

DEVELOPING AND RETAINING HIGH-POTENTIAL NON-ACADEMIC EMPLOYEES IN
PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS TO CREATE SUSTAINABLE NON-
ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP PIPELINES

by

Sheraine Gilliam

Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Liberty University, School of Business

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Abstract

This qualitative multiple case study explored the perspectives of non-academic employees in private higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Northeast United States on the availability of formal career pathing, professional development opportunities, and succession planning impacting engagement and retention. The researcher conducted semi-structured one-on-one interviews with 20 non-academic employees across five private higher education institutions in various career stages and divisions, including human resources, student affairs, facilities, academic affairs, information technology, and development. The researcher also used the 2022 College and University Professional Association of Human Resources (CUPA-HR) employee retention survey to cross-reference, triangulate, and validate findings. The findings revealed that HEIs should implement inclusive strategic talent management and practices like formalized career pathing and succession planning to positively impact the retention of non-academic employees, creating leadership pipelines and continuity. The results also revealed that HEIs should refine and revitalize institutional values, norms, leadership behaviors, and adequate resource allocation to create inclusive cultures where non-academic employees feel a sense of fair treatment and consistency in the employee experience. The researcher used the study's findings to propose practical recommendations to help HEIs enhance non-academic employees' career trajectories and employee experience.

Keywords: non-academic, career pathing, succession planning, retention, higher education institutions

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Dedication

Thank you God for the blessings, guidance, strength, and resiliency you cover me with every day. I dedicate this dissertation and journey to my daughter, parents, extended family, and all non-academic employees in academia. First, to Alana, who has had to deal with mommy going from work to school since you were 2-years-old, and now at 6-years-old, you are my cheerleader rooting mommy on. I love you for changing my life; I did this and everything I do is for you. Second, to Anthoy and Olivia, my precious parents who have provided the foundation for the woman, mother, daughter, sister, and never-give-upper that I am today. I am honored and forever grateful to be blessed with such an amazing demonstration of parenthood and abundant love and support. I love you both, this is for you, and we did it!

I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to all the future generations of my family and ask that we keep this going. I might be the first in our family, but I do not want to be the last. Let us keep this going.

Finally, to the higher education community, specifically CUPA-HR for pouring into me and giving me a community, a voice, and insight into academia to find ways to improve employee experiences. CUPA-HR and all the human resources professionals I have met over the past 12 years have all played significant roles in my trajectory and journey, and I am grateful for my village. I am forever CUPA-HR.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Over the past several years, higher education institutions (HEIs) have experienced significant challenges, from student enrollment cliffs and declining revenues to managing a changing workforce with increased expectations for inclusive employee experiences and flexibility. One area of particular concern is what Bichsel et al. (2022) call the non-academic employee retention crisis in HEIs. Non-academic employees usually hold roles in administrative functions within a college or university, including, but not limited to, human resources, finance, information technology, and facilities (Coomber, 2019). Zahneis (2022) noted that non-academic employees want more equitable compensation, career advancement, and institutional culture. In addition, McClure (2022) provided a grim outlook on retaining non-academic employees due to a lack of career advancement opportunities and emphasized the need for more intentional investment into strategic initiatives that support non-academic employees. Lastly, without intentional investment into non-academic employee talent management, identifying potential successors for critical roles becomes challenging for HEIs and reduces leadership pipelines (Paadi, 2019).

Therefore, this qualitative multiple case study explored the possible deficiency of career pathing and professional development opportunities for non-academic employees within private higher education institutions in the Northeast United States, impacting retention and engagement. The study also revealed the barriers HEIs face in implementing formalized strategic talent management initiatives like career pathing and succession planning and the critical role of leadership and culture in cultivating non-academic employee experiences. The researcher conducted 20 one-on-one semi-structured Zoom interviews with non-academic employees across five private HEIs in the Northeast United States to gain insight into career pathing, professional

development, and succession management programs and their impact on retention and engagement. In addition to the data collected from the interviews, the researcher used the 2022 CUPA-HR employee retention survey to cross-reference findings. The findings of this study emphasize the importance of institutional leadership in defining strategic priorities, creating connected communities, cultivating inclusive cultures, and investing in strategic talent management initiatives for non-academic employees. Finally, the study's findings provide practical recommendations to help HEIs mitigate the retention risk of non-academic employees and overcome barriers to implementing strategic talent management initiatives like career pathing and succession planning.

Background of the Problem

A core element of any organization's success is its workforce quality. Due to the global pandemic, labor market conditions are tight, inflation is rising, and organizations face significant challenges in recruiting and retaining high-caliber talent. The higher education industry is not immune to workforce challenges, and the issues will intensify without prompt attention and the deployment of thoughtful talent management strategies (McClure, 2022). Non-academic staff engagement and retention trends in higher education have declined over the past years, revealing desires for increased compensation, flexibility, and career mobility (Zahneis, 2022). For example, a May 2022 survey of staff members by the College and University Professional Association of Human Resources (CUPA-HR) revealed that 35% of the 3,815 respondents were likely or very likely to look for a new job next year, with 22% saying they were somewhat likely (Bichsel et al., 2022). McClure (2022) described higher education as having dead-end jobs and significant barriers to career mobility, forcing mostly non-academic staff to leave for better

opportunities. The declining trends in engagement and retention of non-academic staff in higher education required exploration into internal factors that drive these outcomes.

As engagement and retention trends decline for non-academic staff, human resource leaders face challenges in developing succession plans for business continuity due to talent pipeline limitations. As a result, there must be a shift in mindset and execution in developing an effective staffing strategy, specifically for recruitment, selection, talent management, development, and succession planning, by leveraging career development (Els & Meyer, 2023). Abdullahi et al. (2022) found that succession planning in higher education is critical due to its demonstration of intentional career planning, intellectual capital preservation, and employee advancement motivation. Valentine et al. (2020) shared that critical elements of succession planning are programs that provide opportunities to identify growth areas and fine-tune strengths that build organizational commitment and connection. In addition, affording non-academic staff opportunities to envision their future at higher education institutions by implementing career development initiatives helps alleviate engagement and retention pressures (Zahneis, 2022). As a result, human resources professionals in higher education must find innovative ways to enhance the employee value proposition (EVP), which Staniec and Kalińska-Kula (2021) defined as an agreement between employees and employers related to rewards and benefits that help foster environments where employees feel a sense of connection, trust, and longevity, which impacts succession planning efforts. The literature indicated potential solutions such as career pathing, leadership development programs, and employer brand management to increase employee engagement and retention to execute effective succession planning.

Although there is research literature that substantiates the context of this study, the existing gap is the lack of focus on non-academic staff experiences within higher education that

contribute to engagement and retention issues. Instead, most of the literature focused on academic faculty and administrative roles in higher education. The literature revealed the correlation between academic staff to achieve the institution's core mission but rarely highlighted the critical role of non-academic staff. This study related to the strategic management cognate of the DBA program due to its focus on strategic workforce planning and the intentional cultivation of the next generation of non-academic administrative leaders in private higher education. The gap in the existing literature provided a unique opportunity for this study to expand on the experiences and significant roles of non-academic staff in private higher education institutions' success and business operations.

Problem Statement

The general problem addressed was the deficiency of formal career pathing and development opportunities for non-academic higher education employees, reducing top talent engagement and retention. Reed (2021) found that high levels of turnover in higher education institutions create gaps in institutional knowledge, disruption to business operations continuity, retention issues, and hinder the ability to execute succession plans effectively. In a recent study, Frantz et al. (2020) stated that higher education institutions face significant challenges in developing career pathways and leadership pipelines due to limited training and professional development investment. Erasmus (2020) indicated that a lack of training opportunities, inadequate career guidance, minimal growth opportunities, and ineffective leader engagement created negative perceptions about career advancement opportunities for non-academic employees, resulting in decreased engagement and attrition. Ahmad et al. (2020) revealed that higher education institutions face challenges in succession management of non-academic leadership roles because of deficiencies in career pathing, development gaps between internal

and external candidates, and growth opportunities tailored to developing and retaining non-academic employees in the pipeline. The specific problem addressed was the possible deficiency of formal career pathing and development opportunities for non-academic employees in private higher education institutions resulting in the possible reduction of top-talent engagement and retention, impacting non-academic leadership succession management.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, flexible design multiple case study was to help the researcher understand employee engagement and retention challenges of non-academic staff in private higher education institutions and their effect on non-academic leadership succession management. The researcher explored the driving factors in employee engagement and retention challenges in private higher education institutions to see if there was a specific influence on the engagement and retention of non-academic staff provided by the employee value proposition. The more significant problems of employee engagement and retention in private higher education institutions required an in-depth study of employee engagement and retention and its effect on creating sustainable non-academic leadership talent pipelines through succession management.

Research Questions

This study used a flexible design and qualitative methods to seek an understanding of the identified problem. This section identified three guiding research questions to help explore the deficiency of formal career pathing and development opportunities for non-academic employees in private higher education institutions, impacting engagement, retention, and non-academic leadership succession management. In addition, the research questions helped identify the best

collection methods to synthesize data to answer each question. The three research questions guiding the inquiry for the study were:

RQ1. To what extent are private higher education institutions deficient in formal career pathing and development opportunities to retain and engage top non-academic talent?

RQ2. What are the challenges in developing formal career pathing and development opportunities for non-academic talent in private higher education institutions?

RQ3. What factors influence the ability to execute succession management for non-academic leadership roles in private higher education institutions?

RQ1. To what extent are private higher education institutions deficient in formal career pathing and development opportunities to retain and engage top non-academic talent? Using a multiple case study, this research question prompted the need for data collection methods such as surveys or interviews with private higher education institutions human resources offices and non-academic staff to assess whether the problem is extensive or not. McClure (2023) shares that career mobility is a significant factor in non-academic staff deciding to stay or leave higher education institutions. This question helped address the specific problem of the possible deficiency of career pathing in private higher education institutions.

RQ2. What are the challenges in developing formal career pathing and development opportunities for non-academic talent in private higher education institutions? Creating formal career pathing and development opportunities for non-academic staff requires a deliberate and thoughtful approach to talent management focused on creating an internal leadership pipeline. Jackson and Allen (2022) found that higher education institutions face challenges in career pathing and creating development opportunities that drive retention and engagement due to resource constraints and a lack of focus on developing internal talent pipelines. Muleya et al.

(2022) revealed that inadequate funding hinders the investment necessary to create career development opportunities within higher education institutions. Finally, Jackson and Allen (2022) highlighted the unique culture of higher education institutions and the tendency to hire external talent rather than identify internal talent or growing leaders from within the institution. This question helped identify barriers to developing career paths related to the specific problem in private higher education.

RQ3. What factors influence the ability to execute succession management for non-academic leadership roles in private higher education institutions? Higher education institutions look to their human resources departments to develop succession plans for critical organizational roles. However, due to engagement and retention issues, a considerable hurdle to effective succession planning within higher education institutions is the availability and identification of top talent as potential successors, especially for non-academic staff. Jackson and Allen (2022) found that a lack of investment in talent management initiatives like leadership development, career pathing, and expanding competencies for non-academic employees create challenges to effective non-academic leadership succession planning and management within higher education institutions. Additionally, Muleya et al. (2022) revealed that career management is critical to the long-term effectiveness of universities, and understanding employee experiences and satisfaction in this area is valuable in creating internal retention and engagement strategies that help develop non-academic leadership succession plans. Without a competent and available non-academic talent pool due to retention and engagement deficiencies, higher education institutions will continue to find it challenging to deliver viable succession plans for non-academic leadership roles. This research question addressed the element of succession planning related to the specific problem.

Overall, the research questions offered direction and helped maintain focus on exploring various elements of the specific problem identified. In addition, each research question provided a different opportunity to explore and analyze influential factors contributing to career development deficiencies within private higher education institutions and the possible relationship to engagement, retention, and succession planning. Lastly, the research questions helped explore resources, university culture, and talent competition that impact availability and investment in career development for non-academic employees within private higher education institutions.

Nature of the Study

A vital element of the research concept development process was understanding the worldview or researcher's paradigm and selecting the appropriate methodology to help adequately answer the research questions. To explore and understand the development and retention of non-academic staff in private higher education institutions, a qualitative approach using a flexible design, specifically a multiple case study, was best suited to explore this topic. The following sections discussed research paradigms, research designs, applicable methodologies, triangulation techniques, and the reasoning behind the selected design and method.

Discussion of Research Paradigms

As researchers explore and seek to understand an identified problem, their worldview impacts how they interpret reality or truth. Creswell (2016) revealed that personal and professional experiences shape research approaches and views of various subjects. In modern research, four primary research paradigms shape a researcher's approach to inquiry. The four primary research paradigms include positivism, post-positivism, constructivism, and pragmatism

(Creswell & Poth, 2018). This section discussed each paradigm, including the most compatible studies for successful outcomes.

Park et al. (2020) described positivism as an approach to inquiry that tests hypotheses to explore causal connections between independent and dependent variables that help predict outcomes through theory. Positivism best suits quantitative studies in the natural sciences that warrant controlled experiments, statistical analysis, the scientific method, and a systematic approach to measuring variables (Sultana et al., 2019). The positivist research paradigm was not the best approach to exploring the subjective, complex, and human-centric experiences of career pathing in private higher education institutions due to its focus on objectivity and quantifiable results.

Turyahikayo (2021) found that the post-positivistic paradigm uses a single objective reality using various techniques to preserve all discoveries to create new knowledge. Post-positivism broadly applies to multiple studies, including quantitative, critical theory, feminist, and mixed methods research, to test hypotheses (Uchendu, 2019). However, post-positivism was not best suited for this study due to the rejection of the idea that the researcher must remain objective, neutral, and unbiased in their data synthesis (Uchendu, 2019). This study focused on applying concepts and ideas to explore and understand to what extent career pathing is deficient in private higher education institutions. Exploring this issue required embracing social and cultural contexts and leveraging various methods to gain more information and a deeper meaning, which differed from the post-positivist approach.

Bogna et al. (2020) found that constructivism is inclusive and embraces the unique depth of research subjects' human experience and social interaction. Therefore, constructivism is best suited for studies that explore the subjective experiences of research subjects shaped by cultural

and social settings like education, psychology, social, and qualitative research (Bibi et al., 2022). On the other hand, constructivism was not best suited for this study because it focuses on how individuals build knowledge based on experiences. Therefore, pragmatism was best suited for this study since the focus utilized knowledge to solve practical problems like career pathing in private higher education institutions and assessed the impact on retention and engagement.

My research paradigm is pragmatism. My worldview is deeply rooted in understanding the human experience based on an issue or problem's realities, data, and conditions. Due to the exploratory nature of this study and the ideals associated with pragmatism, a one size fits all approach did not suffice to capture a variety of perspectives to gain insight into the root cause of the problem. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), researchers who use pragmatism focus on the results of the inquiry after evaluating actions and situations aligned with the problem. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) described pragmatism as having the ability to meet evolving needs to explore problems without being committed to a particular qualitative technique. The pragmatic paradigm helped the researcher break from confinement to a specific theory or method, allowing room to identify what worked best to achieve desired results.

A pragmatic worldview allowed the study to evolve based on identifying the best options to understand the possible deficiency of formal career pathing and development opportunities for non-academic employees in private higher education and the potential impact on engagement and retention. The study required interviews and surveys to address the problem best. The pragmatism paradigm's agility to focus on what works allows various qualitative approaches to fully understand the scope of the problem (Castell et al., 2022). The pragmatism paradigm allowed the adoption of multiple data collection and analysis techniques, which aligned with a flexible design using qualitative methods.

Discussion of Design

As researchers prepare to embark on a study, selecting a suitable design to attain answers to the inquiry is critical. Fixed, flexible, and mixed methods are the designs that researchers choose depending on the study's goal. A fixed design, also called quantitative research, uses a structured proposal, hypotheses, data collection techniques, and statistical analysis to achieve impartiality and generalization of results (Weyant, 2022). Fixed designs are best suited for studies measuring the relationship between two or more variables (Weyant, 2022). However, a fixed design was not a suitable choice for this study because there was no structured proposal, and the problem did not require measuring the relationship between two or more variables. Lastly, the fixed design required no manipulation of variables, which this study required to explore the specific problem related to career pathing in private higher education institutions.

The mixed method approach collects and examines quantitative and qualitative data using structured and agile approaches to inquiry to achieve generalization and a deep understanding of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, mixed methods use a mix of fixed and manipulated factors to assess the effects of independent variables on a dependent variable (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, the mixed method was not ideal for researching the specific problem of career pathing in private higher education institutions because this study did not explore a new hypothesis or information related to the inquiry.

This study used a flexible design using qualitative methods, specifically, a multiple case study. Creswell and Poth (2018) described flexible designs, also called qualitative research, as an agile approach that can adapt to inquiry using various methods, such as surveys, interviews, and observations, as deeper understanding occurs. The flexible design using qualitative methods, specifically a multiple case study, was the best research methodology to explore the identified

problem. For example, the possible deficiency of formal career pathing and development opportunities for non-academic employees in private higher education institutions and the possible impact on engagement and retention required collecting data about experiences to understand the underlying story of the problem. Using a flexible design allowed for adjustment of the research technique when exploring the specific problem presented new information. In addition, the flexible design approach allowed for additional qualitative tools to help drive a more profound understanding of the problem if initial results indicated that gathering different qualitative data was warranted.

Discussion of Method

Within each research design, specific methods are available to help explore and understand phenomena. Five common methods are associated with qualitative research design, also called flexible design, which includes narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, case study, and ethnography (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). For example, Ellis and Hart (2023) described narrative design as exploring life events through storytelling and lived experiences, putting them in chronological order, and representing them in textual form. The narrative research design also embodies various approaches, including biographical study, autoethnography, personal experience story, and oral history (Chali et al., 2022). However, the narrative design was not suitable for this study because the context was within private higher education institutions and not through personal experiences.

In contrast, Creswell and Poth (2018) described phenomenological research as finding shared meaning amongst several participants for one experience. Boadu (2021) found that phenomenological research optimizes interpretation, in-depth evaluation, and reflection to help understand various perspectives within a single context. Phenomenology was not suited for this

study due to its analysis limitation to individual experiences (Boadu, 2021). This case study involved various analyses, including multiple levels across individuals, groups, and the selected institutions.

Grounded theory research focuses on developing a new theory for a process or action with distinct steps occurring over time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In short, the grounded theory attempts to uncover insiders' views who experienced a phenomenon and has distinct features: an inductive process, coding, memoing, simultaneous data analysis, sampling, and theory construction through theoretical saturation (Turner & Astin, 2021). Creswell and Poth (2018) found that interviewing to understand experiences and processes, building theory through iterative data analysis, dimensionalizing data and coding, using theory to explain the process, and presenting theory as a discussion or model is crucial to executing grounded theory. Grounded theory did not suit the inquiry of this study because the desired outcome was not to generate a theory but to gain a deeper understanding of the case and elements that drove the phenomena.

Ethnographic research focuses on understanding shared patterns within a culture-sharing group (Coelho & de Lima, 2021). Pitard (2022) described ethnography as an inclusive journey that helps readers feel an immense connection and sense of the inner workings of the culture, enriching understanding, and elevating knowledge. Creswell and Poth (2018) identified specific steps related to ethnography: identifying a culture-sharing group to study, selecting issues or themes to research, determining ethnography type, performing extensive fieldwork, generating cultural interpretation, and disseminating a holistic cultural portrait. Coelho and de Lima (2021) also emphasized that reflexivity helps ethnographers produce rigorous research. However, ethnography was not a viable option for this inquiry because the problem did not seek to explore

a particular group's culture or behaviors but attempted to gain an in-depth understanding of career pathing within private higher education institutions.

Although deemed one of the most popular research designs, the case study is distinct in its context and focuses on the desire to understand a phenomenon (Yin, 2018). According to Arya (2021), the case study has evolved over the past four decades into an agile and practical research approach that can deliver in-depth analysis and understanding of various issues across disciplines. In contrast, a multiple-case study focuses on two or more cases. Papparini et al. (2020) argued that the case study approach is underutilized in providing solid evidence to demonstrate underlying implications between process elements that are often not straightforward. Arya (2021) described the value of a case study in expanding knowledge by leveraging multiple evidence sources, seeking to offer meaning within the context, and having the ability to tell a compelling story. The case study was best suited for this inquiry because it allowed for collecting rich data to help understand and identify significant factors impacting career pathing in private higher education institutions.

The flexible design using qualitative methods, specifically a multiple case study, was the best research methodology to explore the identified problem. When the researcher started the field study and needed a different qualitative technique, the flexible design allowed deeper exploration and the ability to adjust. Bettie and Evans (2021) found that a multiple case study provided greater confidence in the research outcomes and helped drive higher confirmation of results. A multiple case study fit this study because it helped clarify if the data collected was valuable to help build a stronger case on the relevancy and magnitude of the issue.

In addition, data collection methods varied to explore to what extent private higher education institutions are deficient in formal career pathing and development opportunities to

retain and engage top non-academic talent. For example, a combination of survey reviews and interview techniques was helpful for participants within non-academic roles, like chief human resource officers, within private higher education to gain insight into factors that might influence a lack of career pathing. Another element of the study was to assess qualitative data collected to correlate the findings between career pathing and its possible impact on reduced succession planning, retention, and engagement across five private higher education institutions in the Northeast United States.

Discussion of Triangulation

A vital component of all research is ensuring that data are trustworthy, valid, and reliable. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) emphasized the importance of triangulation in gaining a deeper understanding of the problem while increasing depth, rigor, and substantiated evidence to support findings. Arias Valencia (2022) described qualitative triangulation as combining data sources or methods to improve conclusions' validity, credibility, and reliability to reduce bias and help strengthen the understanding of the topic. Arias Valencia (2022) shared that qualitative triangulation comprises six types that researchers commonly utilize: data, methodological, investigator, theory, time, and space.

Lemon and Hayes (2020) shared that data triangulation leverages various data sources to collect information on a specific topic from multiple perspectives. Lemon and Hayes (2020) suggested that using data from sources like interviews, observations, documents, visuals, surveys, and focus groups helps researchers reduce biases often associated with using a single data source and increase credibility by cross-validating findings. Conversely, Arias Valencia (2022) revealed that methodological triangulation emphasizes the utilization and combination of multiple research methods or tools to gather data like interviews, observations, documents,

visuals, surveys, and focus groups on evaluating different perspectives to enhance the credibility and reliability of findings. Noble and Heale (2019) defined investigator triangulation as collecting and analyzing data using multiple researchers or observers to reduce bias and reach a consensus. On the other hand, theory triangulation is considering and utilizing numerous theories and perspectives for a deeper understanding of the problem (Noble & Heale, 2019). Lastly, Arias Valencia (2022) compared and contrasted time and space triangulation and revealed that time triangulation focuses on different points in time to conduct trend analysis and pattern identification. In contrast, space focuses on various locations and settings to see how the environment impacts findings (Arias Valencia, 2022).

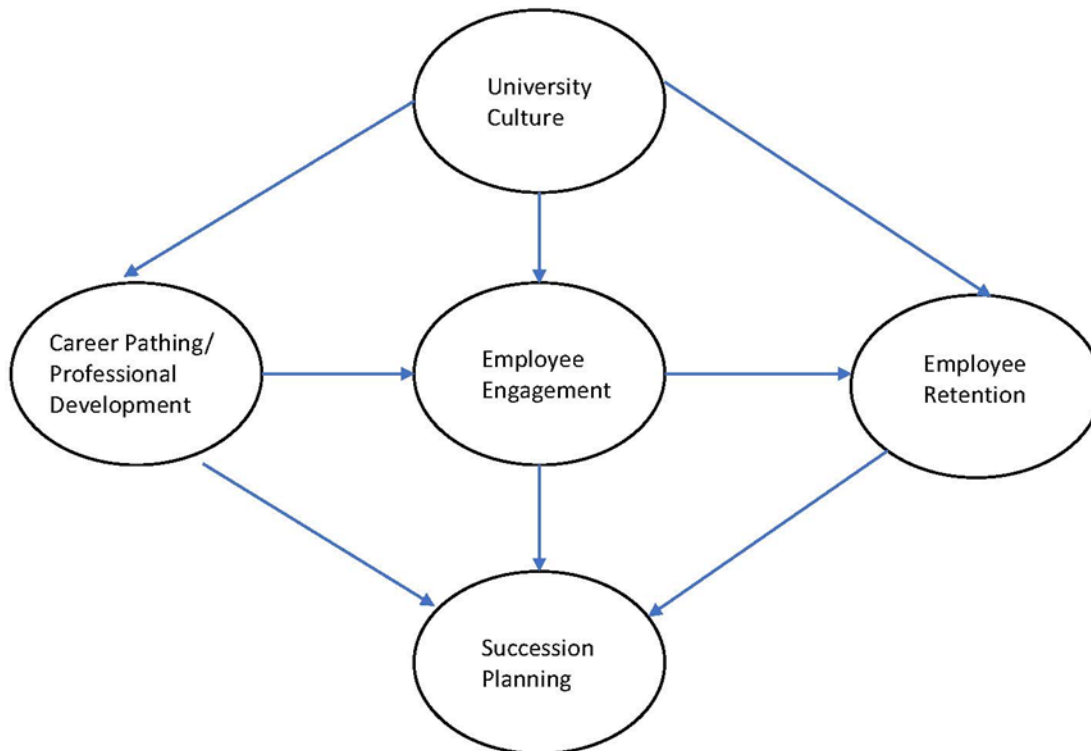
This study leveraged triangulation between methods using qualitative and quantitative collected data to evaluate the problem (Arias Valencia, 2022). The qualitative tool used for triangulation was semi-structured interviews, while the quantitative method was the 2022 CUPA-HR employee retention survey. Interviews offer an opportunity to capture in-depth perceptions, attitudes, and experiences while ensuring the quality of the questions, and data audiotaping and transcription are essential to enhance credibility (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Surveys, along with other methods, are helpful for quickly gathering large amounts of quantifiable data that can provide a representative sample of a population to be analyzed using appropriate statistical methods (Weyant, 2022). Surveys for this inquiry captured responses from various stakeholder groups within non-academic roles and provided representation to support the investigation into career pathing within private higher education institutions. Triangulating the data within methods required coding and analyzing the semi-structured interviews and survey results to identify similarities and emerging themes to increase the findings' validity, reliability, and credibility (Arias Valencia, 2022).

Summary of the Nature of the Study

This paper presented the nature of the study that explored the possible deficiency of formal career pathing and development opportunities for non-academic employees in private higher education institutions resulting in the possible reduction of top-talent engagement and retention, thereby impacting non-academic leadership succession management. The nature of the study included pragmatism as the selected research paradigm and a flexible design, specifically a multiple-case study, using methodological triangulation as elements of the approach to inquiry. The chosen research paradigm, design, and method helped the researcher comprehensively understand the problem and identified areas that impact business practices in private higher education institutions.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework provided a comprehensive understanding of the inquiry into career pathing for non-academic employees in private higher education. It outlined critical concepts, theories, actors, constructs, and their relationships that helped the researcher select the appropriate methodology and analysis. The three concepts related to the inquiry that helped understand the impact of career pathing for non-academic employees in private higher education institutions were: (a) professional development opportunities lead to employee engagement,)b) formal career pathways increase employee retention, and (c) employee retention impacts successful succession planning.

Figure 1*Relationships Between Concepts****Concepts***

Professional Development Opportunities Lead to Employee Engagement. The researcher explored the relationship between professional development opportunities and employee engagement. This concept related to the specific problem and focused on the possible deficiency in career development and the possible impact on non-academic employee engagement within the private higher education industry. For example, Ahmad et al. (2020) found that developing an employee's full potential by integrating professional development opportunities increases employee engagement. Abdullahi et al. (2022) also stated that employees demonstrate increased engagement, performance, and commitment reciprocity when

organizations invest in employee development. Lastly, Owusu-Agyeman and Moroeroe (2022) found that when institutions offer professional development opportunities to non-academic employees, it can create a connection to the institution and increase engagement and cross-functional collaboration.

Employee Retention Impacts Successful Succession Planning. Another concept that helped the researcher explore and understand the problem was how employee retention impacts succession planning. Succession planning focuses on identifying potential internal successors to fill critical roles when they become vacant, but without retention strategies, efforts can fail (Jackson & Allen, 2022). For example, Paadi et al. (2019) revealed that retention and engagement issues would likely increase if higher education institutions do not invest in developing non-academic employees. Additionally, Abdullahi et al. (2022) found that a critical factor in succession planning is retaining top talent to create a stable and engaged workforce to groom for future leadership roles. Finally, Jackson and Allen (2022) shared that strategic human resources practices like conducting employee surveys, offering competitive compensation and benefits, career development, and developing wellness initiatives help higher education institutions retain top talent and build succession plans.

Formal Career Pathways Increase Employee Retention. The last concept that helped the researcher gain insight into the problem was formal career pathing and its relationship to employee retention. Hart (2022) shared survey results of 1,200 respondents by The Conference Board that found nearly 60% of employees would leave an organization that did not offer career development opportunities. Rombaut and Guerry (2020) suggested that organizations demonstrate intentionality toward career advancement by establishing formal career paths and leadership programs as critical components of successful employee retention strategies. Finally,

Mohammed et al. (2022) discussed the positive impacts and organizational benefits of training and development practices like career pathing on enhancing skills, leadership readiness, and retention. Formalized career development programs and initiatives signal to employees that the organization values growth and development and creates a connection to the employer brand.

Theory

Finding meaningful ways to connect this study using relevant theories is critical to enhancing understanding of the identified problem in qualitative studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The term theory is an explanation that seeks to understand and decipher a particular phenomenon to provide a framework for researchers to generate hypotheses for deeper exploration (Heng, 2020). Exploring non-academic employee engagement, retention, and professional development within private higher education institutions required understanding how the characteristics and resources of a job impact performance, engagement, learning, work-related outcomes, and well-being—assessing the demands of a job and the resources needed to thrive within a work environment are great techniques and tools to measure engagement. Several theories impact work-related outcomes, such as expectancy, social exchange (SET), and job demands-resources (JD-R) theories. The researcher used the JD-R theory to explore the relationship between job characteristics, resources, and work outcomes related to the availability of career pathing for non-academic employees within private higher education institutions (Ghosh et al., 2020).

Job-demands Resources Theory. Ghosh et al. (2020) shared that the JD-R theoretical framework helps researchers explore the relationship between job attributes and resources on employee engagement, wellness, and performance. Naidoo-Chetty and du Plessis (2021) found that the JD-R model explains positive impacts on employee engagement through increased job

resources like training and development. Ghosh et al. (2020) discussed employees' psychological detachment due to high job demands and limited resources and how leveraging the JD-R model to mitigate those risks can lead to increased engagement and growth. Conversely, Gong et al. (2021) suggested that based on the effort-reward imbalance theory, employees could feel a sense of detachment even with adequate resources and training opportunities if the efforts exerted do not translate into expected rewards. Additionally, Zhao et al. (2021) found through the conservation of resources theory that individuals have an immense psychological connection to resources such as remuneration, rewards, and opportunities that, if taken away, trigger a sense of loss and decreased engagement.

The JD-R model can be used in human resource management to gain insight into factors impacting employee engagement and help develop mitigation strategies (Dixit & Upadhyay, 2021). For example, Naidoo-Chetty and du Plessis (2021) found that career pathing requires significant job resources such as guidance, mentorship, administrative support, and precise career trajectories. Dixit and Upadhyay (2021) found that higher education institutions can benefit from leveraging the JD-R model in applying strategic talent management practices to ensure sufficient and desired resources are available to enhance employee engagement, productivity, and retention. For these reasons, the JD-R theory helped the researcher explore the phenomena.

