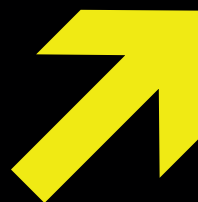


# New Routes



## Professionals who have taken nontraditional routes to advancement share how they've navigated their career shifts

BY MEREDITH BARNETT

**F**or 10 years, at every Ottawa Senators hockey game, Barry Seller strapped on his skates and a lion suit to hit the ice as Spartacat, the team mascot.

As Spartacat, Seller fired up the crowd at the Senators' arena in Ottawa, Canada, and made 400 appearances a year at the National Hockey League team's community events. He didn't know it then, but Seller's time as Spartacat taught him lessons he'd apply years later as an advancement professional.

"I didn't look at it as just showing up and doing the mascot work. I looked at myself as being a representative of the hockey club," Seller says. "I always said before I got dressed: 'I need to make that connection with this business owner or this representative from an organization.'"

That talent for forging connections brought him to Algonquin College (also in Ottawa) in the fall of 2020, where he transitioned into educational advancement after 17 years with the Ottawa Senators Hockey Club and Foundation. That may seem like an unorthodox route to advancement, but the profession has transformed in the last decade and pathways into it are now more varied than ever. Today, newcomers (like Seller) pivoting to advancement from other fields are learning

as they go, leveraging their skills, and building ties with their new alumni, staff, and donor communities.

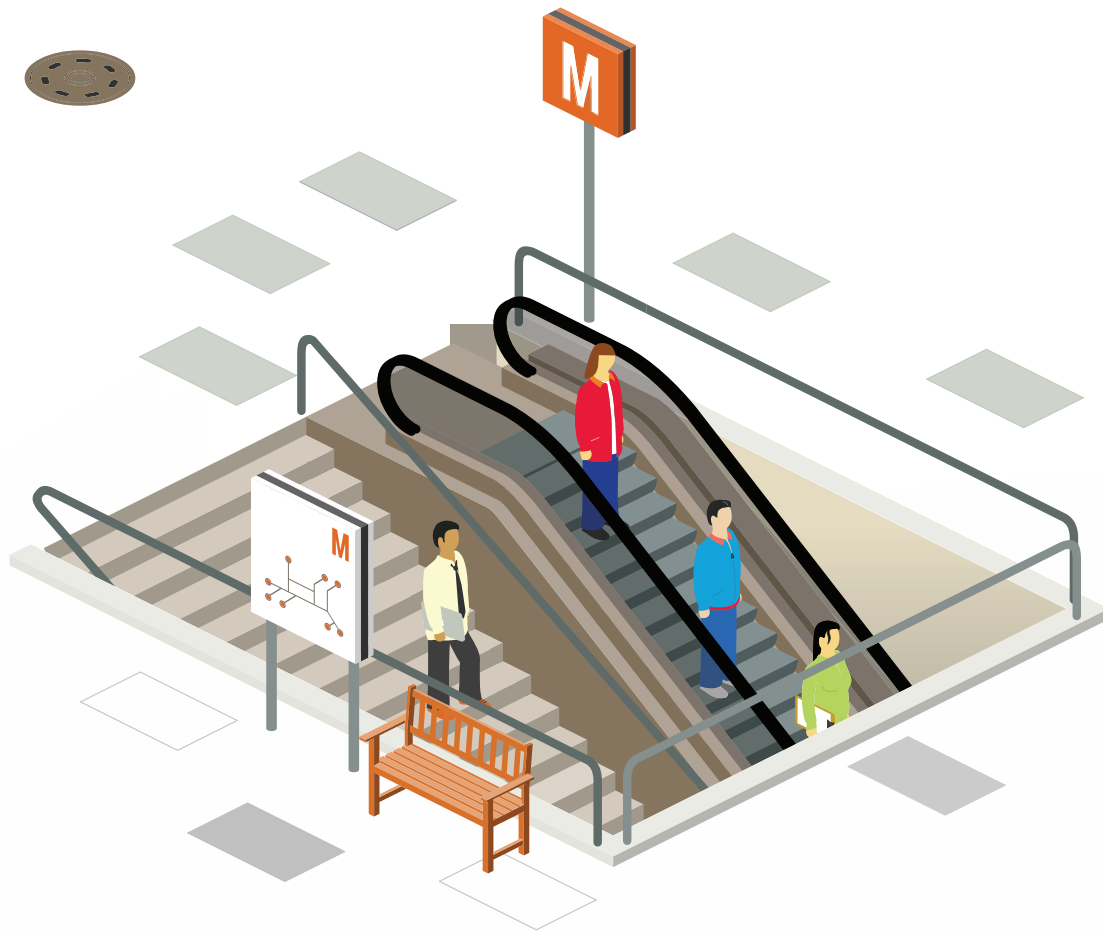
Here, professionals who have taken nontraditional routes to advancement share how they've navigated their career shifts.

