

**Rodger Devine:** Hello everyone. My name is Rodger Devine and I'm the president of Apra. And in my day job, I am the EVP for advancement operations at Pomona College. Thank you so much for joining us today to talk about the Apra visionary award. And this podcast which is co-hosted by my esteemed colleague, Sharise Harrison. Sharise.

**Sharise Harrison:** Hi, everyone, I'm Sharise Harrison. I am an Apra board member and at my day job, I am the Assistant Vice President of events and services and Prospect Management at Sacramento State. Very happy to be here.

So a little about this episode, we're going to talk about the Apra visionary award. And this award is the highest award bestowed upon Apra and in recognizing an individual's contributions to the field of Prospect development in mentorship, innovation and inclusion. And after 38 year history, the organization has only selected six recipients, including our current recipient here with us today, Karen. The past recipients include Cecilia Hogan in 2019, Joshua Birkholz in 2015, Elizabeth Crabtree in 2012, Bobby Strand in 2006, and Ann Castle posthumously in 2004. So Apra will acknowledge Karen virtually at the Apra business meeting in June, and in person at Apra Prospect Development in August. Karen is a former Apra board member, having served as president from 2013 through 2014. And since then, she has participated in numerous work groups and committees, including the Apra body of knowledge, and the campaign task force, as well as serving previously on the Apra, Michigan Apra Illinois boards. So I will turn it over to Karen to introduce herself.

**Karen Isble:** Good afternoon. And thank you again, Rodger and Sharise for the invitation to chat. Of course, I am still amazed and overwhelmed at this incredible honor from Apra. That has served me so well, for so many parts of my career. As Sharise mentioned, I am a former Apra board member, but I am currently serving as the vice president for advancement at Kalamazoo College, a small liberal arts college in southwest Michigan. I've been here for about four years. Part of that I served in roles as campaign director or a VP of advancement services at UC Irvine, and the University of Michigan.

**Sharise Harrison:** Thank you, Karen, you've had a very impressive career. And as you reflect on your career, can you talk about what you're most proud of?

**Karen Isble:** You know, I would say more than anything, I am proud of all of the team members that I have worked with, coached, mentored over time, and have seen grow into the next stages of their careers. Every time someone that I've worked with in the past is promoted or moves into a new opportunity, that it feels like a big win for me, because I feel like I've had some small part in that. And I've, learned from all those individuals. So, I would say that makes me most proud.

**Sharise Harrison:** Thank you. And in your role as Vice President, what advice would you give prospect development professionals that aspire to this position?

**Karen Isble:** You know, it's interesting. I wish somebody had told me this years ago, but I would say don't let yourself be put in a box. And think big if that's what you want. I think I was probably certainly very, you know, midway into many, many years in the prospect development field, when it started to occur to me that I might want to lead a shot someday to be a vice president, but I had no idea how to get there. And everyone I talked to put roadblocks up that said, Well, you know, you're on the advancement services side of things, right. You know, you got to work with donors and all that stuff. Why would you want to do that? Do you want to do that? Do you? And I was like, Well, yeah. And they were like, Oh, well, that's weird. Okay, you know, so I

mean, I think it was always just this little, I felt like this curiosity to folks that they didn't really know what to do with me. And so I let myself stay in that box, perhaps longer than I might have if I had been a little more fearless.

I would say, be proactive in taking on roles and opportunities that are outside of your prescribed responsibilities. Because there's a lot to learn about how an advancement program runs that is outside of prospect development, or even advancement services. I think the nice thing though, is that in our work in advancement services and prospect development, we have that 100,000 foot, bird's eye view of an entire operation, which is an incredible strength, because a lot of folks who come up in advancement leadership roles through other avenues. They really spend a lot of their careers seeing one or two slices of the pie where both coming through the avenues that I did you have a much broader perspective of the entire operation. And that has really served me well.

