President (8 years) and National President (4 years) of Alpha Chi Omega Fraternity. A graduate of the University of Alabama with a B.S. and MBA, Marsha has more than 20 years of management and consulting experience prior to transitioning to her fundraising career. Marsha lives in Tuscaloosa, Alabama with her husband, Dr. David Grady (Phi Gamma Delta) and has two grown children, Rob (Alpha Tau Omega) and Alexandra (Alpha Chi Omega).