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How did we get here? The career paths of higher education fundraisers

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Abstract

University-based fundraisers have career paths that are unique in that most do not come to their careers through traditional training programs that are available to other professions, which may impact their expectations of and experiences in their work. Using the conceptual framework of person-in-environment fit, this study uses qualitative data from semistructured interviews of 44 higher education fundraisers to understand factors influencing their career trajectories. While formal educational backgrounds do not necessarily provide specific skills necessary for a fundraising career, findings show that many rely on on-the-job training, which was at times inadequate. Findings also counter common reports of fundraisers as "falling into the profession" when choosing to join the fundraising field and demonstrate how organizational factors can influence recruitment and retention.

KEYWORDS
fundraising, person-in-environment match, retention

1 | INTRODUCTION

Philanthropic support is integral to the U.S. nonprofit sector: in 2017 alone, more than $410 billion were donated to various nonprofit organizations, with nearly $59 billion designated for education (Giving USA, 2018). Universities and colleges alone garnered $43.6 billion, of which over 44% was given by individuals (Council for Aid to Education, 2018). Regardless of the gift source (i.e., whether supported originated from individuals, corporations, or foundations), it is highly likely that these gifts were facilitated, at least in part, by fundraisers. However, despite

their importance to fundraising, fundraisers remain largely understudied. Although scholarly work examining overall fundraiser demographics (Breeze, 2017; Duronio & Tempel, 1996; Nathan & Tempel, 2017) and fundraising strategies (Goering, Connor, Nagelhout, & Steinberg, 2011; Merchant, Ford, & Sargeant, 2010) exists, most research focuses primarily on donor motivations to give (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2010; Konrath & Handy, 2018; Mount, 1996). As universities rely more and more on philanthropic support to sustain their operations (Thelin & Trollinger, 2014), understanding both who gives and who asks is critically important.

This study specifically explores the experiences of fundraisers at R1[1] colleges and universities, a subsector selected for two reasons. First, there are 81,000 registered members of the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE; the professional association of higher education fundraisers). In contrast, the Association of Fundraising Professionals, which is open to fundraisers from any field, has 30,000 members. These proxies, although admittedly rudimentary, suggest that a substantial number of fundraisers work in higher education settings. Second, like many nonprofits, institutions of higher learning rely on donations to support their operations, and fundraisers have historically raised money for critical needs such as research funds, buildings, student scholarships, and professorships (Caboni, 2010; Iarrobino, 2006). However, the role of higher education fundraisers has arguably become even more important due to reductions in public funding for the sector: although the education field receives substantial philanthropic support, increased public divestment from higher education institutions (Mitchell, Leachman, & Masterson, 2017) suggests a need to rely even more heavily on private philanthropy. In short, "as institutions' desire for private support grows, so too does the demand for successful fundraising professionals" (Shaker & Nathan, 2017, p. 1).

Considering the relative importance of fundraisers to the higher education sector, this article examines motivations and influences that shaped current higher education fundraising leaders. Although some research describing fundraiser pathways into the field exists (Breeze, 2017; Duronio & Tempel, 1996; Nathan & Tempel, 2017), less examined are the influences from which individuals developed the skills and knowledge to become successful fundraisers. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore formative influences that shaped fundraiser career trajectories through the following research questions: How do fundraisers (a) explain their motivations for becoming fundraisers, (b) explain their intentions of continuing in their professions as fundraisers, and (c) characterize their preparation and training for this role?

1.1 | Conceptual framework

This study examines fundraisers' career trajectories through perceived fit with their work environment. This person-in-environment fit has been primarily conceptualized in two ways: complementary and supplementary. Complementary fit occurs "when a person's characteristics 'make whole' the environment or add to it what is missing" (Kristof, 1996, p. 3; Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987). In contrast, supplementary fit occurs when an individual's characteristics match those of his or her environment (Boon & Biron, 2016; Cable & Edwards, 2004). These conceptualizations have been largely (although not exclusively) aligned with two specific types of fit. Supplementary fit is often examined through the perspective of a Person–Organization (P-O) match, while complementary fit has been the overwhelming focus of Person–Job (P-J) research (Boon & Biron, 2016).

1.2 | Fundraiser P-J fit

In contrast to the P-O fit, P-J fit is understood as the "relationship between a person's characteristics and those of the job or tasks that are performed at work" (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005, p. 284). This job–characteristic relationship comprises two variations, a demands–abilities fit and needs–supplies fit. A demands–abilities fit describes a situation in which the individuals' knowledge, skills, and abilities meet the job's demands. Demands include workload and performance requirements, while abilities refer to items such as experience and education (Boon & Biron, 2016). A needs–supplies fit occurs when the individual's needs, desires, or preferences are met by the jobs they perform. Needs include employee interests and preferences, while supplies encompass things such as pay, benefits, training, and promotion opportunities (Boon & Biron, 2016; Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987).

Research suggests that individuals in the nonprofit sector are likely to have higher P-J congruence when prepared for their role (Lee & Sabharwal, 2016; Scroggins, 2008), which rests, in part, on adequate training and appropriate educational pathways. Despite "tremendous growth of the nonprofit management education field," only about 5% of colleges and universities in the United States offer degrees in nonprofit administration (Mirabella, 2007, p. 11). The number of courses on fundraising offered through such programs doubled between 1996 and 2006 and were the second-most frequently offered among all nonprofit management courses. However, there was a 4 percentage-point drop (to 19%) between 1996 and 2006 in fundraising courses as a percentage of all courses (Mirabella, 2007).

