

**Everything is not Pleasantville': Reframing Public Relations Encroachment as Work  
Group Autonomy in Higher Education**

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**Abstract**

Encroachment in nonprofits has been primarily defined as a structural outcome where a senior fundraiser manages the public relations function rather than a CEO. However, few studies actually explore the critical relationship between the public relations and fundraising functions' corresponding departments. These relationships are important to understand because they can have an impact that goes beyond the bounds of reporting relationships. As a result, the purpose of this study is to build on the foundation of encroachment research by examining the interdepartmental relationship between public relations and fundraising in higher education through the lens of work group autonomy. Results indicate that senior public relations officers at colleges and universities that raise the most gift dollars have positive working relationships with their fundraising counterparts. However, "everything is not Pleasantville." In fact, the findings demonstrate that this interdepartmental relationship needs to be constantly cultivated to ensure that public relations departments have sufficient autonomy to contribute to fundraising efforts as well as meet the broader communication needs of the institution.

**Introduction**

Public relations has been defined as an organizational "management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends" (Broom & Sha, 2013, p. 5). This definition represents a broad approach to public relations as relationship building with all publics that are impacted by or have an impact on an organization (Bowen, 2006; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). As a result, public relations scholars have defined fundraising, commonly referred to as development or advancement, as a specialization of public relations that focuses specifically on donor, volunteer and member publics (Broom & Sha, 2013; Kelly 1991, 1998; Waters, 2008, 2009).

However, fundraisers are not usually taught their discipline from a public relations perspective (Mack, Kelly, & Wilson, 2016). In fact, they receive their training in a variety of disciplines, such as marketing, nonprofit management and higher education administration. Moreover, fundraising is typically not practiced as a specialization of public relations (Kelly, 1993b, 1994; Swanger & Rodgers, 2013; Wilson & Kochhar, 2014). In fact, it is more likely that public relations operates in the shadow of the fundraising. Lee (2011) examined the history of nonprofit public relations and concluded that it had only achieved second-tier status in the nonprofit sector because it has “largely been practiced and researched as an extension of fundraising, thus ghettoizing it from broader sectorial applications and benefits” (p. 329). The dominance of fundraising over public relations is particularly evident among U.S. colleges and universities (Hall & Baker, 2003; Kelly, 1993a, 1994; Wilson & Kochhar, 2014).

One reason fundraising seems to take priority at U.S. colleges and universities is because the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) has long supported and advocated an “advancement” model for colleges and universities with one vice president who oversees public relations, fundraising, and alumni relations (Ligenfelter, 2001). In many cases, this department is led by a senior fundraiser because of the need to raise significant sums of money to accomplish educational aims (Council for Aid to Education, 2017; Giving USA, 2017). Another reason is that both fundraising and public relations use similar strategic planning processes and communication techniques (e.g., Hall, 2002; Kelly, 2001). Hall (2002) observed that the similarity in relationship-building approaches of public relations and fundraising often results in cooperation and collaboration between the two functions; however, Lee (2011) noted that the history of these two functions demonstrates that collaboration and coordination can sometimes turn into subordination.

However, college and university leaders are recognizing the critical role of public relations as institutions of higher learning face reputational challenges that arise from increased competition for students, changing student demographics, uncertainty about funding sources, concern about high tuition and student debt, pressure from activist groups, and the demand for responsiveness and transparency created by social media (e.g., Chronicle of Higher Education, 2013, 2014).

These issues have prompted scholars to examine the structural relationship between public relations and fundraising in colleges and universities using the framework of encroachment (Hall & Baker, 2003; Kelly 1993a, 1994; Wilson & Kochhar, 2014). Encroachment has been primarily defined in the literature as a structural outcome where the public relations function reports to a senior fundraiser rather than the organization’s CEO (Kelly, 1993a; Swanger, 2011). However, little research has been conducted to understand the relationships between the functions’ corresponding departments that can enhance or impede interdepartmental cooperation and coordination regardless of structure. These relationships are important to understand because they can have an impact on both departments that goes beyond the bounds of reporting relationships. In addition, a few scholars have talked about encroachment in terms of autonomy, noting that public relations departments need autonomy to be effective in counseling senior managers and participating in strategic decision-making (Bowen, 2006; Huan & Su, 2009).

As a result, the purpose of this study is to build on the foundation of encroachment research by examining the interdepartmental relationship between public relations and fundraising in higher education through the lens of work group autonomy. This study uses a

theoretical framework that builds on the encroachment literature's focus on functions and structure by integrating public relations management and relationship building perspectives (e.g., Broom & Sha, 2013) with the organizational behavior concept of work group autonomy (e.g., Langfred, 2000) — theories applicable at the department level. To this end, researchers conducted qualitative interviews with 23 senior public relations officers at public and private colleges and universities where fundraising is a priority and public relations autonomy may be diminished.

## **Literature Review**

### *Encroachment*

Lee (2013) identified three types of encroachment: authority, structural, and functional. Authority encroachment is “the practice of assigning the top management role in the public relations department to someone from outside public relations” (Dozier, 1988, p. 9). This means that an encroached upon public relations department is managed by someone who lacks public relations training or experience (Lee, Jared & Heath, 1999). Structural encroachment is the result of the public relations function being subsumed by another function. According to Coombs and Holladay (2009), this type of encroachment represents a loss of power that stems from public relations practitioners not being seen as part of management; and, as a result, the public relations function is “placed in the care of the institution” (p. 93). Functional encroachment happens when other organizational functions engage in activities that are traditionally within the domain of public relations.