Actors

The 20 non-academic employee participant groups across five private higher education institutions were critical to assess. These groups helped the researcher gain insight into the inquiry as the competitive landscape of higher education is evolving, and the demand for operational excellence has increased.

Non-Academic Employees. The actors for this study were non-academic employees and human resource leaders across five private higher education institutions in the Northeast United States. Coomber (2019) found that increased pressures on higher education institutions to perform at elevated levels require a higher skillset across university administration offices, where most non-academic employees reside. However, in most higher education institutions, non-academic employees' roles are consistently undervalued and unrecognized as the critical component of leadership continuity, and they experience a lack of investment in professional development opportunities (Coomber, 2019).

Human Resource Leaders. Human resources leaders within organizations are responsible for managing human capital, which is the most valuable asset of any organization. Shwana and Yesiltas (2020) highlighted the human resources leader's critical role in improving operational effectiveness through innovative and strategic people practices like recruitment, engagement, development, and total rewards.

Constructs

Exploring the problem of career pathing and sustainable talent pipelines for non-academic employees within private higher education institutions required identifying and investigating core elements related to the phenomena. The key components that served as the foundation of this research study were career pathing, employee engagement and retention, succession planning, and university culture. These constructs were instrumental in shaping the research methodology and data analysis while exploring each component's potential impact on the problem. This section provided an overview of each construct related to the problem.

Career Pathing. Erasmus (2020) found that career pathing and management encompass advancement and development, vital elements in developing high levels of engagement and

organizational commitment and leading to longevity. McClure (2022) shared that offering a career path in higher education allows non-academic employees to expand their knowledge and understand critical steps to achieve desired career advancement goals. Lastly, Erasmus (2020) found that career pathing helps develop talent pipelines for succession planning and increases retention as organizations invest in the growth and development of key talent.

Employee Engagement. Ghosh et al. (2020) described employee engagement as a positive experience that creates a sense of fulfillment and intrinsic motivation, leading to enhanced performance. Likewise, Gander et al. (2019) stated that employee engagement increases among university professional staff in non-academic areas, resulting from the feeling that the institution was committed to offering development opportunities like mentorship and leadership programs. Finally, Mohammed et al. (2022) opined that the evolved workforce requires providing superior employee experiences that connect intimately to an employer brand, which will improve employee engagement and business outcomes.

Employee Retention. Employee retention is a significant element of human resources strategies to maintain a high-performing workforce through competitive compensation practices and positive workforce cultures (Shwana & Yesiltas, 2020). In addition, Jackson and Allen (2022) shared that organizations that view employee retention as an element of institutional risk and develop strategic mitigation strategies like formal career management programs will likely benefit from lower attrition levels and internal talent pipelines. Lastly, McClure (2022) shared that as the labor market tightens and the shortage of top talent increases, retaining top talent by implementing innovative people practices is a top priority.

Succession Planning. Succession planning was a crucial construct explored to gain insight into career pathing and engagement's impact on developing a leadership pipeline within

private higher education institutions. For example, Jackson and Allen (2022) found that a lack of investment in talent management initiatives like leadership development, career pathing, and expanding competencies for non-academic employees create challenges to effective non-academic leadership succession planning within higher education institutions. Additionally, Pillay (2019) stated that career management is critical to the long-term effectiveness of universities, and understanding employee experiences and satisfaction in this area is valuable in creating internal retention and engagement strategies that help develop non-academic leadership succession plans.

University Culture. Within higher education institutions, university culture moderates the possible causal relationship between career development and employee engagement and retention. For example, Gander et al. (2019) found that most universities begin searches by looking for external candidates, sending a cultural message that internal career advancement and opportunities are lacking. Additionally, Morukhu et al. (2021) revealed that university cultures that do not adequately invest in manager training to execute talent management strategies effectively lead to lower engagement and retention levels. Many elements of university culture made it a valuable construct as the researcher explored its impact on career pathing and the possible causal relationships among non-academic employee engagement and retention.

Relationships Between Concepts, Theories, Actors, and Constructs

This study explored the concepts and constructs related to university culture, career pathing and professional development, engagement, retention, and succession planning of non-academic employees within private higher education institutions, as shown in Figure 1. For example, the foundation of the relationship was university culture, as it set the tone for areas where investing resources was critical and what the institution values regarding non-academic

employee development and engagement (Morukhu et al., 2021). Additionally, Pillay (2019) added that without proper investment and strategic focus on employee engagement and professional development, the retention of non-academic employees will suffer. If institutions experience retention issues due to low engagement, identifying talent for succession planning becomes immensely challenging (Erasmus, 2020). These related constructs aligned with this study's concepts regarding how (a) professional development opportunities lead to employee engagement, (b) formal career pathways increase employee retention, and (c) employee retention impacts successful succession planning.

Career pathing and professional development were critical elements of the problem that helped explore a causal relationship to engagement, retention, and succession planning among non-academic employees in private higher education. For example, due to increased competition in recruiting top talent, higher education institutions must invest in and develop innovative and incentivized retention strategies or risk losing institutional knowledge needed to establish continuity of leadership in non-academic administrative units (Rombaut & Guerry, 2020). The researcher found that the JD-R model was connected to the concepts and constructs through its framework to understand how culture and resources influence employee wellness, commitment, and productivity (Naidoo-Chetty & du Plessis, 2021). This study helped the researcher explore the relationship between the identified theory, actors, concepts, and constructs.

Summary of the Research Framework

This section presented the research framework for the study that explored the possible deficiency of formal career pathing and development opportunities for non-academic employees in private higher education institutions, resulting in the potential reduction of top-talent engagement and retention impacting non-academic leadership succession management. The

research framework included the concepts that suggested that professional development opportunities led to employee engagement, formal career pathways increased employee retention, and employee retention impacted successful succession planning. In addition, this research study leveraged the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, a theoretical framework that explored how job demand and resources impacted employee engagement, wellness, and performance. Finally, the study focused on 20 non-academic employees and human resource leaders across five private higher education institutions in the Northeast United States as critical actors.

Definition of Terms

Career pathing/planning: Ahmad Munir et al. (2020) defined career pathing/planning as a tailored approach to individuals' careers by assessing aspirations, skills gaps, and organizational needs while leveraging human resource programs to develop a roadmap to achieve established goals.

Employee engagement: Ghosh et al. (2020) defined employee engagement as a positive employee experience resulting in increased work commitment, morale, and performance.

Employee retention: Rombaut and Guerry (2020) described employee retention as preventing attrition by implementing strategic human resources practices like recognition, compensation, development opportunities, and performance management.

Non-academic employee: Non-academic employees work in higher education institutions within administrative functions, including finance, information technology, human resources, and student affairs, and are called professional or administrative staff depending on the institutional culture (Croucher & Woelert, 2022).

Succession planning: Jackson and Allen (2022) described succession planning as a systematic process to identify and provide development opportunities to select individuals, resulting in critical leadership position continuity.

Talent management: Talent management is a critical area in the human resources function that focuses on helping organizations develop innovative strategies to attract, grow, engage, and retain employees through opportunities like professional development, mentoring, career planning, and succession planning (Abdullahi et al., 2022).

University culture: Sampson et al. (2022) described university culture as the values, belief systems, assumptions, standards of behavior, and expectations of employees within a college or university.

Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations

Although this study explored the possible deficiency of formal career pathing and development opportunities for non-academic employees in private higher education institutions, resulting in the potential reduction of top-talent engagement and retention, the researcher recognized assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. Assumptions are inevitable and based on the researcher's worldview, experiences, knowledge of the problem, and research questions. However, the most critical element was acknowledging and mitigating the assumptions throughout the study to deliver reliable and valid findings. Limitations were the possible areas of weakness in the research study based on certain factors where delimitations focused on the boundaries set by the researcher. Mitigating assumptions, limitations, and delimitations required the researcher to acknowledge them openly to increase the validity and reliability of findings. This section discussed each element and provided a risk mitigation strategy to address implications.

Assumptions

The researcher needed to acknowledge assumptions because they drive the research study. The first assumption was that participants would answer questions honestly and openly. Durkin et al. (2020) shared that building a rapport with participants was essential to invoking feelings of trust and comfort, ensuring confidentiality, remaining neutral, and encouraging thoughtful answers by leveraging probing and open-ended questioning. The researcher increased the chances of participant honesty and openness by designing and delivering interview questions professionally and respectfully, which encouraged participants to share their perspectives and experiences with career pathing as non-academic employees within private higher education institutions (Durkin et al., 2020).

The researcher recruited participants with non-academic professional and human resource leadership roles within private higher education institutions based on the research question (Weyant, 2022). Based on the targeted participants, the second assumption was that they possessed basic career pathing and succession planning knowledge to understand questions and provide insightful answers. For example, Johnson et al. (2020) suggested conducting semi-structured interviews to allow the researcher to probe to gain clarity on responses to ensure comprehension and help increase the credibility of responses. To ensure comprehension, the researcher offered participants a full explanation of career pathing and succession planning concepts that helped set a fundamental level of understanding.

The third assumption was that the researcher accurately collected the data to deliver reliable findings. Due to the subjectivity of qualitative research, Weyant (2022) shared that the researcher must leverage ways to increase the reliability and credibility of the data through techniques like triangulation, documentation, member checking, data coding, and transcription.

However, qualitative research is subjective, and the researcher embraced reflexivity and focused on integrating ways to enhance the quality and accuracy of the data collected by conducting between-methods triangulation, interview transcription, member checking, and two-step data coding.

Limitations

The limitations of this study were reliability due to the generally small sample size of qualitative studies and a lack of objectivity. The lack of objectivity came from the researcher being a senior human resources leader in higher education for over 10 years with direct experiences and knowledge related to specific problems and research questions. Cypress (2019) found that integrating sampling strategies helped ensure adequate representation of the targeted population in addition to reflexivity to provide transparency into the biases and assumptions of the researcher. The researcher integrated bracketing, journaling, and reflexivity to remain objective and focused on data analysis, reliability, and validity techniques, ensuring the integrity of the results.

Delimitations

The delimitations of this study were related to the selected population of non-academic staff and human resources leaders within five private higher education institutions within the Northeast United States. Therefore, the delimitations impacted the scope and ability to relate to the sampled population. In addition, the selected private higher education institution's geographic location did not present a challenge when collecting data through semi-structured Zoom interviews.

Significance of the Study

Within most higher education structures, there is a distinct difference between academic and non-academic employee experiences. Unfortunately, these two categories have dramatically different employee experiences due to the structured career trajectory outline for academic employees versus non-academic employees. For example, academic employees usually fall into tenure or non-tenure-track roles with a leveled architecture to full professor. In contrast, non-academic employees lack a clear career path or plan, resulting in what McClure (2022) referred to as dead-end jobs. This section highlighted how this study reduced gaps in the literature on non-academic employee experiences within private higher education institutions, impacted business practice within the strategic leadership cognate, and integrated with Biblical perspectives.

Reduction of Gaps in the Literature

The literature review revealed significant gaps in the literature related to the non-academic employee experience within higher education institutions. As a result, the non-academic employee experience does not have a substantial number of related studies to explore this critical population's employee life cycle management within higher education institutions. Instead, most of the literature focused on academic faculty and administrative roles within higher education institutions. However, Aboramadan et al. (2020) found that the success of higher educational institutions is rooted in the quality of treatment and acknowledgment of all employees regardless of type. In addition, the literature revealed the correlation between academic staff and achieving the institution's core mission but rarely highlighted the critical role of non-academic staff in achieving strategic objectives. This study helped reduce the gap in the

literature by highlighting the significant role that non-academic employees play in the administrative operations of higher education institutions within a hypercompetitive market.

Although there was research literature that substantiated the context of this study, the existing gap was the lack of focus on non-academic staff experiences within higher education that contribute explicitly to engagement and retention issues. For example, Croucher and Woelert (2022) shared that non-academic staff are often left out of strategic conversations and research literature when discussing the upward trajectory and changing operational needs within higher education institutions. In addition, McClure (2022) revealed that the lack of supporting literature highlighting the non-academic employee experience contributed to this population's pervasive retention and engagement issues. The gap in the existing literature provided a unique opportunity for this study to expand on the experiences and significant roles of non-academic staff in private higher education institutions' success and business operations.

Implications for Biblical Integration

Finding ways biblical teachings apply to personal and professional life was plentiful. The Bible's guiding principles, rooted in love, integrity, and service, also guide behaviors aligning with God's charge to continue his work. Keller and Alsdorf (2012) found that integrating faith and work was a way of living out God's plan and stated, "If the purpose of work is to serve and exalt something beyond ourselves, then we actually have a better reason to deploy our talent, ambition, and entrepreneurial vigor" (p. 68). When applying this perspective to organizational and employee development, it became evident that focusing on the development of others is God's work. Proverbs state, "Without wise leadership, a nation falls; there is safety in having many advisers" (*Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, 1996), which focuses on the importance of coaching and advising to advance God's work. Valentine et al. (2020) revealed that investment

into developing successors through leadership development plans builds a sense of community and connectedness. The actions of individuals and organizations offering guidance and advisement to enhance others' outputs, such as career pathing, are genuinely living God's purpose of serving something bigger than oneself.

At the same time, leaders within organizations can fulfill their calling and assignment by God to serve others. For example, Zahneis (2022) discussed the importance of professional development within the non-academic population to cultivate talents. They provided an example of how helping create a continuous growth cycle aligns with God's plan. As leaders help the employees build career paths, the growth of the employee's competencies can begin to impact others and create a ripple effect of God's work in the workplace and the world. This study offered new and varied perspectives on how offering professional development and growth opportunities are ways to demonstrate God's plan.

Benefits to Business Practice and Relationship to Cognate

This study benefited strategic leadership and human resources management by exploring areas of opportunity to help develop non-academic employee skills and talents within higher education institutions to cultivate society. In addition, this study explored career pathing to mitigate retention and engagement issues to develop talent pipelines for non-academic leadership within higher education, a current research gap. The two main areas that impacted business practice and the relationship to strategic leadership cognate were talent management, diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Talent Management. Managing human capital is critical to any organization's success, and one of the key elements to enhancing workforce quality is effective talent management practices. Els and Meyer (2023) found that strategic talent management focuses on employee

experience, enhancing recruitment, professional development, performance management, career mobility, and succession planning initiatives and programs. Abdullahi et al. (2022) added that organizations that invest in talent management reap the benefits of a more engaged and productive workforce, leading to positive business outcomes.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. One of the business practices this study addressed was internal diversity, equity, and inclusion practices within private higher education institutions among non-academic and academic employees. Zahneis (2022) found a significant difference in engagement and retention trends between non-academic and academic staff in higher education institutions, leading to increased turnover for non-academic staff. McClure (2022) described higher education as having dead-end jobs and significant barriers to career mobility, forcing mostly non-academic staff to leave for better opportunities. In addition, in most higher education institutions, non-academic employees' roles are consistently undervalued and unrecognized as critical to an institution's success compared to academic employees (Coomber, 2019). This study related to the strategic management cognate of the DBA program due to its focus on strategic workforce planning and the intentional cultivation of the next generation of non-academic administrative leaders in private higher education. Lastly, this study expanded upon current research literature that solely focused on academic staff within higher education institutions.

Summary of the Significance of the Study

This section highlighted the significance of the study and provided key definitions, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, reduction in gaps in the literature, business practice implications, and Biblical integration. This study's significance was that the selected population is rarely the focal point of research, and it offered a new and impactful perspective on career development within private higher education institutions for non-academic staff while illustrating

Biblical alignment. In addition, this study reduced gaps in the literature and offered a starting point for future studies focused on the non-academic employee career experience in academia.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

As organizations recalibrate from the workforce disruption caused by the 2020 global pandemic, finding ways to attract and retain talent remains challenging. In 2023, the candidate-driven talent market was more competitive than ever and required employers to develop an employee value proposition (EVP) that attracts and retains top talent. The EVP connects employees and candidates to the employer brand and articulates what makes an employer unique. Defining the EVP to current employees and potential candidates is critical in increasing competitive advantage and becoming a destination employer through strategic talent management.

The higher education industry is not immune to this issue, which faces significant challenges in attracting and retaining academic and non-academic employees. The two distinct employee types create differences in employee experiences. However, academic employees' skill sets are specific to the higher education environment and focus on teaching and research. In higher education institutions, non-academic employees harness transferable skills in various industries in areas including, but not limited to, human resources, information technology, finance, and marketing. Valentine et al. (2020) suggested that integrating a strategic talent management approach into an organization's deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) helps enhance competitive advantage by focusing on innovative ways to attract and retain talent. McClure (2022) shared that higher education institutions face attraction, engagement, and retention challenges that drive the need for a strategic approach to human capital management sustainability, like career development, especially for non-academic employees. Coomber (2019)

revealed that non-academic employee roles in higher education institutions are consistently undervalued and lack investment in career progression and growth opportunities. In the hyper-competitive labor market that higher education institutions now compete in, Barrett et al. (2019) suggested that leadership development could facilitate a significant culture change that helps enhance leadership pipelines, retention, and engagement.

A key component to exploring this study's topic, creating sustainable leadership pipelines for non-academic employees in private higher education institutions, required evaluating the existing professional and academic body of knowledge. Conducting a professional and scholarly literature review revealed university culture, operating budgets, and human resources practices as emerging themes impacting higher education institutions' appetite and capacity to invest in career pathing strategies and initiatives for non-academic employees. This thematic literature review helped the researcher synthesize the research, provided comprehensive insight into the findings, and compared and contrasted differing opinions.

Business Practices

The researcher explored the impact of embracing the business practice of organizational investment in HR as a strategic partner in achieving long-term success. One of the key drivers in the ability to drive strategic human resource practices is the reporting relationship of the institution's Chief HR Officer (CHRO). CHROs with direct access to a president or chancellor are usually senior leadership team members participating in long-term strategic planning. However, Pritchard and Schmidt (2020) found that the CHRO reporting relationship varied across higher education institution types, with about 35% reporting to the chief financial officer and 22% reporting to the president/chancellor. As higher education institutions seek to gain a

competitive advantage by leveraging human capital, providing an opportunity for CHROs to help lead strategic planning at the senior leadership level is critical.

In this study, the researcher discussed the implications of business practice related to the problem of non-academic employee career development within private higher education institutions, including strategic talent management, diversity, equity, and inclusion. The higher education industry is evolving rapidly, and strategic talent management is valuable to an institution's long-term success and sustainability. Managing human capital is critical to any organization's success, and one of the key elements to enhancing workforce quality is effective talent management practices. Els and Meyer (2023) found that strategic talent management focuses on diversifying employee experiences, improving recruitment, professional development, performance management, career mobility, and succession planning initiatives and programs. Abdullahi et al. (2022) added that organizations that invest in talent management reap the benefits of a more engaged and productive workforce, leading to positive business outcomes. In addition, providing opportunities for growth and development sends employees a positive message that the institution wants to invest in talent to create sustainable leadership pipelines.

An additional business practice the researcher addressed was internal diversity, equity, and inclusion practices within private higher education institutions among non-academic and academic employees. Gonzales et al. (2021) shared that although attempts to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion awareness in higher education institutions are happening nationwide, efforts are perceived as shallow and short-lived, creating a disconnect between intent and impact. Zahneis (2022) found a significant difference in engagement and retention trends between non-academic and academic staff in higher education institutions, leading to increased turnover for non-academic staff. McClure (2022) described higher education as having dead-end jobs and

significant barriers to career mobility, forcing mostly non-academic staff to leave for better opportunities. In addition, in most higher education institutions, non-academic employees' roles are consistently undervalued and unrecognized as critical to an institution's success compared to academic employees (Coomber, 2019). The often unintentional academic versus non-academic divide among employees within higher education institutions presents an opportunity for institutions to find innovative and inclusive ways to bridge the experience gap between the two populations.

The Problem

A core element of any organization's success is its workforce quality. Due to the global pandemic, labor market conditions are tight, inflation is rising, and organizations face significant challenges in recruiting and retaining high-caliber talent. The higher education industry is not immune to workforce challenges, and the issues will intensify without prompt attention and the deployment of thoughtful talent management strategies (McClure, 2022). Non-academic staff engagement and retention trends in higher education have declined over the past years, revealing desires for increased compensation, flexibility, and career mobility (Zahneis, 2022). For example, a May 2022 survey of staff members by the College and University Professional Association of Human Resources (CUPA-HR) revealed that 35% of the 3,815 respondents were likely or very likely to look for a new job next year, with 22% saying they were somewhat likely (Bichsel et al., 2022). McClure (2022) described higher education as having dead-end jobs and significant barriers to career mobility, forcing mostly non-academic staff to leave for better opportunities. The declining trends in engagement and retention of non-academic staff in higher education required exploration into internal factors that drive these outcomes.

As engagement and retention trends decline for non-academic staff, human resource leaders face challenges in developing succession plans for business continuity due to talent pipeline limitations. As a result, there must be a shift in mindset and execution in developing an effective staffing strategy, specifically for recruitment, selection, talent management, development, and succession planning, by leveraging career development (Els & Meyer, 2023). Abdullahi et al. (2022) found that succession planning in higher education is critical due to its demonstration of intentional career planning, intellectual capital preservation, and employee advancement motivation. Valentine et al. (2020) shared that vital elements of succession planning are programs that provide opportunities to identify growth areas and fine-tune strengths that build organizational commitment and connection. In addition, affording non-academic staff opportunities to envision their future at higher education institutions by implementing career development initiatives helps alleviate engagement and retention pressures (Zahneis, 2022). As a result, human resources professionals in higher education must find innovative ways to enhance the EVP to help foster environments where employees feel a sense of connection, trust, and longevity, which impacts succession planning efforts. The literature indicated potential solutions such as career pathing, leadership development programs, and employer brand management to increase employee engagement and retention and execute effective succession planning.

The following sections highlighted university culture, operating budgets, human resource practices, and strategic talent management as the themes that emerged from a review of the professional and academic literature that impact higher education institutions' ability to implement formal career pathing for non-academic staff that helps develop leadership pipelines and succession plans. The changing landscape of higher education, leadership, employee categorization, decision-making, and inclusive workforce practices influenced university culture

and the employee experience. Budget and strategy alignment, funding, and inclusive budgeting practices impacted university operating budgets and an institution's ability to deploy adequate resources to professional development. Lastly, human resource practices like technology adoption, HR practitioner upskilling, and strategic talent management also influenced higher education institutions' resource capability to offer professional development opportunities.

University Culture

One of the emerging themes from academic and professional research was the influence of university culture on employee experiences within academia. A university's culture provides the framework for acceptable behaviors, practices, norms, and values that dictate how community members operate and engage with each other (Singh, 2020). Developing and maintaining an inclusive university culture requires effort from all employees. However, institutional leaders are instrumental in reinforcing values, communicating transparently, and building trust to create connected communities to drive strategic outcomes.

Creating a sense of trust, community, and shared responsibility that is evident across the institution helps to significantly impact how an organization can withstand moments of disruption that require agility and resilience (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). The culture of an institution also sets the tone for employee recruitment, diversity and inclusion, development, and retention efforts. However, based on employee categorization, those experiences can differ between academic and non-academic employees within a university setting. Dee and Collinworth (2023) opined about the pervasiveness of organizational stupidity and the unwillingness to leverage knowledge resources and substantive reasoning that influence culture. This section helped the researcher synthesize the intricacies of a university culture that impacted

the non-academic employee experience related to equitable practices in career pathing and professional development.

The Changing Landscape of Higher Education

Over the past decade, higher education institutions experienced a dramatic shift in competition and the need to develop strategies to increase revenues and prestige. Nhlabathi and Maharaj (2020) noted that higher education institutions suffer from state funding cuts and must operate from a defensive posture and survival mode. As higher education institutions grapple with declining enrollments and revenues, they must find innovative ways to remain in business and thrive. With increased competition for students, employees, and research funding, additional revenue streams must become critical to strategic planning.

The literature reviewed helped the researcher highlight the trend that higher education institutions are shifting to market-driven and business-minded practices and structures to enhance revenues, reduce costs, and maintain financial stability. Dee and Collinsworth (2023) referred to the shift in the higher education industry as corporatization. They shared that higher education institutions are adopting more for-profit corporation values and cultures that focus on speed, efficiency, marketing strategies, rankings, and time commitment from employees. Spinrad et al. (2022) revealed that one way that higher education institutions are lowering costs, especially on the faculty side, is to hire part-time or adjunct faculty, which account for over 70% of all faculty. The increase in the corporatization of higher education institutions is also related to what Schwartz-Shea (2020) shared as an influx of administrators from for-profit corporations into higher education leadership focusing on financial goals and efficiency over traditional academic values.

Spinrad and Relles (2022) discussed the new-found focus of higher education institutions on marketing and branding initiatives to help them become a brand that is easily recognizable and identified by highlighting faculty and student achievements and touting metrics that help convey the value of the institutions' education. Additionally, Nhlabathi and Maharaj (2020) compared the consumer-driven branding process within higher education institutions with dark tourism and the pressures of economic neoliberalism to find ways to draw students to the institutions. However, to remain competitive, metrics related to rankings, affordability, and economic mobility are drivers of student selection, and creating brands that amplify critical messages is essential to enticing student enrollment. The shift to corporatization within higher education institutions significantly impacted university culture and operations. As corporatization continues to infiltrate higher education institutions, staying true to the traditional values of academia to focus on knowledge creation and dissemination became challenging.

Overall, the corporatization of higher education comes with positive and negative consequences. However, as Dee and Collinsworth (2023) shared, it also serves as an opportunity to do things differently while staying true to traditional academic values. It is rooted in self-awareness, reflection, and inclusive business practices that will drive community and outcomes.

Leadership

A vital component of any organizational culture is leadership. In First Peter 5:3, Peter continues to educate on the importance of the weight and influence of leadership by stating, "Do not lord it over the people assigned to your care but lead them by your good example" (*Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, 1996). Leaders possess influence that leads to followership, so it is essential to model collaborative, respectful, honest, and trusting behaviors. Leadership helps set the vision and mission and influence the values and behaviors of community members.

Gamble et al. (2021) found that organizations with a reputation for unethical conduct face challenges in attracting and retaining talent due to fear of alignment with unfavorable behaviors. Finding ways to integrate values in everything done as a leader helps deter unethical choices and decision-making. In any organization, modeling positive behaviors and self-awareness increases trust, credibility, and confidence in strategic partnerships with internal and external stakeholders.

Within a university setting, the leadership team is the President, Provost, and other senior leaders across divisions. The university leadership team is responsible for setting a strategy, championing diversity and inclusion, sharing information, and engaging multiple stakeholders, all of which contribute to creating the university's culture (Akanji et al., 2020). Anderson (2018) found that leaders must demonstrate unwavering emotional strength and vision, even when they may feel vulnerable and lost, as their actions establish behavior expectations. A leader's behavior is a byproduct of culture due to established organizational practices, policies, and internal support systems (Bhaduri, 2019). Behaviors formulate opinions and create perception, which is highly influential during crisis management. A leader perceived to lack integrity and credibility will most likely be unsuccessful in effective communication if members lack trust (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Dee and Collinsworth (2023) shared that university cultures can shift to more for-profit-like cultures focused on revenues, efficiencies, and cost-saving mechanisms depending on the leadership focus and style. Therefore, leadership behaviors and initiatives that align with the established core values and strategic goals tremendously influence the shaping of university culture.

Conversely, university culture can also become a byproduct of leadership behaviors and styles (Singh, 2020). Leadership styles have a multitude of classifications, such as transactional, transformational, enabling, ethical, servant, participative, command-and-control, and charismatic

(Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Each type provides a different experience and directly impacts culture across the university or any organization. For example, Singh (2020) shared that leaders who demonstrate positive affect can have a tremendous impact on the emotional reactions of their employees and simultaneously create resiliency. Fernandez and Shaw (2020) described ethical leadership as the perfect blend of faith, wisdom, and morals that positively affects all decision-making levels and situations requiring agility. Fernandez and Shaw (2020) also revealed that servant leadership is valuable due to demonstrating human connection, a sense of community, and shared governance. Hendrikz and Engelbrecht (2019) defined value-based leadership as integrating individual leadership theories (ethical, servant, authentic, and transformational), where a purpose beyond oneself drives the desire to inspire and motivate others. When compared with other leadership styles, König et al. (2020) shared that transformational leadership led to increased influence, higher levels of resiliency in employees, and positive organizational outcomes. On the other hand, Brandebo's (2020) recent analysis suggested that destructive leadership can put additional strain on an already stressful situation, negatively impacting outcomes and culture. Although culture affects leadership, it is evident that leadership moves culture and plays a significant role in shaping and influencing workplace experiences.

Additionally, Reed (2021) found that as leadership effectiveness increased, voluntary turnover decreased, demonstrating that leadership directly impacts employee experiences and engagement. Bhana and Suknunan's (2019) study on the impact of ethical leadership on employee engagement within a South African higher education setting revealed a direct correlation between the two. As leaders, it is critical to help ignite and connect individuals to their work to feel purposeful and integrated into the culture. Demonstrating values-based

leadership, support, and compassion creates safe spaces for employees to accept feedback and feel engaged and empowered.

König et al. (2020) cautioned that leading with too much emotion can lead to bias and directly impact the decision-making process – a critical component of effective crisis management. For example, in the military, there is an extreme focus on developing coping skills to help leaders and members navigate the challenges encountered on the battlefield (Stănciulescu & Beldiman, 2019). However, as university leaders navigate increased mental health issues among students, faculty, and staff, empathy is valuable in creating psychological safety.

Audenaert et al. (2021) revealed that authentic leadership helps psychological empowerment and reduces the adverse effects of performance management. In addition, the performance management process allows leaders to discuss individual contributions and ways to enhance God-given talents in performance. Finally, Audenaert et al. (2021) articulated that university leaders are walking brand ambassadors for what members of the institution see as the status quo—having leaders who demonstrate vulnerability, trust, integrity, and effective communication creates a sense of connection and loyalty to the institution and sometimes just the individual leader.

Leadership remains a dominant factor in shaping any organizational culture. Leaders demonstrate their values through behaviors, organically creating a roadmap and template for community members. Additionally, if leadership does not value human capital, the results lead to decreased engagement and increased attrition. Finally, culture drives employee experiences and creates an employer brand that amplifies values, norms, and standards of engagement among community members.

Defining Academic Versus Non-Academic Employees

Most higher education institutions have missions focused on knowledge creation through research and education. Within this learning environment, there are generally two categories that employees fall into, which are academic and non-academic. Understanding the distinction between the two employee types is crucial in understanding the foundation of differing experiences. Academic employees, also called faculty, usually teach, research, and perform scholarly activities to advance the university's mission, reputation, and prestige (Singh, 2020). Academic employees often have detailed employment contracts that outline tenure and promotion criteria, academic freedom, teaching and service requirements, and ranks that provide a clear career path (Musakuro & de Klerk, 2021). Musakuro and de Klerk (2021) emphasized the paramount value of academic employees in achieving the university's mission and contributing to society by leading economic growth, reducing poverty, and developing scarce skill sets.

Bone (2021) shared that academic employees have a distinct career trajectory that includes opportunities for advancement by moving through clearly defined ranks that can propel individuals to roles like department chair, dean, and provost, albeit while enduring a significant amount of insecurity, stress, and anxiety. Burns et al. (2021) found that university culture impacts the academic employee experience across multiple areas, including workplace civility, professional development, community, the rigor of research, teaching expectations, and psychological safety. The study by Singh (2020) demonstrated a significantly higher value on academic employees' contribution to institutional outcomes based on their interactions with students whose tuition dollars drive revenue.

A counterargument to the perceived preferential treatment of academic employees is the increased utilization of the contingent or part-time faculty workforce, referred to as adjuncts.

