Bringing Your Endowment to Life: How to Tell a Story That Resonates with Donors – Webinar Replay

Originally presented as part of the TIFF Investment Management Endowment Webinar Series: "Bringing Your Endowment to Life: Three Best Practices to Engage and Inspire Donors."

This piece is written by Suzzanne Eden, Partner with CCS Fundraising. CCS Fundraising is a strategic fundraising consulting firm that partners with nonprofits across sectors to design and implement fundraising programs that achieve transformational goals.

Many nonprofit leaders know their endowment matters. They can explain the draw rate, cite the fund balance, and articulate the long-term vision. And yet, when they talk to donors about endowment, something falls flat. The problem usually isn't the endowment itself, it's the story.

Most endowment communication is written for accountants, not donors. It leads with structure when donors are looking for something far simpler: proof that their gift will matter. TIFF Investment Management's recent webinar with CCS Fundraising explored three best practices for making endowment communication more human, more compelling, and more effective.

Watch the Replay:

When Endowment Language Gets Stuck in Mechanics Mode

The most common failure in endowment communication is centering on the structure of the endowment rather than what it makes possible. "Our endowment has a current valuation of $25M and a 4.5% draw rate" is accurate, but not compelling. Compare it to: "Our endowment funded 32 scholarships last year." Or: "Each year, I know that 20% of our operating expenses are covered. That's the freedom that lets us take risks and serve our community in new ways." It's the same endowment, but a completely different story.

The question to ask before any endowment communication: *What did our endowment make possible this year that wouldn't have happened otherwise?*

There's also a question donors often have but rarely ask: why give to endowment instead of the annual fund? The short answer: endowment doesn't compete with annual giving, it complements it. Endowment protects the organization's ability to do the work the annual fund supports, year after year. When you can say that clearly and confidently, the conversation changes.

A Framework for Talking About What Endowment Does

When you're not sure how to frame endowment for a particular audience, this structure works across sectors: endowment helps your organization a) serve more people, b) serve them better, and/or c) serve them for the long run. Endowment income expands capacity without relying on annual fundraising cycles. Financial stability enables excellence and innovation. And the endowment's unique promise is continuity – not just this year, but every year. This framework works whether you're writing a case for support, preparing for a donor conversation, or drafting a board update.

Making Endowment Tangible: The Power of Naming

Sometimes organizations feel hemmed in by a narrow view of naming and recognition options. The assumption is: "We don't have a building to name. We're not a university." But naming can be applied to almost any endowment-supported function: a named position for a teaching artist, a fund supporting community health outreach, an endowed exhibition series, a scholarship bearing a family's name. The key is to start with what your endowment actually funds and ask: what within that is nameable? What would a donor find meaningful to attach their name to?

Legacy societies are worth calling out specifically. They're a way of naming the act of giving itself, creating a community of endowment donors that works especially well for organizations cultivating a culture of planned and endowment giving over time.

Where Endowment Should Show Up in Your Communications

The most common mistake organizations make is treating endowment as a specialized topic that lives only in planned giving materials or the annual report's financial section. When endowment only shows up there, donors assume it is separate from the work they love. The goal isn't to talk about endowment constantly, it is to make sure it shows up consistently in the places donors already pay attention: annual and impact reports, program materials, cases for support, board communications, donor letters, and your website's impact or future vision sections.

Three Habits That Make Endowment Part of Your Everyday Story

You don't need a new communications strategy, just three simple habits that require no budget, board approval, or communications overhaul.

Habit 1 – The Annual Snapshot: Once a year, share one image, one paragraph, and one outcome linked to your endowment. When donors come to expect it, they start looking for it, and when they start looking for it, they start thinking about it.

Habit 2 – Light, Recurring Mentions: One sentence in a leadership letter. A brief line in a board update. A closing thought in a stewardship email. These don't need to be prominent; they just need to be consistent. Over time, they normalize endowment as a living, working part of the organization.

Habit 3 – One Story: Find one human story connected to your endowment and tell it consistently. A scholarship recipient, a staff position that exists because of an endowed gift, a program that survived a difficult year because of endowment income. If you can't immediately name your endowment story, finding it is your most important first step.

The through-line: Endowment isn't a specialized fundraising category; it is a story. When you center it in mission, make it tangible through naming, and weave it into everyday communications, it stops being something donors have to be "educated" about and starts being something they already understand and feel connected to. That's when endowment giving becomes natural – not the result of a pitch, but the result of a relationship built over time.

Explore additional resources in the accompanying slide deck here.

This article is a companion piece to TIFF Investment Management's Endowment Webinar Series, developed in partnership with CCS Fundraising. Session 2, "Who Gives to Endowment and Why: Donor Strategy for Lasting Impact," takes place June 24. ***Register here****.*

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TIFF Investment Management

TIFF 35TH
INVESTMENT MANAGEMENT
35TH ANNIVERSARY

June 3, 2026

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