Scholars have argued that authority and structural encroachment distance the senior communicator from the dominant coalition and, as a result, a holistic, ethical public relations perspective is not included in organizational decision-making. In contrast, public relations becomes a low-level support function relegated to “explaining and justifying others' decisions made independent of the public relations implications” (Broom & Dozier, 1986, p. 42). Kelly (1994) compared encroachment to placing “environmental blinders” (p. 4) on an organization causing it to focus its relationship-building efforts exclusively on some publics (e.g., donors) while ignoring its relationships with others (e.g., community residents, employees, government, or activists). Bowen (2006) explained that encroachment limits the ability of public relations to act as an ethical counselor to management (Bowen, 2006). Other scholars have argued that encroachment results in decreased organizational effectiveness (Bowen, 2006; L.A. Grunig et al., 2002) and increased negative consequences for organizations, such as “loss of revenue, increased costs, regulation, disruption of operations, increased taxation, decreased productivity, opposition to expansion, negative publicity, damaged reputation, and so forth” (Kelly 1993b, p. 363).

Scholars have identified a variety of factors that contribute to encroachment. However, much of this research was based on encroachment by marketing departments in for-profit organizations. Specifically, scholars in this area have studied the impact of management-level factors. Lauzen (1992a) found that encroachment is less likely when public relations practitioners aspire to enact the manager role, have developed competencies to enact that role, and believe that public relations is a powerful organizational function. Also, scholars have reported that the following factors were related to encroachment: access to the dominant coalition (i.e., the group of organizational leaders who have the power and influence to make strategic decisions), organizational crises (Lee et al., 1999), gender (Lauzen 1992b; i.e., when the

top public relations practitioner is female rather than a male), marketing imperialism (Lauzen, 1991), length of practitioner experience (Lauzen 1992b), and the values and beliefs of top management about public relations (Peterson & Martin, 1996; Van Ruler & De Lange, 2003).

#### *Encroachment in the Nonprofit Sector*

As noted earlier, encroachment has been studied primarily in for-profit organizations. Research has also addressed encroachment on public relations by a variety of organizational functions, including finance, legal, and marketing (Huang & Su, 2009; Laborde & Pompper, 2006; Lauzen 1991; Lee et al., 1999; Peterson & Martin, 1996). However, outside the pioneering work of Kathleen Kelly in the 1990s, little research has been conducted to understand the dynamics of encroachment between the public relations and fundraising functions of charitable nonprofit organizations. In addition, most of the research in this area has focused on structural outcomes. A consistent finding in this literature shows relatively low frequencies of authority or structural encroachment and higher frequencies of separate departments where the risk of functional encroachment is a possibility (Hall & Baker, 2003; Kelly, 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Swanger & Rodgers, 2013; Wilson & Kochhar, 2014). Moreover, qualitative interviews have shown that both public relations practitioners and fundraisers believe the two departments should be separate but equal in organizational influence (Kelly, 1993b; Swanger & Rodgers, 2013). Based on the results of these studies, it is not surprising that scholars have found little empirical support for Kelly's (1991) contention that fundraising should be considered a public relations specialization (Kelly, 1993b, 1994; Swanger & Rodgers, 2013; Wilson & Kochhar, 2014).

#### *Encroachment in the Higher Education*

Research on encroachment in higher education has found that dependence on fundraising (Kelly, 1993b), as well as the mission of the institution (Kelly, 1994), were related to public relations encroachment. These two factors seem to be interrelated. Kelly (1993a, 1994) found that the education subsector produced both the highest and the lowest rates of structural encroachment. Private universities and colleges had the highest proportion of structural encroachment at 50%, while public comprehensive and doctorate-granting universities had the lowest proportion at 8%. According to Kelly (1993a), this pattern reflects the traditional funding patterns for different types of educational institutions. Educational institutions that are perceived to depend more on private gifts have higher levels of structural encroachment, while institutions that depend more on public funding have lower levels of encroachment. However, Wilson and Kochhar (2014) found that these patterns of structural encroachment do not hold true for today's top fundraising schools. They proposed that differences due to governance and mission may not matter when schools pass a certain fundraising threshold. Additionally, they suggested that because public colleges and universities have had to rely increasingly on private dollars to fund their operations due to decreases in public funding, there is now little difference in encroachment potential between public and private institutions of higher learning.

Of particular relevance to this study, Hall and Baker (2003) found that in universities that follow the institutional advancement model, where public relations, fundraising and alumni relations are housed in the same department, there was a stronger correlation between strategic-managerial (building long-term relationships) and historical-technical (communicating with publics) characteristics than in universities with separate and distinct departments. This led to the authors' conclusion that when the departments are "integrated under a single vice president, the

public relations function is perceived, overall, to be less important than when it stands independent of fund raising (sic)” (p. 142).

*Rethinking Encroachment as Autonomy*

As explained in the introduction to this study, the encroachment research is based on the idea that the public relations function should not be limited in its ability to establish and maintain relationships with a wide variety of organizational stakeholders. While some research has explored the factors that lead to the structural outcomes of encroachment, so far scholars have not taken into account the need for public relations departments to establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with coalitions and work groups within an organization. For instance, a public relations department can be a vital partner for fundraisers as it seeks to improve university visibility and reputation, which can impact donor recruitment and cultivation. Likewise, when a fundraising department cooperates with public relations managers, potential issues with donors and donations can be addressed before they turn into organizational crises. The opposite can also be true. Non-cooperative public relations and fundraising departments can potentially impede each other’s success and produce negative consequences for an organization. These interdepartmental relationships impact not only the department’s reporting structure, but also its ability to counsel management, cooperate with other departments, and engage in two-way communication with important organizational stakeholders. In fact, this type of integration and cross-functional collaboration are increasingly important for public relations in the for-profit sector (e.g., Arthur W. Page Society, 2016).