I guess I would also ask folks to think about, you know, why they might aspire to a role like that, because it's not for everyone. And what I learned the very hard way is that the broader your portfolio of responsibility gets, the less time you have for some of the things that you might love. When I went from prospect development, to advancements overseeing all of advancement services, that University of Michigan, I lost time being able to play in the data, which was one of those things that I love to do. And I had team members saying, you got people for that, you know, get out of there, get out of the system, what do you do it? No, and I was like, but I like it, you know. So there was a little bit of that. And then now as the VP, recognizing that I spend a lot of my time and a lot of my day doing things that have absolutely nothing to do with advancement whatsoever, because I'm an executive of the college. And it would be true with any nonprofit, you have to have a broader view. And so only a part of your day is spent in advancement, and then only a part of that time might be spent with things that are irrelevant to advancement services or prospect development. And so you have to be prepared for that. And I think it you know, you figure it out along the way, but there are things I miss about things I used to do.

**Sharise Harrison:** Thank you, I feel like I'm kind of in that stage now, where I missed certain thing. And you've mentioned kind of some blockages that were put up and, you know, kind of considering what you want for yourself and getting into this vice president role. Can you speak about the importance of you know, representation and visibility, especially for Black women in philanthropy?

**Karen Isble:** You know, it's interesting, I think, you know, representation, of course, is important, regardless of the field. And there has, there have always been a lot of women in the philanthropy field, but fewer and fewer of them in early days and leadership roles. And now there's more, which is fantastic. But then across the entire spectrum, of course, then fewer of those have been women of color. And I would say I have never acknowledged that as a barrier. Even if it was, I tried to, I really just was kind of blind to it. And I just plowed on through. So whether or not somebody was trying to put a barrier in front of me. If nothing else, I was used to playing down or was done. In school, I just kept going. And so it but it's interesting, as I as I reflect on that, you know, one of the things years ago when I was still working in advancement services most of the time, and I went to see the movie, Hidden Figures. And I remember coming out of that movie, and crying because I thought if I had known that these women existed, I might have chosen a very different career path, knowing the interest that I had, I just didn't know it was an option available to me. And, you know, I was like I maybe I'd have gotten a computer science

degree. And I there's still times in my life where I think is that the route that I should have gone. But it's just, it just didn't occur to me because I didn't have anybody in your role models who represented me in that field. And so I guess I would say that it's incredibly important. But again, I guess this goes back to what I said in one of my previous questions, don't let anybody put you in a box, because I have been fortunate to be able to navigate, finding my way into a leadership role and philanthropy. Despite the fact that I know that there were barriers there, and there were opportunities that I didn't get. But then those weren't the ones for me. I'm incredibly happy in the role that I'm now.

**Rodger Devine:** Karen, I'm so thrilled to hear about your career path, as you inspire and model leadership for others who may not otherwise think of themselves as even having that potential to reach that trajectory or explore. I'm curious with the breadth of experience that you have in your volunteer leadership service and professional experiences as well: what are some of the most significant changes, or trends that you've seen in the advancement field so far?

**Karen Isble:** That's a great question, because there's been a lot but I would say, you know, as I reflect on where I was very early in my career when I was working for a small arts nonprofits, and then moved eventually into higher education, I would say I've seen a continued specialization of work. So especially in larger or higher ed institutions, I would say probably in a lot of smaller nonprofits or even small schools like the one I am now, both are still very much a generalist jack of all trades, you kind of have to have learn a little bit of everything. And you can rarely afford to be hyper focused on one area of expertise. I would say certainly the acknowledgment across the industry has grown, continues to grow in the power of data and technology. And the need to bring folks who have those skills to the table. I think it was still under invest in that area. But I think people are recognizing that we need to do better. And so I think from leadership ranks, I would also say interestingly, as I mentioned before, with this sort of hyper specialization of skills in parts of the industry, that specialization has actually at times made it harder for people who are interested in rising through the ranks to cross fundraising disciplines. Because people see you again to speaking about being an advice people see you like, well, this is your niche over here. And so it's harder for them to envision you doing something over here. And so while I'd say that specialization has made it possible for us to get much more efficient, and savvy about the way we do our work, it also for the individuals in those roles has sometimes made it even harder for them to move up in organizations because it's easy to get sort of stuck in, in your silo.