Spinrad and Relles (2022) shared that over 70% of all faculty are part-time. Although students are unaware of their employment status, there are significant differences in responsibilities versus the tenure-track faculty. Spinrad and Relles (2022) studied part-time and tenured-track faculty experiences. They revealed that adjunct faculty felt immense autonomy, lack of evaluation, and disconnection from faculty activities like research and service and university culture. Spinrad and Relles (2022) blamed the academic capitalism of higher education and the focus on prioritization of cost incentives and marketplace mindset as a reason for the increase in the use of the contingent workforce. However, replacing full-time tenured faculty that receive robust benefits with a contingent workforce with what Spinrad et al. (2022) highlighted as lower pay, minimal benefits, and no job security that impact student outcomes due to the minimal expectations and requirements placed on the group. Spinrad et al. (2022) added that although categorized as academic employees, it must be clear that part-time academic employees, also called adjuncts, share similar experiences, like the lack of career planning and trajectories with non-academic employees.

Non-academic employees, also known as support or administrative staff, support the overall functioning of a university in areas such as human resources, facilities, information technology, finance, admissions, and other support roles (Coomber, 2019). Erasmus (2020) shared that, unlike academic employees, the contributions of non-academic employees are significant but not taken seriously within some university settings. Croucher and Woelert (2022) added that the focus for strategic conversations and evolving institutional needs focuses on revenue-generating areas, including student-facing roles and not non-academic employee roles. Additionally, non-academic employees are not eligible for tenure and promotion as a part of their employment contract, which supports having separate employee handbooks for each employee

category to manage relevant legal and compliance issues (Crowley & Simmons, 2019). Finally, the nature of the roles requires academic and non-academic employees to be treated slightly differently, especially in the highly regulated higher education environment.

Suwannatarn and Asavisanu (2022) offered a different perspective. They highlighted the essential role of non-academic employees and their value in bringing professional skills, institutional knowledge, and critical resources to institutions that directly impact and realize a university's mission. A study of 14 middle management non-academic employees in a South African University by Erasmus (2020) revealed vital perceived barriers to advancement as university culture, a shift from a collegial to a managerial model, lack of talent management strategies, and ineffective communication. Although slightly different, university culture directly impacted non-academic employee experiences in workplace civility, psychological safety, output expectations, career advancement, and community creation.

The varying experiences among academic and non-academic employees highlighted an opportunity to embrace areas where equitable people practices integrate into the culture. However, there are reasons for some differences in employment contracts due to the nature of each role. However, even for part-time academic staff, a considerable disparity exists. This phenomenon required further exploration as this study focuses on non-academic employees in private higher education institutions. In addition, a lack of career trajectory similarities existed among non-academic and part-time academic employees.

Decision-Making

Decision-making practices also shape university culture and impact how things get done and at what speed. Decisions happen at all levels of an organization and are often made in good faith to propel business strategy forward. However, decision-making is a multifaceted task

requiring time, urgency, and supporting facts and documentation. When assessing whether individual or group decisions are needed, it is essential to understand the context of the situation. Other contributing factors to decision-making in organizations were culture and structure.

Establishing coordinated actions to increase competitive advantage and achieve business outcomes is crucial for growth and sustainability (Gamble et al., 2021). Most university cultures require commitment and participation in shared governance to make decisions. The group decision process can be very time-consuming due to the coordination of calendars and the length of dialogue exchange, which can quickly impact the ability to reach a consensus (Gonzales et al., 2021). On the other hand, in emergencies requiring personal and immediate resolution, an individual leader can make effective decisions with speed and accuracy. Examples of areas where a particular decision can be effective are managing departmental budgets and personnel actions. Due to the situational nature of organizational decision-making, the best course of action and authority depends on specific criteria, culture, organizational structure, and context.

During the global pandemic in 2020, most organizations gathered subject matter experts using what Zheng et al. (2020) referred to as group decision-making (GDM) to deliver workforce adjustments, ensuring the health and safety of community members. In GDM, there are assumptions about the experts' caliber and cognitive ability to make rational decisions in emergencies under pressure and intense risk (Zheng et al., 2020). Hsieh et al. (2020) investigated the relationship between accuracy and response time (RT) in GDM. They found that the groups had faster information processing speeds and presented a collective benefit. Yin et al. (2021) researched the importance of selecting a strategy for how GDM accomplishes results quicker. They found that choosing between authoritative, delegation, voting, and averaging strategies based on the level of risk helped manage processes and efficiency in emergencies. Timing plays

a significant role in decision-making ability because the opportunities to collect information and gain additional perspectives may not be feasible. However, group decision-making has more to offer without urgency in diverse thought, challenging assumptions, and more data. When faced with timeline pressures, each organization must use its best judgment to make effective decisions that impact business outcomes.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging

University culture also shapes employee experiences in diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB). Integrating DEIB into the DNA of an institution starts with leadership being intentional and transparent about the importance of delivering those values in every policy and practice to ensure a fair and equitable experience for all students, faculty, and staff. In addition, due to significant workforce shifts after the pandemic, employees now want more insight into what employers stand for and how they deliver their EVP to assess value alignment and DEIB and social issues. Gonzales et al. (2021) stressed the criticality of a universal understanding among leadership, subject matter experts, and donors on how DEIB efforts and initiatives can help progress or stall institutions if not executed successfully. Another critical element that impacts university culture is promoting diversity by attracting and recruiting diverse candidates to increase representation. Espinosa and Mitchell (2020) shared data from the American Council on Education (ACE) report on race and ethnicity in higher education. The report revealed that higher education institutions struggle to create academic workforces that mirror the students they serve and remain primarily white.

From an internal equity perspective, McClure (2022) emphasized the mounting frustration among non-academic employees related to feeling under-compensated and overlooked in the strategic talent management process versus executives and academic

employees. Likewise, Zahneis (2022) discussed the attraction and attrition trends related to the higher education sector, which lacks its previous appeal due to lower salaries and cultures that do not support flexibility, which can impact fairness and a sense of inclusion and belonging. Additionally, non-academic employees perceive a significant difference in the availability of dedicated career paths and promotion opportunities for academic employees in higher education institutions (Erasmus, 2020). For example, Jackson and Allen (2022) discussed the disparity between academic employees having precise career trajectories through the faculty rank, whereas non-academic staff does not. However, it is essential to highlight that part-time academic employee, known as the adjunct population, share similar experiences in compensation, value, and career trajectories (Spinrad et al., 2022) that render feelings of disconnection from the faculty population and university culture.

Another element unique to the higher education environment is the idea of governance, prestige, and status within academia, which create DEIB challenges. For example, most academic employees have graduate or terminal degrees, whereas non-academic employees' education ranges from high school to terminal degrees, depending on the role. Coomber (2019) shared that due to academic employees' hierarchy and status, non-academic employees feel undervalued and overlooked, leading to tension between the two populations regarding workplace civility and respect. Ramlo (2021) discussed the differences in inclusive decision-making and governance in academia, where faculty opine and have governing bodies like faculty senates to express collective ideas to impact strategy when non-academic employees do not. The differences between the two employee types are driven mainly by job function. However, implementing inclusive and equitable human resources practices can reduce DEIB challenges and create a harmonious workplace culture.

Another area of consideration in academia that impacts DEIB is groupthink. When groupthink happens, team members seek agreement to avoid internal conflict and maintain cohesiveness (Parayitam & Papenhausen, 2018). In his research on the 2003 Iraq War, Eder (2019) revealed that concurrence-seeking was the primary driver of groupthink in military leadership. He suggested more visibility into reaching a consensus without intentionally including ideas as a mitigation strategy.

A contributing factor to groupthink is the lack of oversight and leadership in how culture and behaviors shape organizational knowledge (Namjun et al., 2020). As a result, groupthink can lead to inefficient and costly decision-making by suppressing individual ideas, not assessing imminent risks, and overlooking valuable data. Although groupthink is associated with ineffective decision-making, innovative approaches can course-correct behaviors and lead to better outcomes. Anjum et al. (2020) conducted a study to explore the transformation of groupthink into collective intelligence due to information technology enhancements. They found collective intelligence emerges when members effectively work together and share ideas to form a unique intel specific to the group. Thus, moving from group thinking to collective intelligence is a way to leverage group decision-making by addressing the factors that make it a problematic outcome. Dee and Collinsworth (2023) suggested that leaders reduce what they refer to as organizational stupidity by promoting cultures built on the foundation of diverse perspectives, amplified voices, reflection, and learning. Organizations must focus on shifting behavior, mindsets, and organizational expectations when employees join a decision-making body to avoid groupthink. Embracing accountability for actions and having the courage to speak up is a step in what Dee and Collinsworth (2023) called diminishing organizational stupidity. Lastly, having an

open dialogue with selected members about the pitfalls of GDM may deter common behaviors that lead to groupthink and suppression of ideas.

DEIB must become a pillar of institutions to attract, engage, and retain top talent. Additionally, institutions must ensure the delivery of equitable employment practices to avoid treating members differently. Finally, DEIB must be integrated into an institution's DNA, as demonstrated by leadership and expected of all community members. For this study, DEIB was critical in exploring non-academic career pathing opportunities within private higher education institutions compared to academic employees.

University Operating Budgets

A key concern in the sustainability of higher education institutions is the practical and strategic allocation of resources. Administrators face immense pressure to do more with less in an industry plagued with continuous changes to consumer and public demands. Traditional ways of budgeting in higher education create roadblocks to agility when faced with a crisis. Higher education leaders must look for innovative and effective ways to manage operating budgets and deliver high-quality and affordable education.

A critical element to institutional success is having a detailed plan of action to achieve established goals and business outcomes. Jeremiah 29:11 states, "For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope" (*Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, 1996). The biblical application from Jeremiah 29:11 is understanding how integral planning for the future is to growth and prosperity. Establishing a roadmap to achieve desired business outcomes is critical for institutional success. Without adequate planning and strategic direction, higher education institutions will experience challenges in meeting the changing needs of the industry.

One of the hurdles that higher education administrators face is the shift to corporatization and lack of education about the correlation between budgeting and strategic planning. Blocher et al. (2021) emphasized the innate power of budgets to communicate and manage expectations throughout an organization. For example, Dee and Collinsworth (2023) discussed how the corporatization of higher education creates more awareness of revenue-generating streams and savings initiatives that lead to shifts in budgeting processes and resource allocations. For organizations to achieve desired outcomes, there must be an awareness, ownership, accountability, and understanding of budgeting goals when developing the master budget to impact the delivery of strategic plans.

Higher education is a complex industry that is becoming increasingly fragile. Increasing tuition costs and inflation make college affordability a top concern for most college-bound students. As the higher education industry faces declining enrollments, revenues, and budgets, the sustainability of sound financial operations is challenging (Pratolo et al., 2020). Budgeting effectively helps allocate resources where needed to drive the growth and expansion of high-demand programs and attract and retain top talent. Although there are similarities in the challenges that colleges and universities face, some significant financial challenges stem from categorizing them as public or private higher education institutions. Lastly, strategic focus and leadership prioritization impact internal investment, significantly impacting employee experiences.

Aligning Budget with Institutional Strategy

Strategic priorities do not define the budget process in most colleges and universities. As organizations look to create competitive advantage, significant investments must go to the HR function to develop innovative people strategies. Although workforce planning enhances

productivity and business outcomes, it must be a priority for the organization to receive adequate resources. However, Kenno et al. (2021) found a lack of research to support the link between budgeting and strategic planning initiatives, and evidence often focuses more on the control function. As a result, the two processes usually happen separately, and leaders do not provide feedback to develop departmental budgets based on targeted strategic priorities. Kenno et al. (2021) also found that a considerable challenge in aligning budget and strategic planning is due to ambiguous goals that are hard to measure. Also, within budget-constrained environments, leadership must make difficult decisions and choose one strategic priority over another.

Fethke and Policano (2019) emphasized the importance of developing corresponding resource allocation models to the strategic plan to align activities and enhance fiduciary transparency. The budgeting and strategic planning process being disconnected impacts appropriate resource allocation to fulfill desired goals. However, the strategic allocation of internal resources is a critical element of strategic planning that must include workforce planning and development to shape institutional priorities. Ramlo (2021) shared that connecting divisional budgets to the strategic plan helps secure adequate resources to implement critical priorities, like workforce planning and strategic talent management across the institution. To create a master budget reflective of the strategic plan, higher education institutions must connect the two processes and create an inclusive environment to solicit perspectives from various stakeholders while prioritizing investments in people strategies.

How Funding Impacts University Operating Budgets

Although this study focused on private higher education institutions, understanding the fundamental differences in funding and the development of operating budgets between public and private institutions helped assess the problem holistically. In a 2023 *State of HR Survey* of

168 HR professionals conducted by Business Management Daily, the top two issues identified as roadblocks to providing opportunities for advancement and investing in employee development were management buy-in of HR initiatives and insufficient funding for HR initiatives (Business Management Daily, 2023). In addition, understanding the contrasts in budgeting between private and public institutions also helped the researcher understand the opportunities for managing budgets through two different lenses.

First, public institutions are governed and controlled by the states where they reside, and private institutions typically operate independently (Fethke & Policano, 2019). Second, a group of selected board members governs each institution type, with the main difference in the appointment process. For example, many public institutions have board members appointed by the governor or state agency and adhere to strict by-laws and statutes. In addition, Reis (2020) shared that public institutions generally have lower tuition and fees and more generous financial aid packages covered by government subsidies that target students needing financial assistance. The governance of public institutions significantly impacts how funds are received, directly impacting operating budgets and resources to allocate to strategic initiatives and growth. Pratolo et al. (2020) shared that public institutions face strict state regulations that almost limit autonomy and subjective allocation of resources for various university activities. However, receiving state funding provides a predictable assessment of baseline operating budgets that allows public higher education institutions to plan for budget changes that align with the execution of strategic goals (Pratolo et al., 2020). As a result, the ability to leverage operating budgets to address localized issues is difficult for most state-funded institutions and forces administrators to make hard decisions (Wondwosen, 2021). The impact of governance is a critical element of higher

education budgeting that creates opportunities or challenges depending on the classification of the institution.

Unlike state-funded public higher education institutions, private institutions receive most of their revenues from tuition fees, which require future revenue projections based on enrollment trends to drive operating budget development (Reis, 2020). Unfortunately, declining enrollments and poor profitability directly impact revenues and budget development, creating significant challenges for private higher education institutions in avoiding financial distress and targeting strategic priorities (Jayabalan et al., 2021). Wondwosen (2021) shared that private higher education institutions face challenges with funding to upgrade their staffing compared to public higher education institutions because they are on their own to generate income to cover operating expenses. As a result, Jayabalan et al. (2021) shared that private higher education institutions must find innovative ways to address operational challenges by leveraging human capital and intellectual capital using what they identified as frugal open innovation (FOI). FOI helps create a competitive advantage by optimizing internal resources, skills, and competencies to increase efficiency and positively impact desired outcomes (Jayabalan et al., 2021). For these reasons, the absence of state oversight of the budgeting process in private higher education institutions presents a unique opportunity and the autonomy to implement innovative budgeting practices to meet institutional objectives. (Wondwosen, 2021). Private higher education's independence with budgeting decisions amplifies the possibility of allocating resources to specific needs and goals, including strategic talent management to raise the institutional profile to attract and retain top talent (Pratolo et al., 2020). However, if investment into strategic talent management and human capital is not considered an institutional priority, then autonomy in private higher education institutions' funding and resource allocation is irrelevant.

Inclusive Budgeting Practices

As institutions integrate budgeting and strategic planning, administrators must find ways to educate and build trust, accountability, and transparency into both processes. One way to achieve an inclusive process is called participative budgeting. Participative budgeting leverages a bottom-up approach to ensure all employees actively participate and drive effective communication (Blocher et al., 2021). The benefit of participative budgeting is the impact on employee satisfaction and morale to help guide actions toward strategic objectives, often referred to as goal congruence. Blocher et al. (2021) defined goal congruence as achieving a cascading consistency amongst the firm, divisions, and employees to achieve overarching objectives. Creating processes and environments that allow all stakeholders to distribute resources helps transform institutional operations and results. Due to the evolving nature of the higher education industry and the pressures to achieve results with limited resources, finding innovative and efficient ways to manage finances to impact institutional goals and workforce planning strategies is crucial. Connecting budgeting and strategic planning increases competitive advantage and influences critical thinking to create differentiation.

Another inclusive budgeting practice is Performance-Based Budgeting (PBB), which allocates funds based on outcomes related to specific performance indicators. Performance measures must be clearly defined and embedded into the process to execute PBB effectively. In a recent study of higher education institutions in Indonesia, Pratolo et al. (2020) found that PBB correlated to enhanced quality, leadership competence, employee commitment, and rewards. Pratolo et al. (2020) highlighted that integrating PBB requires upskilling in financial management and accounting. Overall, PBB is a simple approach; however, a downside to PBB is that developing outcomes, measures, and the process for review is time-consuming.

Human Resources Practices

The final emerging theme from a review of the professional and academic literature was the impact of human resources practices on operational excellence and employee experiences. An organization's human resources (HR) function manages the employee life cycle, including attraction, recruitment, engagement, development, and retirement. As candidates convert to employees, there is a sense of excitement and engagement at the start of the employment journey. However, maintaining employee engagement requires that employers focus on workplace culture, performance, development, connection, and communication. Ali and Mahmood (2020) shared that a modern and best-in-class HR function requires practitioners to integrate technology, social media, marketing, and strategy into creating tailored workforce planning strategies that lead to competitive advantage.

Employees desire environments where they can feel connected to their work and the organization. However, Keller and Alsdorf (2012) revealed that people struggled with work feeling fruitless and pointless, leading to a disconnect for many. It is important to remember that people aim to find ways to incorporate service into the work experience. Organizations with strategic human resources (HR) units focus on process efficiency and innovation to help leaders create inclusive environments that foster growth and empower employees to deliver their best. This section helped the researcher highlight themes and practices from a review of the professional and academic literature that connect human resource practices to this study.

Strategic Human Resources

The HR function within an organization is responsible for attracting, recruiting, and retaining talent, directly impacting organizational effectiveness. In the highly competitive war for talent, human resources professionals must embrace the shift from transactional to creating

transformational experiences by leveraging strategic HR practices. HR professionals are now tasked with developing unique and individualized employee experiences, much like marketing professionals do for consumers. According to Poell (2022), strategic HR refers to aligning people strategies, activities, and best-in-class practices while optimizing human capital to impact business outcomes positively. The main areas that strategic HR focuses on are workforce planning, development, employee engagement, communications, compensation, and performance management (Poell, 2022). Els and Meyer (2023) suggested an approach to strategic HR practices that requires alignment with organizational culture with a focus on agility to meet an organization's evolving needs. Based on the research, integrating strategic human resources impacts competitive advantage and business outcomes by cultivating environments where resources focus on managing human capital effectively.

Adopting HR Technology

A key element in delivering strategic human resources practices is finding innovative and cost-effective ways to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the function. Ali and Mahmood (2020) highlighted the importance of integrating technology and enhancing the utilization of HR information systems (HRIS) to streamline processes and quickly assess data to drive decision-making. Fernandez (2019) found that using HR analytics and recruiting technology can enhance efficiency by as much as 57% and produce highly skilled and diverse applicant pools. Hipps (2019) stated that adopting technology in the recruitment function reduces administrative work and allows recruiters to provide a more personalized and welcoming candidate experience. This emerging trend, predictive analytics, allows (HR) professionals to serve as true strategic partners to help make data-driven decisions impacting business outcomes. Deploying strategic HR that includes predictive analytics and innovative technology, HR

professionals can redefine the recruitment process and immediately assess data to identify areas for improved efficiencies.

Bekken (2019) conducted a survey and used structural equation modeling to empirically analyze replicated data from leading firms to estimate the impact of advanced technology on the HR function. The survey comprised 4,800 participants and asked about workforce analytics and ways advanced technology could impact HR functions. Bekken (2019) found that 87% of respondents identified recruitment as the top area where advanced technology could have a significant and radical impact. By utilizing mathematical algorithms and statistics, recruitment could see an immediate improvement in assessing and identifying highly skilled talent (Shrivastava et al., 2018). Like Bekken (2019), Bongard (2019) used a structural equation modeling approach to study the correlation between e-recruitment, predictive analytics, and AI. The survey included 2,400 participants from leading organizations who answered questions related to feelings regarding AI's usefulness, understanding, and impact on recruitment. Bongard's (2019) research revealed that respondents felt that AI and predictive analytics were most helpful in reducing time and human bias in (a) assessing soft skills and candidate personality, (b) screening, and (c) identifying the best candidate match.

HR Practitioner Limited Skillset

Until recently, HR units have been transactional functions focused on managing the employee life cycle from recruitment to retirement. However, with the advent of technology, HR professionals today are evolving into a more consultative and strategic partner role. As a result, HR has increased pressure to find cost-effective, innovative ways to impact organizational goals. For example, one of the ways HR can impact bottom-line results is by leveraging people data and advanced technology – such as predictive analytics – to help leaders make evidence-based

decisions. However, Pritchard and Schmidt (2020) revealed a clear need for more HR generalists versus specialists within higher education institutions to handle varying projects and emerging practice areas outside benefits, compliance, employee relations, training, and compensation. The need for versatile and strategic generalists to deliver high-level workforce strategies, including career pathing and succession planning, is crucial to institutional sustainability goals.

The shift to advanced technologies is here to stay, and HR professionals must embrace new skill sets to help lead adoption and implementation (Fernandez, 2019). Survey results from Bekken (2019) identified deficiencies in the analytics capabilities of HR as the most significant hurdle to the widespread use and adoption of big-data applications. Tataru (2019) suggested that the digitalization of HR requires practitioners to learn new competencies, stay abreast of recent trends, and prepare for the continuous evolution of the profession regarding technology and legal regulations. Anita (2019) found that shifting landscapes in the HR profession required practitioners to develop additional skills in analytics, advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, and strategic data application.

There is an extreme need for a hybrid role in HR that embodies quantitative analysis, information technology, marketing, and business strategist aspects. In addition, as part of staffing strategies, organizations must identify new roles focusing on HR operations, data, and technology to create flexibility within the function as technology advances (Fernandez, 2019). Bekken (2019) highlighted the recent influx of other disciplines into the HR space – such as IT and engineering – as a benefit to the progression and diversification of skills to enhance HR's capacity. A great example of this in practice is at Google's People & Innovation Lab for HR, comprised of employees well-versed in psychology, decision science, and research (Shrivastava et al., 2018). Another emerging skill set for HR practitioners is creating career mobility strategies

like job architectures and career planning using technology and people analytics to help engage and develop employees (Zavyalova et al., 2020). However, the expectation that HR practitioners will develop these additional competencies at the speed of emerging technologies is unrealistic due to strategic priorities, resources, and investment in professional development. However, not upskilling HR units to meet the needs of changing environments creates a significant risk to increasing competitive advantage.

Strategic Talent Management

A critical human resource practice that sets institutions apart is the focus and investment in strategic talent management. Human capital within an organization is one of the most valuable assets left off the balance sheet that directly impacts business objectives. The workforce behind the operations that produce a product or service is essential to delivering desired business outcomes and requires strategic investment in engagement and retention efforts. Additionally, strategic talent management is vital as organizations seek operational excellence and competitive advantage in the current war for talent. This section helped the researcher highlight the findings that revealed the significant impact of strategic talent management on this study.

Anlesinya et al. (2019) defined strategic talent management as a proactive approach to attracting, recruiting, growing, and retaining high-caliber organizational talent to create sustainable value. Organizations must define strategic objectives and conduct workforce planning to evaluate the current versus future state needs analysis to develop a tailored recruitment strategy (Anlesinya et al., 2019). Valentine et al. (2020) found that organizations develop workforce strategies to ensure that the jobs have the right people. An emerging trend is using predictive analytics to identify candidates that will likely be successful based on objective criteria to reduce bias. Predictive analytics assess the likelihood of candidate success within an

organizational framework. Hipps (2019) found that HR and information technology collaborate to develop a predictive system tailored to institutional needs. For example, Google developed and implemented a successful algorithm to enhance its recruitment process. It maps behaviors, traits, and attitudes to required skills via an online survey tool to predict candidate and organizational fit (Shrivastava et al., 2018). Workforce planning and leveraging predictive analytics can ensure that organizations find a talent match likely to succeed within their environment.

An intentional focus on building a positive employer brand that attracts top talent is critical in deploying a successful talent management strategy (Rombaut & Guerry, 2020). Offering competitive total rewards packages, a great workplace culture, and opportunities for growth and development are foundational elements to attracting and retaining a high-caliber and diverse talent pool. CUPA-HR's May 2022 employee retention survey revealed that compensation, remote work, flexibility, career advancement, and a new challenge are the top five reasons employees seek new opportunities (Bichsel et al., 2022). In addition, a destination employer offers enticements such as recognition for achievement, outstanding leadership, career advancement opportunities, and philanthropic outreach (Valentine et al., 2020). Lastly, the advancement of technology in social media platforms like LinkedIn and Glassdoor influences how people look for jobs and perceive employers, so creating a positive employer brand that attracts and retains top talent is crucial.

Schreuder and Noorman (2019) shared that strategic talent management starts with a strategy derived from organizational demand, identifying critical roles, and a significant investment in developing top talent to impact engagement, retention, and organizational performance. "Employee optimization is developing and leveraging all available talent to

maximize performance and minimize costs, so organizations can more efficiently and effectively move toward achieving their mission and vision" (Hultman, 2020, p. 35). Employee development comes in various forms and focuses on improving current job performance and career development by identifying skill gaps for the future. Guan and Frenkel (2019) found that offering career development opportunities is motivational and instrumental in building confidence and upskilling to enhance problem-solving and increase engagement and retention. When employees can improve their skillsets and capabilities, the benefits mutually benefit the employer. A great example of the lack of strategic talent management is the increased utilization of adjuncts within higher education institutions without growth and development expectations for contingency work (Schwartz-Shea, 2020).

Conversely, Beer et al. (2016) found that organizations in the United States spend over \$160 billion on training and development, which does not translate into changed behavior that impacts business outcomes. Although Beer et al. (2016) offered a different perspective on training and development, it is essential to highlight that funding cuts drive cost-saving strategies in the hyper-competitive market of higher education. If institutional leaders do not see the return on a significant investment like training and development, it is easy to see why it drives expenses versus savings.

A recent survey by The Conference Board revealed that not offering development opportunities would drive nearly 60% of respondents to seek employment elsewhere, amplifying the significance of career development on retention (Hart, 2022). Additionally, Atheer et al. (2020) provided a business case for higher education institutions to embrace strategic talent management to help improve performance and operational excellence to gain a competitive advantage by focusing on high-potential employees who can fill vacancies for future critical

roles. For example, Musakuro and de Klerk (2021) provided insight into the attraction and retention challenges within the South African higher education sector and found that inconsistencies in talent management practices such as professional development, compensation, succession planning, and recruitment were contributing factors.

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is another critical element related to this study under the purview of human resources. Finding ways to engage the workforce is difficult for employers, and the approach must be multifaceted. Employee engagement is a feeling that develops through various interactions between an employee and the organization. Employee engagement is crucial to commitment, retention, connection, productivity, and succession planning, impacting business outcomes. The researcher used employee engagement as one of the constructs to help explore the problem. Opoku et al. (2023) shared that employee engagement results from an immense connection and dedication to one's work-related activities that include output, job fit, organizational support, and psychological safety. Ghosh et al. (2020) described employee engagement as a positive experience that connects an employee to an employer. Conversely, Kura et al. (2019) shared that retention may be an issue even if employee engagement is high due to other factors such as misaligned expectations in career growth, compensation, work-life balance, and leadership. For these reasons, organizations must identify the factors driving engagement and retention for their respective workforce by providing employees with a platform to share their experiences and expectations.

Assessing engagement levels requires employers to collect employee feedback on their experiences across all stages of the employee life cycle. Jackson and Allen (2022) suggested that collecting multiple data points through employee engagement surveys is a way to assess the

effectiveness of initiatives and develop tailored programs to increase engagement and retention. A recent CUPA-HR employee retention survey uncovered that higher education faces a talent retention crisis among its non-academic employee population (Bichsel et al., 2022). Non-academic employee engagement and morale are low due to feelings of inadequate compensation and growth opportunities, which prompt departures from their respective institutions (McClure, 2022). Gander et al.'s (2019) research corroborated McClure's (2022) findings and shared that engagement levels in non-academic employees increased when presented with growth and development opportunities like coaching, mentoring, and management development programs. Kura et al. (2019) shared that integrating HR best practices like career development leads to better business outcomes and increased engagement but does not always lead to increased retention if critical employee needs are deficient.

In addition, creating opportunities for non-academic employees through intentional career management initiatives that help upskill and stretch capacity for broader work scope increases engagement and retention through strategic talent management (Owusu-Agyeman & Moroeroe, 2022). Employee engagement is a foundational tool to enhance employee productivity and dedication, which helps achieve organizational goals. Based on the research, finding ways to increase employee engagement through investment in equitable compensation practices, flexibility, and development, especially among non-academic employees in higher education, was critical to developing and sustaining talent pipelines.

Performance Management

Another essential HR practice crucial to career planning and pathing is performance management. Once employees settle into their new roles, performance management becomes critical to their experience and longevity. Valentine et al. (2020) stated that performance

management is a process to ensure that employees receive feedback on their contributions to the organizational mission that encourages, supports, and helps develop critical skills and gap areas to meet organizational outcomes. During the performance management process, leaders have influence and can help ignite and connect individuals to their work to feel purposeful and integrated into the culture. Demonstrating values-based leadership, support, and compassion creates safe spaces for employees to accept feedback. Audenaert et al. (2021) revealed that authentic leadership helps psychological empowerment and reduces the adverse effects of performance management.

The tool most often used in performance management is the annual performance appraisal. However, trends in HR now focus more on continuous feedback to ensure consistent two-way dialogue between employees and their leaders (Opoku et al., 2023). Performance appraisals are the mechanisms to provide feedback about individual performance related to a specific job and expectations within an organization. Valentine et al. (2020) found that performance appraisals allow employees to understand areas for improvement and develop an action plan to address any deficiencies in performance while justifying personnel actions. However, performance appraisals can present some challenges for both individuals and organizations.

Performance appraisals use subjective views, creating bias, discrimination, and differing views. Laser's (2019) discussion on subjectivity in strategic career planning helped create an awareness that tools within the process, like performance appraisals, need evaluation and consistent improvement to ensure consistency in criteria, ratings, and clarity. Additionally, HR practitioners must train managers and leaders regularly to foster transparent, open, and

constructive dialogue to help drive meaningful conversations that empower, engage, and motivate employees to perform.

Career Planning/Pathing and Development

Erasmus (2020) defined career pathing or career development as developing employees in alignment with their individual needs and organizational priorities. Due to its individualized approach, career planning requires significant input from employees, HR, and leaders to help set goals, assess skill gaps, and develop individual development plans. Rombaut and Guerry (2020) emphasized that integrating career planning or development initiatives into strategic talent management plans yields increases in engagement and retention that help drive effective succession planning. Career pathing provides employees with a detailed plan for their career aspirations with a thoughtful and achievable guide to success within their organization.

The steps to the career pathing are robust and require subject matter experts to help assess and provide feedback throughout the process. For example, career pathing starts with employers identifying what Els and Meyer (2023) referred to as internal pathways to growth and advancement through job profiles and descriptions and conducting talent skill and readiness assessments based on key performance indicators that predict future performance. Understanding career pathing and conducting detailed assessments requires HR practitioners who understand strategic talent management, workforce planning, and organizations with those internal capabilities. For example, Mahat's (2021) assessment of the impact of a career intervention program revealed that intentionality in incorporating self-awareness, industry requirements, career exploration, setting goals, and evaluating progress produced higher career advancement. Without subject matter experts, career pathing fails due to its direct link to internal opportunities requiring significant input from the HR function.