Therefore, in order to advance scholarship in this area, it is important to make a distinction between reporting structures of organizational functions and the interdepartmental relationships that exist independent of those structures. This is because the current focus on structural outcomes has not demonstrated empirically that authority, structure, or functional encroachment of public relations produces the negative organization-level impacts predicted by scholars. On the contrary, it may be the case that some public relations departments at colleges and universities can have significant organization-level impact under a variety of structural arrangements relative to fundraising. For example, L. A. Grunig and colleagues (2002) found that public relations managers who were not part of the senior management team could still be involved in strategic management if (1) the senior public relations officer had access to senior leaders and (2) public relations managers were allowed enough freedom from other organizational managers. Additionally, Neill (2015) found that domain expertise, industry type, organizational hierarchy, CEO preferences, and organizational culture were factors in determining which functions contributed to organizational decision making. As a result, this research seeks to broaden the scholarly conversation about encroachment by reframing it in terms of work group autonomy. This approach shifts the focus from thinking of the public relations function as a passive victim of imperialism by other departments or of neglect by unenlightened organizational leaders to thinking about public relations departments as interdepartmental relational partners that can influence relationship dynamics and outcomes.

Along these lines, a few public relations scholars have mentioned the conceptual link between encroachment and autonomy; however, none of their studies examined the relational tensions among work groups that can have an impact on the autonomy of public relations departments. Bowen’s (2006) comparative case study of two global organizations revealed that public relations autonomy was related to organizational power and authority. She explained that

when public relations is “subsumed by another organizational function . . . [it] is expected to take on the subjective concerns of that function” (p. 345). Only when public relations is autonomous can it offer a different perspective to management than those of other departments. She found that public relations departments’ efforts to earn autonomy are separate from their inclusion in or access to their organization’s top decision makers. In other words, structure and reporting relationships do not necessarily guarantee departmental autonomy. In addition, Huang and Su’s (2009) survey of public relations-oriented crisis managers found that autonomy of the public relations department was the strongest predictor of organizations adopting a concession response to crisis, while legal dominance over public relations predicted a defensive strategy.

To better understand the concept of autonomy at the group level, this research draws on the work of organizational behavior scholars. Guzzo and Dickson (1996) defined a work group as having the following characteristics: (1) It is made up of “individuals who see themselves and who are seen by others as a social entity,” (p. 308); (2) Individuals in the group are interdependent; and, (3) The group is embedded in a social system and has an impact on other groups in the system. Building on this definition, Langfred (2000) noted that work group autonomy was not simply an aggregation of the autonomy of individual workers in the group, but rather “the amount of control and discretion the group is allowed in carrying out tasks assigned by the organization” (p. 567). Additionally, Cordery and colleagues (2010) observed that work group autonomy can involve selecting work methods, determining the timing of tasks, and making work-related decisions.

Scholars in this area have examined the impact of autonomy on work group performance. However, empirical research regarding this relationship has been inconclusive, prompting one scholar to note that autonomy “appears to be helpful for teams, but additional research is needed to understand the environmental conditions that influence the extent to which autonomy improves performance” (Stewart, 2006, p. 46). Additionally, Cordery and colleagues (2010) attempted to examine one potential environmental condition, task uncertainty, in relation to work group autonomy and performance. Task uncertainty is a product of the unpredictability that can be caused by an organization’s operating environment and can make it difficult for a work group “to predict which tasks must be executed, when, how and to what effect,” (p. 242). Their results demonstrated that work groups performed better under higher task uncertainty when the group was given higher levels of autonomy. In other words, increased autonomy improved team performance because of a decreased need for approvals higher up the chain and an increased ability to apply specialized knowledge to solve organizational problems.

### Research Questions

In order to examine the relationship dynamics between public relations and fundraising, as well as the impact of the relationship on public relations autonomy, the following research questions, which were based on the literature, guided this study:

RQ1. Among U.S. colleges and universities that raise the most gift dollars, how do senior public relations officers view the working relationship between public relations and fundraising?

RQ2. Among U.S. colleges and universities that raise the most gift dollars, what factors do senior public relations officers believe influence the relationship between public relations and fundraising?

RQ3. According to senior public relations officers at U.S. colleges and universities that raise the most gift dollars, how has the public relations-fundraising relationship impacted the autonomy of public relations departments?

### **Method**

Because this study sought to understand senior public relations officers' perceptions of their departments' day-to-day working relationships with fundraising departments, as well as the impacts of these relationships, qualitative semi-structured interviews were employed to give respondents an opportunity to talk about their opinions and discuss their perceptions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

The population of interest for this study was senior public relations officers from U.S. colleges and universities where fundraising is a priority. This population was selected because these institutions are more likely to deal with issues arising from funding and resource demands, as well as reputational threats. For the purposes of this research, the population defined for actual study was senior public relations officers who worked for a college or university that consistently was ranked on the Philanthropy 400<sup>1</sup> from 2012 to 2015. This was done to ensure that participants drawn from these academic institutions would have a history of dealing with the issues faced by top fundraising schools. Researchers used purposive sampling to select participants from among public universities and private colleges from across the United States. In addition, respondents were selected based on their level of knowledge and experience in dealing with issues relating to the relationship between the public relations and fundraising functions. After securing institutional IRB approval, an invitation email was sent to prospective participants explaining the general purpose of the study and the general format of the interviews. Once the respondents agreed to participate in the study, arrangements were made to conduct telephone interviews. The telephone interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes and were recorded using a digital audio recording device to facilitate transcription and data analysis.

An interview guide was developed based on the literature review and research questions outlined in this study. The interview guide was pretested with three senior public relations officers at universities not included in the study. After the pretest interviews, these public relations officers provided feedback from which revisions were made to the interview guide. Two graduate students conducted the pretest interviews as well as the main study interviews. Both had previous experience in public relations and received extensive training in semi-structured interviewing techniques before conducting any interviews.