**Rodger Devine:** Thank you for sharing that insightful perspective. As someone who loves data and analytics, I know that you have blazed trails and really been an advocate in the profession for using data and an analytics role. And curious now with the emergence of more advanced technology and artificial intelligence or AI, what do you see as the intersection of some of these emerging technologies in shaping prospect development over the next decade or beyond?

**Karen Isble:** It's interesting, of course, the debate continues to rage across higher ed in academia, about the pitfalls and the worries about using AI in the teaching and learning space, and that will continue. But I think certainly many orgs are starting to understand that the potential for AI on the business side of things, in terms of how we can do work and advancement and how we can make our work more effective, more efficient, and at a scale that perhaps we didn't have access to before, is really exciting. I would also say the pace of that change is very rapid. I still remember a decade ago, when I was at Michigan working with the analytics team there, and they were just starting to build out some tools that were going to use

natural language processing to sort of comb through our databases, and it was all very exciting, but it's all very cutting edge. And we were like, I don't know where this is going to end up. And when I look at now, what you can do with some of the AI tools now that just sort of take that in the blink of an eye, the pace of change is incredibly rapid. And so organizations I think that are hesitant to dive in will find themselves behind the curve very quickly. And I say this as somebody who myself has been moving somewhat slowly, but being pushed by my team, which I'm happy about. And I think unlike having the need for new expensive software, or technology, experimentation with AI can be very individualized. And it's relatively easy, as long as you're using the appropriate safeguards around your institution's data. So there's really no reason we shouldn't be diving in at least dipping our toes in the water at institutions of every size to see how AI can help us better understand who our constituents are, how they've interacted with us over time, what we need to know about them to engage them better, and then figuring out how are we just ready for whatever the next thing is going to be because of course, as it becomes more ubiquitous, more and more companies are then going to package it and sell it to us as a tool that we can use very specific to our work.

**Rodger Devine:** Continuing this thread about the rapid acceleration of technology, and what you've seen in the last decade and using data and natural language processing, and now we're in predictive AI and generative AI. You know, when we talk about the future of work, and how that will change, individualized and collective ways. I'm curious your thoughts on what role Apra can play and how Apra can help the prospect development community prepared for some of these changes in the course of their work.

**Karen Isble:** You know, it's interesting, this is a conversation I still remember, it's probably been about a decade. And I gave one of the very — I think 2013 was the first Apra talks — and I gave one of those talks. And it was not AI, but one of my colleagues did talk about the fact that there was this fear that technology was going to take over all of our prospect development jobs, and that we would become irrelevant in the future. And I would say what we talked about then, in terms of reassuring ourselves, that our roles remain incredibly relevant and vital to our institutions is regardless of what the tools that we have at our disposal. Artificial Intelligence is just that, it is artificial. And it's often we still are finding not very intelligent. And so having humans who can interpret that data, discern the nuances and catch the many errors that AI is still producing will be critical. And we were having this conversation a decade ago, like, you know, it's just as people were worried about, oh, I can press the button and get a research profile. Okay. So for me, that's a win, because then my staff is not cranking out that briefing. But they can be doing higher level strategic work. Knowing enough about how AI works, and its weaknesses, will be incredibly important for folks in our field to learn over time to make sure that we're averting missteps in our institutions, and so having that expertise on a team is going to be incredibly valuable, because for the folks who just push the button and run without a human intervening and making sure that that is the right course of action, I think trouble lies that way.

**Rodger Devine:** Yeah, and that resonates with your prior reflections on the importance of experimentation and dipping your toes, but thoughtfully, kind of bringing yourself up to speed and be ahead of that curve and not lagging behind. I'm curious as you think about future proofing, the skill sets needed. And for these active ingredients for success in the profession, what do you think are the essential skills for individuals who are doing fundraising, both now and into the future? What would you recommend really focusing on as kind of core skill sets, you have the Apra body of knowledge, and you're very well versed in that, but I'm just curious with

all the technology change, and it's so rapid, are their skill sets that you see being really critical for success? Today and tomorrow.