At the last update, 338 schools offered a degree in nonprofit management, and 86 offered noncredit courses in areas, including fundraising (http://academic.shu.edu/npo/). There are options for students for formal fundraising education and training; for example, Indiana University (IU) Lilly Family School of Philanthropy at Indiana University is the culmination of IU's longstanding commitment to the study of philanthropy, beginning with the founding of the Center of Philanthropy in 1987 (https://philanthropy.iupui.edu/index.html). Since then, IU developed (and offers) the first bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in philanthropic studies and established the first known academic chair in fundraising (Sargeant & Shang, 2011). The University of Michigan's (Michigan) Development Summer Institute Program offers another example; this program was established in 2007 and has won two CASE awards for fundraising education excellence (CASE, n.d.). The program, available to Michigan undergraduates, includes both a curriculum and a 12-week paid internship pairing students with current Michigan fundraisers in a variety of roles (e.g., public relations, data mining, individual stewardship).

Despite both IU and Michigan's essential contributions to fundraising education and training, there are no necessarily widely available and clear educational pathways into the fundraising field. However, professional associations such as the Association of Fundraising Professionals and others have developed certification programs (e.g., Certified Fund Raising Executive credential) in response to an unmet demand from practicing fundraisers to both develop and demonstrate their expertise (Aldrich, 2016). The rapid growth of such training programs over the past few decades, as Breeze (2017) writes, "[enables the fundraising profession] to be increasingly based on a body of verifiable and learnable knowledge and techniques" (p. 93).

Teachable or technical skills—including effective communication, marketing experience, and an understanding of laws or taxes related to philanthropy (Breeze, 2017; Duronio & Tempel, 1996; Shaker & Nathan, 2017)—are thought to represent the "science" of fundraising.

In contrast, the "art" of fundraising (which has been the emphasis of much research on fundraising professionals) focuses on soft skills such as flexibility, curiosity, and tenacity (Breeze, 2017; Duronio & Tempel, 1996; Education Advisory Board, 2014; Meisenbach, 2008; Shaker & Nathan, 2017). There are two important caveats to the discussion of expertise development. First, most research on fundraiser skills and attributes focuses primarily on frontline fundraisers; although the term "fundraising" suggests a primary focus on directly requesting donations (Klein, 2001), fundraising comprises several different roles—including research, pledge processing, and volunteer management—that do not require solicitation, direct or otherwise (Bowman, 2010). Second, fundraising training programs are not without controversy. Sargeant and Shang (2011), who offer one such program from their United Kingdom-based Philanthropy Centre, argue that the "sector is awash with low-quality training programs based largely on fundraising folklore and the illusion of best practice" (para 5). Whether such statements accurately reflect fundraiser perspectives remains to be seen, but they illuminate the importance of exploring what constitutes appropriate "preparation" for a P-J fit.

Given the lack of a clear and defined education pathway (Mack, Kelly, & Wilson, 2016), organizations must often rely on recruitment and in-house training processes to facilitate a P-J fit (Haggerty, 2015; Opportunity Knocks, 2012). Recruitment of new fundraisers is expensive as it requires an infrastructure of training and mentoring, an up-front cost that may not be feasible for smaller fundraising programs (Smith, 2010). Furthermore, both practitioner and scholar reports suggest there is a shortage of qualified candidates (interpreted here to mean candidates displaying a P-J fit) to fill existing fundraising positions (Joslyn, 2016; Laskowski, 2016; Sullivan, 2013). In a national survey of U.S. nonprofit executive directors, the median vacancy length of a development director position was 6 months, and more than half of the respondents reported an insufficiently qualified candidate pool for their positions (Bell & Cornelius, 2013). While educational institutions accounted for only 10% of their sample, there are other indicators that talent management remains a concern for the sector. CASE's resource library features more than 100 articles examining recruitment, hiring, and turnover, most of which were added in the past 5 years. In one featured article, a vice chancellor of university advancement laments, "Ask any chief advancement officer what keeps her awake at night and the answer will probably relate to people. Identifying, recruiting, developing, and retaining human capital are at the core of our relationship-based business and, not surprisingly, our most daunting challenges" (Hayashida, 2014, p. 18).

Bowman (2010) argues that another form of P-J fit—needs–supply—is a major driving force for lacking recruitment, suggesting that many students do not see fundraising as a viable career path, largely borne from a belief that working at a nonprofit necessarily means unsustainably low salaries. Evidence is mixed regarding wage differentials between nonprofit and for-profit professionals (Bishow & Monaco, 2016; Borkoski & Ruhm, 2016; Handy & Katz, 1998; Handy, Mook, Ginieniewicz, & Quarter, 2007; Leete, 2002; Schumacher, 2009), but fundraisers are often among the highest-paid nonprofit employees and among the highest-paid administrative staff at universities (Lindahl & Conley, 2002; Mesch & Rooney, 2008). In 2016, the average salary of all fundraisers (not just those in higher education) was $70,256 (Association of Fundraising Professionals, 2017). For fundraisers at large organizations, salaries are even higher: Bell and Cornelius (2013) found that development directors (or equivalent positions) at organizations with annual budgets of at least $10 million (a threshold most, if not all, R1 institutions are likely to exceed) have an average salary of approximately $100,000. Lindahl and Conley (2002) suggest that a combination of factors provide justification for fundraisers' comparatively higher salaries. These include fundraisers' advanced education (including both formal education and

specialized training), strong communication skills, and a growing demand for skilled fundraisers (Hall, 2009). Nevertheless, the perception of low salaries is pervasive in the non-profit sector (Faulk, Edwards, Lewis, & McGinnis, 2013; McGinnis, 2011; McGinnis Johnson & Ng, 2016), which may contribute to recruitment challenges.