A total of 23 senior public relations officers from 13 public and 10 private academic institutions agreed to participate. The interviews were conducted between December 1, 2015 and March 30, 2016. Researchers observed that the data saturation point was achieved after 20 interviews, when participants expressed similar responses. Participant ages ranged from 43 to 69 with an average age of 57. There were 10 males and 13 females. Their combined years of experience totaled 668 years, with an average of 29 years and a range spanning from 17 to 40 years. The amount of money raised by the colleges and universities represented in this group ranged from approximately \$70 million to over \$600 million, averaging \$215 million. The official titles of participants interviewed included Vice President of University Communications,

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<sup>1</sup> The Philanthropy 400 is an annual ranking compiled by *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* of the U.S. charities that have raised the most money from private sources (López-Rivera, 2012).

Chief Communications Officer, Director of University Communications, Vice Chancellor of Communications, Associate Chancellor of Communications, Strategic Communications Lead, and Executive Director of Communications.

Working independently, the authors used an open coding process to analyze the verbatim transcripts of the interviews. This involved reading through the information and coding relevant statements into conceptual categories that emerged from the data (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Following this initial round of coding, the authors compared conceptual categories and made adjustments based on the discussion, which focused on related the categories back to the data. The authors then looked for commonalities among the categories and grouped them into larger themes, which were then related back to the study's research questions. The emergent themes and subthemes are presented in detail in the results section.

## **Results**

RQ1 focused on senior public relations officers' views of the relationship between the public relations and fundraising departments. One main theme emerged from the data: Senior public relations officers described a close, positive working relationship with their fundraising colleagues. In fact, 20 of the 23 participants in the study reported that public relations and fundraising have a close, positive working relationship. Representative statements expressing this perspective include, "We work very closely in partnership with them," "They have a different function than we do, but we support each other," "You know, we're on the same team so we're always unified," and "In order to be successful it has to be collaborative. That's the key." This finding is interesting because it runs counter to the logic of encroachment that public relations is under threat and must defend itself from fundraising. Further analysis of this theme resulted in the identification of two subthemes that contribute to the closeness and positivity described in this relationship: (1) mutual respect and understanding; and (2) recognition of the need for alignment between the two functions in higher education.

Turning to the first subtheme, a significant component of this close, positive working relationship between public relations and fundraising was respect and mutual understanding. In the words of one participant: "I think it's very important that there be an enormous amount of respect both ways from advancement and communications." Specifically, respondents who discussed respect and understanding between departments largely focused on their personal relationship with the leaders of the fundraising department. For example, one participant explained that "myself and the Vice Chancellor for Institutional Advancement respect each other's professional abilities and work hard to make it work." Another, talking about his relationship with the head of fundraising, said, "There are a lot of people who have been here for a while, and they like and respect one another." Similarly, one participant observed that "one of the great advantages that I have in my position is that my counterpart in college relations really understands communications and really, really values it."

In terms of the second subtheme, senior public relations officers recognized that the public relations and fundraising functions need to be more aligned to ensure that their institutions succeed financially. For example, one participant said, "[In higher education] it certainly seems to me as though the closeness of the relationship between communications and fundraising is increasingly common." Another stated, "What I've seen is that development and communications have probably never been more aligned than they are today." However, comments about alignment always revolved around public relations contributing to the fundraising effort. None of

the participants mentioned fundraising becoming more aligned with the efforts of the public relations function. Participants explained that the main reason for this increased alignment and collaboration was because the strengths of both the public relations and fundraising functions are needed for fundraising success at colleges and universities. In particular, these public relations leaders identified expertise in storytelling, content creation, and communication as key components of fundraising. For instance, one participant said, “The communications and fundraising functions are very, very intertwined because there is a clear understanding that these are nonprofit organizations that need to raise money and that communications is an important component to doing that successfully.” Another compared both functions to Lego bricks with unique strengths and capabilities that “really need to be locked together.” Additionally, a respondent explained that public relations contributes to fundraising because “to do the job you need to do on the development side, you’ve got to have great content. You’ve got to have a reason to engage with people.” Another put it this way, “[Public relations] job is to feed the machine from the development standpoint and give them the tools and resources they need to tell stories to help engage with their donors.”

A few public relations officers pointed out that when they help fundraising to be successful, their departments as well as the entire university benefit. For example, one participant said, “I prioritize development because they bring in money that we need to be great,” while another explained that fundraising “literally provides the fuel for the fundamental mission of the university, which is the education of students and the furtherance of research.” Others observed that there is a synergy between public relations and fundraising that benefits both institutional reputation and fundraising. One of these respondents explained that when public relations helps fundraising, it has a positive impact on the goals of the public relations department:

What philanthropy does to support the university ultimately helps the university’s reputation because we receive a larger endowment. We might get a large gift that would bring some attention to the university and that helps support the reputation. And then on the communications side, the work we do also helps the reputation, which then helps fundraising drive dollars coming into the university.

Another even brought up the potential negative impact that not supporting fundraising can have on public relations and the university as a whole:

And if we didn’t support development for some reason, it only hurts us, because the more development does for the university, the more likely offices like ours and offices across the campus . . . are to get the resources they need to effectively do their jobs. And so, the way I see that is . . . maybe development is the favorite child of our division, but it’s good for us all, and so it shouldn’t be one of sibling rivalry, but sibling pride.