It is essential to highlight the challenges and disadvantages of career paths and the rigid planning structures that can limit cross-functional opportunities and alternative directions within an organization. For example, Mahat's (2021) detailed structure of a career intervention program required employees to set ambitious goals and follow a well-defined plan. However, Mahat's (2021) discussion did not consider the unpredictable job market, the impact of setting unrealistic expectations, the limited ability for agility and flexibility, and the potential for attrition after developing transferable skills and competencies. Laser (2019) shared a different viewpoint and emphasized the subjectivity in career planning due to potential conflicting interests between the employee and employer. Laser (2019) also introduced the concept of strategic career planning, which focuses on how organizational interests are affected and requires agility as market shifts occur. Hence, although the research revealed the positive impacts of career planning, the downsides of a laborious and subjective process also have drawbacks to consider before implementation and adoption.

Career development is slightly different and embraces the ongoing acquisition of skills through various training and learning opportunities. Erasmus (2020) suggested that career management is the ideal action to increase engagement and retention by integrating career planning, pathing, and development opportunities. Employees can engage in career development activities without the guidance of the HR function and obtain certifications, attend training programs and workshops, and work to expand their skill set independent of a specific career trajectory. Most organizations offer career development opportunities as a form of talent management rather than career pathing due to the reduced requirement time and resource investment in developing a structured approach to a career trajectory, which still positively impacts engagement and retention (Abdullahi et al., 2022). Wash (2023) suggested that

developing employee development programs must align with organizational goals and focus on competency development to improve performance. Offering career development and providing financial support to pursue various upskilling and professional growth opportunities is one way organizations demonstrated intentional investment if they have limited resources to integrate career planning programs.

Another way organizations can implement career planning and pathing easier is by implementing job architectures. Job architectures provide clearly defined career paths, levels, and job families for employees and highlight the necessary competencies and skills to move within the structure (Zavyalova et al., 2020). In addition, job architectures help simplify career pathing by creating career maps, internal mobility criteria, and cross-functional opportunities that offer expanded reach and a deeper breadth and scope of visibility across the organization (Zavyalova et al., 2020). Wash (2023) discussed increased awareness of organizations needing strategic talent management practices like job architectures to help deliver career planning and pathways to illustrate internal mobility and longevity.

Related to the problem of this study, McClure (2022) shared that within higher education, the lack of career advancement opportunities and attention to creating formalized career pathing programs for non-academic employees is a driver of increased attrition within academia. Erasmus (2020) added that since higher education institutions react to market conditions and pressures, the focus is on return on investment versus cultivating meaningful employee experiences that lead to competitive advantage. Zahneis (2022) also emphasized the significance of providing career development opportunities for non-academic staff as significant contributors to institutional success. However, Bone (2021) highlighted tenure-track academic employees' access to career paths established through the faculty rank system, making growth and

advancement clear and attainable versus the non-academic employee experience. The increasingly competitive landscape within higher education requires leaders to be innovative, rethink their human capital practices and strategies, or risk increased attrition.

Succession Planning

Another critical human resource practice is succession planning, which identifies and provides career development opportunities to prepare individuals to assume essential vacancies in the future (Jackson & Allen, 2022). Although viewed as a critical component of business continuity and sustainable success, succession planning is challenging for many leaders and HR practitioners. One of the biggest challenges is having HR practitioners with the relevant skills to implement succession planning into talent management strategies. Fernandez (2019) discussed the requirements of upskilling HR practitioners to understand emerging technologies and people practices like succession planning and the challenges of adopting innovative and strategic HR practices. Gonzales et al. (2021) also emphasized the lack of diversity within higher education leadership pipelines, which creates challenges in identifying a diverse slate of potential successors and increases representation among crucial leadership roles. Additionally, succession planning is time-consuming and requires dedicated resources and support to help deliver detailed and tailored growth plans that impact continuity and strategic workforce planning.

A key component of succession planning that creates leadership pipelines is coaching. Coaching has become a valuable and essential tool for organizations to use in the development and growth of employees and especially leaders. However, incorporating coaching into strategy requires a thoughtful and intentional approach, including assessment of needs, culture, budget, framework, and measurement. "Coaching is a *process* (focused on learning, choice, change, and growth), a *partnership* (a designed alliance between the coach and the executive), a *balance*

between individual and organizational needs, a *way of working*, and a *new face of leadership*" (Maltbia et al., 2014, p. 164). Using this robust definition of coaching and its variety of elements, organizations need to perform initial assessments to ensure that coaching is the right path – and fit – for them. In addition, to the point that coaching is a process, organizations must be willing to invest both time and resources to implement and execute a successful strategy.

Although research shows some difficulties in measurement, tools are leveraged throughout the coaching engagement to help assess progress toward business goals and outcomes. As part of the coaching contract, feedback and measurement help to determine progress on behavior changes, competencies, and self-awareness. Wiginton and Cartwright's (2020) review of 87 companies that utilized coaching found that participants' soft skills related to leadership effectiveness, communication, strategic thinking, and decision-making positively impacted business outcomes.

Els and Meyer (2023) emphasized elements of the strategic talent management process like individualized career pathing to help develop succession plans that yield readiness within a sufficient talent pipeline. As a part of strategic talent management, succession planning requires the creation of objective and clearly defined programs (Valentine et al., 2020) to nurture and develop relevant competencies within identified talent to address skill gaps and meet future needs. Abdullahi et al. (2022) reinforced that higher education institutions must take succession planning seriously or risk the loss of institutional knowledge and intellectual capital that increases competitive advantage. Lastly, Zahneis (2022) promoted the inclusion of strategic talent management initiatives like career pathing and succession planning that increase engagement and retention among non-academic staff in higher education. Overall, succession

planning posed challenges and opportunities for organizations because it depended on other factors like resources, strategic priorities, and organizational culture.

Concepts

Employee Retention Impacts Successful Succession Planning. Another concept the researcher explored to understand the problem was how employee retention impacted succession planning. Succession planning focuses on identifying potential internal successors to fill critical roles when they become vacant, but without retention strategies, efforts can fail (Jackson & Allen, 2022). Before developing succession plans, organizations must understand the current state of their workforce engagement, productivity, and employee experience sentiments related to potential attrition and continuity by capturing relevant data through surveys or focus groups (Jackson & Allen, 2022). Kura et al. (2019) emphasized that high levels of employee engagement do not always translate to increased retention, and other elements like delivering on the EVP, compensation, culture, and leadership drive retention. In addition to understanding employee engagement sentiments, Valentine et al. (2020) shared that conducting performance reviews is crucial to identifying high-caliber talent with the necessary skills or capacity for upskilling to meet future organizational needs.

Employee retention also impacts succession planning and filling critical future vacancies because of the need for knowledge transfer. Mazorodze and Buckley (2020) described knowledge as an organization's most significant asset and that effectively managing it can directly impact initiatives like succession planning. Abdullahi et al. (2022) found that a critical factor in succession planning is retaining top talent to create a stable and engaged workforce to groom for future leadership roles. Additionally, employee retention helps transfer knowledge to potential successors, creating a pipeline of leaders surrounded by organizational knowledge and

insight that drives internal mobility, business continuity, and decision-making (Mazorodze & Buckley, 2020).

It is important to note that retention and succession planning issues differ slightly within the higher education industry. For example, Paadi et al. (2019) revealed that retention and engagement issues would likely increase if higher education institutions do not invest in developing non-academic employees. Abdullahi et al. (2022) shared that higher education institutions are knowledge-creating environments, and losing key talent impacts the student experience, which is mission-critical. Additionally, higher education institutions are what Mazorodze and Buckley (2020) described as knowledge-intensive environments where employees have tacit and explicit knowledge, and finding ways to manage and transfer knowledge is challenging. In comparison, Gonzales et al. (2021) revealed that DEIB issues related to lack of diversity within higher education institution leadership create challenges in identifying potential successors. Finally, Jackson and Allen (2022) shared that strategic human resources practices that drive engagement, enhance experiences, and deliver EVP helped higher education institutions retain top talent and build succession plans.

Formal Career Pathways Increase Employee Retention. Another concept that helped the researcher gain insight into the problem is formal career pathing and its relationship to employee retention. Erasmus (2020) defined career pathing as a structured and progressive approach within an organization that enhances opportunities for skill development and growth. Formalized career development programs and initiatives signal to employees that the organization values growth and development and creates a connection to the employer brand (Staniec & Kalińska-Kula, 2021). Rombaut and Guerry (2020) suggested that organizations demonstrate intentionality toward career advancement by establishing formal career paths and

leadership programs as critical components of successful employee retention strategies. Finally, Mohammed et al. (2022) discussed the positive impacts and organizational benefits of training and development practices like career pathing on enhancing skills, leadership readiness, and retention.

Although not the only reason for attrition, lack of career development opportunities was a top reason more than half of the employees in a recent survey conducted by The Conference Board said they would look for other jobs (Hart, 2022). Organizational investment in employees by providing career development and growth opportunities demonstrates what Mahat (2021) described as an intentionality toward building better employees who feel empowered and connected, leading to favorable business outcomes. For example, organizations implementing job architectures with job families help HR practitioners shape career trajectories, leadership levels, and internal mobility criteria that are easily communicated to employees and create visualizations for growth (Zavyalova et al., 2020). Conversely, Laser (2019) emphasized that the administrative burden and requirements to develop and implement a robust career pathing program are high and create challenges with changing needs and skill sets for future needs.

Within the higher education industry, McClure (2022) revealed that career pathing or advancement opportunities were top drivers for non-academic staff retention. Due to the increasingly competitive landscape, especially for non-academic staff with transferrable skills, Zahneis (2022) emphasized the importance of offering career development opportunities before those employees become a flight risk. Additionally, as higher education institutions look to deliver equitable talent management programs, Bone (2021) discussed the inequity of academic employee career trajectories that include moving through ranks versus the non-academic employee experience and shared that offering similar opportunities for growth and development

would lead to increased engagement and retention of that population. Lastly, Wash (2023) shared that illustrating a long-term career plan to employees leads to meaningful conversations around performance, internal mobility, and job security.

Professional Development Opportunities Lead to Employee Engagement. One of the critical concepts of this inquiry helped the researcher explore the relationship between professional development opportunities and employee engagement. The concept related to the specific problem focused on the possible deficiency in career development and the possible impact on employee engagement on non-academic employees within the private higher education industry. First, organizations must decide that integrating strategic HR practices like professional development to optimize talent is an element of their EVP (Hultman, 2020). Schreuder and Noorman (2019) shared that leaders must focus on impacting employee engagement, retention, and outcomes by meeting expectations regarding career development, compensation, and employee experience when developing organizational strategy. Providing professional development opportunities such as skill development, career pathing, mentoring, and leadership programs are all critical elements of strategic HR practices that help connect employees to organizations (Poell, 2022). Using the JD-R model, Balwant et al. (2022) found that offering training and development programs to administrative employees was a resource that increased employee engagement within higher education institutions. However, organizations must invest in strategic HR practices like professional development as part of their overarching workforce strategy to empower HR departments to deploy such initiatives.

Ahmad et al. (2020) found that developing an employee's full potential by integrating professional development opportunities increases employee engagement. Hart (2022) shared a recent survey by The Conference Board that revealed that offering professional development

opportunities was a key driver of engagement and retention for over 60% of respondents. Abdullahi et al. (2022) stated that employees demonstrate increased engagement, performance, and commitment reciprocity when organizations invest in employee development. Guan and Frenkel (2019) revealed that providing professional development opportunities signals that organizations invest in employees, impacting motivation and connection. Lastly, Opoku et al. (2023) shared that offering professional development opportunities to employees demonstrates organizational commitment and support, impacting psychological safety and leading to engagement.

Regarding this study's focus on the higher education industry, Coomber (2019) discussed that non-academic employees often feel undervalued and lack support related to equitable career development. For example, Jackson and Allen (2022) discussed how academic employees move within ranks as a pre-determined career trajectory, whereas non-academic staff do not. However, Suwannatarn and Asavisanu (2022) revealed that non-academic employees are essential to delivering the university's mission and vision, and making investments in strategic talent management is critical for sustained success. Lastly, Owusu-Agyeman and Moroeroe (2022) found that when higher education institutions offer professional development opportunities to non-academic employees, it connects them to the institution and increases engagement and cross-functional collaboration.

Theory

Finding meaningful ways to connect this study using relevant theories is critical to enhancing understanding of the identified problem in qualitative studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Exploring non-academic employee engagement, retention, and professional development within private higher education institutions required understanding how the characteristics and

resources of a job impact performance, engagement, learning, work-related outcomes, and well-being—assessing the demands of a job and the resources needed to thrive within a work environment are great techniques and tools to measure engagement. Several theories impact work-related outcomes, such as the expectancy, social exchange, and job demand-resources theories.

Chopra (2019) shared that Vroom's expectancy theory suggests that people expect desired outcomes based on actions or efforts and also includes instrumentality and valence as crucial components. From an employee perspective, the expectancy theory implies that motivation comes from the belief that performance will yield desired outcomes like rewards and recognition (Chopra, 2019). Lastly, Chopra (2019) shared that the expectancy theory helps researchers understand how employees make decisions based on motivating factors.

On the other hand, Ohemeng et al. (2020) stated that the social exchange theory (SET) spread in the 1970s by George Homans, Peter Blau, and Richard Emerson provided an influential framework to explain employee behaviors at work. In employee engagement and retention context, SET is rooted in social psychology and person-to-person relationships through a cost-benefit analysis (Ohemeng et al., 2020). SET helps researchers understand employees' behavior and reaction to positive interactions like career development as an investment where the reciprocation for that benefit leads to potentially increased performance, engagement, and retention levels (Abdullahi et al., 2022). However, Ohemeng et al. (2020) also shared that negative interactions can decrease engagement and satisfaction, leading to attrition.

The JD-R theoretical framework helps researchers explore how job demand and resources impact employee engagement, wellness, and performance. Naidoo-Chetty and du Plessis (2021) shared that the JD-R model explains positive impacts on employee engagement

through increased job resources like training and development. Ghosh et al. (2020) discussed employees' psychological detachment due to high job demands and limited resources and how leveraging the JD-R model to mitigate those risks can lead to increased engagement and growth. The JD-R model can be used in human resource management to gain insight into factors impacting employee engagement and help develop mitigation strategies. For example, Naidoo-Chetty and du Plessis (2021) found that career pathing requires significant job resources such as guidance, mentorship, administrative support, and precise career trajectories. Higher education institutions can benefit from leveraging the JD-R model in applying strategic talent management practices to ensure sufficient and desired resources are available to enhance employee engagement, productivity, and retention.

Dixit and Upadhyay (2021) studied the JD-R model among academic employees in higher education. They found that job autonomy among academic employees was a resource that impacted innovative work behavior but not employee engagement. Balwant et al. (2022) found that an institution's training and development climate as a resource directly impacted administrative employee engagement and productivity. Additionally, Botha et al. (2023) explored working from home as a resource using the JD-R model within a higher education institution. They found that it had positive engagement results related to institutional support but positive and negative impacts on engagement depending on employee preference. Using the JD-R model helped the researcher determine if offering career pathing and development opportunities to non-academic employees within private higher education institutions are resources that impacted engagement and retention.

Constructs

Exploring the problem of career pathing and sustainable talent pipelines for non-academic employees within private higher education institutions required identifying and investigating core elements related to the phenomena. The key elements that served as the foundation of this research study were career pathing, employee engagement and retention, succession planning, and university culture. These constructs were instrumental in shaping the research methodology and data analysis techniques. This section provided an overview of each construct related to the problem.

Career Pathing. As the labor market tightens and the talent competition becomes challenging, Rombaut and Guerry (2020) emphasized the importance of offering professional development and career pathing opportunities to enhance employee attraction, engagement, and retention. Erasmus (2020) found that career pathing and management encompass advancement and development, which are vital elements in developing high levels of engagement and organizational commitment and leading to longevity. McClure (2022) shared that offering a career path in higher education allows non-academic employees to expand their knowledge and understand critical steps to achieve desired career advancement goals. Lastly, Erasmus (2020) found that career pathing helps develop talent pipelines for succession planning and increases retention as organizations invest in the growth and development of key talent.

However, career pathing and offering development opportunities require a substantial amount of investment, effort, and planning from leadership buy-in to the development and implementation by the HR unit (Els & Meyer, 2023). Frantz et al. (2020) found that higher education institutions provided limited investment into strategic talent management initiatives like career pathing, which impact retention. Additionally, career pathing requires a detailed

approach to various job families, trajectories, and skill sets while shifting to meet changing organizational and employee needs due to internal and external factors (Mahat, 2021). In contrast, Laser (2019) added that career planning activities include a subjective element of personal perception that can create a misalignment between employee and employer. Therefore, Erasmus (2020) suggested that organizations leverage career management as a holistic approach that includes various development and advancement initiatives tailored to meet the organization's and employees' unique needs.

Employee Engagement. Within any organization, multiple factors impact employee engagement. Ghosh et al. (2020) described employee engagement as a positive experience that creates a sense of fulfillment and intrinsic motivation, leading to enhanced performance. Positive experiences within a work environment that positively impact productivity, an affinity for the organization, and connection are factors that Opoku et al. (2023) considered vital to developing higher levels of employee engagement. Mohammed et al. (2022) added that the evolved workforce requires providing superior employee experiences that connect intimately to an employer brand, improving employee engagement and business outcomes. In a hyper-competitive labor market, Ali and Mahmood (2020) suggested that employee engagement is just one element of creating elevated employee experiences that infuse various marketing strategies like branding into HR best practices. Kura et al. (2019) added that engaged employees could also decide to leave an organization if other elements of their experience create dissatisfaction. Poell (2022) proposed that integrating strategic HR practices like best-in-class total rewards, development, and recognition programs for talent optimization increases employee engagement.

Employee engagement is not a one-size-fits-all approach and must meet the expectations of experiences of the employee population within an organization (Staniec & Kalińska-Kula,

2021). Related to higher education institutions, Gander et al. (2019) stated that employee engagement increases among university professional staff in non-academic areas resulted from feeling that the institution was committed to offering development opportunities like mentorship and leadership programs. Bichsel et al. (2022) shared data from a 2022 employee retention survey of non-academic higher education employees that supported Gander et al. (2019) observations on how institutional support for non-academic employees through professional development programs increases engagement and connection to the institution. Bichsel et al. (2022) found that career advancement, development opportunities, and low compensation were critical drivers of employee engagement for non-academic staff. Rombaut and Guerry (2020) suggested that organizations manage employee engagement by embracing tailored solutions, being intentional with actions, and seeking input from their workforce about needs related to the EVP.

Employee Retention. Employee retention is a significant element of strategic human resources practices and focuses on the ability of an employer to retain its employees through competitive total rewards programs and positive workforce cultures (Shwana & Yesiltas, 2020). Jackson and Allen (2022) shared that organizations that view employee retention as an element of institutional risk and develop strategic mitigation strategies like formal career management programs will likely benefit from lower attrition levels and internal talent pipelines. McClure (2022) shared that as the labor market tightens and the shortage of top talent increases, retaining top talent by implementing innovative people practices is a top priority. Anlesinya et al. (2019) suggested conducting strategic workforce planning and assessment to find ways to identify top talent and ways to entice them to stay. For example, Rombaut and Guerry (2020) shared that building a positive employer brand can attract and retain top talent. Valentine et al. (2020) also

shared that developing competitive compensation packages and offering programs that build competencies and leadership capabilities impact employee retention.

However, various factors, such as misaligned expectations, leadership, and culture, impact an organization's ability to retain employees. Reed (2021) found that leadership effectiveness directly impacted voluntary turnover intentions within a higher education institution. Morukhu et al. (2021) also shared that leadership, specifically direct supervisors, are a crucial factor in talent management and create micro-cultures of the immediate work environment, which drives employee satisfaction and retention. Additionally, performance management within an organization is critical to retention efforts because it is the instrument used to measure performance against organizational objectives and provides an opportunity for two-way dialogue that influences employee perception and connection (Valentine et al., 2020). Lastly, Singh (2020) stated that organizational cultures that yield unhealthy working environments create flight risk for talent due to unsatisfactory employee experiences.

Succession Planning. Succession planning was crucial for exploring and gaining insight into career pathing and engagement's impact on developing a leadership pipeline within private higher education institutions. Ahmad et al. (2020) defined succession planning as an organization's proactive approach to identifying employees to backfill critical leadership roles when incumbents vacate positions. Els and Meyer (2023) suggested that organizational investment in career management initiatives, which include leadership competency development, helps employees identify skill gaps for future roles. However, succession planning requires HR practitioners to identify critical roles, assess talent, develop high-potential employees, implement equitable practices, and conduct continuous reviews of the plans, increasing the administrative burden (Laser, 2019). Although succession planning is a critical component of strategic talent

management, it is not an easy task or strategic objective to achieve without adequate resources and planning.

Ahmad et al. (2020) also highlighted the leadership crisis within higher education institutions and suggested that formalized succession planning is critical for leadership and business continuity. For example, Jackson and Allen (2022) found that a lack of investment in talent management initiatives like leadership development, career pathing, and expanding competencies for non-academic employees create challenges to effective non-academic leadership succession planning within higher education institutions. Additionally, Pillay (2019) stated that career management is critical to the long-term effectiveness of universities, and understanding employee experiences and satisfaction in this area is valuable in creating internal retention and engagement strategies that help develop non-academic leadership succession plans. Lastly, Abdullahi et al. (2022) emphasized the institutional risk related to intellectual and job knowledge transfer within higher education if succession planning is not considered a strategic priority.

University Culture. University culture is a system of values, norms, and established behaviors within a higher education institution that shape community member interactions and experiences (Singh, 2020). University culture is also shaped and influenced by leadership, which often consists of a President, Provost, and other senior leaders who drive decision-making and strategic direction of the institution (Akanji et al., 2020). Audenaert et al. (2021) shared that leadership behaviors set the tone and establish standards of behavior and expectations that drive university culture. However, university culture can shape leadership behavior just as leadership behavior can shape university culture (Singh, 2020). University leadership determines the institution's strategic objectives and can overlook the importance of integrating strategic talent

management into objectives and the university's mission (Morukhu et al., 2021). For example, Gander et al. (2019) found that most universities begin searches by looking for external candidates, sending a cultural message that internal career advancement and opportunities are lacking. Additionally, Morukhu et al. (2021) revealed that university cultures that do not adequately invest in manager training to execute talent management strategies effectively lead to lower engagement and retention levels.

Dee and Collinsworth (2023) shared that higher education shifting to more market-like conditions also impacts university culture and creates more corporate-like environments. Nhlabathi and Maharaj (2020) added that the shift in industry conditions and labor market deficiencies caused higher education institutions to embrace different mitigation strategies that impact operations and shift university culture. For example, universities have moved to hiring more adjuncts to cut costs, shifting from a traditional tenured faculty culture to an over 70% contingent academic workforce (Spinrad et al., 2022). Spinrad and Relles (2022) shared that the new focus on creating revenues has dramatically changed university operations and created a cascading impact on university culture.

Related Studies

Human resources management practices and organizational commitment in higher education: The mediating role of work engagement (Aboramadan et al., 2020). This study examined the impact of human resources management practices on employee engagement in Palestinian universities. The study targeted academic and non-academic employees and received 237 responses, with 65% in administrative roles. The results revealed that employee engagement and commitment increase when human resources practices like training and development, performance management, and total rewards are optimized.

The influence of organisational culture on leadership style in higher education institutions (Akanji et al., 2020). This study explored the impact of organizational culture on leadership styles within Nigerian universities. The findings revealed that values and organizational culture shaped leadership styles. This study helped the researcher examine the relationship between university culture and leadership behavior, impacting employee experiences and workplace norms.

Challenges for HR professionals in the post-COVID-19 era (Anjum et al., 2022). This study offered a different viewpoint, focusing on the impact of COVID-19 on the human resources (HR) profession and how the approach to workforce strategies must change. This study highlighted the challenges HR professionals face in delivering strategic HR initiatives and the need to quickly change and adapt to the new world of work. New challenges include but are not limited to integrating hybrid operations, building resiliency, creating connected communities remotely, and ensuring employee well-being.

The role of career development in ensuring effective quality management of training (Els & Meyer, 2023). This study highlighted the importance of career development in organizational success. The study revealed that a lack of training and development led to the appointment of incompetent leaders, impacting the output quality. The results supported that investing in strategic talent management and high-quality career development yielded better-prepared leaders and improved outcomes.

Perceptions of administrative staff on career advancement realities at a South African university (Erasmus, 2020). This study focused on a small sample of the senior-level administrative staff at a South African University to explore perceived barriers to career advancement and succession planning that impact non-academic employee engagement and

experiences. The study revealed that non-academic employees perceived barriers to advancement as university culture, shift from collegial to managerial model, lack of talent management strategies, and ineffective communication. However, the limitations of this study revealed that conducting additional studies with multiple universities and more participants would help understand the phenomena.

The careers of university professional staff: a systematic literature review (Gander et al., 2019). This research focused on university professional staff, also categorized as non-academic employees, who are actors of this study. This research was critical as the non-academic employee experience is not often studied or documented. This study supported examining the identified problem as an extended and future research opportunity.

Succession planning for senior leaders: is it always a good idea? (Jackson & Allen, 2022). This study offered an opposing view that succession planning is not a one-size-fits-all approach and should not always be the default for senior leadership positions in higher education institutions. Instead, the findings revealed that institutional needs must drive talent management and consider several factors before solely looking at internal succession planning. The approach presented resulted in institutions exploring a mix of external and internal hiring to meet evolving institutional needs adequately.

Talent management practices on employee performance: A mediating role of employee engagement in institution of higher learning: Quantitative analysis (Mohammed et al., 2022). This study investigated the relationship between talent management practices and employee performance and engagement at private Malaysian higher education institutions. However, this study only considered 314 academic staff and did not include the perspective of non-academic

staff. Nevertheless, the results revealed that talent management strategies such as recruitment, compensation, and development positively impact employee engagement.

The role of leadership in higher education institutions talent management processes (Morukhu et al., 2021). This study investigated the role of leadership in talent management decisions within higher education institutions in South Africa. The exploratory design consisted of interviews with 10 academic and non-academic leaders and focused on participants' perceptions of their role in the talent management process. The results revealed that the participants felt their roles were critical in recruitment, motivation, engagement, performance management, and talent retention through effective internal communication strategies.

Systematic review of the job demands and resources of academic staff within higher education institutions (Naidoo-Chetty & du Plessis, 2021). This study focused on academic employees' job resources and demands and their impact on engagement and well-being. The utilization of the Job Demands-Resources JD-R model in this study makes this an excellent resource for comparison since the JD-R theory will help explore resource issues with non-academic employees in private higher education institutions. The results revealed that resources such as social support, autonomy, coaching, and professional development positively impact work commitment.

Human resource policies and work–life balance in higher education: Employee engagement as mediator (Opoku et al., 2023). This study examined workplace policies and their impact on employee engagement within higher education institutions. The findings indicated a correlation between HR policies, employee engagement, and work-life balance. The results suggested that developing policies supporting employees' well-being increases employee engagement. This study added value to exploring the problem by highlighting leadership,

institutional culture, and HR's critical role in deploying initiatives that impact employee engagement and retention.

Higher education administrator turnover: An examination of situational leadership styles (Reed, 2021). This study examined higher education administration turnover and evaluated the relationship between culture and leadership style to attrition and decreased engagement. The findings revealed a positive relationship between perceived leadership effectiveness and attrition and illustrated the impact of leaders on employee experiences. This study helped add additional context to the critical role of direct managers and supervisors in engagement and retention efforts.

Anticipated and Discovered Themes

Anticipated theme: University culture drives behavior and objectives across higher education institutions. Sampson et al. (2022) examined the impact of culture on employee engagement within a higher education institution. They found that an organization's culture influences employee engagement, morale, retention, performance, and behavior. In addition, Sampson et al. (2022) emphasize the integral role that senior leadership has in creating a strategic vision and an institutional culture that enables positive employee experiences. Lastly, Reed (2021) revealed that university culture impacts the importance of leadership effectiveness on the employee experience, which directly correlates to voluntary employee turnover.

Anticipated theme: Budget constraints impact the ability to deliver strategic human resources programs. Some of the significant issues facing higher education institutions (HEI) are declining enrollments, shrinking budgets, and the dramatic impact the global health pandemic of 2020 had on revenues. In addition, Blocher et al. (2021) emphasized the innate power of budgets to communicate and manage expectations throughout an organization. However, when

institutions face budget constraints, the ability to invest in strategic talent management is challenging and results in limited initiatives and programs dedicated to growth and development.

Anticipated theme: Career planning initiatives impact employee engagement. Erasmus (2020) shared that individual career planning positively impacts employee engagement and morale because employees have a tangible roadmap that illustrates future opportunities and organizational investment in employee growth. Ahmad Munir et al. (2020) revealed that career planning leads to increased employee satisfaction, a significant indicator of reduced attrition and higher levels of commitment. Lastly, Aboramadan et al. (2020) found that implementing strategic human resources practices like career planning increases employee engagement and satisfaction.

Discovered themes: This study's results revealed several themes that align with the reviewed literature and the study's findings. The following discussion focuses on the themes that emerged as the researcher compared the literature review to the study's results. First, the professional and scholarly literature reviewed lacked a focus on the non-academic employee experience. McClure (2022) described the lack of focus on non-academic employees within higher education institutions as a significant issue resulting in increased attrition. Instead, most of the literature focused on academic faculty and administrative roles in higher education. The literature revealed the correlation between academic staff to achieve the institution's core mission but rarely highlighted the critical role of non-academic staff.

The second discovered theme from the study's findings that addressed research question 1, confirmed a lack of formal career pathing for non-academic employees within private higher education institutions. Ninety-five percent (95%) of participants shared that their institution did not have formal career paths, influencing them to seek outside employment. Conversely,

professional organizations like CUPA-HR provided relevant data on non-academic roles, such as higher education HR professionals, suggesting that turnover is relatively stable within the function across higher education (Pritchard & Schmidt, 2020). The researcher added retention as a discovered theme due to the significant finding related to the lack of career pathing and addressed the correlation in the presentation of findings. In addition, the findings supported the inquiry into the availability of professional development opportunities across all participant institutions. It emerged as a theme for research question 1. However, the findings did not support the idea that the availability of the resources and programs directly impacted non-academic employee engagement or retention.

Resource constraints, university leadership, and culture emerged as themes that supported research question 2 and showed a relationship between the literature review and the study's findings. The findings revealed that resource constraints, specifically division budgets and human capital, presented challenges in developing formal career paths for non-academic employees. Lean teams and limited budgets prevented institutions from investing the time and resources required to establish formal career pathing for non-academic employees. In addition, participants shared that university leadership and culture were significant themes impacting institution priorities and non-academic employee experiences, which correlates to the literature review.

The final themes discovered from the research study findings, in alignment with the literature review, were the need for formal succession management, institutional culture, and consistency in talent management. The findings revealed that a lack of structured processes and practices like formalized strategic talent management initiatives impacted the ability to execute succession management for non-academic leadership pipelines. For example, informal

succession planning initiatives without formalized processes created a culture of insufficient talent management. The discovered themes are interrelated, similar to what the literature review revealed about the importance of strategic talent management.