### A Growing, Changing Profession

Advancement is growing as a profession and as a job market. According to 2019 analysis from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of fundraising jobs is projected to grow 14% over the next 10 years. Globally, the nonprofit sector has grown faster than other fields since the 1990s in several countries, including Australia, Canada, Norway, and Thailand, according to a report from the Johns Hopkins University Center for Civil Society Studies.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, "we were seeing a very high growth rate nationally within the [advancement] industry," says Josh Wyatt, director of talent development at the University of Arizona, U.S.

It's unclear yet how the sector will grow post-pandemic. During COVID-19, the number of nonprofit jobs shrunk 7%, and though recovery started in mid-2021, the Center for Civil Society Studies predicts that it may take two years for those jobs to return.



Historically, professionals come to advancement because they have a personal tie to the institution, says Wyatt. Some, for instance, worked as a student caller or have been involved in the alumni association. Additional common pathways are through other university divisions (such as student affairs or admissions), fundraising in sectors other than education, or other nonprofit roles.

For years, professionals landed in advancement by happenstance or “drifted” into it, according to The Balance’s online fundraising career guide. But in the past decade, fundraising and advancement have matured as professions. The Lilly Family School of Philanthropy opened in Indianapolis, U.S., in 2012 as the world’s first school dedicated to the study of philanthropy. CASE and other organizations have developed standards and principles of practice to formalize the profession, as well as internships, residency programs, and scholarships for beginners.

**While the traditional pipeline to advancement via nonprofit or education work still exists, as advancement has grown as a profession, it’s attracted professionals from many backgrounds.**

While the traditional pipeline to advancement via nonprofit or education work still exists, as advancement has grown as a profession, it’s attracted professionals from many backgrounds. Wyatt has seen advancement hires come from fields like athletics, law, and the private sector. Ultimately, as researcher Zachary Smith concluded in 2010 in the *International*

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*Journal of Educational Advancement:* “The complex job of fundraising requires diverse knowledge, skills, abilities, and attributes found in many professions.”

### Community Ties

Fundraisers, communicators, event planners, and others switch careers to advancement for many reasons, both practical and personal.

For Amanda Zopp, director of annual fund and alumni engagement at Wayland Academy, it was a little of both. After graduating with a master’s degree in environmental science and policy, Zopp taught at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, U.S., and spent eight years as director of research and conservation at a nature center. But an hour-plus commute and having two children in daycare led her to look for a position closer to home. She hadn’t known a thing about Wayland, a small independent and boarding school in Beaver Dam, Wisconsin, but the campus felt like the right fit, she says.

“Once I got there, I could feel the energy that small campuses have. I went to a small campus for college for both my undergraduate and graduate degrees, and it’s just palatable to anyone who has been in that environment,” she says. “I really fell in love with the campus and community.”

**“We’re hearing more and more from millennials and Generation Z that an organizations’ morals and ethics are a big deciding factor for if they even apply [to a job]—but also whether or not they stay.”**

**Josh Wyatt**, director of talent development, University of Arizona

Like Zopp, community (and practicality) drew photographer Toni Buckley to advancement. Originally from Germany, Buckley became enamored with the Berkshires area of New England in the U.S. on a trip, met her husband there, and moved in 2015. She forged ties to the community by volunteering with an activist musicians’ group, and after organizing several



**LINEUP CHANGE:** Barry Seller spent nearly 20 years in community relations and program strategy, including serving as the Ottawa Senators’ hockey mascot Spartacat. Now, he’s helping Algonquin College strengthen and grow alumni engagement.

fundraisers, she got a call from Berkshire Community College in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, U.S., for a grant-funded job collecting immigrants’ stories.