RQ2 asked about the organizational factors that senior public relations officers believe can have an impact on the public relations-fundraising relationship. Three main themes emerged from their comments: (1) university administrators’ preferences, (2) internal factors unique to specific institutions, and (3) external change pressures

Regarding the theme of administrator preferences, 11 participants mentioned that the relationship between public relations and fundraising is influenced by the view that university

administrators have of public relations and fundraising. In the words of one senior public relations official, “I think it has to do with each president’s leadership and what works best for them.” Another expressed it this way, “I bet you it would depend a lot on the personality of the president.” Still another stated as a matter of fact, “obviously it depends on leadership. What is the leadership going to think is critical to the institution and what to invest in?” Another reiterated, “It really depends on who the leader is at the top and what their directive is.”

Multiple respondents talked about the impact of the president’s views about communication on the institutional authority and influence of the public relations function. A representative statement by one of the participants summarizes this idea in this way: “To a certain extent, my authority around campus derives from the fact that my boss, the president, has made it clear that he relies on my guidance and counsel, not just on communications matters, but a lot of different things.” Related to this idea, others observed that most administrators recognize the importance of communications, which has a direct impact on the function’s reporting relationships and organizational influence. For example, one participant noted the reason she reports directly to the president is “because he considers the role of communications to be very important and so that’s reflected in his decision about how to organize his management team.” Another explained that most college presidents and administrators understand the value of communication “in terms of the institutional reputation and [the] institution’s relationship to its key audiences, both external and internal,” as well as the importance of communication because “it’s a function that cuts across really every part of a college operation. It touches every part of a college operation and has implications for every part of a college operation.” One senior public relations officer reported that even though the public relations department was under the umbrella of university advancement, the respondent was still able to counsel the university president because, “The president puts a very high price on what the role of communications is in administration. So it’s not that my role is diminished in any way because I am under advancement.”

However, administrators may not always see communication as a priority. As a result, they may make decisions that prioritize fundraising and possibly minimize public relations. For instance, one respondent described how the university president restructured a combined public relations and fundraising department into separate organizational functions. While this might be seen as a positive step to give more autonomy and power to public relations, the perception of the respondent revealed that the sole reason for the separation was to empower fundraising. According to this interviewee, the president said, “I need my fundraisers . . . to be focusing laser-like on fundraising and alumni. I don’t want [them] deluded with having to worry about public relations. . . . He was pretty adamant that the fundraising function is important enough that he didn’t want the person in charge to have to worry about too much other than that.” Another participant lamented that it did not really matter to whom the senior public relations officer reported because the result of reporting to someone else always has the potential to result in decisions that minimize the effectiveness of public relations. This interviewee explained, “Regardless of whether you reported to advancement or directly to the chancellor, it’s basically just someone. There’s always a potential issue of someone at the top prioritizing in a way that’s not the most effective way.”

The second theme, mentioned by 10 participants, was that the relationship between public relations and fundraising is depended on internal factors specific to each college or university. The factors mentioned by respondents were university size and complexity, organizational

culture, history of the relationship between public relations and fundraising, centralization versus decentralization of public relations and fundraising departments across campus, and the reputations of each department on campus. The most consistent answer relating to this theme had to do with the size and complexity of the university. For example, one participant explained that the larger universities tend to have separate departments for public relations and fundraising:

I mean all of the Big 10 universities, most of the Pac 12, but not all . . . you will see this structure that we have, which is a separate communications office from the alumni and development. So I just think it depends to a great extent on the size.

Another respondent observed that although public relations and fundraising were separate at her institution, it may make sense to combine them as a smaller school. She said, “I don't necessarily disagree with combined functions at a small institution. You know, small institutions don't necessarily have the size or the bandwidth to have . . . so many vice presidents.” Another participant expressed a similar sentiment about his university and added, “I think when you look at the extent of fundraising, size of the endowment, etc., you get into a complexity and difference in magnitude that are used for having separate functions.”

The third theme that emerged from the interviews was that external pressures from universities' operating environments influence the relationship between public relations and fundraising. This view is summarized by the comment one interviewee made that “I think you'd find from most communications people the major changes have come from the outside changing, the outside world.” The interviews showed that technological changes, as well as pressing cultural and social issues, create an opportunity for public relations to play a greater organizational role separate from fundraising focused on safeguarding reputation and cultivating relationships through new communication channels. However, economic pressures on colleges and universities seem to be drawing public relations and fundraising closer together to meet the financial needs of these institutions.

Turning first to technological changes, eight participants mentioned that public relations has had to become more responsive to deal with the increased velocity of communication produced by the internet and social media. One participant described the new environment as a “22 second turn around versus 24 hour turnaround” and said that “the agility with which one has to be able to respond . . . is just off the charts compared to even 15 years ago.” Other participants observed that the internet and social media have had different impacts on public relations and fundraising. For instance, one respondent said that stakeholders “expect instant responses now” from the university; but that a large part of fundraising must still be done in person or over the phone rather than on social media. “If you're asking someone for \$50,000 or something like that, you're going to have a personal ask, so I don't see the communications changing in that area quite so much.” Still other participants discussed the opportunity that the internet and social media afforded university communicators to proactively tell their own stories. For example, one respondent observed, “It's now easy to tell a story with one excellent Instagram post,” and explained that the public relations department produces its own videos, podcasts and stories for distribution on websites and social media channels. However, an increase in content production means an increase in needed resources: “I see a growing consensus that you need more people working communications or a sense that you do. You need more people to manage websites. You need more people to develop apps for your constituencies.”