Summary of the Literature Review

The study's literature review helped demonstrate the connection between the current body of knowledge and the possible deficiency of formal career pathing and development opportunities for non-academic employees in private higher education institutions, resulting in the possible reduction of top-talent engagement and retention. In addition, the literature review highlighted the following themes: (a) university culture's impact on employee engagement and experience, (b) budget implications on strategic human resources management in higher education, (c) evolving HR practices, and (d) the impact of strategic talent management.

The literature revealed that various factors shape university culture, including organizational values and norms, leadership, academic and non-academic employee categorization, decision-making and diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging practices. For example, leadership significantly influences university culture by setting strategic direction and modeling acceptable behaviors. Additionally, university culture influences the academic and non-academic employee experience, which is very different due to the nature of the roles. However, offering clear career progression for academic employees and not for non-academic employees leads to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging challenges that impact engagement and retention among non-academic employees. Another contributing factor that shapes university culture is decision-making and shared governance, which impacts the strategic direction of institutional priorities. These elements create a system of values, beliefs, and norms

that ultimately shape employee experiences that significantly impact engagement, growth opportunities, and retention.

University funding and financial operations are significant in deploying strategic initiatives and resources allocated to strategic priorities. The literature review revealed that public higher education institutions operate under strict guidelines and are state-funded. Private higher education institutions have more autonomy and can decide where to allocate funding to meet institutional goals. Since this study focuses on private higher education institutions, the research implies that private higher education institutions have more flexibility in investing in human capital initiatives and people strategies that drive business outcomes.

Lastly, the literature review highlighted the impact, evolution, and opportunity for the HR function to help align human capital with institutional strategic plans. Emerging themes highlighted the skill gap in meeting the function's changing needs due to technological advances that require upskilling, like data analytics. Additionally, the research revealed that employee engagement and succession planning were critical elements of implementing an effective strategic talent management strategy and impacted long-term business outcomes.

In addition, this study established practical business applications in private higher education institutions related to the value of HR as strategic partners, strategic talent management, and the importance of integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion practices among academic and non-academic employees. Lastly, the literature review highlighted the concepts that suggest that professional development and career advancement opportunities lead to employee engagement, formal career pathways increase employee retention, and employee retention impacts successful succession planning.

Summary of Section 1 and Transition

Section 1 of this study provided the background and critical research to support the exploration of the problem identified as the possible deficiency of career pathing for non-academic employees within private education institutions and the possible impact on engagement and retention. For example, the current research revealed that non-academic employee engagement and retention trends declined due to factors related to employee experience and that professional development opportunities are vital to the employee experience and drive engagement and retention. Therefore, one area of consideration was developing formal career pathing opportunities for non-academic employees within private higher education institutions, which this study explored through the three research questions presented. A flexible design with multiple case studies helped the researcher investigate the relationship between professional development opportunities like career pathing and employee engagement, retention, and succession planning among non-academic employees within private higher education institutions. In addition, the researcher used the JD-R model to focus on job-related resources and demands that align with the problem. Finally, an overview of critical terms helped readers understand the overarching vernacular used throughout the study.

Furthermore, the researcher discussed the study's vulnerabilities in the form of assumptions, limitations, and delimitations, including sample size, participant honesty, and lack of researcher objectivity with corresponding risk mitigation strategies. In addition, the study was significant in adding to the current body of knowledge related to the non-academic employee experience within higher education institutions. Lastly, the literature review outline presented emerging themes related to culture, budget, professional development opportunities, and the lack of research on the non-academic employee participant group. Finally, this problem was worthy

of exploration and added value to current impact business practices related to non-academic employees within academia.

The following section provides an in-depth discussion of how the researcher conducted the study. The section explains the researcher's role and actions performed during the study, in addition to reducing personal bias through bracketing. The researcher discussed the study's design, method, triangulation techniques, eligibility, population characteristics, access, sampling methods, and size to provide the researcher's goals with selected participants. In addition, the researcher provided insight into the data collection and analysis plan and its appropriateness for the study. For example, the data collection and organization plan included an overview and summary of instruments, interview guides, and surveys that addressed the research questions and validated participant responses through member checking. A vital element of this section addressed reliability and validity, summarized emergent ideas, and used techniques like bracketing to address bias. Finally, the following section contained a detailed action plan that addressed the research questions while ensuring credible findings.

Section 2: The Project

This section helped the researcher provide an overview of the key elements needed to conduct this qualitative research using a flexible, multiple case-study design to explore career pathing for non-academic employees within private higher education institutions. Creswell and Poth (2018) discussed the essential components of executing an ethical and subjective qualitative study focused on answering research questions that include the researcher's role and avoiding personal bias, research design, appropriateness of methodology, sampling strategy, data collection, and analysis techniques. To provide detailed explanations related to how the researcher conducted the study ethically and rigorously:

1. The researcher discussed the role of the researcher and the actions taken to avoid bias.
2. The researcher provided an in-depth discussion about the appropriateness of this study's research methodology and design.
3. The researcher explained the criteria for selecting research participants, the target population, and the sample size.
4. The researcher provided an overview of the data collection and analysis plan incorporating triangulation to increase the reliability and validity of the study.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this flexible design multiple case study was to help the researcher explore and understand employee engagement and retention challenges of non-academic employees in private higher education institutions and the effect on non-academic leadership succession management. The researcher sought to understand the driving factors in employee engagement and retention challenges in private higher education institutions to see if there was a specific influence on the engagement and retention of non-academic staff provided by the employee

value proposition. The more significant problems of employee engagement and retention in private higher education institutions required an in-depth study of employee engagement and retention and its effect on creating sustainable non-academic leadership talent pipelines through succession management.

Role of the Researcher

Creswell (2016) described qualitative research as an ideal way to explore the perspectives of a selected population. The qualitative researcher initiates the study and sees it through to completion, making the researcher the most critical part of the study. Specifically, the researcher is responsible for participant recruitment, data collection, data analysis, maintaining reflexivity, employing triangulation techniques, maintaining ethical standards, and presenting findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, the researcher utilized a flexible, multiple-case study design to explore career pathing for non-academic employees within private higher education institutions by leveraging human resource professionals' and non-academic employees' perspectives using a combination of surveys and semi-structured interviews. Lastly, it was essential to understand that the researcher's understanding, experience, and subject matter knowledge impact the researcher's approach and observation capacity of the phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

As researchers explore and seek to understand an identified problem, their worldviews and lived experiences impact how they interpret reality or truth. Creswell (2016) revealed that personal and professional experiences shape research approaches and views of various subjects. Karagiozis (2018) emphasized that even the most systemically organized studies are susceptible to value and moral conflicts that go unrecognized by the researcher due to how close they are to the study. The researcher's views on politics, religion, socioeconomic status, age, and cultural

differences shaped their values and beliefs, significantly influencing the study's development and conclusions. To mitigate bias, researchers must elevate levels of self-awareness and have a profound understanding of their perspectives, limitations, and biases that can impact the study's outcomes (Karagiozis, 2018). As a result, a key component of conducting qualitative research is incorporating bracketing.

Dörfler and Stierand (2021) stated that bracketing could mean very different things depending on philosophical foundations and a lack of implementation guidelines, aligning closely with phenomenology, which focuses on the meaning of human experiences. However, when regarded in most rigorous qualitative studies, bracketing is a researcher's attempt to suspend their biases, assumptions, and preconceived understandings (Dörfler & Stierand, 2021). Nicholls (2019) suggested that by bracketing out personal beliefs and values, the researcher's focus shifts to embracing only the participant's perspectives and views without imposing preconceived ideas or understandings.

Researchers can leverage bracketing tools and techniques like reflexivity, reflective journaling, peer debriefing, researcher triangulation, audit trails, and member checking to acknowledge and reduce personal bias (Karagiozis, 2018). Reflexivity is the process of self-reflection and awareness of bias related to the research topic, and it is one of the most common tools used in bracketing (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Journaling and auditing help document decision-making processes, thoughts, feelings, and reflections throughout the engagement with participants as a form to examine personal assumptions (Humble & Sharp, 2012). Peer debriefing and researcher triangulation bring in multiple perspectives for the data collection and analysis to reduce researcher bias (Arias Valencia, 2022). In comparison, member checking invites participants to view initial findings and results to validate the researcher's understanding

and interpretation (Creswell, 2016). Lastly, bracketing is valuable for managing and reducing personal bias to enhance the study's rigor, reliability, and credibility.

Summary of the Role of the Researcher

Overall, the role of the researcher was to ensure that the study incorporated the highest ethical standards throughout all elements of the study, including design selection, participant engagement, data collection, and analysis, in addition to mitigating personal bias through various bracketing techniques. The researcher remained active and reflective while gaining deep insight into the experiences, views, unique perspectives, and meanings through the participant's lens to understand the research topic. Lastly, the researcher understood how to quell the insertion of personal beliefs and values into assessing the phenomenon through increased self-awareness and consistent reflexivity.

Research Methodology

The research methodology comprises several components: design, research method, and triangulation to conduct a successful study, including collecting and analyzing data to infer conclusions on the identified research topic. The researcher used a flexible design with a multiple case study to allow for an agile approach to inquiry and included various triangulation methods to increase the results' validity, reliability, and credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher used this section to highlight the appropriateness of the flexible design, multiple-case study approach, and triangulation methods to explore career pathing for non-academic employees within private higher education institutions.

Discussion of Flexible Design

A key component to starting a research study is selecting the appropriate design to allow good exploration into the inquiry to answer the established research questions. Creswell and

Creswell (2018) said that a researcher's worldview influences research design selection due to their beliefs and background. The most common research design choices are flexible, fixed, and mixed methods. Weyant (2022) shared the fixed designs, also called quantitative research, which are structured and include hypotheses requiring statistical analysis and a controlled approach to measure the relationship between two or more variables that seek generalizability. The fixed design was not ideal for this study because there is no structured proposal, and the problem does not require measuring the relationship between two or more variables. The mixed methods approach incorporates elements of both quantitative and qualitative methods for a more comprehensive understanding of data based on integrated analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). They added that the mixed methods approach is valuable for research questions that require a combination of methods to adequately address the topic through subjective and numerical interpretation. Lastly, the authors shared that the flexible design allows agility and adaptability to modify various study elements based on the interactive research process that requires shifts to meet emerging insights and research needs to address the phenomena seeking relatability.

The researcher used the flexible design, specifically using a multiple case study, to explore career pathing for non-academic employees within private higher education institutions because of the ability to adapt and incorporate different methods, which allowed for a more exploratory and participant-centric approach as the study evolves (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The flexible design was the appropriate selection because it focused on exploration and discovery, in which the researcher collected data on human experiences and perspectives that led to the integrating of additional qualitative tools to gain a deeper understanding of the problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Discussion of Qualitative Method

The qualitative research method best suited this study since the researcher explored the problem through semi-structured interviews and surveys focused on experiences and participant perspectives (Yin, 2018). Researchers can choose from five common qualitative research methods: narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, case study, and ethnography (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). However, exploring career paths for non-academic employees in private higher education institutions required multiple data sources and evidence to understand the phenomena better. Therefore, the researcher used a flexible design with a multiple-case study approach to obtain greater confidence in the results by incorporating multiple evidence sources to create a compelling story (Bettie & Evans, 2021). This study included semi-structured interviews and the review of surveys as the data collection and analysis methods. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) shared that interviews help capture in-depth personal responses and attitudes. Weyant (2022) found that surveys capture information quickly and combined with other data collection methods, can help create a representative population sample.

Arya (2021) shared that the case study approach helps deliver in-depth analysis and profound understanding across issues and disciplines, making it an excellent selection for exploratory research like this study. According to Bettie and Evans (2021), the multiple-case study allows the researcher to gain a rich and in-depth understanding of the problem through cross-case analysis to identify patterns, similarities, and differences that influence broader outcomes. Additionally, Arias Valencia (2022) suggested that the multiple case study approach allows the researcher to conduct methodological triangulation to strengthen the validity and reliability of the study due to the utilization of multiple sources of evidence. Therefore, the flexible design using a multiple-case study method was the best choice for this exploratory study.

Discussion of Method for Triangulation

When conducting research, the researcher must incorporate ways to ensure that data are reliable, valid, and credible. Creswell and Poth (2018) shared that all flexible design approaches must incorporate triangulation methods to increase credibility and validity while reducing bias. Arias Valencia (2022) shared that triangulation is the process researchers conduct to gain a deeper understanding of the problem by combining multiple data sources to reduce bias and increase the validity, reliability, and credibility of findings and includes six types: data, methodological, investigator, theory, time, and space.

Data triangulation involves varying data collection methods across space, people, and time to increase the generalizability of the results of the same event (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). Multiple data sources should reveal similar findings showing a relationship among the evidence, which increases reliability and credibility (Natow, 2020). Noble and Heale (2019) described investigator triangulation as leveraging the findings of multiple researchers or observers to evaluate findings and reach a consensus and using multiple theories to gain a deeper understanding of the problem. Time triangulation utilizes various points in time to identify trends and patterns, while space triangulation evaluates multiple locations to identify trends in environmental settings (Arias Valencia, 2022). The authors also shared that methodological triangulation utilizes between-method approaches, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to explore a problem, like surveys, interviews, and document analysis, to help the researcher comprehensively understand the problem. Within-method triangulation utilizes multiple approaches within a single research method to allow for variations within the same method to produce broader data and enhanced perspectives to increase validation (Natow, 2020).

The researcher incorporated methodological triangulation to enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings. Arias Valencia (2022) added that methodological triangulation requires coding and deep analysis to validate, complement, and examine the data collected from each method. Specifically, the researcher used the between-methods approach by incorporating qualitative and quantitative techniques from semi-structured interviews and the 2022 CUPA-HR employee retention survey to cross-validate and corroborate findings, increasing the reliability and credibility of the research. Between-methods triangulation allowed the researcher to use the in-depth data captured from interviews that revealed attitudes, perspectives, and experiences and larger amounts of data captured via a survey to cross-validate findings to deliver credible and reliable conclusions (Weyant, 2022).

Summary of Research Methodology

Qualitative research allows for the exploration of a phenomenon by the researcher, who is critical to the execution of a successful study. The researcher utilized qualitative research methods, specifically a flexible design using a multiple case study to explore career pathing for non-academic employees within private higher education institutions. The flexible design best suited this study due to its agility and adaptability to probe emerging insights as the researcher explored the problem. Additionally, understanding the career pathing for non-academic employees with private higher education institutions was best supported by a multiple-case study to identify similarities, patterns, themes, and differences across cases since each offered unique insights. Lastly, the researcher collected data through semi-structured Zoom interviews and cross-referenced the findings with the 2022 CUPA-HR retention survey, making methodological triangulation an appropriate tool to verify the findings' validity, credibility, and reliability.

Participants

Creswell and Poth (2018) shared that participants are critical to a successful qualitative study because they help provide insight that allows the researcher to explore the problem. The researcher focused on the problem related to career pathing for non-academic employees within private higher education institutions. Within higher education institutions, non-academic employees are those who do not perform academic instruction or research activities but work in professional, administrative, or support roles, usually within various functional areas including but not limited to human resources, finance, information technology, development, marketing, and facilities (Coomber, 2019).

Eligible participants included full-time non-academic employees within administrative or professional roles with a minimum of 2 years of consecutive employment at a non-profit 4-year or more private higher education institution in the Northeast United States. A participant subset of the non-academic employee target population was human resources leaders responsible for driving organizational change through strategic people operations. Shwana and Yesiltas (2020) shared that human resources leaders manage talent through strategic workforce planning to enhance culture, recruit and retain talent, and comply with employment laws and regulations. The researcher set the minimum years of employment at two because 2 years allowed participant exposure to the institution, insight into the human resources practices and programs available, and the perspectives needed to contribute to the research inquiry adequately. Therefore, not targeted for this study were part-time, physical facilities, skilled trades, and campus police non-academic employee populations within private higher education institutions. The parameters set for participant eligibility helped the researcher define a targeted population for this multiple-case

study that represented and aligned with the research objectives and nature of the research questions to explore the phenomena.

Population and Sampling

Population and sample size are critical to ensuring the reliability and validity of qualitative studies. The researcher identified a population and sample size applicable to larger or similar populations in similarly situated settings. The researcher explained the reasoning behind the selected population and the added value to the higher education human resources body of knowledge. Lastly, the researcher discussed the sampling method, frame, desired sample size, and how the sample size helped reach saturation.

Discussion of Population

Since qualitative research helps researchers gain an in-depth understanding of an issue, the researcher must adequately define the larger target population to select eligible participants to provide rich and meaningful insight and data to answer the research questions (Ghauri et al., 2020). The qualitative study population can be individuals or groups selected using specific characteristics like experiences, cultural backgrounds, events, or activities focused on deeper understanding compared to quantitative studies that seek statistical generalizability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Yin (2018) emphasized that generalizability is not best suited for qualitative studies due to the focus on gaining deeper meaning and understanding of phenomena. However, Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) revealed that in qualitative research, the transferability of the research findings to other contexts and settings using rich and thick descriptions is critical to help other researchers understand how the results apply to additional contexts. Lastly, access, geographic location, and time availability impact qualitative study target population selection.

For the researcher to draw meaningful conclusions, this qualitative study's target population was non-academic employees in 4-year non-profit private higher education institutions in the Northeast United States. Non-academic employees have non-instructional administrative roles, including human resources, information technology, finance, student affairs, admissions, and other support roles (Coomber, 2019). Singh (2020) noted that due to their direct interactions with students, primarily through instruction, institutions place a higher value on academic employees' contributions to institutional outcomes. Conversely, Erasmus (2020) disclosed that the non-academic employee experience within academia is much different and revealed barriers to the advancement of the group, such as university culture, lack of talent management, and inadequate communication. Non-academic employees were appropriate for this study because the research inquiry focused on their experience with career pathing opportunities within higher education institutions, and this population provided rich and relevant information related to the research questions.

The National Center for Educational Statistics (2023) revealed that in Fall 2021, approximately 244,000 non-academic employees were employed in 378 4-year non-profit private higher education institutions in the Northeast United States. Participant demographics such as race, age, ethnicity, gender, and marital status are not factors driving selection. However, characteristics of the eligible population participants included having a minimum of 2 years of continuous employment in a professional or administrative role, also known as non-academic or staff, within a 4-year private higher education institution within the Northeast United States. The researcher used the research questions to explore the non-academic employee experience and viewpoints on career pathing within 4-year private higher education institutions in the Northeast United States. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with participants and gained

insight and a deeper understanding of career pathing for non-academic employees within private higher education, which produced transferability of findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Discussion of Sampling

When conducting research, selecting the appropriate sampling strategy is critical and challenging. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) shared that qualitative research, like multiple case studies, leverages numerous cases to help drive in-depth exploration of the phenomenon through various perspectives to produce a detailed and thick description of the problem. Conversely, quantitative studies require larger samples to help generalize a broader population (Yin, 2018). To have a multiple-case research study, Ghauri et al. (2020) shared that the researcher must decide on the adequate number and type of cases to address the purpose statement and research questions. Although most qualitative studies can utilize theoretical or purposeful sampling, Gentles et al. (2015) found that purposeful sampling helps the researcher provide relevant and meaningful data aligned with research objectives using information-rich cases to gain a comprehensive understanding. In contrast, theoretical sampling focuses on emerging theoretical concepts in grounded theory research studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Sampling Method

Kalu (2019) stated that purposeful sampling is a valuable sampling strategy for qualitative researchers because of the deliberate and intentional selection of participants or cases that will add the most value and relevance to the study based on established research objectives. Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that critical, convenience, criterion, and snowball case selection are commonly used strategies in purposeful sampling. The authors shared that critical case selection is valuable when cases are unique and highly informative. In contrast, they revealed that convenience case selection provides easy access to participants and data collection but can

decrease credibility). The snowball case strategy leverages initial participants to refer or nominate additional participants when access to participants is challenging (Kalu, 2019). Lastly, criterion sampling focuses on selecting participants using the established criteria or attributes directly aligned with the research question and objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Gentles et al. (2015) mentioned that purposeful sampling focuses on the intentionality of finding participants and sources that can provide rich, robust, and relevant data related to the research questions. Since the research questions center around the non-academic employee experience related to career pathing, purposeful sampling, specifically criterion and snowball case selection, was the most appropriate strategy to engage with participants who provided valuable, rich, and thick data addressing the research questions related to career pathing for non-academic employees within private higher education institutions. The researcher served as a human resources leader within higher education for over 10 years and developed deep connections and relationships with higher education human resources professionals across the United States. The researcher also served as an at-large member of the national board of directors and in other volunteer leadership roles within College and University Professional Association of Human Resources (CUPA-HR), a professional association dedicated to elevating the human resources function within higher education (College and University Professional Association of Human Resources, 2023). Most CUPA-HR members are non-academic employees within human resources within higher education institutions in the United States. The researcher leveraged personal and professional networks such as CUPA-HR to recruit participants who met the eligible criteria and outreach via email. Through snowball case selection, the researcher asked initial participants to refer others based on their experience, and the researcher successfully secured 20 participants across five private higher education institutions.

Sample Frame

Tuckett (2004) highlighted the complexities of qualitative research sampling and advised that sampling framing is when the researcher defines and delineates population parameters in alignment with the study's purpose. Sample framing helps shape and focus the study by ensuring that participants are relevant to the research question, so outcomes are meaningful to the population. To determine the sample frame for this study, the researcher developed a list of inclusion criteria regarding experiences and perspectives central to this study's objectives and research questions. The sample descriptors were consistent with non-academic employee duties, expectations, and roles within higher education institutions. The sampling frame consisted of non-academic employees with the following attributes:

1. Serving in administrative or professional roles
2. Employed at a non-profit 4-year private higher education institution within the Northeast United States
3. Currently employed at the institution for 2 consecutive years

Sample Size

Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that the qualitative study design, research objectives, research questions, and purpose of the study help the researcher determine the appropriate sample size. Guetterman's (2015) research on the appropriate sample size for a qualitative study revealed a lack of guidance for researchers in determining the appropriate sample size but suggested that researchers focus on information-rich cases. Yin (2018) suggested that in conducting qualitative multiple-case studies, the researcher determines the number of cases based on the researcher's desired level of certainty. The sample size in qualitative studies does not focus on statistical analysis or representation calculations. However, it is driven by what is

known as data saturation, where new information is no longer revealed (Mwita, 2022). For these reasons, Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended that researchers do not need to incorporate more than five cases in a single study, creating a sufficient opportunity for emerging themes and cross-case evaluation. Based on Creswell and Poth's recommendation, the researcher's sample size was five cases with four participants within each case for a total of 20 interview participants to allow for new information since the researcher had direct access to professional and personal networks with a sizeable eligible population based on established participant criteria. The sample size helped increase the findings' reliability, credibility, and validity across multiple locations, institutions, and individual experiences, reaching data saturation.

Most research study assessors leverage saturation to determine if a sample size is sufficient (Mocănașu, 2020). Data saturation is where no new information, themes, or insight is captured (Mwita, 2022). The researcher captured data from five information-rich cases with multiple perspectives until the researcher was confident in a deep and comprehensive understanding of the problem and no new information was available. The researcher gained access to the population and desired sample size by sending recruitment letters through personal and professional networks requesting participation in the study based on established participant eligibility requirements using criterion and snowball case selection. The researcher developed a semi-structured interview guide and asked the same questions for all participants while exploring career pathing for non-academic employees to reach data saturation. However, participants the researcher encouraged participants to share individualized experiences. The researcher used Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendation of five cases for sample size that allowed for the introduction of new information and thick and rich data.

Summary of Population and Sampling

Conducting a qualitative multiple-case study is challenging and requires a detailed and well-thought-out approach to selecting the appropriate population, sample size, and sampling method (Yin, 2018). The researcher used purposeful sampling, specifically criterion and snowball case selection, to find information-rich and thick cases that provided comprehensive insight into the research questions and objectives, achieving the study's purpose. The researcher used the participant eligibility criteria to recruit participants with adequate exposure and insight into their institution's human resources practices and programs related to career pathing for non-academic employees, directly addressing the research questions. The researcher's sample size of five cases across 4-year private higher education institutions yielded sufficient information to achieve data saturation. Finally, the researcher generated findings and themes that applied to other higher education institutions across the United States, adding value to the higher education human resources profession.

Data Collection & Organization

Critical elements to the success of a research study are the researcher's data collection plan that details the collection, organization, and analysis of captured data to ensure reliability and validity. The researcher's data collection plan included the methods and instruments used to gather valuable data that answered the research questions related to career pathing for non-academic employees in private higher education institutions. The researcher provided an overview of data evaluation, analysis, representation, and protection. Lastly, the researcher discussed mitigating bias through various techniques to enhance the reliability and validity of the data.

Data Collection Plan

An advantage of gathering rich and thick data for qualitative studies is that the researcher can utilize various collection methods to gain a more profound and comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Vivar et al. (2007) detailed a 17-step process for effective qualitative research that highlighted the four standard data collection methods: interviews, focus groups, textual or visual analysis, and observations. In addition, technological advances offer researchers new, efficient, cost-effective ways to capture qualitative data through internet-based videoconferencing platforms like Zoom, providing data management and security features (Archibald et al., 2019). However, one of the key components to conducting a successful qualitative study is ensuring that the methods deployed are best suited to answer the research questions. For this qualitative multiple case study, the researcher collected data using semi-structured Zoom interviews to explore the experiences of career pathing for non-academic employees in private higher education institutions.

Semi-structured Interviews. Giudice et al. (2019) conducted in-depth research on qualitative interviews and identified three fundamental types: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. They stated that structured interviews have minimal variation and do not allow for follow-up questions, which limit responses and impact the depth a researcher can gather. In addition, unstructured interviews are executed without organization and can be time-consuming and challenging. In contrast, semi-structured interviews include vital questions to frame areas of exploration with the flexibility to ask follow-up questions to increase the discovery or expansion of new information. It is important to note that with the advent of technology, the usual and customary face-to-face interview has shifted to online platforms that allow for flexibility, more accessible access, time efficiency, and cost savings (Archibald et al., 2019). The semi-structured

interview was best suited for this study because it allowed the researcher to define areas of inquiry and exploration with the flexibility to deviate and ask follow-up questions to gain additional insight and new information related to the research questions. For these reasons, the researcher utilized Zoom videoconferencing to conduct semi-structured one-on-one interviews with eligible participants who are non-academic employees within private higher education to explore career pathing opportunities and answer the research questions. Before conducting the interview, the researcher collected informed consent forms from all participants. The researcher identified perceived barriers, opportunities, and impact on the non-academic employee experience related to career pathing within private higher education institutions.

In the evolving world of work, the researcher investigated a population of non-academic employees who are professionals who have full work schedules and time constraints, which made the Zoom videoconferencing option ideal for conducting the interviews. Additionally, Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that internet-based options like videoconferencing create comfort and empower participants to share their experiences and perspectives on the inquiry. Zoom allowed the researcher to connect with participants and record interviews to develop transcripts, which all participants permitted. After the interviews, the researcher conducted member checking by sending a copy of the interview transcript via e-mail to ensure an accurate portrayal of responses, allowing respondent validation to increase the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings (Candela, 2019). After member checking, the researcher used NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software (QDAS), for additional data analysis. NVivo is a qualitative analysis program that helps researchers organize data into themes and perform additional in-depth analysis to gain insight into the findings (Bergin, 2011).

Surveys. The researcher did not collect survey data for this qualitative multiple-case research study. The researcher used existing published surveys from CUPA-HR that captured data from non-academic employees within higher education to triangulate the findings. CUPA-HR has over 33,000 higher education human resource professional members across 1,800 organizations in the United States and abroad and is the premier organization for robust resources on emerging workforce trends, annual surveys, and research to prompt strategic discussions among colleges and universities (College and University Professional Association of Human Resources, 2023). In 2022, CUPA-HR conducted a higher education employee retention survey for its membership that yielded 3,926 non-academic employee respondents and focused on what higher education institutions can do to increase retention and engagement. The researcher downloaded the study directly from CUPA-HR's website and properly cited findings per the data-use agreement when referring to the captured data. The researcher used the data from the survey to compare and confirm information from the semi-structured interviews to achieve triangulation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Instruments

Interview Guide. When conducting a qualitative study, a researcher must understand the skills required to remain cautious and neutral as an interviewer (Ghauri et al., 2020). The interviewer must focus on questions to yield as much information related to the phenomenon as possible to help answer the research questions and achieve the study's goals (Gill et al., 2008). Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested that before interviews start, the researcher develops robust interview procedures that help guide participants through the entire interview process. Kallio et al. (2016) noted that when conducting semi-structured interviews, developing a robust interview guide is critical to increasing the rigor and trustworthiness of the research method. The

researcher developed a semi-structured interview guide to conduct this qualitative multiple-case study that provided structure, consistency, focus on the research inquiry, and an opportunity to build rapport with participants, which helped gather rich and deep data (see Appendix A).

The semi-structured interview guide included an overview of the process, four opening questions to gather baseline participant data, and nine open-ended questions for all participants related to the three research questions. All interview questions were clear and concise to avoid leading language and ensure easy comprehension.

The interview questions categories were sub-questions to the study's three guiding research questions and explored different elements related to career pathing for non-academic employees within private higher education institutions. Interview questions one through three corresponded to the first research question and helped the researcher explore to what extent private higher education institutions lack formal career pathing and development opportunities to retain and engage top talent. The researcher used interview question one to ask participants about their perception of the availability of career pathing opportunities and what factors might contribute to that perception. The researcher used interview question two to ask participants about available resources and programs to identify and pursue career paths and if the participant had taken advantage of any opportunities. The researcher used interview question three to ask participants if they considered outside employment due to career pathing concerns and what the influential factors were in assessing engagement and retention components of research question 1.

The researcher asked interview question four to gather information to answer research question 2 related to challenges in establishing formal career pathing programs. The researcher discussed participants' perspectives on the main challenges their institutions face in establishing

career pathing and development programs and a follow-up question for additional information related to actions the institution can take to establish. The researcher used interview questions five through eight to gather additional data related to research question 2 and the factors influencing the ability to execute succession planning effectively. The researcher asked interview question five to explore how the institution defined and approached succession planning for leadership roles and asked for examples of available opportunities. The researcher asked interview question six to inquire about succession planning policies or guidelines. The researcher asked interview question seven to understand if the institution articulated the criteria and competencies for evaluating non-academic employees for potential succession into leadership roles and if their direct leader communicated the criteria. The researcher used interview question eight to obtain information about the role that institutional culture played in succession management and if there were any challenges the institution encountered. The researcher used interview question nine to allow the participant to openly share additional thoughts, perspectives, or details related to the three research questions.

Surveys. The researcher downloaded and used an existing published and accessible survey on CUPA-HR's website that captured data from non-academic employees within higher education to triangulate the findings from the semi-structured interviews. The researcher used the *CUPA-HR 2022 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey* conducted in July of 2022, which yielded 3,926 non-academic employee respondents and focused on what higher education institutions can do to increase retention and engagement. However, only the final report included 3,815 employee responses due to missing information required to identify institution classification, department, or employment status. The survey (see Appendix B) asked about the non-academic employee experience and contributing factors to the increased risk of leaving and

satisfaction with institutional policies, programs, and benefits (Bichsel et al., 2022). The survey has proven reliability and credibility because of CUPA-HR's established positioning as the higher education information resource center and its large respondent population of 3,926 non-academic employees representing 949 institutions. The researcher had permission to use the survey as an active member of CUPA-HR and per the data-use agreement that required proper citation (see Appendix C). The survey addressed the study's first research question because it covered the engagement and retention of non-academic employees within higher education. The researcher used the first research question to explore and understand to what extent private higher education institutions lack development opportunities to retain and engage non-academic employees. The researcher used the between-methods approach and leveraged the survey data and findings to cross-validate increasing reliability and credibility of the findings.