1.3 | Fundraiser P-O fit

Broadly defined, P-O fit encompasses the compatibility between individuals and their organizations. Kristof (1996) argues that P-O fit occurs when "(a) at least one entity provides what the other needs, or (b) they share similar fundamental characteristics, or (c) both" (p. 4). Of particular interest to P-O is the extent of value congruence. Value congruence refers to values shared between an individual and organization, as well as the extent to which the individual's values match with the organization's culture (Chatman, 1991; Kristof, 1996). Nonprofit employees' values have traditionally been examined through the frame of Public Service Motivation (PSM), which was first defined by Perry and Wise (1990) as "an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations" (p. 368). Rainey and Steinbauer (1999) later expanded on this definition, arguing that PSM is a "general, altruistic motivation to serve the interests of a community of people, a state, a nation, or humankind" (p. 20).

The role of altruism as a defining value among nonprofit employees has been explored by several scholars. For example, de Cooman, de Gieter, Pepermans, and Jegers (2011) found that nonprofit employees were more concerned about altruism than their for-profit counterparts. In addition, Stride and Higgs (2014) found that perceptions of organizational values strongly affected employees' commitment, although fit between individual and organizational values did not. There has been comparatively less research on the specific importance of altruism among fundraisers, but there are indications that value congruence is important. For example, in a study of university-based chief development officers, Nehls (2008) found that a passion for both the work and the institution were critical to success: one interviewee shared that he "counted on a 'belief in the importance of what [he was] doing to persevere through difficult times at the institution" (page 207). More broadly, there is a growing body of research examining fundraisers' own philanthropic activity (a potential indicator of altruism and values fit), although it is less definitive. For example, Jones and Castillo (2017) did not find personal philanthropy to be a driving factor in fundraisers' career selection, although it did surface as an important theme in terms of their career commitment.

Beyond potentially fostering a strong P-O fit between the individual and their organization, value congruence can also influence between-employee relationships. First, value congruence can enhance both formal and informal communication within organizations. Edwards and Cable (2009) argue that value congruence promotes communication because "having shared standards concerning what is important establishes a common frame for describing, classifying, and interpreting events," as well as "[facilitating] the exchange of information and [reducing] the likelihood of misunderstandings" (p. 656). Enhanced communication is also thought to reduce role ambiguity and resolve uncertainty about the organization's priorities, rules, and practices (Edwards & Cable, 2009; Erdogan, Kraimer, & Liden, 2004; Kalliath, Bluedorn, & Strube, 1999), all of which can foster an improved P-O fit. Second, value congruence is perceived to create an environment of trust among colleagues due, in part, to arguments that trust is most likely to develop and be nurtured in environments where people share values (Cable &

Edwards, 2004; Williams, 2001). While the researchers are unaware of existing work examining fundraisers' P-O fit specifically from the perspective of interorganizational communication and trust, both strong communication skills and commitment to integrity have been identified as important characteristics of fundraisers (Breeze, 2017; Duronio & Tempel, 1996; Shaker & Nathan, 2017). Furthermore, the importance of intraorganizational trust and communication are likely heightened in fundraising environments such as higher education, where they must often navigate a complex bureaucracy with multiple players and stakeholders (Nehls, 2008; Tindall, 2009).

A second approach to examining P-O fit is through identification commitment. Identification commitment describes the degree to which an employee connects with his or her organization's purpose and mission (Balfour & Wechsler, 1996; Haggerty, 2015). Research suggests that nonprofit employees are motivated by organizational goals rather than profit maximization (Hansmann, 1980; McGinnis, 2011; Mesch & Rooney, 2008), although it is less clear to what extent this identification commitment can counterbalance concerns about (P-J) issues such as pay or advancement opportunities (Brown & Yoshioka, 2003; Kim & Lee, 2007). Specific to fundraisers, Duronio and Tempel's (1996) groundbreaking study argued that fundraisers entered the profession largely due to previous involvement with an organization whose mission they supported. However, in a small-scale qualitative study examining the formative influences of fundraisers, Jones and Castillo (2017) found that participant aptitude was the strongest driver in identifying fundraising as a career option, writing that "the mission of the organization appears to be secondary to the fit with their skills and abilities" (p. 4). These findings echo Smith's (2010) argument that more successful hiring processes would emphasize general competence for a fundraising position (which Smith describes as primarily the existence of necessary soft skills), followed by assessment of congruence between the prospective employee and "priorities, principles and guiding values [of] the organization" (p. 93).

In summary, much of the research examining fundraiser's careers and trajectories and fit emphasize aspects of P-J fit, namely, employee abilities and job supplies such as pay and benefits, although P-O fit is a popular frame for examining nonprofit careers generally. Of course, it is important to recognize that P-J and P-O fits are neither mutually exclusive nor static. Individuals can incorporate multiple perceptions of P-O fit and P-J fit in their overall narratives (Shipp & Jansen, 2011), and both kinds of fit can influence one another over time (Boon & Biron, 2016; Tak, 2011). High P-O fit may benefit P-J fit; enhanced communication and trust within the organization could reduce ambiguity or confusion about job expectations (Edwards & Cable, 2009). Similarly, individuals with a high P-J fit may be willing to overlook or may not be strongly affected by low P-O fit (Boon & Biron, 2016).