In addition to the technological changes, three participants said that cultural and social issues had an impact on public relations and fundraising at their institutions. One participant captured this sentiment in a comment about “issues management” activities her department is involved in: “I think if you really look at public relations, it’s reputational management all day, every day.” Similarly, another senior public relations official explained that issues related to universities have become more prominent and can have reputational consequences. He observed that there is “an increased focus on universities, an increased critical focus on them in a number of areas that you didn’t see in the past.” Specifically, the issues this interviewee identified were the cost of education, student debt, and sexual assaults on campus. Another respondent at a smaller university commented that the relevance of her university to ongoing news media narratives has resulted in the public relations department being larger than it should be for an institution of its size. For example, she explained that “in the last five weeks, we have one faculty member who’s an expert on the Zika virus who’s done 73 interviews locally, nationally, and internationally.”

Finally, economic pressures also emerged as external factor that can influence public relations and fundraising. This theme was particularly evident among respondents at public universities that relied mainly on public funding before the economic downturn of the early 2000s. One participant explained that because of the economic downturn, state funding has not increased, but operating costs have. As a result, this interviewee noted that there are only two options to provide a quality education for students and to fund faculty research projects, “increase tuition or increase private fundraising.” Another respondent noted that public universities are “increasingly dependent on philanthropy and endowment.” Accordingly, this means communicators at public universities are more involved in raising money for their universities, from “state[ing] the case to legislators” to “communicating to benefactors and donors about how much of an impact your gift makes.” Related to the theme of economic pressure on universities, 11 participants reported that their institution was currently launching or wrapping up large fundraising campaigns. These campaigns are a manifestation of an institution’s need for money, and oftentimes they result in fundraising receiving more emphasis and resources than under normal operating conditions. For example, one participant’s university built up a large staff for a capital campaign, but as the campaign came to a close, the participant expressed concerns about hearing that “the advancement staff is saying . . . ‘Hey you know, maybe we should take over other divisions, other offices to kind of keep on momentum and justify our existence during a non-campaign stretch.’” Another interviewee explained that the university’s emphasis on a fundraising campaign for a year and half had focused public relations “a lot more on including philanthropic messages across our communications” and resulted in working “a lot more closely with development communications.”

RQ3 asked about the impact of the public relations-fundraising relationship on the public relations department’s autonomy. The main autonomy-related themes that emerged from the data were (1) interdepartmental cooperation and (2) the expectations of fundraisers.

While most participants described a positive working relationship with fundraising, 10 respondents said they faced varying levels of difficulty with interdepartmental cooperation that could potentially limit a public relations department’s ability to select work methods, determine the timing of tasks, or make work-related decisions (Cordery et al, 2010). At one end of the spectrum, one participant said that the level of collaboration was good, but could be improved, indicating a small or insignificant impact on public relations autonomy:

Like a lot of institutions our size, we are very siloed. And every department and unit has its own budgets, and its own resources, and its own people. And so we're going to have to work hard to bring everyone together. And there's a lot of good collaboration that happens to date, but I think we're looking for a whole new level of that.

While at the other end of the spectrum, respondents described situations where the lack of cooperation could lead to more significant reductions in public relations autonomy. Namely, one respondent said fundraising and public relations need to be better at “collaborating top to bottom” in order to “have some kind of, for lack of a better word, peace.” Likewise, another implied that while public relations and fundraising both have “the university's best interests . . . at their heart,” serious underlying contention can cause the departments to get in the way of each other. He said, “I think that sometimes the means by which [public relations and fundraising] achieve those best interests can sometimes be at odds with one another, let's put it that way.” One impediment to cooperation and collaboration seemed to be a lack of a shared vision across departments. For example, one participant noted that outside assistance was needed to get the public relations and fundraising departments to agree on a shared vision:

The VP over there and I, have hired a consultant to work with us to lead us down the road toward some joint planning. And the real focus of the project right now is to develop a joint model for alumni engagement so that we have shared metrics, and kind of a shared vision of agreement of what alumni engagement is and what our, you know, respective contributions to that are. . . . Once we have kind of a shared vision and clarity on exactly what things we are driving together then we, you know, [can] do some things, and have some joint work.

Another impediment to cooperation and threat to autonomy that emerged from the interviews was competition for scarce resources. Five respondents noted that when fundraising has access to more human and financial resources than public relations, it can impede the work of the public relations department. As one respondent explained, this competition can often turn into “battling for some of the same resources when [public relations and fundraising] should be working together.” Other interviewees explained the negative impact on public relations when it is the losing side of the resource battle. One said, “The development team was getting the lion's share of the resources and it was slowly starving the communications team.” Another respondent observed that the fundraising department's marketing staff at his institution outnumbered the entire staff of the public relations department. He commented, “The university will always take care of the entity that's bringing in revenue. [Fundraising is] definitely kind of the favorite child in that regard.” An additional battlefield in the war for resources between public relations and fundraising may be data. One participant noted, the fundraising department's reluctance to share data about donors and alumni with the public relations department “impedes not only my ability but the institution's ability to really move forward.”

Turning to the theme of the expectations of fundraisers, 10 of the respondents said that at times they felt pressure to prioritize fundraising over public relations, another direct impact on the autonomy of public relations departments. As before, these interviewees said they enjoyed positive, collaborative relationships with fundraising; however, at times, they felt fundraising

priorities or expectations often made it difficult to accomplish their department's broader communication goals. For example, one participant expressed concern that fundraising had expectations that the public relations department would perform certain tasks, such as securing top-tier media coverage to recognize major donors that did not make sense from a public relations perspective:

One of the things we are trying to do is figure out other ways that we can recognize donors that will make them feel great and feel good about the donation that they've made to the institution, but isn't a sort of slavish expectation that the only kind of reasonable recognition is, you know, a press release.

Another respondent shared an incident about a story published by the public relations department that a donor did not agree with:

I received a telephone call from the senior development person telling me that one of the major donors of the institution did not . . . appreciate that we had published that story. And my response was, No. 1, I'm not going to not publish this legitimate story of legitimate research. No. 2, surely you're not suggesting that I abridge this professor's or my office's ability to freely express a research finding of this institution. And of course my counterpart in advancement said oh no, no, no, we would never do that. And I said, that's what I thought, and we ended the conversation.