Archived Data. Yin (2018) noted that researchers use archived data like public statistical data with other data sources to conduct deep analysis when developing case studies. Archival data has limited benefits due to the specificity of content and purpose. Due to the emerging research study topic, archived data were irrelevant to this study's inquiry. In this qualitative study, the researcher used semi-structured interviews and a previously conducted survey by CUPA-HR as data sources instead of archived records.

Data Organization Plan

Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that data management and organization are robust and interconnected processes critical to successful data analysis in a research study. Devers and Frankel (2000) shared that good data analysis depends on how quickly the researcher can locate the data due to efficient information organization. The researcher must also ensure that the participant's data remains anonymous, confidential, and private (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Throughout this study, the researcher used password-protected applications, software, and laptops with multi-factor authentication to safeguard participants and study data to the highest standards possible. The researcher created folders for each participant labeled with participant pseudonyms and subfolders for interview transcripts, notes, and institutional information. During data collection, the researcher used coding as a form of data management to identify common themes for categorization (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Lastly, the researcher utilized the QDAS NVivo to help organize, store, and analyze various data sources in a single platform (Bergin, 2011).

Member Checking. As part of the interview guide, the researcher defined member-checking for participants to ensure a complete understanding of the interview process. After data analysis, the researcher shared the interview transcript with each participant to verify alignment with experiences and viewpoints (Candela, 2019). During this process, participants could share additional explanations and make clarifying comments based on the transcript and summary provided, but all participants sent approvals of transcripts. The advantages of member checking were enhanced credibility and validity, reduced bias, participant engagement, reflection on previous responses, and ethical alignment by demonstrating consistent interpretations and conclusions (Harper & Cole, 2012). However, the researcher understood that member checking was not free from challenges such as scheduling and participant difficulty recalling details. The researcher did not experience issues with member checking and approval of interview transcripts.

Follow-up Interviews. As part of the interview guide, the researcher defined the expectations for possible follow-up interviews for participants to ensure a complete understanding of the interview process. Bano et al. (2019) emphasized how easy it is to make

mistakes during the interview process, especially for novice interviewers. However, after member checking, the researcher did not need to conduct follow-up interviews to gain a deeper understanding or explore new themes.

Summary of Data Collection & Organization

Due to the large amount of data captured within a qualitative study, Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested the utilization of a data analysis spiral that emphasizes the interconnectedness of data collection, organization, and analysis strategies to conduct an efficient and credible study. However, the initial step focused on the researcher ensuring the collection method was appropriate to help answer the established research questions. For this qualitative multiple case study, the researcher conducted semi-structured Zoom interviews on Zoom and used the CUPA-HR 2022 survey to cross-reference and triangulate findings. The semi-structured interview was appropriate for this study because it allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions, leading to new and more insightful data (Gill et al., 2008). Additionally, the researcher developed an interview guide to ensure participants were well-informed on the interview process, including privacy, confidentiality, data storage, member-checking, and follow-up interviews.

The researcher incorporated the most cyber-secure versions of applications, software, and personal computer programs with multi-factor authorization to safeguard the data collected. As part of the data organization plan, the researcher created folders with participant pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and confidentiality and utilized the qualitative data analysis tool NVivo to organize, store, and analyze the data in one platform (Bergin, 2011). Lastly, to prevent the loss or damage of data collected, the researcher used Liberty University OneDrive secure cloud storage to back up all data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is crucial in qualitative research because it transforms collected data into meaningful information and insights supporting the inquiry. Data analysis is a fluid process that requires researchers to move in analytic circles to systemically organize, interpret, and understand the large amount of data collected throughout the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data analysis also helps the researcher develop themes and understand their interconnectedness to fully comprehend the phenomenon (Houghton et al., 2015). In this section, the researcher discussed the process for recording and memoing emergent ideas, coding themes, interpretation, data representation, and triangulation analysis.

Emergent Ideas

Creswell and Poth (2018) revealed that recording and memoing are critical to data analysis and help the researcher organize data by requiring the researcher to thoroughly read data to become familiar with and create a memoing system for reflective thoughts to identify themes and patterns useful for future coding. The researcher prioritized the organization and sorting of data in addition to reading and memoing throughout the analysis process by reading interview transcripts and listening to recordings several times to develop a comprehensive sense of the participant's experiences related to the phenomenon. The authors also suggested that during each analytic session, the researcher continue to write memos as emergent ideas arise and utilize quotes or clear examples to support observations. While reading transcripts and listening to recordings, the researcher used detailed memoing using short phrases or critical concepts to record what was learned and observed and integrated bracketing techniques like reflective journaling to reduce researcher bias (Karagiozis, 2018).

Coding Themes

Coding is a critical step in qualitative research that involves a systemic process where the researchers organize and categorize captured data based on emerging themes, patterns, ideas, and concepts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The authors added that coding requires the researcher to interpret the data and find meaningful ways to label it for manageable analysis by creating detailed in-context descriptions through their lens. It is important to note and caution researchers that coding takes away the participant's voice because the researcher reduces interaction between parties into words and phrases (Parameswaran et al., 2020). For these reasons, the authors suggested a new approach called live coding, which allows for manual coding while the researcher listens to or watches audio or video recordings.

The coding process begins with the researcher identifying initial code labels for distinct concepts using single words or a short sequence of words from the aggregated visual or text data (Williams & Moser, 2019). In addition, Williams and Moser shared that the researcher must then compare codes to perform an expansion of codes, or axial coding, to create broader categories while looking for connections and relationships between codes to create themes and subthemes. After reviewing and revising the code list, the researcher created codebook of themes with robust definitions, guidance on when and when not to use themes, and samples pulled directly from the study to provide evidence (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Lastly, the researcher finalized the themes and synthesized findings to provide evidence to support the inquiry.

Interpretations

Upon completion of coding and creating themes, another critical element of the data analysis process is interpreting the data to make sense of emerging patterns, relationships, and themes related to the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The authors added that the

interactive process of interpreting the data requires the researcher to place interpretations in the broader context of the study topic to challenge findings against existing literature or obtain peer feedback. During the process of interpretation, the researcher used member-checking to present interpretations and verify experience alignment (Harper & Cole, 2012). Lastly, the researcher refined and developed a robust narrative that clearly described the analytical process and actions to mitigate bias, increase rigor, and interpret the discovered themes.

Data Representation

Displaying data through matrices or visual representations such as narrative descriptions, tables, charts, mind maps, and conceptual diagrams is extremely valuable in analyzing and drawing conclusions due to reducing data in a meaningful and accessible manner (Colorafi & Evans, 2016). Creswell and Poth (2018) guided researchers on the final phase of the data analysis spiral and suggested that the selection of representation fit the research question and available data, researchers develop a draft and seek feedback, assess ease of comprehension and accuracy, highlight patterns and summarize initial interpretations, and ensure verified conclusions. Lastly, the researcher used NVivo charts, tables, and word clouds as representation methods that effectively communicated complex data and findings for readers' ease of understanding and clarity.

Analysis for Triangulation

Triangulation involves utilizing various data sources or methods to increase the credibility, reliability, and validity of the study's findings through cross-validation to corroborate findings (Arias Valencia, 2022). Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasized that all flexible design approaches include triangulation methods to increase rigor and reduce bias. The researcher incorporated methodological triangulation, specifically the between-methods approach, to

include qualitative and quantitative techniques using the data collected from the semi-structured interviews and CUPA-HR's 2022 non-academic employee retention survey published on their website. The between-methods approach helped the researcher leverage extensive data captured during interviews and large amounts of survey data to help find patterns, similarities, and inconsistencies requiring further investigation (Weyant, 2022). The researcher incorporated member checking using interview transcripts to accurately depict participant experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher utilized the QDAS NVivo as a triangulation tool to help manage and analyze data by importing interview transcripts for organization, coding, memoing, and linking survey data to explore connections between the two data types to deliver visualizations and synthesized reports and findings (Andrade et al., 2022).

Summary of Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis was critical in completing this qualitative research study because it focused on analyzing and synthesizing raw data captured to determine patterns and themes to enhance the credibility and validity of the study's findings (Houghton et al., 2015). The data analysis process is fluid, and Creswell and Poth (2018) referred to it as a spiral that starts with data collection and includes the organization, thorough review and understanding, classification, interpretation, and representation of captured data. The researcher used semi-structured interviews and published survey data to complete the data analysis spiral, incorporated between-methods triangulation, and used NVivo to manage, organize, code, analyze, and provide visualization of findings to generate meaningful insights.

Reliability and Validity

Qualitative research is perceived to lack the same rigor as quantitative research. For example, Noble and Smith (2015) stated that qualitative research lacks "scientific rigor with poor

justification of the methods adopted, lack of transparency in the analytical procedures, and the findings being merely a collection of personal opinions subject to researcher bias" (p. 34). For these reasons, the authors presented that validity and reliability are essential elements of qualitative research. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), researchers must be able to defend the accuracy of their findings using validity and reliability constructs like triangulation, member checking, auditing, and coding. As a result, the researcher discussed the various approaches to ensuring that this multiple-case qualitative study enhanced the reliability and validity of findings.

Reliability

Creswell and Poth (2018) defined reliability as a part of the analysis process that focuses on the stability of responses. Amaratunga et al. (2002) discussed the importance of reliability in reducing errors and biases in a study using repeatability under the same conditions. From a construct perspective, reliability in qualitative research focuses on the intercoder agreement, which requires a detailed procedure (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Compared to the quantitative approach, a significant difference is focusing on results supporting conclusions versus the reliability of the data collection process in the qualitative approach (Amaratunga et al., 2002). The researcher leveraged Lincoln and Guba's (1986) approach to assessing trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

To establish credibility, the researcher used between-methods triangulation using semi-structured interviews and published survey data to conduct cross-verification and reduce bias for consistency of findings (Weyant, 2022). Transferability refers to the extent to which findings apply to other settings, and the researcher's use of purposeful sampling for case selection will provide the rich and thick data descriptions and findings required to meet that threshold (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) noted that dependability is the stability

and consistency of the research process and findings. The researcher achieved dependability by ensuring a well-documented and transparent research process, consistent data collection, reflexivity, audit trails, triangulation methods, negative case analysis, member checking, and consistent coding and data analysis (Singh et al., 2021). Lastly, confirmability ensures an accurate portrayal of participants' experiences and is free from researcher biases, assumptions, or interpretations (Singh et al., 2021). The researcher ensured confirmability by maintaining document audit trails, incorporating reflexivity, conducting member-checking, employing data triangulation, considering negative cases, and providing thick descriptions of the research process for straightforward interpretation by others (Singh et al., 2021).

Validity

In qualitative research, validity depends on the researcher accurately and meaningfully portraying the participant's experiences and perspectives related to the research topic. There are several strategies that the researcher can employ to increase validity that highlight the importance of keeping accurate written records, seeking feedback, and comprehensive reporting (Cho & Trent, 2006). For this study, the researcher leveraged bracketing, triangulation, and saturation to enhance the study's validity. The researcher employed bracketing by integrating reflexivity and journaling into the research process to understand how personal background and experiences shaped interpretations (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The researcher used between-method triangulation for the semi-structured interviews and survey review to compare and verify data sources to identify themes and patterns, enhancing validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Lastly, the researcher investigated the problem using the same questions for all participants through semi-structured interviews until the point of saturation, where new information was not present to increase validity.

Bracketing

Bracketing is a researcher's attempt to suspend biases by bracketing their beliefs and values to focus solely on the participant's perspectives and experiences without any subjective insertions (Nicholls, 2019). Karagiozis (2018) suggested that researchers use bracketing tools and techniques like reflexivity, reflective journaling, peer debriefing, researcher triangulation, audit trails, and member checking to acknowledge and reduce personal bias. The researcher disclosed serving as a human resources leader within a private higher education institution in the Northeast United States so that readers understood the researcher's position when conducting the study. The researcher understood the importance of remaining objective throughout the research process. Therefore, due to the researcher's direct experiences related to the study's topic, it was crucial that the researcher integrated reflexivity and journaling to self-reflect, recognize, and monitor bias (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). In addition, the researcher conducted member checking with all participants to review interview transcripts, findings, and interpretations to ensure an accurate representation of their experiences related to the topic.

Summary of Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are essential components in qualitative and quantitative research. Due to the perceived lack of rigor associated with qualitative research, it is even more important for researchers to enhance research findings' quality, trustworthiness, and credibility (Noble & Smith, 2015). Therefore, the researcher discussed strategies to ensure reliability using Lincoln and Guba's (1986) criteria, including credibility, dependability, transferability, and conformability. The researcher disclosed that reflexivity, between-methods triangulation, member-checking, and thick descriptions increased reliability. Next, the researcher discussed the techniques used to increase validity, including bracketing, triangulation, and saturation. Finally,

the researcher disclosed direct experience related to the topic and that it was critical to incorporate bracketing using reflexivity and journaling to self-reflect, recognize, monitor, and mitigate bias in addition to member checking.

Summary of Section 2 and Transition

This researcher used this qualitative multiple case study to explore career pathing for non-academic employees within private higher education institutions within the Northeast United States. The researcher used Section 2 to comprehensively discuss the research process and methodologies to achieve the study's objectives. First, the researcher discussed the researcher's role as a critical instrument in the study, disclosed significant experience related to the topic, and stated that remaining objective throughout the study was critical while conducting research. For those reasons, the researcher utilized reflexivity and journaling as bracketing techniques to ensure self-awareness to recognize, monitor, and mitigate bias.

The researcher discussed the research methodology and the importance of appropriate selection of design, research method, and triangulation in achieving the study's objectives. The researcher used a qualitative, flexible design with multiple case studies to allow for agility and flexibility while exploring the topic and gaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. The researcher leveraged semi-structured interviews and a CUPA-HR survey as multiple data sources to conduct methodological triangulation, specifically between methods, to enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings. The researcher developed a semi-structured interview guide to explain the interview process for participants, including member checking and follow-up interviews, to ensure an accurate portrayal of experiences to capture rich and thick data to answer the three research questions. In addition, the researcher utilized the *CUPA-HR 2022 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey* results to compare and verify data from the semi-

structured interviews to cross-validate non-academic employee sentiments regarding career pathing, engagement, and retention. The researcher also used the QDAS NVivo to organize, store, analyze, and provide visualization tools for various data sources in a single platform to present findings.

The researcher deployed purposeful sampling, criterion, and snowball case selection to find rich information-rich cases that answered research questions and achieved the study's objectives. The researcher used a sample size 20 of non-academic employees with at least 2 years of consecutive experience across five non-profit, 4-year private higher education institutions in the Northeast United States that yielded enough data to reach saturation. Lastly, the researcher discussed the importance of ensuring reliability and validity using Lincoln and Guba's (1986) criteria, including credibility, dependability, transferability, and conformability.

In Section 3, the researcher discussed the field study and presented the findings, including discovered themes and their interpretations, provided a representation and visualization of data, and provided a detailed discussion of how the findings relate to critical areas of the research proposal. The researcher discussed how the findings addressed the research questions, conceptual framework, anticipated themes, professional and academic literature, and the problem. Lastly, the researcher provided a summary highlighting key conclusions from the findings.

Conclusion

Sections 1 and 2 represent the background of the problem and the researcher's objectives in exploring career paths for non-academic employees in private higher education institutions. The researcher used Section 1 to highlight the foundation of the study, research questions, and conceptual framework and present the academic and professional literature review. In Section 2,

the researcher discussed the project overview, which includes the role of the researcher and the approach to research methodology, population and sampling, data collection, and enhancing the reliability and validity of the study. After conducting the field study, the researcher used Section 3 to present findings, including application to professional practice, recommendations for further studies, and personal reflections on the doctoral journey process.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

In this section, the researcher presents an overview of the study, a detailed discussion and visual presentation of the findings, how the findings can apply to professional practice, recommendations for further study, personal reflections, and Biblical perspectives. The researcher explored career pathing, professional development, and succession planning of non-academic employees within private HEIs in the Northeast United States. The researcher discussed and interpreted the discovered themes and provided data visualization to support the findings. In addition, the researcher explored and analyzed the relationships between the findings, research questions, conceptual framework, anticipated themes, literature review, and the problem. The researcher also discussed how the study results could improve general business practice for HEIs and the human resources profession, offered recommendations for application strategies, and provided recommendations for further study. Lastly, the researcher discussed how the project provided personal and professional growth and integrated with a Christian worldview.

Overview of the Study

This qualitative multiple case study explored how private higher education institutions are deficient in formal strategic talent management initiatives like career pathing and succession planning for non-academic employees within private higher education institutions in the Northeast United States. Moreover, the researcher examined the challenges and barriers that prevented higher education institutions from developing formal career paths, development opportunities, and succession planning programs. First, the researcher used a pre-interview questionnaire to screen potential participants to ensure eligibility against established criteria. After establishing eligibility, the researcher scheduled and conducted semi-structured Zoom interviews following the interview guide, live coding, and reflexivity. After each interview. The

researcher conducted member checking by sending each participant a copy of the transcript for review, edits, and approval to ensure accuracy. After participant review and approval, the researcher leveraged a two-cycle coding process in NVivo to identify study themes. Finally, the researcher downloaded the 2022 CUPA-HR employee retention survey to cross-reference and validate findings using triangulation methods.

Presentation of the Findings

This qualitative multiple-case study helped the researcher explore and understand the factors and challenges for private higher education institutions in the Northeast United States related to employee engagement, retention, and succession management for non-academic staff. The researcher conducted semi-structured one-on-one interviews using Zoom with 20 non-academic employees across five private higher education institutions in the Northeast United States to gain insight into their perspectives on the non-academic employee experience related to the availability of career pathing, professional development opportunities, and succession planning within their institutions. The following sections include the researcher's presentation of the discovered themes, interpretation of the themes, and data visualization. Lastly, the researcher analyzed the relationship between the study's findings, research questions, conceptual framework, anticipated themes, literature review, and problem statement.

Themes Discovered

After reviewing the interview transcripts multiple times to take notes and receiving approval of member checking by each participant, the researcher started the coding process to identify themes. The researcher used a two-step coding cycle to identify themes within the collected data, ensuring a thorough review, analysis, and content organization. The first step focused on organizing and analyzing collected data into small categories of information labeled

as First Round in NVivo, which included adding new codes as the researcher examined interview transcripts and notes (Saldaña & Omasta, 2021). During the second step, the researcher synthesized the First Round of codes into new groups, combining similar concepts and ideas in the new themes folder under each research question label (Saldaña & Omasta, 2021). This data analysis allowed the researcher to create a list of eight themes that address the three research questions driving the qualitative multiple case study. The researcher found commonalities among interview participants and CUPA-HR's 2022 survey on the non-academic employee experience related to the research questions. Table 1 identifies the eight themes related to the research questions.

Table 1

Discovered Themes According to the Research Questions

| Research Question | Theme |
|--|---|
| RQ1. To what extent are private higher education institutions deficient in formal career pathing and development opportunities to retain and engage top non-academic talent? | Lack of Formal Career Pathing Professional Development Opportunities Retention Issues |
| RQ2. What are the challenges in developing formal career pathing and development opportunities for non-academic talent in private higher education institutions? | Resource Constraints Leadership and Institutional Culture |

| | |
|--|---|
| RQ3. What factors influence the ability to execute succession management for non-academic leadership roles in private higher education institutions? | Lack of Formal Succession Planning Institutional Culture Inconsistent Talent Management |
|--|---|

RQ1. Theme 1: Lack of Formal Career Pathing. Within higher education institutions, there is a difference between defined career trajectories for academic versus non-academic employees. Ahmad Munir et al. (2020) defined career pathing as a clear and structured plan or approach to individual career advancement that identifies the necessary steps to advance to higher positions within an institution. McClure (2022) highlighted the importance of higher education institutions embracing formal career pathing strategies to help non-academic employees reach career advancement goals to increase engagement and retention. Additionally, Rombaut and Guerry (2020) shared that formalizing career paths impact employee engagement and retention by affording an optimistic vision of future advancement within an organization.

A portion of research question 1 seeks to understand to what extent private higher education institutions in the Northeast United States are deficient in formal career pathing, and the researcher used semi-structured interview questions one through three to collect related data through participant perspectives. Interview question one focused on the perception of available career pathing opportunities for non-academic employees within each participant's institution. During the interviews, 19 out of 20 participants (95%) shared similar sentiments, confirming a lack of formal career pathing within their institutions. For example, P10 and P18 shared that formal career pathing was “nonexistent,” other participants, except for P8 and P9, shared sentiments about their institutions not having a formal or structured program, allowing inconsistent experiences across roles and divisions. P8 shared that there was a “good hierarchy

on the administration side of things that would allow people to grow and learn on whatever path they choose.” At the same time, P9 expressed that there was “fairly good mobility within the university for non-academic leadership roles and administrative positions.” However, P8 and P9 did not confirm a formal career pathing strategy or program. The data collected coincides with sentiments from the 2022 CUPA-HR employee retention survey that out of 3,815 respondents, almost 40% do not feel their institution adequately invests in their career development (Bichsel et al., 2022). In addition, approximately 50% do not believe they have advancement opportunities (Bichsel et al., 2022).

The researcher found that another key factor in identifying the lack of a formal career path strategy as a theme for research question 1 was that 11 out of the 20 participants (55%) expressed that the higher the level of non-academic employees, the more limited paths become. For example, P11 stated that there is limited growth for non-academic senior leaders overall, and P15 shared that career paths get “consistently narrower the higher you move up.” Participants (P2, 3,7, 9,13,14,16, 18, and 20) expressed similar feelings of being stuck at a crossroads, waiting for someone to leave, and very clear ceilings at more senior-level roles aligning with Rombaut and Guerry’s (2020) insights into the importance of visualization of career advancement opportunities.

RQ1. Theme 2: Professional Development Opportunities. Hultman (2020) shared that integrating talent management strategies that offer employees professional development opportunities is essential to optimizing an organization’s workforce and impacts engagement and retention. Erasmus (2020) also shared that a lack of focus on growing and developing non-academic employees within a higher education institution can create negative perceptions that impact engagement and turnover. There was a consensus among all interview participants, P1

through P20, that training and development opportunities to enhance skills were available within their institutions. The availability of resources for mostly upskilling through channels like LinkedIn Learning highlights Hultman's (2020) point about optimizing workforce capabilities.

The interview data also revealed that although training opportunities are available, 65% of participants shared that taking advantage of the resources and programs is self-directed. Fatemeh et al. (2022) found that non-academic employees within higher education tend to embrace self-development to expand skills to keep up with the constant innovation and dynamic environment of academia that requires agility. For example, P18 stated that employees have to "chart their path," while P19 shared that it "completely depends on the person, what they do, and what they want to do," and P9 expressed that much training is "self-directed, and you have to know what you want to do." In addition, 55% of participants shared that they have taken advantage of some professional development or training opportunities offered by their institution. Therefore, the availability of professional development opportunities through training and resources at higher education institutions is one of the major themes discovered in research question 1.

RQ1. Theme 3: Retention Issues. The 2022 CUPA-HR employee retention survey revealed that higher education institutions face significant retention challenges among non-academic employees due to factors related to increased compensation, career advancement, flexible work, and new challenges (Bichsel et al., 2022). Zahneis (2022) emphasized the importance of non-academic staff envisioning a future within their institution to combat declining trends in engagement and retention. The data collected aligns with the current trends and sentiments about non-academic higher education staff retention issues. When the researcher asked participants if they looked for opportunities outside their current institution due to

concerns with career pathing opportunities, 75% responded yes. However, five participants said they have not considered looking outside their institution for varying reasons, such as happiness with the current environment (P7, P9, P15), upcoming tuition benefits for children (P2), and waiting to see what happens with a higher-level role (P18). The overwhelming response to participants considering opportunities outside of the current institution due to career pathing concerns made retention issues a theme for research question 1 and related to the researcher's exploration into the phenomenon.

RQ2. Theme 1: Resource Constraints. Research question 2 explored perceived challenges that private higher education institutions in the Northeast United States might face in establishing formal career paths and development opportunities through the non-academic staff lens. Higher education institutions face declining enrollments and revenues, resulting in constraints on various types of resources impacting institutional operations (Nhlabathi & Maharaj, 2020). The changing higher education landscape challenges the sustainability of healthy financial operations, impacting the delivery of strategic initiatives across the institution (Pratolo et al., 2020).

The interviews revealed that 95% of participants felt that resources were a main challenge in establishing formal career paths for non-academic employees, with 60% identifying human capital as the top constraint. For example, P2, P3, P4, P5, P9, P10, P11, P13, P15, P16, P18, and P19 said formalizing career paths and programs requires dedicated resources, which their HR departments do not have. In addition, P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P13, and P15 shared that limited budgets presented a challenge in developing formal career paths and investing in training opportunities, with P13 sharing that they operate with the same budget from 8 years ago. Other resource constraints that participants felt hindered the formalization of career paths and

development opportunities were inadequate communication, education on career paths, lack of job architecture, and institution size, all of which required dedicated resources and time to implement. Due to the significant responses related to resource constraints as a challenge, it was a theme for RQ2.

RQ2. Theme 2: Leadership and Institutional Culture. Akanji et al. (2020) shared that university leadership sets the tone for university culture by establishing a strategic vision and direction for the institution. Setting vision and direction helps employees see how their roles and career trajectories align with university goals. In addition, university culture drives standards of behavior and norms within an institution that cultivate employee experiences (Bhaduri, 2019). As participants shared their perspectives on challenges to developing formal career paths and training for non-academic employees, institutional culture and leadership emerged as a theme. Within the interview responses, various factors related to direct supervisor and manager behavior, institutional strategic focus, and the acknowledgment of non-academic employees emphasized leadership and university culture as a theme among 85% of study participants.

Participants identified managerial support of non-academic employees to engage in training and development as a key challenge. For example, P1 shared that managers “do not feel there is sufficient time for their staff to pursue some of the opportunities,” P2 highlighted that managers “must be willing to give the employee the time to enhance themselves, and P10 shared experiences where self-advocacy to their leader for development opportunities was essential to participate.” In addition, P7 said there is “no incentive” for managers to support the development of their employees, and P9 highlighted the challenge of managerial support when non-academic staff have academic leaders who do not focus on that. Lastly, P12 expressed that managers in the later stages of their careers who are not thinking of career paths for themselves forget that their

staff might be looking for advancement opportunities, and P17 noted that often, leaders want their staff to stay in the current roles out of necessity.

Additional contributing factors for the leadership and culture theme focus on inadequate institutional support for non-academic employees, formalized career paths, and development opportunities. P10 suggested that “forward-thinking initiatives must originate from senior leadership and cascade downwards,” which coincides with P1’s sentiment that there is “not always institutional support for career pathing.” Another element impacting culture is the perception of a lack of institutional focus on non-academic employees. For example, P13 expressed that the reason for participating in the study was because non-academic employees do not get strategic focus, and P3 shared similar sentiments. In addition, P14 expressed that the top challenge was “just the acknowledgment of staff,” whereas P15 shared that the perception of non-academic employees is a cost center within the institution. All elements of the employee experience are connected to how a university operates, its strategic focus, and the standards of behavior that create culture. The various factors presented in the findings highlight leadership and university culture as themes related to challenges in developing formal career paths and development opportunities for non-academic employees.

RQ3. Theme 1: Lack of Formal Succession Planning. Succession planning is a strategic process involving the intentional development of leadership pipelines to ensure continuity when changes in key roles happen due to various factors such as retirement and resignation (Jackson & Allen, 2022). To explore research question 3, the researcher asked participants about the factors influencing the ability to execute succession management for non-academic employees. Based on interview data collection, there is a lack formal succession management strategies, guidelines, and approaches experienced by 100% of study participants

across their institutions. For example, P6, P11, P12, P13, and P18 shared experiences that succession plans were reactive and born out of necessity rather than proactive to ensure knowledge and critical role continuity. P13 said that they “have been working in survival mode,” P11 and P18 said plans were put in place when someone departed, or there was a change in leadership, whereas P12 and P6 highlighted their current environments being reactive to changes with interims serving in the President and Provost roles. In addition, all other participants shared experiences with a lack of formal succession management documentation, guidance, and knowledge, which influenced their ability to execute succession planning for non-academic staff.

Throughout the interviews, 55% of participants identified the lack of continuity after departures as a byproduct of the lack of formal succession planning. For example, P2 said it “is like a crisis mode when somebody leaves,” whereas P14 revealed that “when someone leaves, we have a huge hole if we are not fostering growth in our teams,” and P17 shared “if you only have one person who knows how to do the job, then when that person leaves, it is a big risk to your organization.” In addition, P1, P3, P9, P11, P15, P16, P18, and P19 noted that a lack of formalized succession planning created gaps in institutional knowledge and significant disruption to operations among key departures, impacting engagement and morale. The lack of an institution’s strategic approach to succession management influences a leader’s ability to manage talent effectively to identify, develop, and transition them into critical roles, making it a theme for research question 3.

RQ3. Theme 2: Institutional Culture. Although institutional culture emerged as a theme related to research question 2, it was also a prevalent response among interview participants to research question 3. University culture is a core set of beliefs, behaviors, values, and normal practices that define an institution and impact employee experience (Erasmus, 2020).

Morukhu et al. (2021) emphasized how critical leadership is in developing and influencing university culture to shape and drive vision and institutional priorities. Ninety-five percent (95%) of interview participants felt that institutional culture substantially impacted succession management efforts. Only one participant, P6, felt that their institutional culture supported succession management but identified specific leaders as problematic in effective execution.

Several interview participants' comments expressed the significant role of institutional culture in shaping an institution's strategic priorities and leadership behaviors related to talent management practices. For example, P11 felt that culture was the “bedrock” and needed to foster a commitment that succession planning was an institutional priority. P13 felt that culture was all they had, while P14 emphasized that culture was huge in requiring leaders to plan for the future. P3 said culture “will be the barrier, or it will lead to success” and must align with the established institutional values to support strategic initiatives like succession planning. As leaders set the vision and path forward for their institutions, those decisions deeply impact employee experiences driven by the established culture (Akanji et al., 2020).

RQ3. Theme 3: Inconsistent Talent Management. The final discovered theme related to factors influencing the ability to execute succession management is talent management. Talent management is a critical element of succession planning because it focuses on identifying top talent who demonstrate skills, knowledge, initiative, and potential to ascend into leadership roles (Muleya et al., 2022). To explore participants' experiences with succession planning, the researcher inquired about the criteria and competencies evaluated and required as part of the process. The interview responses from all participants revealed a lack of clarity around the criteria and competencies required to advance into leadership, in addition to an inconsistent and undefined approach to managing talent succession.

Overall, 100% of participants shared experiences that revealed inconsistent talent management practices related to defined criteria, competencies, and expectations for advancement into leadership roles. Although participants understood the overall competencies and criteria evaluated as part of the annual performance process, it was unclear which ones were required or how they integrated into career advancement or succession planning. For example, P14 shared that they think the competencies required for advancement into leadership were “being thoughtful in responses, handling situations, and managing up.” In addition, P20 said that leaders must have a “passion for leadership,” P9 highlighted diplomacy as a key criterion, whereas P13’s experience with informal guidelines led to informal conversations at the division level that evaluate how well an employee works as a consideration for advancement. P2, P5, P15, P16, P17, P18, and P19 shared similar sentiments about the lack of understanding of criteria and competencies related to succession management. Providing constructive feedback and connecting employee performance to strategic objectives are essential elements of the talent management process (Valentine et al., 2020). P2, P17, and P18 felt that personality and likeability were key selection criteria and that subjective opinions often become part of the decision-making process.