**Karen Isble:** I can never enough stress. And I remember having a lot of these conversations with my team when I was at Michigan, regardless of what tools and data and technology, we also have to remember to be working on our people skills. Because the relationships that we build in our institutions, where we're building trust, we're building a pipeline of, you know, I still love the fact that, you know, the, the prospect development team at Michigan was in a place where every time they wanted to try a new experiment, by the tongue, you know, after we'd been doing it for a decade, instead of running in the other direction, the gift officers were lining up saying, Oh, let me be your guinea pig. And so I think being able to not only be very skilled in the knowledge and the tools that we think are going to help our fundraising organizations perform better be it at the annual given level, the major gifts level, principal gifts, whatever it is, being able to market ourselves internally to our institutions, in such a way that they are hungry for the value the data, they understand how it can help them do their jobs better. And they're hungry to be at the forefront with you, I think is a really, I mean, and that's sometimes hard to do, because sometimes, you can have all the skills over here. But if you can't make that leap over into being able to apply it to the folks that you're working with it kind of dead in the water.

**Rodger Devine:** thank you for bringing that up. Because I think with all of the talk and excitement, around artificial intelligence, those hard skills and the technology, we also have the soft skills. And so the essential ingredients for success in fundraising are relationship building, listening, communication. So I'm on that note, very few of us arrive to wherever we land without the help of others. So I'm really curious. We know that for fundraising, relationship building is key, but then even in a prospect of all of managing services, how we're doing our work and socializing that with others. I'm curious, do you have a role model or mentor who played a significant role or influenced how you think about your work?

**Karen Isble:** Probably the first. In this space, the first real mentor that I had was my first boss. When I was at University of Michigan, he was a VP of individual giving prospect development reported up to him. And I was new in that role. I had been out of PD for a while, I've been working for a small arts nonprofit as a sort of jack of all trades. And I went from being a researcher and seven year hiatus and then came back and a prospect development role. And this was a VP, who was a great fundraiser, but who also was a massive data geek. And he really gave me a platform to get in front of hundreds of gift officers, Michigan is an incredibly big shop that at the time back in 2006, had no prospective management program. And so I was tasked with creating that. And, you know, usually the first couple of years I was there, I talked to people and say, what is it you're doing again, and I would try to explain that I was trying to sort of create some order out of chaos. So, you know, hundreds and hundreds of gift officers scattered across three, six units of the institution, as well as the central team. And usually the response I got was, Ooh, good luck with that. And so you know, having to be fearless than that I could be fearless because I had this incredible boss, who was like, Go do what Karen's gonna tell you to do some stuff. Let's do it. And, and not needing to feel like he needed to get in front of me. And sort of, you know, set me up for anything. But it was sort of like, here she is, here's her role. Karen, go get 'em. And to have had that level of support, and guidance. He also had actually spoken at an Apra conference a couple of years before I joined his team. So even people within the industry knew him. And he really launched, really launched my higher ed career and most of my role within prospect development. And I'm still grateful to this day, he just recently retired after a, you

know, many, many decades of career in fundraising. And I told him last fall when he told me he was retiring, how grateful I was. But beyond that, I've certainly had any number of managers, other vice presidents, peers in Apra, beyond Apra to count. And I think, I think probably in many ways, what I learned from a lot of them is, again, back to how to work with people. Because as much as I love data and technology, I find I was surprised, I wasn't expecting that I loved managing and coaching people as that was like, not something that I was expecting that I would love as much as I do. And sadly, people aren't as neat and orderly as data can be. So they're hard. And as I have grown in my role, that pool of people that I have to deal with on a regular basis, has become larger, including donors and boards and staff and colleagues. But a lot of what I learned from him, and from so many others is how to work with people. And I think that has really helped me continue to advance in my career. I still to this day credit former Apra board member, Shelly Ratcliffe. She's currently VP for Advancement at Lamet University in Oregon, for putting me on my current path. I was at Michigan happily doing things and she got named as Vice President for Advancement at Occidental many, many years ago. And my first thought was, how did she do that? I don't understand. So you know, I was had just joined the Apra board, she had recently rolled off and I called her and I was like, you don't really know me, but Oh, my God, you gotta tell me how you did this. And that it gave me a rundown that helped me sort of aspirationally think about, okay, what are some of the things I need to do in the coming years, if I think I want to do that. And the more and more I thought about it, I thought I do want to do that. And then ultimately, when I got this job, she was the one who recommended me to the president of this college because she had worked with him before. She did that without telling me and then she pushed me to go for it. And so, you know, I've had so many people along the way who have helped me and Apra has been part of that.