Yet another talked about how, at this time, the fundraising department at his institution does not seem to understand the boundaries between the functions. And as a result, the fundraisers are "constantly pounding on the communications folks, 'Could you please tell one more advancement story in your institutional work? We've got this great gift and it would be really important if we could tell everyone about it.'" Further he observed that the departments are eventually able to work out the right balance, but added that "at the end of the day, we're never going to tell enough advancement stories. They always think that we should tell more."

Other participants explained that fundraising's focus on donors created expectations that sometimes conflicted with public relations efforts to communicate with a broad range of stakeholders. One participant expressed frustration with this situation, saying, "I think that [fundraisers] feel that they want more from us. And we just can't. We can't be exclusively providing support to them, because we have a lot of other partners." Another participant pointed out that tensions between departments may arise during crises because fundraisers have different response expectations than public relations practitioners. This interviewee said, "Their expectation is one thing, and . . . we are not only trying to keep the donor stakeholders in mind, but the legislature, working with government relations, and alumni and faculty, staff and students." Moreover, the respondent noted that this broad stakeholder view can become frustrating to fundraisers who are "laser focused" on the donors. He commented, "They get frustrated with us because they don't think we are keeping them involved enough or they think they need to be part of every strategy step."

Similarly, other respondents explained that public relations sometimes has to deal with controversial issues that affect the reputation of the organization, which fundraising would rather stay away from. For instance, one senior public relations officer said, "There are times in a

university where doing the right thing is going to upset some people outside of the institution.” Another said that fundraising does not “handle bad news, and they don't tend to strategize.” This participant added that sometimes having to deal with negative issues can exacerbate tensions with fundraisers who need to present the university in the most positive light for donors:

They tend to be focused on fundraising, and they tend to look at you as an entity that can help promote their fundraising, as opposed to an entity that, you know, sometimes has to say, “Hey, the university made a mistake,” and “that professor’s comment was inappropriate,” and “that student that got arrested did a disservice to the university and deserves to be punished.” So, we can say things that the fundraisers would never say. They just want everything to be ‘Pleasantville.’ They want everything to be rosy, so you know, it’s different. They’re cheerleaders, and we are too. We are certainly cheerleaders, but we also have to deal in the real world.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the working relationship between the public relations and fundraising departments in higher education and its impact on the autonomy of public relations departments.

#### *Implications for Theory*

Regarding the first research question, most of the senior public relations officials who participated in the study reported having close, positive working relationships with their fundraising counterparts. The quality of these relationships was affected by the level of respect and understanding between leaders of the public relations and fundraising functions as well as a recognition by senior public relations officers that public relations and fundraising need to be closely aligned in institutions of higher learning. It is interesting to note that structural reporting relationships were not a factor in determining how senior public relations officials viewed their working relationship with fundraising. At this interdepartmental level, senior public relations officers were more concerned about their interpersonal relationships with senior fundraisers. In addition, public relations managers recognized the importance of fundraising to their universities and were collaborating with fundraising departments to boost their institutions’ overall fundraising efforts. While it could be argued that this increased collaboration with fundraising is a form of encroachment because public relations is doing more fundraising-oriented work (Kelly, 1994), the findings related to the remaining research questions show that public relations managers are not just doing the bidding of their fundraising counterparts. Instead, they are trying to strike a delicate balance between providing communication support for donor publics while maintaining relationships with a variety of publics that are also important to their universities.

Turning to the second research question, the results showed that senior public relations managers felt the relationship between public relations and fundraising was affected by three factors: (1) university administrators’ preferences, (2) internal factors unique to specific institutions, and (3) external change pressures. The first factor relates most closely to conceptualizations of structural encroachment where public relations is not considered a management function and does not have access to the dominant coalition (Coombs & Holladay, 2009; Lee, 2013; Peterson & Martin, 1996; Van Ruler & De Lange, 2003). However, as expressed by a number of respondents, university presidents seem to understand the importance

of communication to their organizations, which gives the public relations function authority to work across departments as well as to provide strategic council to university decision makers. This study even documented one instance of authority encroachment where the senior public relations officer reported to the senior fundraiser. However, this public relations manager still had contact with a university president who valued communication allowing her to maintain a broadly focused public relations department and provide counsel to university leadership (L.A. Grunig et al., 2002; Neill, 2015).

The emergence of specific internal factors as a theme demonstrates the situational and contextual nature of the relationship between public relations and fundraising. Based on the results, it seems there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to describe the way public relations and fundraising should work together. This conclusion runs contrary to the traditional logic of the encroachment literature which defines encroachment as a negative consequence in every circumstance (e.g., Bowen, 2006; Kelly, 1993b). However, the data seem to suggest that under a certain set of conditions, having a one department that includes public relations and fundraising can make sense, while in a different set of circumstances the same approach will not work at all. According to senior public relations officers, the situational factors that influence the public relations-fundraising relationship include university size and complexity, organizational culture, history of the relationships between public relations and fundraising, centralization versus decentralization of public relations and fundraising departments across campus, and the reputations of each department on campus.

The third factor that had an impact on the relationship between public relations and fundraising was external pressure from universities' operating environments. These external pressures can both strengthen and weaken the position of public relations relative to fundraising within the institution. For example, interviews from the study show that economic pressures have increased collaboration and cooperation between the public relations and fundraising functions at colleges and universities that rely heavily on fundraising. However, technological changes such as the rise of the internet and social media have increased the importance of public relations, and its broad focus on multiple publics, to administrators at these same colleges and universities. Participants also noted that societal changes have increased pressure on universities to make significant changes, which in turn has increased the demand from university administrators for the public relations function to be involved in issues management activities that help them adapt and adjust to avoid crises and safeguard institutional reputation. Ironically, as public relations successfully helps administrators manage the uncertainty caused by unpredictability in their universities' operating environments, it may create more certainty and carve out more autonomy for public relations departments (Cordery et al, 2010).