“Even though I didn’t have any real professional experience in that field, as a photographer I had the storytelling background,” she says. “That was the dream job. It got me even more connected to our small community here.”

After taking another part-time position at BCC (and juggling five other part-time jobs), Buckley talked with her supervisor about needing a full-time role. BCC hired her as director of alumni relations based on her connection-building skills.

“My supervisor always joked, ‘I’ve been here for over a decade, and Toni knows four times the people I know,’” Buckley says. “Being connected in such a small community helps, and I see part of my job as connecting alumni to resources.”

### Mission Matters

Some newcomers switch to higher education or schools jobs because an institution’s mission resonates with them. That’s what drove Anakarina Pina to advancement. Originally from Mexico, Pina had traveled globally with her diplomat husband and worked in

## Departures

Time	Destination	Platform
16:51	ADVANCEMENT	1
17:19	ADVANCEMENT	15
17:46	ADVANCEMENT	9

public relations and business development at the Dallas Regional Chamber. But by 2018, she was looking for an engaging school environment for her two children. The American School Foundation, a 2,500-student K-12 school in Mexico City, sprang to mind.

“We were looking for an open-minded, interesting education and a very international experience,” says Pina, who attended ASF herself and joined the school in 2018 as alumni relations specialist. “I always say: At this school you can be whoever you feel you want to be. That is a freedom not all schools give you, and something I wanted my kids to experience.”

Increasingly, job seekers are driven by values, says Arizona’s Wyatt. In engagement surveys and stay or retention interviews, “we’re hearing more and more from millennials and Generation Z that an organizations’ morals and ethics are a big deciding factor for if they even apply [to a job]—but also whether or not they stay.”

A 2020 McKinsey study revealed that two-thirds of professionals want their employer to provide more opportunities for purpose in their day-to-day work. The COVID-19 pandemic may exacerbate this trend: According to a 2021 Kaspersky report, 35% of employees are thinking of transitioning to a new job. After salary and work/life balance, looking for more meaningful work is the third most common reason why.

Algonquin’s Seller is one of those 2020 job-changers. The pandemic inspired him to consider his mental health and how he wanted to exercise his creative and leadership muscles differently.

“[Algonquin’s values] are caring, learning, integrity, and respect, and that’s what I live by too,” he says.

**For early-career professionals and career-changers to flourish in advancement, they need solid training and supportive teams.**

### Building Skills and Bonds

Whatever roads brought them to advancement, newcomers have plenty to learn, and sometimes the learning curve is steep.

At Wayland, Zopp had been on board six weeks before the campus closed due to the pandemic and five months before layoffs cut her team of seven staff members to four. Although originally hired to oversee the annual fund, she added alumni relations to her responsibilities. Her previous roles teaching, managing research projects, and writing grants made her a “jack-of-all-trades,” which she says has helped at Wayland, but learning the intricacies of fundraising and alumni relations during a pandemic has been challenging.

“I felt comfortable soliciting sponsorships for events, writing grants, and making connections with individuals from my work with other nonprofits, but I’ve never had to write an appeal letter before,” she says.

Plus, she’s had to get to know peers, donors, and alumni via Zoom, and “making those relationships has been really hard,” she says. The pandemic made the relationship-building process especially tough in 2020, canceling or altering the key events and meetings that would help a newcomer acclimate. Still, Zopp revitalized her teams’ use of Facebook as a communication

tool to engage with alumni and has used it, along with Zoom, to host 18 virtual events.

Beyond the pandemic, building relationships with stakeholders is essential for advancement beginners. At ASF, Pina grappled with understanding families' and alumni culture around giving. She frequently volunteered with the school to get to know parents and set an example of "contributing to your community, with time or economically."

A thousand miles north in Marshall, Texas, U.S., relationships have been vital for Kemisha Roston as well. Roston practiced law for more than a decade in Los Angeles, but in February 2020, she took the helm as vice president of institutional advancement at Wiley College. Now, she serves on multiple community boards, communicates frequently with the local chamber of commerce, and "if there's a raffle, I make sure that we have a basket."