**Rodger Devine:** Thank you so much, Karen, for sharing so many insightful reflections on this network of support, because the technology or tools that are going to ultimately be used by people. So for our audience tuning in, to this podcast, you know, one of these themes more explicitly, indirectly, as we will have technology, it's changing rapidly, it's going to keep evolving. And the people using that that's really the bridge right? The art and science together, we're the left and the right brain, we're the chocolate and the peanut butter. We got to just keep bringing things together. So for those who might not know, I think I understand that you are a sci fi fan and might like Star Trek just a little bit.

**Karent Isble:** Star Trek, Star Wars, all the things.

**Rodger Devine:** Anything with a star in it. So, in a galaxy, maybe not so far away, if you had a time machine, and you could go back earlier in your career at the outset, and give yourself a piece of advice that you wish you would have had that, you know, as you reflect on the industry, and your leadership and your vision, and all of the things that you wished had come true with data and analytics that are now literally a button. Still, you're not ready for primetime just yet. I'm just really curious, in this time machine scenario, honoring the time space continuum. What advice, what's one piece of advice you would have given earlier in your career to yourself, that you think might inspire or help others tuning in today?

**Karen Isble:** Be brave. There were so many times I stopped myself from exploring an opportunity, because I just, I was timid. And it you know, some of that just takes time, you have to grow up and become a mature adult. And, you know, I don't even know if I come back to

myself when I was in my 20s and said to be braver, I don't know if I would have had it been like, I don't know what that means, no. Because there have been times along the way, when I think if I had said, Yes, or jumped on a particular opportunity earlier in my career, where might I be in my career today? And I have loved my career. And it's been great. But there have been times when I have, especially when I've seen others who have who are the same age as I am or things like that, who are, I think, you know, a step or two ahead. I'm like, what did where did I miss earlier? And so I think some of it was for me just being brave. I think there were times that I would also have gone back and said, take that class, go to that training, do that thing, because sometimes we get very caught up in we've got the things to do today. And they're all do and I get that. But I think there are some things even now that I wish I had studied this more or taken advantage of this particular training, to build some of my technical skills beyond what I did. And I think that that could have helped me as well. And so I think that's, that's probably the two things that I would go back and say to myself.

**Rodger Devine:** Thank you for that. And some of the people tuning in today might be brand new to Apra new members, and they have their whole careers ahead of them. And from, you know, an honor and recognition of this various teams, visionary award, is there any advice that you would give to someone tuning in who's new, who's listened to your story and all of the things that you've learned along the way? You've told them to be brave by example, by walking that talk? Is there any other things else on your mind that occur to you that you might encourage them, to inspire some newer members to Apra to consider on the stage?