Finally, the third research question tried to understand the impact of the public relations-fundraising relationship on the autonomy of public relations departments to select work methods, determine the timing of tasks, or make work-related decisions (Cordery et al, 2010). The intent of this research question was to move beyond thinking of the public relations function as a victim of encroachment to thinking about public relations departments as interdepartmental relational partners that can exert influence on relationship dynamics and outcomes. The interviews revealed the autonomy of public relations departments is impacted when there are cooperation problems between the public relations and fundraising departments and when senior fundraisers have unrealistic or uniformed expectation of their public relations colleagues. According to senior public relations officers, problems with cooperation occur when public relations and

fundraising departments do not have a shared vision and are working at cross-purposes. It is a threat to public relations autonomy when the vision of the fundraising department takes precedence over the vision of the public relations department limiting what public relations departments can do. Additionally, cooperation is difficult when public relations and fundraising compete for scarce institutional resources. When fundraising wins this competition and pulls resources away from public relations, the ability of public relations to accomplish its purposes is diminished. Finally, public relations departments can lose autonomy to communicate with a broad range of publics when fundraisers misunderstand the proper role of public relations. These misguided expectations often lead fundraisers to expect public relations to prioritize donor communication over all other communication or to use public relations channels to communicate with donors in ways that are detrimental to the institution's overall public relations effort. Disagreements about the role of public relations in university fundraising efforts can become especially acute when fundraisers are trying to secure maximum recognition for major donors, or when public relations managers are dealing with controversial issues or crises.

*Implications for Practice*

This study offers the following practical suggestions for public relations managers in colleges and universities to achieve more effective at cross-functional collaboration with fundraising (e.g., Arthur W. Page Society, 2016). These suggestions are based on the idea that public relations leaders need to establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with coalitions and work groups within an organization, not just outside it:

1. **Public Relations Capabilities:** As has previous research has suggested (e.g., Kelly, 1994; Lauzen, 1992a), senior public relations officers should ensure that their public relations team has the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to meet the demands of fundraising needs as well as university expectations to build trust with both fundraisers and university leaders. This is a critical concern because public relations managers have control over their own departments and limited influence on the management of fundraising departments. High value public relations departments will have expertise in communications management, including issues management, crisis management, interdepartmental relations, and strategic counseling. In addition, these departments will have expertise in using tactical communication channels, including earned, owned and social, as well as a mastery of storytelling techniques. This specialized knowledge in solving organizational problems can lead to increased autonomy for the department (Cordery et al, 2010).
2. **Interdepartmental Relationships:** Senior public relations officers should adopt a relationship building approach (e.g., Broom & Sha, 2013) with other internal departments, including fundraising. Specifically, they should build strong interpersonal relationships with senior fundraisers. These relationships should be built on trust, mutual understanding and respect between both departments. Public relations and fundraising leaders should create a shared vision that helps them work together instead of at cross-purposes. A shared vision can also help both departments understand when cooperation is appropriate and when it is not. It can also clear up misperceptions and misunderstandings about the role of public relations in institutional fundraising efforts. Additionally, it can define clear boundaries that

shield public relations managers from fundraisers when the university is dealing with controversial issues or crises, which can contribute to public relations autonomy.

3. Relationship with Administrators: Senior public relations officers should educate university administrators about the importance of communication to the institution regardless of the structure of the department to which they belong. An issues management focus can help public relations leaders contribute regularly to the strategic decision making processes of the administration by helping leaders manage the unpredictability and uncertainty of their operating environment. Being able to effectively manage crises and handle the volume and velocity of communication through social and digital channels can also help senior public relations leaders gain credibility and influence with administrators, as well as increased departmental autonomy.

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

As in most qualitative research, some limitations emerged. For one, this study focuses exclusively on senior public relations officers at colleges and universities that raise the most gift dollars. While the stated purposes of this study required such a focus, additional research involving university administrators and fundraising officers at institutions with varying levels of fundraising commitment and success might uncover alternative perspectives that shed a unique light on their relationship with public relations. Giving voice to these other vested parties might enrich scholarly understanding of the factors that influence the relationship between public relations and fundraising departments.

The issue of generalizability surfaces in most qualitative studies, and certainly applies in this research. However, the intent of this study is not representation, but exploration of the dynamics between public relations and fundraising across various structural relationships. Thick description was the desired outcome in this study. Admittedly, the quality of descriptive findings is strengthened when researchers sample broadly within their defined categories. Additionally, longitudinal research should be conducted to better understand the erosion processes that can lead to fundraising encroachment and the steps public relations can take to conserve its organizational value and influence.

#### **Conclusion**

The results of this study indicate that senior public relations officers at colleges and universities that raise the most gift dollars have positive working relationships with their fundraising counterparts. However, as the results of the study indicate, “everything is not Pleasantville” in the working relationship between public relations and fundraising departments. In fact, the findings demonstrate that this interdepartmental relationship needs to be constantly nurtured in an era when public relations and fundraising are becoming more aligned in practice. The relationship between public relations and fundraising should ensure that the public relations department has sufficient autonomy to contribute to institutional fundraising efforts without being too burdened by the demands of fundraisers that it cannot meet the broad communication needs of the institution, including counseling management, providing communication support for other departments, and engaging in two-way communication with important organizational stakeholders.

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