2 | METHOD

Interview participants were selected from a pool of higher education fundraisers originally identified for a research project whose goal was to identify baseline data about the population (e.g., length of service, areas of responsibility). The survey sampling frame (from which interviewees were drawn) was developed through extensive web searches of the R1 higher education with a specific focus on fundraising leadership, defined as those with a director title or higher. As practicing fundraisers in leadership roles at colleges and universities, these individuals have firsthand experiences as fundraisers, as well as specific knowledge about the field and its

challenges, perspectives that are key to addressing the stated research questions. Of the 2,234 individuals contacted to participate in the survey, 830 completed it, a 37% response rate.

Survey respondents were asked whether they would be interested in providing additional information (via interviews) about their experience as higher education fundraisers: 75 expressed interest. All those interested were invited to participate in interviews, although our follow-up efforts attempted to ensure sufficient variability of interview participants, considering characteristics such as gender, geographic region, institution type, and field and position tenure. Table 1 gives the summary statistics of respondents to the survey and to the interviews.

The final sample included 44 interviewees,[2] of whom 20 were male and 24 were female. The participants came from 14 different states, with the majority hailing from universities in the northeast. In terms of institution type, 24 respondents were from public universities, and 20 from private. The average length of professional fundraising experience was 17 years, with respondents ranging from a minimum of 2 years to a maximum of 35. However, when asked about tenure in the current position, the average length dropped to 4 years, and the range substantially shortened, with participants reporting tenures from less than 1 year to 15 years. Furthermore, efforts were made to recruit participants from across the fundraising spectrum: the final sample included professionals whose primary responsibilities lie in prospect research; alumni engagement; and major, planned, and annual giving (Table 2).

Data were collected through semistructured interviews. The focus of the interview was to provide fundraisers an opportunity to share the story of their career trajectory, with detailed discussion about their entrance and advancement in the field. Using themes from existing literature, an initial interview guide was developed and tested with three current higher education fundraisers in April 2017. The protocol was then revised and finalized based on interview length, interviewee feedback, and improved alignment with the research questions. Example questions included "Would you tell me the story of how you became a fundraiser?" "When you got into your role, how did you 'learn' to do your job?," and "What has been your motivation to stay in this field so far?" Follow-up questions probed for more depth regarding participant experiences, specifically regarding the motivating factors for joining the field and challenges faced when learning their roles.[3]

Interviews lasted, on average, 41 min (min: 15 min; max: 72 min); all but four interviews were conducted over the phone. With participant permission, all interviews were audio-

TABLE 1 Survey and interview demographic comparison

	Survey respondents	Initial interview respondents	Final interviewees
Total survey sample: 2,234	$n = 830$ (response rate: 37%)	$n = 73$	$n = 44$
Geographic representation	50 states	20 states	14 states
Public universities	69%	73%	55%
Female	60%	55%	55%
Total fundraising experience	M: 16 years Range: 1–40 years	Not available	M: 17 years Range: 2–35 years
Current position experience	M: 4 years Range: 1–27 years	Not available	M: 4 years Range: 1–15 years

TABLE 2 Individual-level interviewee demographics

			Fundraising experience (years)	
Gender	Institution type	State	Current position	Total
Female	Private	Missouri	1	24
Female	Public	Massachusetts	3	37
Female	Private	Pennsylvania	1	16
Male	Private	Indiana	1	2
Female	Private	New York	1	8
Male	Public	North Carolina	1	17
Male	Public	Virginia	1	22
Male	Private	Utah	2	9
Male	Public	California	2	6
Female	Public	Pennsylvania	3	2
Male	Private	Massachusetts	8	20
Female	Private	Pennsylvania	6	25
Female	Public	Connecticut	3	17
Male	Private	New York	1	7
Female	Private	Pennsylvania	3	25
Female	Public	Hawaii	1	13
Male	Private	Pennsylvania	12	20
Female	Private	Pennsylvania	3	30
Female	Public	Pennsylvania	2	15
Male	Private	Pennsylvania	15	35
Female	Private	Indiana	12	25
Male	Public	Michigan	1	8
Female	Private	Pennsylvania	10	35
Female	Private	Pennsylvania	3	3
Female	Public	Kentucky	1	30
Female	Private	Pennsylvania	15	30
Female	Public	Michigan	1	14
Male	Public	Michigan	15	24
Female	Private	Connecticut	1	22
Male	Public	Michigan	2	8
Male	Private	Pennsylvania	4	10
Female	Public	New York	1	5
Male	Public	Kentucky	1	28
Female	Public	Massachusetts	13	30
Male	Private	Pennsylvania	5	15
Male	Public	Virginia	2	9

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Gender	Institution type	State	Fundraising experience (years)	
			Current position	Total
Male	Public	North Carolina	14	29
Male	Private	Pennsylvania	8	15
Female	Public	Massachusetts	1	12
Female	Public	California	4	4
Male	Public	North Carolina	1	4
Male	Public	Michigan	1	13
Female	Public	Oklahoma	2	5
Female	Public	Missouri	1	27

recorded and professionally transcribed,[4] resulting in 482 pages of single-spaced text. Participants were provided a copy of their transcript, as well as the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym; all identifying information (e.g., names, locations, titles) was changed to protect participant confidentiality. Finally, participants were also asked if they would like to be included in future rounds of the project (e.g., for follow-up interviews or member checks); all agreed.

