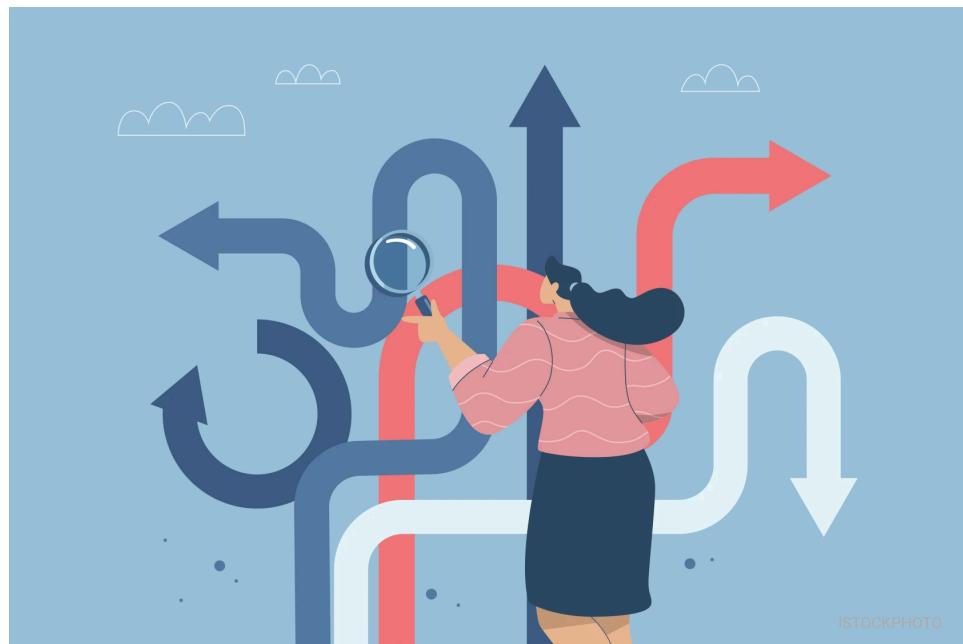


How Young Fundraisers Can Chart Their Careers



CAREERS

By [Rasheeda Childress](#)

FEBRUARY 4, 2025

Caitie Deranek Stewart's former boss at the Indiana University School of Medicine was, in her words, "the best supervisor on the planet." When Stewart shared that she wanted to be a major-gifts officer, her supervisor replied, "Let's see how we can get you there." And then she helped make it happen.

Early-career fundraisers should explore different kinds of development work, be vocal about their goals, and build a network of support.

Stewart considers this mentoring a big part of how she was able to progress to her current position as the senior director of development for the University of Florida McKnight Brain Institute. For her, guidance and help were readily available. But many young fundraisers struggle with figuring out not only what they want to do in the fundraising world, but also how to get there.

The *Chronicle* asked next-gen and experienced fundraisers for their best advice on how young fundraisers can chart their fundraising careers, and here is some of their hard-earned wisdom:

Get Broad Experience

Veteran and new fundraisers alike say it's important to explore different kinds of fundraising early in your career, everything from grant writing to major gifts to back-end data crunching.

"Learn a little bit more about fundraising, and figure out which area you want to do," says longtime fundraiser Vicki Pugh, co-CEO of Advancement Experts, a consultancy.

Larger organizations offer an overview of how fundraising works, says Michelle Flores Vrynn, a development consultant who started out in higher-education fundraising.

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"If you start out in a big shop like a health care system or university, you see all these resources are designated to specific areas," Flores Vryen says. "You see how the functions should interact. Ever since then, I've worked at smaller nonprofits, but I still took away that understanding of here's the linkage between the different function areas and what you really need to be doing to be successful in fundraising."

Pugh points out that the majority of nonprofits are small, with budgets of less than \$1 million dollars, and many fundraisers will work at those organizations. Having generalist skills that include many aspects of the profession make fundraisers "very marketable," she says.

Sean McCarthy found himself jumping around early in his career, trying grant seeking, corporate fundraising, and even some individual giving in a major-gifts program before coming full circle; he is now associate director of institutional giving at the Center for American Progress, a think tank.

"Some people identify immediately what they are most interested in," he says. "And they may focus on that their entire career. But I experimented, because fundraising is such a dynamic industry."

Be Vocal and Get Advice

Once you have tried on a few hats and found the one you like, the next step is to see what advancement options are available in that specialty. Someone who likes working one-on-one with donors might look to become a major-gifts officer, whereas someone who loves data might aim to snag a spot as director of prospect research or data analytics.



CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS

Early-career fundraisers should try different kinds of development work, advises Sean McCarthy, associate director of institutional giving at the Center for American Progress.

The paths people pursue vary based on their endgame. To figure out which path is right, fundraisers need to share their goals with trusted peers and mentors and get advice on the best way forward.

“Be vocal about what your goals are,” Stewart says. Sharing goals allows you and the person you share them with to strategize on what to do next. Stewart realized she faced an unenviable Catch-22.

“Fundraising is unique because we want to hire major-gift officers who have done major gifts before,” she says. “So if you’ve not done major gifts, then you can’t get major-gift experience to become a major-gifts officer. In some ways our career path is

difficult to advance in unless you are provided with extraordinary coaching and fantastic people to help you.”

Flores Vrynn agrees on the importance of having those fantastic people in your corner. She says that because of that, it’s important for young fundraisers to network in the nonprofit community, leading with their talents.

“Visibility creates opportunity,” she says, “and a network that really can see you for who you are and understand your talent and talk about you in rooms when you’re not there.”

Start on That Path

After figuring out the best path forward, it’s time to execute. For some people, that means staying put.

In Stewart’s case, her former boss allowed her to start talking to bigger donors in addition to her midlevel work raising gifts of \$5,000 to \$10,000. In time, she closed “several six-figure gifts.” When an opening came up on the major-gifts team, Stewart got it.

For other folks, moving up means moving on. Carlos Prieto, a major-gifts officer at Greenpeace, started out as a canvasser at the organization while attending college. He moved up the ranks but then plateaued. There were no openings that would help him reach his goal of becoming a major-gifts officer. So he moved to another nonprofit for several years and then came back when a slot opened.

“If you know that there’s your dream role and it’s somewhere else, don’t be afraid to go out there and apply for it,” Prieto says. “Even if you love the organization that you’re at, that organization will always be there.”

Evaluate the Real Goal

Once you hit your goal, that's not the end, because fundraising careers are long and dynamic, says Birgit Smith Burton, who's been in the profession for nearly four decades.

While working as associate director of foundation relations at Georgia Tech, she learned that titles matter. The one she had wasn't appropriate for the work she was doing: seeking grants from foundations. A foundation leader she reached out to — and eventually became friends with — told Smith Burton the university didn't think highly of the foundation or of her as the foundation's leader because it only sent an associate director to seek funding.

"That spoke volumes to me," Smith Burton says. "I wanted a bigger title. It would make all the difference in my connecting and communicating with donors or prospective donors."

She advises fundraisers to keep abreast of the field, even when they reach their goals. It's especially important to watch for new job titles and what responsibilities fall under those titles. With technology advances and evolution in the field, various new titles have emerged, Smith Burton says.

If you are doing work associated with one of those new career paths but don't have that title, lobby for it, she says. And if it's not something you're doing but think it will advance the organization's mission, she says, then also lobby for it.

"There are opportunities to say, 'Listen, I bring value with regard to X, Y, and Z,'" Smith Burton says. "Is there a possibility of creating another position that's called the chief such-and-such officer? I've seen organizations create those positions."

A version of this article appeared in the [February 4, 2025, issue](#).

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