Another key area that 75% of participants emphasized was that individual managers did not feel supported in making decisions about succession planning without adequate guidance. Leaders are responsible for their employees' growth, development, and career trajectory through effective talent management practices. However, often, there is a lack of investment in manager training in academia, which negatively impacts the employee experience (Morukhu et al., 2021). P18 said there is no strategic direction for leaders and that “within our division, we are not providing enough training for people to succeed.” P1 shared that “it is usually left to me to define

how I would think about succession planning for myself, much less my senior team.”

Additionally, P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P12, P14, P16, P19, and P20 shared multiple perspectives about the challenging role of individual leaders who operate in environments that lack formalized institutional succession planning guidelines but are responsible for the development of a talent pipeline. Without a consistent approach to talent management, institutions increase the risk of bias and subjectivity, leading to potential disparities and differential treatment.

Interpretation of the Themes

After conducting qualitative research, creating codes, memoing, and identifying themes, the researcher used categorical aggregation to analyze the data and interpret overarching meanings compared to other scholarly studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It was critical that the researcher was familiar with the data and deeply understood the context and content. Interpreting the recurring themes helped the researcher explore the study participants' underlying meanings, experiences, and perspectives. In the following sections, the researcher interpreted the discovered themes using what Creswell and Poth (2018) defined as naturalistic generalizations.

RQ1. Theme 1: Lack of Formal Career Pathing. Career pathing is a mapped-out and detailed structure that establishes key milestones and goals needed to progress within an organization (Ahmad Munir et al., 2020). McClure's (2022) article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* included a detailed discussion and alarming depiction of the roadblocks with the career trajectories of non-academic academic employees. Erasmus (2020) revealed that non-academic employees often do not receive dedicated guidance on formal career paths in higher education institutions. It is essential to highlight that academic employees within higher

education institutions' formal career paths often include a career trajectory through various ranks, creating a different employee experience (Musakuro & de Klerk, 2021).

The 20 non-academic employees who served as participants (P1-P20) represented five private higher education institutions (HEI1-HEI5) within the Northeast United States, with 19 (90%) perceiving a lack of availability of formal career paths within their institutions. The lack of formal career paths at non-academic leadership levels was more severe, as indicated by 55% of participants (P2, P3, P7, P9, P11, P13, P14, P15, 16, P18, and P20) and using phrases to describe the experience like “clear ceiling,” “consistently narrower,” “top of my career path,” “crossroads,” “limited growth,” “lack of opportunity” and “nowhere to go.” The lack of formal career pathing also led to participant perception that unequal opportunities exist within their institutions based on factors like role, division support, direct leadership, personal connections, tenure, and favoritism. For example, P10 and P17, who serve as executive assistants to senior administrators, shared similar sentiments that support roles are often not considered for career advancement beyond administrative duties.

Participants shared that the lack of focus on non-academic employee career paths impacts engagement and retention, and people often leave for other opportunities because they do not see advancement within their institutions. Rombaut and Guerry (2020) brought awareness to the need for institutions to invest in effective talent management strategies, like developing formal career paths and trajectories to recruit and retain non-academic employees. The lack of visualization of career advancement leading to employee departures correlates to the third theme for research question 1, retention. In addition, although the participant's responses support research question 1's second theme related to the availability of professional development opportunities, it is evident that career pathing is not a common practice among the participating

higher education institutions. Therefore, private higher education institutions lack formal career paths to retain and engage top non-academic talent.

RQ1. Theme 2: Professional Development Opportunities. The second theme that emerged from the data related to exploring research question 1 relates to professional development opportunities. Professional development within an organization allows employees to leverage resources and programs designed to enhance their knowledge, skills, and abilities within their respective roles or fields (Poell, 2022). Hultman (2020) emphasized the importance of organizational investment in developing and optimizing employee skills to reach desired business outcomes. The researcher focused on assessing to what extent higher education institutions lack development opportunities to retain and engage non-academic talent.

When the researcher asked the participants about resources and programs offered to help non-academic employees pursue career paths, all participants (P1-P20) shared that their institutions (HEI1-HEI5) offered some professional development resources to enhance skills and achieve personal growth through various activities such as tuition benefits, training programs, attending conferences, career coaching, self-directed learning, and obtaining certifications. Although professional development was available through various activities and channels among the HEIs, 50% of participants (P1, P5, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P17, P19, and P20) shared that professional development opportunities varied at their institutions depending on factors like department, direct leader, and individual role. Coomber (2019) shared that non-academic employees often perceive unequal treatment related to career development opportunities and support.

A recent survey by The Conference Board found that 60% of respondents felt the availability of professional development opportunities increased engagement and retention (Hart,

2022). However, only 55% of study participants utilized professional development opportunities offered by their institutions. In comparison, 65% suggested that most activities are self-directed, and several participants noted that communication about institutional offerings is lacking and needed improvement. Compared to the survey data shared by Hart (2022), the availability of professional development opportunities to all participants does not appear to be a key driver of engagement within the selected population. However, based on the data collected, private higher education institutions do not appear deficient in offering professional development opportunities for non-academic employees.

RQ1. Theme 3: Retention Issues. Research question 1 explored the relationship between formal career pathing, professional development opportunities, and employee engagement and retention. The researcher leveraged the guidance of Creswell and Poth (2018) to document recurring statements and striking content, a process to develop themes, and identified retention issues as a theme for research question 1. The 2022 CUPA-HR employee retention survey illustrated the severity of retention issues among non-academic employees within higher education (Bichsel et al., 2022). For example, of the 3,815 respondents, approximately 57% stated there was a likelihood they would look for other employment opportunities within the next 12 months with pay, flexible work, promotion, career advancement, and a new challenge as the top five reasons (Bichsel et al., 2022). When the researcher asked participants if they considered seeking career opportunities outside their current institution due to non-academic employee career pathing concerns, 75% (15) responded yes. The reasons shared by participants were related to limited career paths and growth opportunities (12) in addition to other factors like compensation (1) and leadership (2). The findings reinforce the 2022 CUPA-HR employee

retention survey and McClure's (2022) article about higher education's non-academic employee retention crisis.

The theme also distinguished the impact of formal career pathing and professional development opportunities on non-academic employee engagement and retention. For example, although all participants have access to professional development resources and programs, the key driver of participants seeking outside opportunities is limited career growth, which relates to the lack of formal career pathing revealed as theme one. Jackson and Allen (2022) cautioned institutions to focus on talent retention as a mitigation strategy and invest in creating career pathways to deter top talent from leaving the institution. Overall, the availability of professional development opportunities for non-academic employees did not seem to impact retention significantly. However, the theme revealed that the deficiency in formal career paths experienced by non-academic employees correlates to potential retention issues.

RQ2. Theme 1: Resource Constraints. The researcher identified resource constraints as a theme while exploring challenges to developing formal career paths and development opportunities for non-academic employees within private higher education institutions. Private higher education institutions face challenges with funding to enhance their budgets and human capital needs because they must generate revenue to sustain operations, unlike public higher education institutions (Wondwosen, 2021). When the researcher interviewed participants about the institution's main challenges in establishing formal career paths and development opportunities, 95% said resources.

The top resource constraints identified by participants were human capital and available budgets. For example, P11 shared that developing a career pathing program would require “dedicated regularity and commitment to attend, participate, and commit to the program’s

outcomes for development.” P18 shared that in addition to the lack of resources, there is “much focus on formalizing the HR department” to help develop strategic talent management initiatives. In addition, P2, P3, and P19 discussed being understaffed and running lean as challenges to developing formal career paths and development opportunities. Resource limitations, specifically dedicated human capital within the HR division, which can also be a byproduct of budget restraints, are a key challenge for private higher education institutions in developing formal career pathways. However, professional development opportunities and activities are available across all participating institutions under the same workforce conditions.

RQ2. Theme 2: Leadership and Institutional Culture. University culture is a unique set of values, beliefs, norms, traditions, and practices that drive behaviors within an institution (Singh, 2020). In addition, university leadership sets the tone and leads the decision-making process around strategy, operations, priorities, mission, and vision, which helps create culture (Akanji et al., 2020). When the researcher continued to explore research question 2 and the challenges participant institutions face in establishing formal career paths and professional development opportunities, 85% expressed that institutional culture and leadership were contributing factors. University leadership, such as the board, president, provost, and other senior-level leaders, drive institutional culture through their behaviors, modeling values, articulating vision and mission, fostering a culture of communication and collaboration, empowering employee growth, cultivating DEI, and reinforcing the desired culture (Singh, 2020).

The interpretation of this theme is that to develop formal career paths for non-academic employees, university leadership must demonstrate behaviors and emphasize employee growth to create a culture that supports and champions strategic talent management initiatives for non-

academic employees. University culture also emerged as a discovered theme for research question 3 related to succession planning, reinforcing leadership's role in strategic talent management and retention. Morukhu et al.'s (2021) study suggested that university leaders must integrate strategic talent management initiatives like developing formal career paths, mentorship, and career coaching to combat the higher education non-academic employee retention crisis.

Participants also said that university leadership must work to create an inclusive culture where non-academic employees feel acknowledged and valued. P14 shared that, although there is a very low bar, leadership acknowledging and highlighting staff is significant in public speeches and talking points for engagement and to make staff feel valued. P13 discussed the feeling of always celebrating faculty and that they experienced times when they "felt like an afterthought as a staff member." Therefore, university leadership and culture can significantly impact the establishment of formal career paths and development opportunities for non-academic employees.

RQ3. Theme 1: Lack of Formal Succession Planning. Jackson and Allen (2022) defined succession planning as identifying and developing internal talent to create pipelines and continuity when filling key organizational positions. The researcher used the last research question to explore factors influencing an institution's ability to execute succession management for non-academic leadership roles in private higher education institutions. When the researcher asked participants about their institution's approach to succession planning for critical leadership roles, 100% of participants shared that their institutions did not have a formal process or guidelines to fill key roles. Some participants (P1, P2, P3, P5, P8, and P9) expressed not seeing anything official related to succession planning, while others shared how the informal process leads to disruption and perceived unequal treatment based on role or division. Mazorodze and

Buckley (2020) discussed the risk of losing institutional knowledge with key departures that make formalized succession planning crucial for organizations. For example, 40% of participants noted that the lack of formal succession planning increased the risk of talent gaps in knowledge, creating what P2 describes as “crisis mode” and P3 as “leaving a gap” when someone leaves without a plan. The interpretation of this theme is that the lack of a formalized structure and guidance around succession planning leaves leaders to manage the process independently, leading to unequal practices, key departure disruption, and inefficient talent management.

RQ3. Theme 2: Institutional Culture. The researcher continued to explore the factors influencing the ability to execute succession management, and 95% of participants noted institutional culture as a key factor. Institutional culture and leadership also emerged as a theme for research question 2, which is related to challenges in developing formal career paths and development opportunities, leading the researcher to deduce that institutional culture is a key finding. When answering this question, participants attributed a lack of formal succession planning and guidance to institutional cultures that do not have non-academic employee talent management and succession planning as strategic priorities. For example, P11 said that culture was the “bedrock” and “when executive leaders do not recognize that having internal career pathways is a viable way of developing leaders versus going outside for program development, that is a cultural tenet.” In addition, P10 added that the main challenge for executing succession planning is “deeply rooted in the culture” and that it “requires individuals in positions of power who are forward-thinkers, adaptable, and as committed to the development of their staff as they are to achieving institutional goals.” These participant sentiments align with Morukhu et al.’s (2021) study that found that university cultures that do not support talent management strategies will likely experience lower engagement levels and increased attrition.

Another factor that 35% of participants (P2, P4, P9, P12, P13, P16, and P18) mentioned is that their institutional cultures allow people to stay in roles for a very long time without any significant planning or innovation until they depart. For example, P9 said the culture is challenging because the “length of careers is sometimes a hindrance.” P18 shared that succession planning did not happen because the president served over 20 years, and most cabinet members were there for most of the tenure, and that was a norm that is part of the university culture. Akanji et al. (2020) revealed the correlation between leadership behavior and university culture and their significant impact on employee experiences. Leadership develops culture and defines strategic priorities. Therefore, the researcher interprets that institutional culture plays a significant role in executing succession planning and talent management strategies.

RQ3. Theme 3: Inconsistent Talent Management. The final theme from research question 2 about factors influencing the ability to execute succession management for non-academic employees was inconsistent talent management. When asked about criteria and competencies to evaluate potential successors into non-academic leadership roles, 100% of participants shared perspectives using subjective, not formal, criteria and competencies. In addition, 75% of participants shared that leaders lacked education and guidance on formalized practices outside the annual performance evaluation process that established clear criteria and competencies to identify employees as potential successors. For example, P13 said, “There are no formal guidelines. We have more informal conversations due to our size and resources.” P16 was honest and said, “I have no idea. I am hoping that it is a baseline of whatever their performance evaluation is. However, we do not have a rubric matrix that makes sense.” In their study about the ethics of talent development, Reinert and Debebe (2023) emphasized the importance of creating formal talent development infrastructures that include clear procedures,

rules, performance evaluation metrics, tracking, managing subjectivity, and creating trajectories. For an institution to execute effective succession planning and management, clearly defined criteria and competencies will help leaders identify and develop internal talent. Therefore, the researcher interprets this theme as a foundation for developing succession planning initiatives within an institution and a key study finding.

Representation and Visualization of the Data

In this section, the researcher used NVivo software to generate tables, graphs, and word clouds to illustrate data patterns from participant interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher uploaded notes, interview transcripts, and observations into NVivo to help produce illustrative graphics of study findings. The researcher presented data on participant demographics and roles within their institutions to highlight the perspectives captured for this study. In addition, the researcher used illustrative visuals as evidence to support the three research questions (RQ1- RQ3).

Demographic Characteristics

Tables 2 and 3 provide participant demographics and the higher education institutions they represent. Table 2 exhibits each participant's assigned pseudonyms, years in higher education, years at current institution, role, division, and location in the Northeast United States. The researcher did not disclose the specific state of each HEI to avoid any potential identification of participants by title. Table 3 presents each participant's HEI, including type, location, and Fall 2023 total student enrollment, illustrating the different institutional sizes.

Table 2*Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants*

| Participant Assigned Pseudonym | Years in Higher Education (HE) | Years at Current Private HE Institution (HEI) | HEI Pseudonym | Current Role | Div. | Location |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|---------------|---------------------------------------|------|----------|
| P1 | 24 | 24 | HEI1 | Chief Info. Officer | IT | NE USA |
| P2 | 5 | 2.5 | HEI5 | Exec. Dir. of Employee Benefits | HR | NE USA |
| P3 | 11 | 7 | HEI3 | Assoc. Provost | AA | NE USA |
| P4 | 10 | 8 | HEI2 | Assist. Dean | SA | NE USA |
| P5 | 14 | 9 | HEI2 | Dean of Campus Life | SA | NE USA |
| P6 | 2.5 | 23.5 | HEI2 | Dir. Of Campus Log. | Fac. | NE USA |
| P7 | 28 | 28 | HEI1 | Sen. IT Dir. | IT | NE USA |
| P8 | 2 | 2 | HEI5 | Sen. Mgr. of Benefits | HR | NE USA |
| P9 | 9 | 9 | HEI1 | Assoc. Vice Provost for Research | AA | NE USA |
| P10 | 7 | 7 | HEI3 | Exec. Asst. and Operations Mgr. | Fac. | NE USA |
| P11 | 16 | 2.5 | HEI4 | VP for HR | HR | NE USA |
| P12 | 9 | 9 | HEI4 | Assist. Provost for Operations | AA | NE USA |
| P13 | 8 | 8 | HEI2 | VP of Workplace Culture and Inclusion | HR | NE USA |

| Participant Assigned Pseudonym | Years in Higher Education (HE) | Years at Current Private HE Institution (HEI) | HEI Pseudonym | Current Role | Div. | Location |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|---------------|--|------|----------|
| P14 | 3.5 | 2.5 | HEI4 | Exec. Dir. of the Equal Opportunity Office | AA | NE USA |
| P15 | 12 | 12 | HEI1 | Dir. Of Student Engagement | SA | NE USA |
| P16 | 7 | 2 | HEI5 | Assist. VP for AUX | AUX | NE USA |
| P17 | 6.5 | 6.5 | HEI5 | Sen. Spec. Assist. to the EVP and COO | PO | NE USA |
| P18 | 18 | 3.5 | HEI4 | VP of Alumni Engagement | Alum | NE USA |
| P19 | 22 | 8 | HEI3 | VP Student Affairs | SA | NE USA |
| P20 | 2.5 | 2.5 | HEI3 | Sen. Dir. Of IT Client Exp. and Strat. Initiatives | IT | NE USA |

Note. Information technology (IT), Human resources (HR), Academic affairs (AA), Student affairs (SA), Facilities (Fac.), Auxiliary Enterprises (AUX), President's Office (PO), Alumni Engagement and Development (Alum).

Table 3*Demographic Characteristics of Participating HEIs*

| Participating HEI Assigned Pseudonym | Type of HEI | Fall 2023 Total Number of Students (rounded to the nearest 1,000) | Region |
|--|---------------------|---|----------------|
| HEI1 | Private Institution | 29,000 | Northeast, USA |
| HEI2 | Private Institution | 2,200 | Northeast, USA |
| HEI3 | Private Institution | 10,000 | Northeast, USA |
| HEI4 | Private Institution | 38,000 | Northeast, USA |
| HEI5 | Private Institution | 10,000 | Northeast, USA |

RQ1 Themes Discovered

Figure 2 shows the discovered themes for RQ1, and Table 4 shows how the researcher merged codes to find themes.

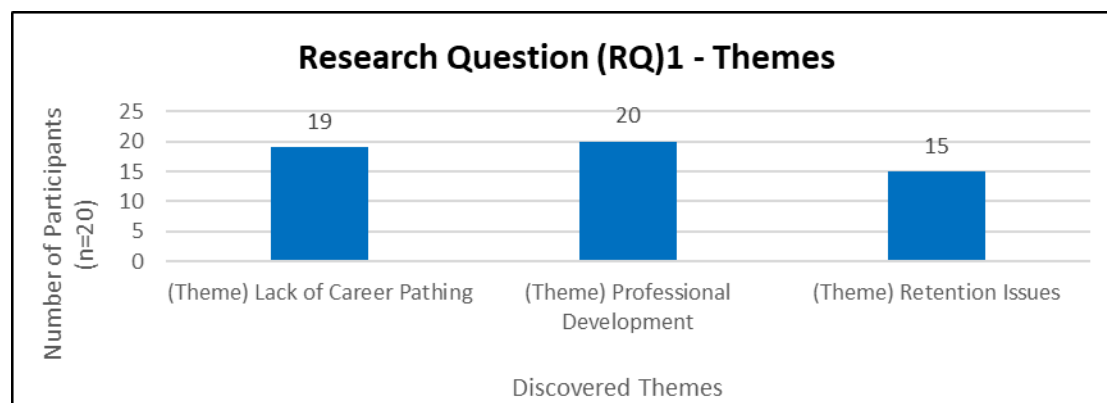
Figure 2*Discovered themes for RQ1*

Table 4*The Merger of Codes with Similar Concepts into Discovered Themes for RQ1*

| Merger of Codes into Themes | Participant Count |
|--|-------------------|
| (RQ1) Formal career pathing and professional development | 20 |
| (Theme) Lack of Career Pathing | 19 |
| Code: Lack of availability of career pathing | 18 |
| Code: Lack of HR guidance | 4 |
| Code: Limited growth at the leadership level | 11 |
| (Theme) Professional Development | 20 |
| Code: Available training and development | 15 |
| Code: Dependent on individual role | 10 |
| Code: Participated in training and development | 11 |
| Code: Self-directed | 13 |
| (Theme) Retention Issues | 15 |
| Code: Open to outside opportunities | 15 |

Research question 1 focused on identifying to what extent private higher education is deficient in formal career paths and development opportunities to retain and engage top non-academic talent. Table 4 shows that the researcher developed several codes based on participants' responses to interview questions one through three regarding the perceived availability of career paths, professional development programs and resources, and considering employment opportunities due to career path concerns. As part of the coding process, the researcher composed codes that best-described information shared by participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

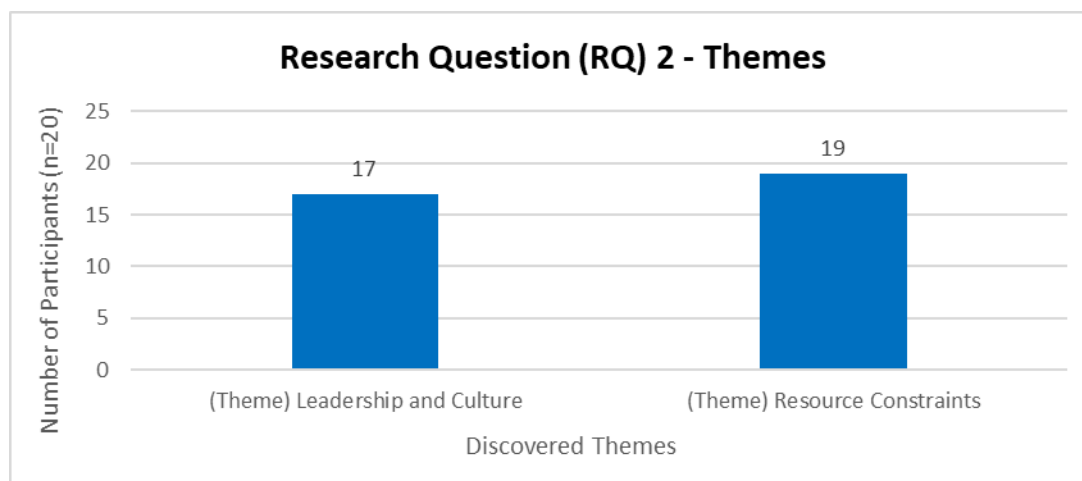
The data showed that 90% of participants experienced a lack of formal career pathing within their institutions, a key driver in 75% of participants seeking employment outside their current institution. The data also showed that a significant number of participants mentioned the limited opportunities for career paths in higher leadership roles, creating feelings of “being

stuck” (P13), “a very clear ceiling” (P14), and “you have to leave to go to another university to do that rather than staying where you are” (P16). The data showed that all participants felt professional development resources, programs, and activities were available at their institutions. However, the data also showed that with the availability of professional development opportunities, 75% considered seeking outside employment due to the inability to see clear career advancement opportunities.

Four participants (P5, P16, P18, and P20) shared comments on the lack of HR guidance with the career pathing process, with P18 stating that there is “much more focus on traditional HR things and not necessarily how to retain and engage employees, which career pathing can do.” In addition, 50-60% of participants felt that professional development opportunities were mostly self-directed and based on individual roles and divisions. Overall, the data collected presented information that allowed the researcher to develop three strong themes to answer RQ1.

RQ2 Themes Discovered

Figure 3 shows the discovered themes for RQ2, and Table 5 shows how the researcher merged codes to find themes.

Figure 3*Discovered themes for RQ2***Table 5***The Merger of Codes with Similar Concepts into Discovered Themes for RQ2*

| Merger of Codes into Themes | Participant Count |
|--|-------------------|
| (RQ2) Challenges to developing formal career pathing | 20 |
| (Theme) Leadership and Culture | 17 |
| Code: Access to rotational programs | 5 |
| Code: Support for Administrative Staff | 4 |
| Code: Decentralized institution | 2 |
| Code: Lack of focus on staff | 6 |
| Code: Leadership and culture | 7 |
| Code: Managerial support of time | 9 |
| (Theme) Resource Constraints | 19 |
| Code: Budget | 7 |

| Merger of Codes into Themes | Participant Count |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|
| Code: Communication | 6 |
| Code: Education on career paths | 3 |
| Code: Human Capital | 12 |
| Code: Lack of job architecture | 5 |
| Code: University size | 4 |

The researcher used research question 2 to explore what participants felt the institution's main challenges were in establishing formal career paths and development opportunities, and the data revealed leadership, culture, and budget constraints as the emerging themes. As the researcher took notes and created codes, the researcher found that most of the sentiments revealed experiences related to the behaviors, norms, practices, and expectations of participants defined by Sampson et al. (2022) as university culture. For example, 45% of participants expressed a lack of managerial support of time to engage in professional development as a barrier to development, and 30% of participants felt that staff was not a strategic priority – clear indications of standards of behavior and practices associated with culture.

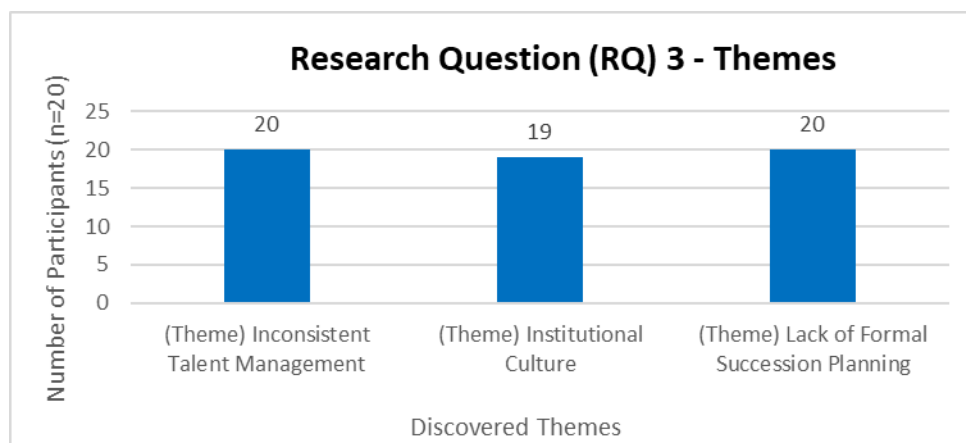
Participants also shared experiences with siloed environments and decentralized structures and suggested possible solutions, such as access to rotational programs, to help create a more collaborative culture. For example, P3 said that a culture supporting rotational programs “gives individuals opportunities just to experience a different area, experience a different project which in itself adds to their career development and growth.” P20 expressed issues with silos and said that employees “cannot be immersed in other areas to explore possible interests or cross-train, which might be due to a subculture.” In addition, the perception of differential treatment of administrative assistants and individual collaborators added to the narrative that culture drives

employee experiences. P10, an executive assistant to a C-suite executive, felt that their leader “perceives their role as the pinnacle of their career,” and P17 shared that “there are other organizations for different positions in a university, and there are none for people who are in administrative roles.”

The data also showed that participants felt that resource constraints hindered the development of formal career pathing and professional development opportunities for non-academic employees, specifically human capital, budget, and effective communication. Although participants mentioned university size, lack of job architecture, and education on career pathing as challenges, they are associated with the previous challenges. Sixty percent (60%) of participants felt that human capital and budgeting hindered the development of formal career paths and professional development opportunities. For example, P11 expressed that “resources to conduct a career pathing program are just not as structured as they should be,” whereas P4 shared that their CHRO wants career pathing to be a priority. However, P4 added that the size of the HR office cannot support such demanding initiatives. In addition, participants (P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P13, and P15) shared similar sentiments that budgets differed based on department and role, causing perceived inequity in the availability of professional development opportunities. Lastly, 30% of the participants felt that improved communication about resources and programs would help increase participation.

RQ3 Themes Discovered

Figure 4 shows the discovered themes for RQ3, and Table 6 shows how the researcher merged codes to find themes.

Figure 4*Discovered Themes for RQ3***Table 6***The Merger of Codes with Similar Concepts into Discovered Themes for RQ3*

| Merger of Codes into Themes | Participant Count |
|---|-------------------|
| (RQ3) Factors that influence the ability to execute succession management | 20 |
| (Theme) Inconsistent Talent Management | 20 |
| Code: Educating leaders | 6 |
| Code: Inconsistent criteria and competencies | 20 |
| Code: Left to the individual manager | 15 |
| (Theme) Institutional Culture | 19 |
| Code: Culture | 19 |
| Code: Long-tenured employees in leadership | 7 |
| (Theme) Lack of Formal Succession Planning | 20 |
| Code: Continuity after departures | 11 |
| Code: Defined approach | 0 |

| Merger of Codes into Themes | Participant Count |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| Code: Informal Approach | 20 |
| Code: Turnover | 7 |

Research question 3 explored the factors influencing an institution's ability to execute succession management for non-academic leadership roles in private higher education. The data showed that 100% of participants shared that their institutions lacked formal career pathing programs, guidance, or practices. In addition, 35% of participants felt that the lack of formal succession planning left divisions in crisis (P2) and significantly impacted business continuity after key departures (P17). The data also showed that institutional culture was key in influencing succession management as an institutional priority, reinforcing the previous findings that culture drives employee experiences. For example, P12 shared that although budgets are often a roadblock, nothing will make up for actual dollars, but working on culture for staff was valuable. In addition, the data showed that a lack of formal succession planning led to inconsistent talent management, creating environments with perceived inequities and subjectivity in performance evaluations and leadership selection. For example, several participants shared ideas on potential criteria, but no participant shared a confirmed outline or list of criteria to identify and develop potential leaders. The informal approach to succession planning experienced by all participants also left managers vulnerable to assessing potential leaders based on factors that can cause unintended discriminatory practices. P19 said, "We should have something consistent about what she should do and how we should do it," and P3 said, "If we had a more formal succession planning program, we would have identified that a key area of risk and we could have planned for it better." The data showed that participant institutions lack a formalized approach to succession management, impacting the development of a leadership talent pipeline.

Overview of Themes

Figure 5 shows the word cloud generated by NVivo software using the participant transcripts. It shows the words that were used most frequently throughout the interviews. The word cloud illustrates high-frequency words such as career, succession, opportunities, culture, development, formal, management, lack, leadership, and institutional as the top ten. In addition, Figure 6 shows CUPA-HR's 2022 employee retention survey results on satisfaction with the higher education environment, with opportunities for advancement as a leading reason for dissatisfaction at 46.3% and investment in career development at 38.8%. The findings from this study correlate with survey results and illustrate the importance of offering formal career paths and development opportunities for advancement.

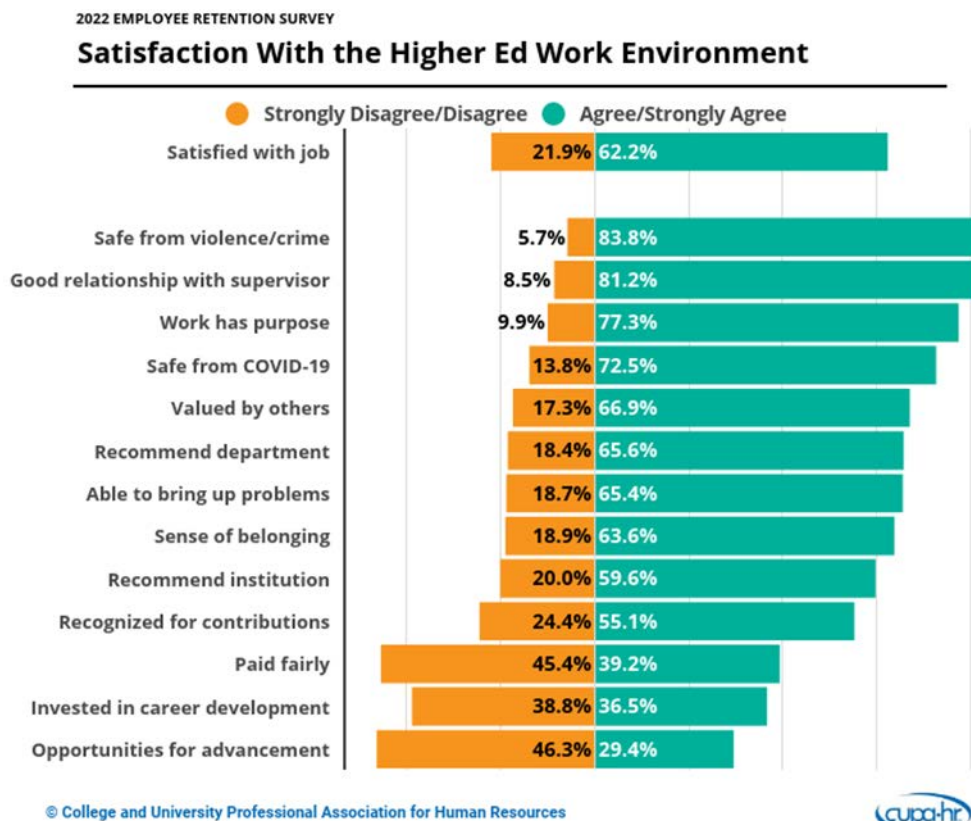
Figure 5

Words Coded to Interview Transcripts



Figure 6

2022 CUPA-HR Satisfaction with Higher Ed Work Environment



Relationship of the Findings

In this section, the researcher provided a detailed discussion of how the findings relate to key areas from the research proposal, including the research questions, conceptual framework, anticipated themes, literature review, and the problem.