Crucially for Wiley's visibility, Roston has also pushed for the historically Black college to open campus buildings for community events.

"It's really important for us to open up the space. It lets people know that we're here. We're part of the community," she says.

### Transferrable Skills

Prior to coming to Wiley, Roston had never had formal fundraising or alumni relations experience. But she had a knack for talking to donors, and she chaired local fundraising with her sorority, Alpha Kappa

**"I'm not afraid to make the ask. I think that's what helped me in this position."**

**Kemisha Roston**, vice president of institutional advancement, Wiley College

Alpha. Wiley's president, Herman Felton was a mentor for her and encouraged her to put that know-how to use. Now, in her advancement role, she's secured a \$3.5 million grant and boosted alumni giving.

"I'm not afraid to make the ask. I think that's what helped me in this position," she says.

As Roston's journey underscores, transferrable skills and experiences matter for newcomers and



**EMPATHY AND ENGAGEMENT:** Fiona McMillan says working in retail helped hone her people skills. At the University of Stirling, she plans programs and engages with alumni at events like postgraduate open day.

career pivoters. Higher education experience, though helpful, isn't always necessary if a professional has the right skill mix, says Arizona's Wyatt.

"If I'm hiring somebody that is coming into leadership giving, annual giving, or foundation giving, I'm looking at a variety of different skill sets," he says. "If I can find somebody that's hungry to learn and is engaged, we have a pathway for them to succeed."

Those essential skills to succeed in advancement are outlined in the CASE Competencies Model, developed by a task force of advancement leaders. These traits include emotional intelligence, integrity and professionalism, relationship building, global and cultural competence, business acumen, leadership, and strategic thinking.

At the University of Stirling, Fiona McMillan calls on many of these skills as alumni and business engagement officer. Before landing at the 14,000-student Scottish university, McMillan worked as a bookseller for more than a decade. In addition to sharpening her research skills and giving her a different perspective on academics, it also polished her people skills: "Thirteen years in retail helped that massively," she says.

Prior to coming to Stirling, McMillan also worked briefly in bereavement services, which involved emotional, difficult conversations.

“That’s been an invaluable skill: developing empathy for students, early-career graduates, alumni—anyone who’s in a slightly vulnerable place and needs a little bit of support,” she says. “We’re here to help people at Stirling. We offer lifelong career support. ... As a university, we’re relatively young, so we see ourselves very much as a family.”

One way she’s applied that principle is by organizing talks to support recent graduates on well-being topics, including personal finance, LGBTQ+ alumni and workplace issues, and mental health.

### Thriving as a Newcomer

For early-career professionals and career changers to flourish in advancement, they need solid training and supportive teams. Comprehensive orientation is step one, says Wyatt. The University of Arizona has a multi-part, structured onboarding program for new advancement employees, with touchpoints up to a year in, he says. The program evens the playing field for newcomers—whatever their previous experience has been—and helps them understand organizational culture and definitions.

For McMillan, connecting with and learning from others in advancement has been vital. In 2019, she attended the CASE Europe Annual Conference in Birmingham, U.K., and returned to Stirling with new ideas and enthusiasm.

“That was really, really exciting, and it helped me find my feet in the sector,” she says.

Similarly, Buckley, Pina, Zopp, and Seller all received CASE’s Virginia Carter Smith Scholarships for newcomers to attend a CASE conference to learn and kick-start their advancement careers.

Finally, a collegial team can help newcomers to advancement thrive. Seller has felt this team support in his time at Algonquin, where he’s been building ties externally and internally with colleagues across the university. In the winter of 2020—just months into his job—Seller and his colleagues faced a major challenge: reimagining the college’s Alumni of Distinction Awards program virtually. For the special online celebration, Seller and an alumni relations colleague hand-delivered trophies and catered meals to the recipients.

“We were able to bring the Algonquin community together for that evening and celebrate our alumni,” Seller says. “We have a great team, and it didn’t take one person. It took many of us to work together.” ●

**MEREDITH BARNETT** is CASE’s digital communications manager.

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