Interview transcripts were analyzed using the qualitative software Dedoose (version 8.2). Transcribed interviews were first read for general understanding and were then reread and coded to identify recurring themes and concepts. Coding was iterative and occurred simultaneously with interviews, an approach that allowed for adjustment of the interview protocol in order to follow up on emerging themes as needed (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Some text excerpts were overcoded (i.e., assigned more than one category code), and others were deemed not relevant to the research questions at hand, thus remaining uncoded. Coding progressed in three stages. In the first stage, descriptive codes restated or summarized key points in the interviewees' career trajectories, including their preparation, skill development, and initial attraction to the field. As data collection progressed, new transcripts were coded to either fit existing codes, or new codes were generated. This first cycle of coding resulted in 79 unique codes. In the second stage, codes were clarified and, in some cases, either merged or further delineated. The remaining 51 codes were then clustered into 10 thematic categories, which were reassessed through the theoretical frame of P-J and P-O fits. In the final stage, code patterns were examined both between and across demographic subcategories (e.g., tenure, institution type). To ensure data quality, the primary coder engaged with a critical inquiry group and discussed emerging themes and findings with other researchers on the project.

3 | FINDINGS

3.1 | Motivations to join and remain

3.1.1 | Accidental circumstances but active decisions

As discussed earlier, literature suggests that there exists no formal pathway into fundraising, either through education or a shared professional background (Burlingame, 1997; Sargent &

Shang, 2011). This raises the question of whether there exist clear motivations to pursue fundraising as a profession and, if so, what those motivations may be. To this end, a significant focus of the interviews was providing participants the opportunity to share their stories, including both their initial introduction to the field and their career progression. When specifically asked about their entrance into the field, many participants described an accidental or circumstantial entrance, with several responding that they "fell into [the profession]". For example, April, a major gifts officer at a school in the medical field, said that, "like many people in this field … [she] fell into fundraising." Another participant, Michael, a university-level major gifts fundraiser, described his entrance similarly, saying, "I think I wasn't looking for a career in fundraising when I first got that first job in the annual giving office doing direct mail…. I was honestly looking for whatever I could get."

These responses were not unique: nearly one-third of respondents specifically used the phrase of "falling into" the profession or described their entry as "accidental", and this language was utilized by participants regardless of length of tenure in the field. Despite assertions of accidental entry, however, many participants also provided additional context to their statements, sharing the active decision-making processes that led to them joining the fundraising field. For example, shortly after saying she "fell into" fundraising, April discussed how she weighed the importance of a fundraising background, saying that "I recognized that I would need some development experience to climb the ladder within a nonprofit." Gracie, another participant who characterized her entrance as accidental, also considered the potential benefits of fundraising experience, thinking to herself, "Gracie, go there, do that job, learn how to do that because that's (A), where the money is [in her field] and (B), that's how you're going to get to be in a management position faster."

These typical responses offer substantial context to the topic of field entrance. Participant language echoes themes of accidental entry from literature (Breeze, 2017; Duronio & Tempel, 1996; Nathan & Tempel, 2017), potentially suggesting that field growth (i.e., more educational and training opportunities, increased opportunity) has not affected pathways into the profession. However, these findings do offer some nuance to our understanding of "accidental" entry as most participants who described themselves as "falling into the profession" also articulated an active decision-making process that weighed future professional payoffs that would result from fundraising experience.

This "accidental" but "active decision-making" process is particularly interesting given that several participants—regardless of the nature of their entry into the field—described their pre-entry knowledge of fundraising and the fundraising profession as minimal or even nonexistent. For example, Jordan, a development director at a university in the Midwest, described his movement into fundraising as one stemming from a specific purpose of finding "the cleanest path of upward mobility in higher education." Although Jordan ultimately identified development as the ideal position to achieve this goal, even going so far as to call it a "no-brainer," he also discussed a general lack of awareness about the fundraising field prior to entering, saying "I have a master's degree in higher education, had worked in higher ed, and never heard a word about higher ed development in my master's program or in some of my conversations with other people in the industry." In short, regardless of limited information about the specific tasks of fundraising professionals, fundraising was identified as being useful in advancing one's career.

3.1.2 | Connection to and benefits of higher education

Beyond just understanding participants' introduction to the field of fundraising, the interviews also elicited information about the factors motivating their continued commitment to the

profession, a particularly useful line of inquiry given the sample's average tenure in the field (17 years). By far, the most common response offered regarding motivation to remain a fundraiser was the connection to "meaningful" work about which they could be passionate (21 respondents), with five specifically sharing a strong belief in and dedication to education.

For Mark, a dean of advancement at a large public university, his belief in the importance of higher education has been a specific driver in his more than 20 years of experience in fundraising: "I like working for institutions of higher learning and helping young people get their degrees.... I feel like when I go to work every day, I'm helping do something important. I'm helping people." Here, Mark articulates both an emotional connection to the specific cause of education and a direct link from his work to the university's goal, a common theme among participants. In fact, several participants also frequently referenced their unique contribution to the cause of higher education via fundraising, expressing appreciation that their work was so critical to achieving the university's mission. As Sarah, a director in donor relations from a northeastern university explains:

> Once I got into fundraising and realized how important it is and the difference that we as fundraisers, particularly in higher ed, can make for so many people that may or may not even realize that we exist, that is so incredibly important to me. I have an overwhelming feeling of gratitude all the time, which is a really great thing to have, and that comes from understanding the importance of generosity.