**Karen Isble:** Oh, thank you, Rodger, I think I would, really say take advantage of this organization. When I first started out as a prospect researcher back in the 90s, when yes, we were still looking at microfiche and I had CD ROMs in my office, and I've done a whole presentation on this. I had old pictures and everything and there was no internet then. And so it's pretty amazing this, the and in fact, the presentation was called to boldly go so I think the group that I gave that gave me a Federation of Planets pin when I came to speak with them. But I remember I had a great boss, my first boss at the Chicago Symphony, Julie Yerco, who has also served Apra, served Apra for many years, and is now leading a nonprofit. She encouraged me to join the Illinois chapter of Apra. And I did and then I met folks like some friends who I still periodically connect with who were all in that sort of Illinois cohort. And they were so welcoming to me who I still didn't really understand what it was I was doing what this field was it was all very new. It was the mid-90s. And it seemed like a very strange job. And I remember going to my very first Apra conference, I think it was in Pittsburgh, in like 1994/95 Somewhere in there. And I was just overwhelmed, I was suddenly in a place where there were hundreds of people who all did the same job that I did. And I was so I was like, oh, this is a real job. Wow. Like, I mean, how I was so excited, just to have found this community of people who were doing this work that in isolation seems so very strange. And, and, and I embrace that, and I have tried to I've hungered for that community ever since. And so I've continued, and that was why I eventually I joined the Apra Illinois Board. And then when I took after my hiatus, of working in an arts organization, and I came back to prospect development, I was running the Apra Michigan board and then was encouraged to, to join the Apra international board. And that was five of the most amazing years of my life, because it also the learning that I had, while I was an active board member, just on how to lead organization, I mean, that helped me that's that informed how I do some of the things that I do now, as a leader in my institution, or sitting on other boards, other nonprofit boards, and I'm incredibly grateful for that. But I had to be brave, because I was terrified to join the Apra international board. I still remember there were these

iconic names of people and that we all talked about in hushed tones. And they're like President can't be on a board with them. And I had a colleague at Michigan at the time, she just looked at me like Are you crazy, why not? And I was like, Oh, but I don't know. So I, you know, I was brave. And I stepped forward. And I have been thrilled ever since to be a part of this community.

**Rodger Devine:** Thank you so much for sharing that particular insight, because we are always within Apra leaning on and depending on our volunteers for their insights. Their things they're seeing in their local communities, their organizations — whether they're caused-based, they're small shop, a large shop, higher ed, healthcare. And so getting involved and overcoming that sense of imposter syndrome and being brave is really important. And that message rings, its really true and I hope it rings loud across the interwebs. And for those who are not familiar CD ROM is a compact disc. Read only memory and you store files on it. You probably some many of the people tuning in today probably never seen one or a floppy disc or microfiche you can go on Wikipedia and look those things up.

In closing I would love to extend gratitude. Thank you so much Karen, for your volunteer service, you are so deserving of this Visionary award and it is my honor to be able to share this time together today with you and Sharise hosting this podcast and my sincere hope that anybody tuning listening in is going to hear something, a piece of the jigsaw puzzle of the tapestry of their career that they're weaving together. Something in Apra's body of knowledge maybe it'll inspire someone to raise their hand and micro volunteer, or join a committee, or their local chapter, or even you know what be bold and apply for the board because you'll be the minds and hands of the future. And we'll work on our time travel machine technology so we can maybe next episode imagine a hundred years out from now.

And I'd also like to thank our Apra staff for making all of the logistics today to deliver this episode possible. So thank you so much from one Apra member to another and you're continuing to inspire many within the community not only through your leadership representation but your investment and advocacy for data analytics, data science, making that a real thing codified that into a role and we look forward to sharing important updates with you and please stay in touch. And thank you for mentioning Shelby and her trajectory and impact on not only the profession but the industry at large so thank you

**Karen Isble:** Absolutely thank you so much Rodger and Sharise it's a pleasure. Again I'm incredibly grateful that I am still connected to Apra and that I've been considered for this incredible honor and I look forward to seeing you all in Seattle this summer.

**Rodger Devine:** Yes and those tuning in we hope to see you there as well and there's still time to sign up and register. Thank you Sharise as well.

**Sharise Harrison:** Thank you everyone, it's a pleasure being here and I just want to echo all of Rodger sentiments and Karen you are a major role model to a lot in the industry including myself. I am very happy to see you in this role and just wanted you to know that listening to your story, learning even more, there's so many people out there that are going to be brave and take risks because of what they heard today, so again thank you

**Karen Isble:** My pleasure thank you.

**Rodger Devine:** Be brave y'all!