Despite the vast number of fundraisers in the sample who described their entry into the field as accidental or circumstantial, nearly all also assert that they made a definitive decision to "become" a fundraiser, a decision often informed by understanding the importance of their work. Sarah's experience is particularly illustrative of this point: although she originally "fell into" fundraising, once she knew "what it was all about," she asked to stay at the university as a fundraiser even though her position ended, and she had originally planned to move to a different aspect of university administration.

The second most common theme of responses regarding motivation to remain in the fundraising profession related to circumstances related to working in higher education. Rather than describing the fundraiser's connection to the work, these responses highlighted advantages of being a fundraising professional specifically within a higher education context, namely, institutional benefits, support, and stability. In general, institutional benefits included P-J topics such as pay ("I also realized that the money was better") and retirement ("The university has a terrific retirement program. It's a 2:1 match and you're not going to find that very many places"), and three respondents also discussed the value of tuition remission as a compelling reason to remain in the field ("I'm getting a free doctoral degree as part of the deal").

Participants also articulated P-O benefits, speaking highly of the institutional support they received for their work, including the opportunity to operate within a larger community of fundraisers both within the institution and as part of a network of fundraisers within their specific field of practice (e.g., major gifts) and within the overall sector. For Gracie, an annual fund director for a school within a larger, decentralized university fundraising system, this consideration was extremely important when weighing the opportunity to leave the university for another development job. She said, "My own experience has been a lot of informal or intentional conversations with colleagues ... we have quarterly meetings ... with all representatives from schools and centers.... At an agency it would be really different." Here, Gracie identifies different ways that the university environment specifically supports her learning, both through

informal and formal channels, an important component of her commitment to university fundraising. Participants discussed, at length, their (largely self-driven) process for learning how to be a successful fundraiser, a theme that will be discussed in greater depth later. However, the institutional culture that both actively and passively supports cross-collaboration and learning was an important source of support for participants and a driver in their desire to remain within higher education fundraising.

Finally, participants also extolled the virtues of working as a fundraiser within the higher education system as a function of both institutional and occupational stability. Separate from themes regarding organizational benefits or culture, these responses addressed the relative permanency of higher education fundraising compared with fund development within the larger nonprofit sector, which participants' stories painted as unpredictable or even volatile. For example, Pauline, a fund development director from a university in the northeast, contrasts her current university experience with her previous work at a small community-based organization:

> And day two, like literally half my company was laid off. I wasn't laid off because I was a fundraiser. And I was like well, I guess I made the right choice ... but it was very difficult ... it was like "Oh, what checks did you get in the mail today? Are we gonna meet payroll?" That's difficult. It's wonderful, like it's benevolent, but it's hard to sustain for your life, as a person. It's great if you can volunteer for those organizations, but it's really hard to say I'm gonna be in that kind of grassroots non-profit world for a real professional career for your whole life. So being in higher education, it gives you the resources that you need; it gives you all the tools that you would hope to have in order to be successful.

Here, Pauline draws a distinction between organizations where fundraisers have the potential to develop a "real" career—higher education—and smaller, grassroots organizations where such work may be underresourced and unsustainable. Although several fundraisers—including Pauline—discussed performance pressures and challenges, many also expressed appreciation for their respective universities' (and, in some cases, schools') overall financial stability.

3.2 | Preparation and training

3.2.1 | Self-motivation as a cultural norm

Closely connected to the discussion of pathways into the field, another area greatly discussed in current fundraiser literature is the issue of training. The educational pathway literature discusses at length the importance of a set of expectations for the role, including a shared body of knowledge that all professionals within the field are expected to know (Sargeant & Shang, 2011). No participants pointed to clear education pipelines that led to them to become a fundraiser, although most could identify ways that their educational (and in some cases, professional) backgrounds benefited them as fundraisers. Given the lack of an educational background that explicitly prepared them for their roles, participants were instead asked to discuss how they learned to "be" a fundraiser. Consistent with literature (Breeze, 2017), most discussed a process of self-directed learning, usually by explicitly asking for training ("We bring in some consultants that would do some trainings, two- or three-day workshops, that kind of thing.... I had to really fight for that"); mentorship ("I have sought out mentors everywhere I go"); or, in

some cases, the opportunity to shadow a more experienced fundraiser ("the best they could do is we'll go out with some of the other fundraisers and just watch them").

As demonstrated above, most participants discussed their job learning as a constellation of factors—mentorship, on-the-job experience, shadowing—that were accumulated largely because of self-determination. While the literature frames fundraiser preparation primarily in terms of self-teaching (Breeze, 2017; Shaker & Nathan, 2017), participants rarely described it using those words, instead preferring the concept self-motivating (or, in some cases, self-directing/determining). This is an important distinction as these same concepts were frequently named by participants as critical to success in the fundraising profession. In fact, rather than emphasize a specific type of skill (e.g., communication) or body of knowledge (e.g., legal exper-tise), self-motivation was the most commonly named characteristic of successful fundraisers, mentioned by 25 interviewees. For example, when asked if she thought there were ideal profes-sional or educational backgrounds to become a successful fundraiser, Amber, a director of development in the Midwest, said no but went on to clarify that she did think there were ideal characteristics:

> If we are thinking about within higher education, specifically, I think being self-motivated is an important attribute, because even if you have ... if you work for an institution that has great metrics, you still need a significant amount of motivation to reach those goals.... I say all the time, I do not understand how people from out-side of the university come in and are expected to raise significant funds within a certain amount of time. There's a huge learning curve, and no training programs, really, to be seen.

Here, Amber contextualizes self-motivation within a system where there are clear metrics that would demonstrate success but little training to support that development, an environment that echoes many respondents' current experiences within university fundraising. Taken together, this combination seems to suggest that, rather than challenges around the practice of fundraising itself, ability to self-direct learning (either by identifying mentors or advocating for specific trainings) may be an implicit expectation of the field and one that is potentially unclear to newcomers. Thus, the inability to self-motivate to learn fundraising may unintentionally serve as an indicator of poor P-J fit while also representing an unacknowledged norm of the profession.

3.2.2 | The potential of preparation

When asked about preparation for their careers in fundraising, several respondents questioned whether preparation was even possible as, in their words, the skills needed for success were sometimes understood as an art and other times as a science; in fact, six participants discussed the challenges of preparation specifically in the terms of "art" and "science." As discussed by participants, fundraising's unique blend of soft and hard skills creates challenges for developing an effective training tool or preparation guide for budding fundraisers, raising important ques-tions about whether success in fundraising was necessarily a teachable (or learnable) skill. For example, Jeffrey, a senior vice president of development at a southeastern university, articulated the challenge in defining what makes a successful fundraiser, saying:

I'm not gonna say it's an innate ability, I do not believe that. Some people try to make it scientific and say you need to have between five and seven touches over a period of 18 to 24 months. I do not believe that either. I started here [a few months ago], I met a [donor] over the course of two to three meetings. The third meeting I asked [them] for $100,000 and [they] said yes. I just think you have to know when to do it.

Despite asserting that fundraising success was not necessarily a function of innate ability, Jeffrey concludes his comment with the statement that when to ask is instinctual, and this instinct was important to his success. Other participants who invoked the "art vs. science" phrase discussed the latter in terms of specific metrics such as number of visits. Ian, a director of development services in the Midwest, specifically identifies this as a struggle for many gift officers as there is a perceived shift from relationship management (art) to metrics management (science): "They don't see … why they should be tracking metrics in a system…. They see their job as managing relationships and all this other stuff is just not part of it." In short, although there remains no firm consensus among participants about the "true" nature of fundraising work, the tension between art and science has manifested, in some regard, as a struggle between different types of P-J match: those aspects of the work that are measurable and metrics-driven and those that are less easily observed, such as relationship building.

Finally, while the lack of fundraising training is potentially a function of sample bias (the participant experience averages 17 years, suggesting their knowledge of educational pathways may be dated), participants also consistently struggled to articulate appropriate bodies of learning that would aid individuals entering the field today. This is significant given that the interview sample was specifically focused on individuals in leadership positions, suggesting at least some level of responsibility for hiring and managing future fundraisers. Although seven interviewees mentioned the University of Michigan's Development Summer Institute Program, Indiana University's Lilly School of Philanthropy, or a combination of the two, the remaining participants were unaware of any existing programs within higher education that prepare future fundraisers. Given the lack of a clear educational pathway, participants stated that they assess potential competence and job fit based on characteristics such as curiosity (which was often also tied to self-motivation), especially for candidates with no previous fundraising experience. For example, when asked about how he learned in his first fundraising job, Ian said the following:

I keep going back to curiosity, because I think that's been something that's really helped me in my career, and it's something that I really look for when I'm hiring people. Because I took initiative on my own to try and learn about other people's roles, and other people's work.

However, not all participants shared this view on the importance of what might be called "innate" characteristics such as curiosity. For some participants, such as Christian, a development director at a western university who began his career in alumni relations, educational background or prior preparation is less important as he conceptualizes fundraising as a collection of teachable skills and identifies on-the-job learning as generally sufficient for success, saying, "I mean, I sort of laugh sometimes with other fundraisers. What we do is pretty easy. It's pretty straightforward."

In sum, participant experiences echoed existing research and literature suggesting that there exists no formal education process nor skillset required before becoming a fundraiser. While there are degree programs and training programs in nonprofit management and philanthropy, including some with fundraising courses, there is no legally required credential for the field. Thus, participants emphasized the importance of self-motivation (and, to a lesser extent, curiosity) as a key characteristic of successful fundraisers, both in the learning process and in their work in the field. Without a formal body of knowledge demonstrating competence or preparation, some participants emphasized the value of these characteristics in fundraiser success, including evaluation of candidates in the hiring process. However, participants were split regarding their views of the relative importance of these traits and concrete teachable skills for a successful fundraising career, a divide that also seems to mirror existing tensions about the fundamental nature of fundraising skills.

4 | DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the mechanisms through which fundraisers come to their professions and to better understand and contextualize their formative experiences. Although interviewees often described their entry into the profession as "accidental", they also articulated active decision-making processes. This apparent contradiction complicates anecdotal evidence and previous literature suggesting that fundraising is neither viewed nor pursued as a full-fledged career option. There was overlap between "accidental" entry language and understanding of P-O fit at field entry, and this held true regardless of the tenure in the profession. Participants were also more likely to describe their entry as accidental when their initial interest was organization- and mission-based rather than job-based. Eventual recognition of a P-J match led participants to actively choose to remain in the field and, in more than one participant's words, "become a fundraiser." These findings suggest that narratives of accidental entry may persist simply because some fundraisers' careers initially stem from attraction to the organization rather than the profession.

In terms of factors influencing interviewees' willingness to remain in the profession, previous literature suggests that P-J congruence may play a significant role in fundraiser retention. For participants whose entry into fundraising was "accidental," recognition of a P-J fit was critical to *initial* retention. Across the broader sample, however, participants referenced a mix of P-J and P-O factors, including meaningfulness of their work and advantages of fundraising within a higher education context, including high pay, formal and informal networks of support, and institutional stability. This does not suggest that P-J fit is unimportant to retention or that it was insignificant to our participants; instead, findings indicate that participants more consciously considered and articulated P-O fit when weighing the benefits of continuing a fundraising career within higher education. Setting was critical as many stressed differences between fundraising for well-resourced universities and smaller community-based organizations. In addition, interviewees consistently discussed the attainment of fundraising skills as critical for career mobility, a needs–supplies P-J fit. While this may suggest that the fundraisers in this sample exhibit stronger devotion to individual goals than to organizational mission, participants frequently cited a connection to the overall cause of education as a motivation to remain in the field, another indication that organizational factors are critical to fundraiser retention.

Regarding role preparation and skill development, interviewees reflected that their educational backgrounds did not explicitly equip them for fundraising, and many reported on-the-job training to be inadequate. Furthermore, despite a sample comprising only higher education leaders, most with significant fundraising experience and all with some form of management responsibility, few were familiar with formal education programs such as those offered by Indiana and Michigan. More importantly, many remained skeptical about whether academic programs alone could effectively "teach" fundraising, even as they showed an eagerness for further training, education, and mentoring. This is evident as many respondents were willing to spend their own time and resources to achieve their learning goals. This tension may suggest dissatisfaction with the training opportunities experienced by our interviewees, rather than a general lack of confidence in the importance and potential of training, mainly if such preparation included mentoring and experiential learning. Finally, although self-motivation and, to a lesser extent, curiosity were identified as potential areas that would indicate P-J fit, few interviewees articulated whether or how these traits are currently operationalized and evaluated during the hiring process.

4.1 | Limitations

The conclusions drawn from this study should be considered within the broader landscape of fundraiser research as generalizability is not a goal of qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Furthermore, our findings should not be interpreted to reflect the views and experiences of all higher education fundraisers, let alone those working in other fields. Our sampling frame included only R1 institutions, and despite efforts to ensure variability among interviewees, the sample could not capture those fundraisers whose contact information was not available online. In addition, our sample intentionally focused on those in positions of fundraising leadership, most of whom had substantially more experience than the broader population of fundraisers; thus, their experiences and perspectives may not reflect more recent changes in the broader fundraiser training landscape. Finally, despite efforts to recruit participants from diverse fundraising practices, most interviewees described their work as having a frontline focus. As a result, our findings may be more applicable to those in similar roles.

4.2 | Conclusion and implications

One of this study's goals was to understand current higher education fundraisers' formative experiences through the perspective of a person-in-environment fit. Our findings demonstrate several implications for both research and practice. Regarding the former, studies should more empirically examine the balance of P-O and P-J fit in fundraisers' career pathways, including the perception of fundraising ability as key to career advancement. Given indications that more people are selecting fundraising as a first career (Nathan & Tempel, 2017), and considering previous research that suggests 10 years as a break point for career stability (Duronio & Tempel, 1996), additional research might explore the experiences of early career fundraisers to better assess the extent to which strong P-O fit can or does influence self-directed efforts to enhance P-J fit. Importantly, more research across the fundraising spectrum is needed, as our study and others primarily focus on those fundraisers responsible for direct gift solicitation, only one type of job within the fundraising field.

In terms of practice, if a specific educational background or credential to indicate preparedness for a fundraising career is lacking, hiring managers may instead consider ways of assessing traits such as self-motivation and curiosity. For example, one interviewee tasked applicants with compiling brief dossiers of hiring committee members, while another asked them to share their process for preparing for their interview. Hiring managers may consider how their interview process weights assessment of both organizational (e.g., Why is the university's mission meaningful to you?, What are some of your personal values and how do those align with the university's?) and job fit (e.g., How are your skills a match for this position?) as many of our interviewees articulated a "fit" cycle of initial attraction to the organization, recognition of aptitude for their role, and identification of both job- and institution-specific benefits.

While training and turnover can be costly for organizations, our findings suggest that organizational fit alone can be a fruitful entry point for entry-level fundraisers who are broadly interested in or committed to working within a higher education institution. Furthermore, in terms of P-J fit, hiring managers should consider the breadth of skills required for any given position, as those with multiple types of responsibilities (e.g., direct solicitation, event planning, grant research) may overemphasize their less-skilled areas as indicators of poor overall job fit (Haggerty, 2015). Finally, regarding training and onboarding, managers should consider whether there exists an implicit expectation to self-learn fundraising or if they might more explicitly frame a self-developed learning plan as an opportunity to practice foundational fundraising skills and qualities (e.g., research, relationship building, tenacity).

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ENDNOTES

[1] Doctoral universities with highest research activity as identified by the Carnegie Classification system

[2] Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam (2003) identify fewer than 50 participants as the ideal sample size for qualitative studies utilizing interviews as larger sample sizes can become unwieldy and usually do not elicit additional evidence due to saturation.

[3] This project received approval from Institutional Review Board of the authors' university.

[4] All interviewees were offered the opportunity to review interview transcripts.

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