The Research Questions

Creswell and Poth (2018) shared that research questions help researchers focus on exploring and understanding the study's purpose from the participants' perspective through data

collection and analysis. Using the data collected, the researcher conducted in-depth data analysis to determine if the study's findings addressed the three research questions.

Research Question 1. The first research question asked, “To what extent are private higher education institutions deficient in formal career pathing and development opportunities to retain and engage top non-academic talent?” It is important to note that formal career pathing and development opportunities are different talent management strategies. Formal career pathing is a tailored approach to individual career advancement focusing on skill development, identifying goals, and steps needed to progress within an organization (Ahmad Munir et al., 2020). When institutions offer employees professional development opportunities, activities often include upskilling knowledge and competencies within the employee's profession through instructor-led training, conferences, webinars, self-directed learning, and mentorship (Ahmad et al., 2020). The findings suggested that private HEIs in the Northeast United States lack formal career pathing for non-academic employees but not professional development opportunities. Almost all participants (95%) felt that their institutions lacked formal career paths that helped them understand the steps and skills needed for individual career advancement. In addition, participants felt career pathing and advancement opportunities became more limited for non-academic leaders serving as assistant vice president and above. All participants (100%) shared that their institutions offered sufficient professional development opportunities, mostly through training, skills enhancement, conferences, and self-directed learning—however, only 55% shared that they participated in the available professional development programs and opportunities.

The findings also revealed that the lack of formal career paths and perceived advancement opportunities increased participants' consideration of employment outside their current institution, addressing the engagement and retention element of research question 1.

Conversely, the findings did not support the idea that the availability of professional development opportunities, programs, and resources increases engagement or retention. The findings indicated that private higher education institutions in the Northeast United States lack formal career paths and should consider investing in strategic talent management that clarifies career advancement for non-academic employees within their institutions to impact engagement and retention.

Research Question 2. The second research question stated, “What are the challenges in developing formal career pathing and development opportunities for non-academic talent in private higher education institutions?” The findings suggested that resource constraints, university leadership, and institutional culture are the leading challenges to developing formal career pathing for non-academic employees, but not professional development opportunities. Professional development opportunities are available at each participant's HEI, although offerings vary at each institution. Participants shared that inadequate communication about professional development offerings negatively impacted employee participation and suggested improved communication as a resolution. The findings highlighted that resource constraints were mostly related to budget and human capital, with human capital identified by 60% of participants. In addition, the findings suggested that leadership and university culture are major drivers in developing formal career pathing and development opportunities across each HEI.

The findings show that the participating HEIs do not have sufficient human capital in their HR divisions to adequately support the development of formal career pathing programs that require significant time and work to implement. Most participants discussed lean operations and understaffing due to limited budgets, including the HR divisions that would lead a formal career pathing initiative. In addition, the findings suggested that university leadership and culture are

challenges in developing formal career pathing for non-academic staff due to the lack of these types of initiatives as strategic priorities. Participants felt that non-academic employees are not a strategic priority of participating in HEIs and leadership, which creates a culture that does not focus on developing that employee population. As a result, participants perceived unequal treatment within their respective HEIs. They desired leadership to acknowledge their contributions and value by investing in strategic talent management initiatives to create a supportive culture of non-academic employees and their career advancement. Therefore, the findings suggested that resource constraints, leadership, and university culture are the main challenges private HEIs in the Northeast United States face when developing formal career paths, not professional development opportunities.

Research Question 3. The third research question stated, “What factors influence the ability to execute succession management for non-academic leadership roles in private higher education institutions?” The findings suggested that factors influencing the lack of formal succession planning across participating HEIs are lack of formal succession planning, institutional culture, and inconsistent talent management.

The findings revealed that leaders do not have adequate guidance and education on effective talent management and pipeline development without leadership support and commitment to formalized succession planning as a strategic priority. 100% of participants shared that formal succession planning guidelines, practices, and policies were non-existent, creating inconsistencies in criteria and competencies to identify successors. In addition, the lack of formal succession planning disrupts business operations upon key departures, leaving gaps in knowledge and skillsets. Therefore, if university leadership does not identify strategic talent management initiatives, like succession planning, of non-academic employees as a strategic

priority, then inconsistent talent management and informal succession planning become part of the established culture. The study's findings addressed all three research questions. The findings provided key insights into the non-academic employee experience related to formal career pathing and professional development and how private HEIs manage internal talent for succession into key leadership roles.

The Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework helps researchers understand and organize concepts, relationships, assumptions, and theories to guide the study, data analysis, and interpretation of information (Collins & Stockton, 2018). The findings related to most of the components within the research framework, and this section includes a discussion of the relationship between each element of the conceptual framework.

Concepts. The researcher identified three concepts as the foundation of the research framework for this study: (a) professional development opportunities lead to employee engagement, (b) formal career pathways increase employee retention, and (c) employee retention impacts successful succession planning. The concept of professional development opportunities leading to employee engagement helped the researcher understand the relationship between institutions offering professional development opportunities and what Abdullahi et al. (2022) define as commitment reciprocity. The study's findings demonstrated that the availability of professional development opportunities does not always directly impact employee engagement. In addition, HEIs' communication about professional development opportunities needed improvement. The findings also revealed that the availability of professional development opportunities did not always increase participation in activities such as self-directed learning, workshops, seminars, and conferences.

The second concept is that formal career pathways increase employee retention and refer to the higher education non-academic employee retention crisis and career advancement as a major concern (Hart, 2022). The findings suggested that private HEIs lack formal career pathways, and the absence of career trajectories increased employee consideration of new opportunities outside their current institutions. In addition, for higher-level non-academic leaders, developing formal career pathways is more challenging due to long tenures at the senior leadership levels, which impacts the retention of potential successors for key leadership roles. The findings also revealed that formal career pathways require university leadership support, commitment, and dedicated resources within the HR division.

The third concept that employee retention impacts successful succession planning refers to the ability of HEIs to find ways to decrease attrition and identify and develop internal talent as successors for key roles. The findings suggested that the retention of employees does not impact successful succession planning due to the lack of succession planning as a strategic priority. In addition, inconsistent talent management practices and lack of formal career pathing impacting retention are prevalent in the study's findings. The findings also reveal that HEIs must invest in formalizing succession planning to include consistent and objective criteria and competencies required for key roles and employee retention initiatives as part of the overall succession management strategy.

Theory. The jobs-demands resource theory (JD-R) allows the researcher to explore the relationship between job demand and resources on employee outcomes such as engagement, productivity, and retention (Ghosh et al., 2020). With declining enrollments, revenues, and increased operational costs, HEIs often experience resource constraints and must find innovative ways to engage and retain top talent to ensure business continuity (Pratolo et al., 2020). The

study's findings relate to JD-R theory through the discovered theme of lack of formal career pathing and succession planning in HEIs. The findings suggested that HEIs must invest in strategic talent management initiatives like developing formal career paths and succession planning to increase non-academic employee retention. The findings revealed that the interplay between participant job demands, resources, and outcomes requires HEIs to prioritize and commit sufficient resources to formal career paths, leading to career advancement and increased engagement and retention. Therefore, the findings aligned with the JD-R theory regarding job demands and resources being key drivers of employee outcomes.

Actors. The actors of this qualitative study were non-academic employees in private HEIs within the northeast United States in various departments like academic affairs, human resources, student affairs, alumni engagement, facilities, information technology, and the president's office. The findings suggested that regardless of department, non-academic employees perceived inadequate career advancement opportunities and trajectories due to private HEIs' lack of formalized career pathing. The findings revealed that the actors provided sufficient insight into the problem and offered data to help address each research question.

Constructs. The study's findings correlated to the initial identification of constructs, including career pathing, employee engagement and retention, succession planning, and university culture. The participants understood each construct and its impact on the non-academic employee experience. The findings showed that participants across the HEIs experienced similar impacts on the constructs related to the problem. For example, the lack of career pathing for non-academic employees with private HEIs was a significant issue for all participants. It correlated with McClure's (2022) comments related to HEIs inadequate focus on staff career advancement. The findings accurately demonstrate a mutual understanding from all

participants that formalized career pathing is essential for retaining non-academic employees. Therefore, the researcher determined that formal career pathing can increase engagement and retention. However, the researcher cannot determine that retention impacts succession planning if HEIs lack formalized succession management practices to leverage internal talent as successors for key leadership roles.

Anticipated Themes

At the beginning of the study, the researcher identified three anticipated themes, including the following: (a) university culture drives behavior and objectives across higher education institutions, (b) budget constraints impact the ability to deliver strategic human resources programs, and (c) career planning initiatives impact employee engagement. The researcher examined if the findings relate to the anticipated themes.

The study's findings supported the first anticipated theme that university culture drives behavior and objectives across higher education institutions. University culture and leadership emerged as a theme for two research questions highlighting their importance and direct impact on employee experiences and strategic initiatives. HEIs leaders must integrate the non-academic employee experience into strategic objectives for the institution through strategic talent management initiatives focusing on career growth and advancement to build internal talent pipelines. The researcher would adjust the theme to reflect university leadership and culture as drivers of behaviors and strategic objectives across HEIs.

The second anticipated theme was that budget constraints impact the ability to deliver strategic human resources programs. The findings supported the anticipated theme and indicated that budget constraints limit HEI's ability to resource HR divisions adequately to provide strategic human resources programs. The findings identified human capital as the leading

resource constraint in delivering strategic talent management programs like formal career pathing; however, the budget drives workforce planning. In addition, strategic human resources programs require dedicated support, planning, and extensive time for implementation and sustainability. Therefore, the study's findings supported this anticipated theme.

The third theme was that career planning initiatives impact employee engagement, and the study's findings supported the anticipated theme. However, career planning initiatives also impact retention, as reflected in the study's findings. The lack of a career path and a clear career trajectory led to several participants considering outside employment, creating a retention issue. As a result, the researcher would adjust the theme to career planning initiatives that impact employee engagement and retention.

As a result of the study, an additional theme was revealed: succession planning requires a formalized and institutional approach. The study's findings showed that informal succession planning led to inconsistent talent management and perceived unequal treatment of non-academic employees in leadership roles. A formalized approach adopted by HEIs would mitigate risk, create efficiencies, and help identify top talent based on objective and standardized criteria needed for key leadership roles.

The Literature. The academic and professional literature review examined creating sustainable leadership pipelines for non-academic employees in private higher education institutions. University culture, operating budgets, human resource practices, and strategic talent management emerged as themes from the literature review that impact HEIs' ability to implement formal career pathing for non-academic staff to develop leadership pipelines and succession plans. Overall, there are significant similarities between the study's findings and the professional and academic literature review.

University Culture. The literature review discussed the factors influencing university culture as a key driver of employee experience and leadership as a foundational component (Singh, 2020). The study's findings showed university culture and leadership as themes for two research questions emphasizing the impact and influence on employee experiences. The study findings identified university culture and leadership as a challenge to developing a formal career path and a factor influencing the ability to execute succession planning. For HEIs to implement formal career pathing and succession planning programs, university leadership must prioritize strategic talent management initiatives and build a culture to support the growth of non-academic employees. For example, Morukhu et al. (2021) found that the lack of investment and commitment by HEIs in leadership training and talent management strategies led to lower engagement and retention.

The study's findings also relate to the literature reviewed regarding the difference between academic and non-academic employee experience. Erasmus' (2020) study found that in some HEIs, non-academic employees perceived their contributions as insignificant compared to faculty and viewed culture as a barrier to advancement. McClure (2022) shared that non-academic employees' frustration with perceived unequal treatment in compensation and strategic talent management is due to the different experiences of academic employees, impacting inclusion within HEIs. The study's findings revealed similar sentiments by participants about the academic versus non-academic employee experience. The data showed that they perceived unequal treatment of academic and non-academic colleagues due to inconsistencies in HR practices. Therefore, the study's findings related to the identified literature review theme of university culture as a factor in developing leadership pipelines for non-academic employees in private higher education institutions.

Operating Budgets. The literature review discussed the increasing challenges HEIs face with declining enrollments impacting revenues and the importance of effective resource allocation (Pratolo et al., 2020). The discussion included insight into the significance of HEI leadership aligning budgets with strategic objectives and embracing inclusive budgeting practices to ensure effective resource allocation to institutional priorities like workforce planning and talent management (Ramlo, 2021). The study's findings are related to literature because resource constraints, specifically budgeting and human capital, have emerged as challenges in developing formal career paths for non-academic employees in private HEIs. The findings suggested that HEIs do not have adequate support and resources to build formal career pathing and deliver strategic talent management of non-academic employees as an institutional strategic priority. Therefore, the study's findings related to the identified literature review theme of operating budgets as a factor in developing leadership pipelines for non-academic employees in private higher education institutions. However, the difference is that the literature review theme should include human capital as a separate resource issue driven by operating budgets and strategic prioritization.

Human Resource Practices. The literature review discussed the impact of HR practices on operational excellence and employee experience. Ali and Mahmood (2020) highlighted that HR practitioners who leverage technology and implement tailored approaches to strategic talent management can increase their competitive advantage. The discussion included findings by Els and Meyer (2023) that emphasized aligning strategic HR practices with organizational culture. The study's findings related to the literature on these topics because participants felt that culture and leadership impacted HR's ability to deliver formal career pathing and succession planning, known as strategic HR practices. The study's findings did not relate to the literature review

discussion on adopting HR technology and the HR practitioner's limited skillset, only the limited resources available to manage the magnitude of implementing strategic talent management.

Strategic Talent Management. The literature review discussed strategic talent management as an organizational value-added initiative that impacts engagement, performance management, retention, and succession planning (Anlesinya et al., 2019). Included in the discussion was Hultman's (2020) insight into employee optimization by developing talent to align with institutional goals. In addition, Guan and Frenkel (2019) said that upskilling employees by offering professional development opportunities motivates employees and increases engagement and retention. The discussion included topics related to strategic talent management, like career planning and succession planning, that require significant investment of HR resources, specifically human capital. The study's findings related to this theme in the literature review because data showed that private HEIs lack formal career pathing and succession planning, which fall under strategic talent management. In addition, institutional leadership and culture were key challenges in implementing these initiatives, which indicated that the HEIs do not adequately invest in strategic talent management. The researcher did not find many differences in this topic. Therefore, the study's findings related to the identified literature review theme of strategic talent management as a factor in developing leadership pipelines for non-academic employees in private higher education institutions.

The Problem. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested that researchers clearly state the problem, focus on understanding a specific topic, and apply the work to real-world scenarios. The specific problem studied was the possible deficiency of formal career pathing and development opportunities for non-academic employees in private higher education institutions in the Northeast United States, resulting in the possible reduction of top-talent engagement and

retention, thereby impacting non-academic leadership succession management. This research applies to real-world situations in academia, and participants shared that they would like more clarity around career trajectories and advancement opportunities.

The findings related to the problem of the lack of formal career pathing for non-academic employees in private higher education in the Northeast United States. However, although participants did not leave their current institutions, they considered seeking outside employment opportunities due to a lack of career paths and clear advancement opportunities. Formal career pathing programs could increase engagement and retention for HEIs, as indicated by the study's findings, McClure's (2022) article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and CUPA-HR's 2022 retention survey (Bichsel et al., 2022). In addition, the availability of a clear career trajectory for academic staff creates a perception of unequal treatment and opportunities for non-academic employees. The findings showed that institutional leadership and culture directly impact this part of the problem studied by the lack of prioritization of strategic objectives, investment, and communication of strategic talent management for non-academic employees.

The findings showed no deficiency in professional development opportunities for the same population within private HEIs in the Northeast United States. Participants shared that professional development opportunities were readily available through training, workshops, self-directed learning, and conferences. However, the availability of professional development opportunities did not appear to impact engagement or retention significantly, but 55% of participants took advantage of resources available through the professional development offerings. The findings also showed that career pathing and professional development opportunities cannot directly impact non-academic leadership succession planning if no

formalized succession planning guidelines, policies, or practices exist to assess potential successors.

Summary of the Findings

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews to collect data and explored the problem related to the possible deficiency of formal career pathing and development opportunities for non-academic employees in private higher education institutions, reducing top-talent engagement and retention. The findings addressed the problem and revealed that formal career pathing is deficient in private HEIs, but professional development opportunities are sufficient and available. In addition, the findings addressed the engagement and retention component of the problem by revealing that a lack of career pathing is a key driver for seeking external opportunities, impacting engagement and retention. The findings addressed the impact of non-academic leadership succession management by revealing that all HEIs have informal approaches to succession management. Therefore, the data did not show a direct relationship between formal career paths and professional development in non-academic leadership succession management.

The researcher aimed to understand the reasons behind employee engagement and retention challenges of non-academic staff in private higher education institutions and the impact on succession management. The findings revealed that the key drivers for non-academic employee engagement and retention are a supportive university culture that creates meaningful employee experiences, formal career pathways, clear expectations of succession planning, adequate resources (staffing and budget), and inclusive leadership that acknowledges the different needs of the non-academic employee population.

Lastly, the findings addressed all the research questions and revealed that HEIs lack formal career pathing, which impacts career trajectories and leads employees to consider outside employment, impacting retention. HEIs provide professional development opportunities through various resources and programs, although they do not appear to impact engagement or retention significantly based on the findings. In addition, the top challenges in developing formal career pathing and development opportunities are resource constraints, university leadership, and culture. The factors influencing the ability to execute succession management are HEI cultures that do not prioritize or formalize the succession planning process, leading to inconsistent talent management practices. Finally, HEIs must invest in workforce development through strategic talent management initiatives like formal career pathing and succession planning to sustain non-academic employee engagement and retention.

Application to Professional Practice

This study focused on the non-academic employee experience related to formal career pathing and professional development opportunities within private higher education institutions in the Northeast United States and their impact on engagement, retention, and succession planning. The findings revealed meaningful employee experiences from participants that can help HEI leaders and human resources departments implement strategies and initiatives to combat the higher education industry's non-academic employee retention crisis. The following section provides insight into how the study's findings improve general business practice and how the findings can help HEIs apply strategies to positively impact the non-academic employee experience.

Improving General Business Practice

The research findings apply to the professional practice of human resources as the division or unit responsible for managing an organization's most valuable asset – its people. Although this study focused on the private higher education industry, the findings can apply to the general human resources profession as guidance to implement key practices to attract, engage, grow, and retain talent in a highly competitive workforce landscape. This section will provide a detailed discussion of how the study's findings can improve the general business practice of human resources management in higher education institutions.

The first finding revealed a lack of formal career pathing for non-academic employees in private HEIs in the Northeast United States, resulting in most participants considering outside employment opportunities. This finding can improve the general business practice for HEIs and their HR departments in understanding and addressing a key area of concern and dissatisfaction within the non-academic employee population, leading to potential retention issues. For example, CUPA-HR completed a new employee retention survey in 2023 and found that non-academic employee retention remains a crisis and that institutions must invest in resources that prioritize retention and job satisfaction (Bichsel et al., 2023). Human resource departments are responsible for managing the growth and retention of employees, and career pathing can improve that element of the employee experience and illustrate opportunities for advancement for non-academic employees (Zahneis, 2022). When HEIs invest in and prioritize career pathing or planning for the non-academic employee, it demonstrates a commitment to employee growth and internal mobility, leading to decreased attrition (Wash, 2023). Suwannatarn and Asavisanu (2022) emphasized the importance and value of non-academic employees in functional areas like human resources, finance, information technology, and admissions to the mission and

performance of HEIs. Therefore, the study's finding that the lack of career pathing for non-academic employees correlates with retention issues can help HEIs human resources departments improve the general business practice of employee growth and retention.

The second finding was that university culture and resource constraints challenge the development of strategic talent management initiatives like career pathing and succession planning within private HEIs. University leadership behaviors and vision drive culture and resource allocation, and the findings suggested that participants felt that strategic talent management for the non-academic employee was not an institutional priority as experienced through culture and resource constraints. For example, participants shared that inadequate staffing in the HR divisions, acknowledgment of staff, and lack of budget prevented the implementation of strategic talent management programs that require dedicated resources to deliver meaningful outcomes. These findings help HEIs understand the importance of creating an innovative culture of trust, support, adequate resource allocation, and strategic prioritization that impacts non-academic employee engagement, retention, and succession planning (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). A significant subtheme in the findings is that non-academic employees perceive their career trajectory and advancement opportunities to differ from their academic colleagues and do not feel that their HEIs prioritize them. Coomber's (2019) research highlighted that non-academic employees often feel undervalued compared to their academic colleagues due to hierarchy and status dictated by the university culture. These findings can improve business practices by bringing awareness to HEI leadership about their role in cultivating inclusive cultures where all employees feel treated equally. Lastly, these findings help HEI leadership understand the dynamic influence that connecting non-academic employees to institutional

strategic priorities and missions can have on the inclusion and belonging of a vulnerable population.

The final finding of this study is that inconsistent talent management and informal succession planning activities lead to perceived unequal practices and operations disruption. This finding can improve general business practice by heightening HEI leadership awareness about the non-academic perception of unequal treatment compared to their academic counterparts and the importance of standardized processes to avoid disruption and unintended discriminatory practices. Poell (2022) shared that strategic HR practices focus on aligning leadership, strategy, talent optimization, and succession planning through intentional programs leading to desired business outcomes. This finding helps HEI leaders understand that strategic talent management practices like formalized succession planning include consistent talent management, identification of high-potential employees, clear evaluation criteria, upskilling for knowledge gaps, and preparation to fill critical roles. Overall, the study's findings can improve general business practice by providing HEI leadership with data that supports the importance of prioritizing strategic talent management and cultivating an inclusive culture of support and growth for non-academic employees.

Potential Application Strategies

There are several application strategies that HEIs can use to leverage the findings of this study, including prioritizing talent management as a strategic goal for non-academic employees and investing in human resources departments to enhance the delivery of resources and programs for non-academic employees. Zahneis (2022) revealed that the employee value proposition for HEIs needs improvement due to the declining appeal of the industry by top talent regarding culture, compensation, and flexibility. Based on this study's findings, one of the most important

things HEIs can do is review the institution's goals and prioritize enhancing culture, strategic talent management, and formal succession planning as key areas for human capital management that lead to increased engagement, retention, and continuity.

Embracing transformational leadership is a key strategy for enhancing culture, which impacts engagement, retention, and the employee experience. To transform culture, HEI leadership must define and communicate the institution's core values, lead by example, encourage growth and development, and promote transparency, diversity, equity, belonging, and inclusion. König et al. (2020) found that transformational leaders see an increase in followership, employee engagement, and positive business results. To enhance the culture, leadership must review and refine institutional goals to ensure alignment with desired outcomes. Chagas Landim et al.'s (2023) research on the alignment of strategy, governance, and people management in organizations revealed that alignment between strategy and people management is essential to creating a culture of internal consistency in policies, practices, actions, and processes that impact organizational performance. Therefore, a potential application strategy for HEI leaders is to revitalize culture by strategically aligning institutional priorities and innovative people management practices focusing on workforce optimization and operational continuity.

Another strategy that HEI leaders can leverage, based on the findings of this study, is to invest in implementing an institutional strategic talent management program. Strategic talent management requires a comprehensive people management approach that aligns with overarching strategy and objectives, including acquisition, development, performance management, succession planning, workforce planning, and retention strategies (Anlesinya et al., 2019). Institutional support and resource allocation for the human resources department are key drivers in implementing and successfully delivering a robust strategic talent management

program. If HEIs applied a strategic talent management strategy, it would address the findings of this study. For example, key integrated components of strategic talent management are talent development, performance management, workforce, and succession planning, which manage employees throughout their life cycle, which the researcher found as areas of improvement within HEIs.

A major component of applying a strategic talent management strategy is for HEIs to focus on consistency in practices, policies, and guidelines to achieve fair and equitable treatment of employees throughout their life cycle. Talent development and performance management initiatives must be consistent and clear so that employees understand areas of improvement and skills needed to advance within an organization (Valentine et al., 2020). Creating a job architecture and formalized career pathing as an element of workforce planning is crucial for succession planning and retention of non-academic employees in HEIs. A job architecture helps organizations structure roles and provides a framework for job leveling and career paths, outlining the advancement opportunities and potential career paths within an institution (Zavyalova et al., 2020). As a result of effective talent development, performance management, job architecture, and career paths, succession planning becomes easier for leaders. The integrated steps of strategic talent management make it critical for HEIs to ensure internal consistency throughout the process.

Summary of Application to Professional Practice

The study's findings are valuable to HEI leaders as they face significant issues with retaining non-academic employees. The researcher provided examples of how the study's findings can improve general business practice and offered potential application strategies. A key takeaway is bringing awareness to the opportunities for HEI leaders to improve the non-

academic employee experience through review and refinement of institutional practices, culture, and strategic people management. In addition, HEI leaders can embrace transformational leadership practices to enhance culture and belonging for non-academic employees who often feel treated unequally and not valued. Lastly, investing in people management initiatives and strategies like strategic talent management helps optimize workforce capabilities and positively impacts succession planning and business continuity.

Recommendations for Further Study

Based on the study's findings, one further area that should be studied is how long-term tenures in non-academic senior leadership impact innovation and the advancement of top talent within the pipeline. The study's findings revealed that non-academic leadership in the pipeline, like assistant vice presidents and above, felt stuck and lacked internal mobility based on long-term tenures and a lack of formalized succession planning. Long-term non-academic tenure is an area that should be studied further, as most participants stated that they would seek opportunities outside their institution for career advancement. When non-academic leaders leave, HEIs increase the risk of the loss of institutional knowledge and the opportunity to create a pipeline that helps maintain continuity through key transitions.

This study's findings revealed that non-academic employees seek ways to better understand the business of higher education at their institutions by having the ability to break down silos and gain access to other areas to enhance knowledge and understanding of business operations. A further area of study based on the findings is how to break down silos through divisional rotational or mentorship programs that allow non-academic employees exposure to other areas to understand the interconnectivity of institutional administrative operations. Additional research into this area can help HEIs understand the importance of creating non-

traditional avenues for professional development that create camaraderie, respect, and collegiality among non-academic units.

Another area of further study based on the findings is understanding and exploring the internal social systems within HEIs that create a disconnect and unequal experience for academic versus non-academic employees. Most participants did not feel their contributions mattered as much as academic colleagues, perceived unequal treatment in career pathing opportunities, and expressed that behavior created cultures that perpetuated the divide. Further research into the tradition and legacy of academia and its impact on the new world of work will prove valuable to the industry and general business practices for HEIs going forward.

Reflections

Embarking on a doctoral journey requires focus, dedication, resilience, and, most importantly, faith. The journey to a doctoral degree has helped the researcher to learn and grow personally, spiritually, and professionally. The next sections highlight the researcher's reflections on how this study provided personal and professional growth and how the research on the higher education human resources business function relates to and integrates with a Christian worldview.

Personal & Professional Growth

When starting this doctoral degree, the pathway was clear on the journey ahead through coursework requirements, selected readings, learning the research process, and submitting numerous papers. As the journey progressed, the researcher grew personally and learned the importance of time management and self-care while finding harmony between faith, work, family, health, and school. The researcher embraced the trials and triumphs as learning milestones and self-discovery that built a stronger connection to God, resiliency, confidence, and

agility. The personal growth the researcher experienced as a single mother, executive, servant leader, daughter, sister, and student is a direct result of pushing beyond the perceived personal limitations that this research project presented. The researcher realized that conducting this study could ignite change and impact the higher education industry in meaningful ways for the non-academic employee experience and, as a result, gain personal satisfaction and pride for the work accomplished.

After coursework, there was a significant transition from doctoral student to doctoral researcher that forever changed the personal and professional posture of the researcher. Conducting a research study is extremely challenging and makes researchers question the reasons for starting the journey, leading to feelings of failure, and wanting to give up. However, as the researcher began to read scholarly journals and feel more confident that this study would have a deep and meaningful impact on the researcher's profession, the excitement increased, and the passion for understanding and sharing the non-academic employee perspective became a flame that was hard to put out. While conducting the research, the researcher learned things that directly impacted their professional life as an executive in human resources in higher education, which enhanced their leadership style and connection to their team. This study provided the researcher with data to help amplify the need for HEIs to understand the opportunity-rich environment available to enhance the non-academic employee experience. Overall, the researcher gave participants a voice in effecting change within academia, which was deeply impactful personally and professionally.

Another personal and professional growth area for the researcher was active listening and writing. By interviewing 20 participants, the researcher listened more intently to ensure accurate participant perspectives. Listening more and practicing active listening was a growth area for the

researcher. Better writing is likely not a common area researchers mention as an area of growth when conducting research. However, the researcher's writing quality was enhanced as a senior human resources leader and doctoral student in scholarly writing due to the constructive feedback of the researcher's dissertation chair, committee, and admin reviews. These exercises allowed the researcher to improve with each submission, requiring fewer changes and edits as time progressed. Overall, this research project improved the researcher's outlook on lifelong learning and leveraging God-given talent to cultivate society.

Biblical Perspective

The business functions explored in this study focus on human resources management and the growth and development of non-academic employees in private higher education institutions. People may not always make the immediate connection, but managing human resources and talent is referenced in the Bible through many stories and experiences highlighting leadership, coaching, development, culture, and cultivating talent to work towards God's purpose in the world. Strategic human resources and talent development business functions relate to and integrate with a Christian worldview because the underlying exploration is cultivating talent and creating a culture of servant leaders and advisors. The first topic of career pathing for non-academic employees aligns with Keller and Alsdorf's (2012) discussion about the significance and purpose of work as using God-given talents to serve others and something bigger than oneself. "Just as God equips Christians for building up the Body of Christ, so he also equips all people with talents and gifts for various kinds of work, for the purpose of building up the human community" (Keller & Alsdorf, 2012, p. 66). Focusing on employees' career progression allows leaders to serve something beyond themselves by providing guidance, coaching, and support to help employees deploy their God-given talents in meaningful ways within their institutions. In

addition, Proverbs 11:14 states, "Without wise leadership, a nation falls; there is safety in having many advisers" (*Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, 1996), which highlights the positive impact of servant leadership and the role of advising employees through their career advancement as a way to demonstrate being a steward of God's plan.

Another business function the study explored was leadership and the impact of setting the tone at the top. Leadership and culture were two areas that participants felt impacted their non-academic employee experiences and emerged as themes across two research questions, amplifying their significance. The book of Titus states, "and you yourself must be an example to them by doing good works of every kind. Let everything you do reflect the integrity and seriousness of your teaching" (Titus 2:7, *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*). In his letter to Titus, Paul instructs him to be a positive role model by demonstrating integrity, modeling good behavior, and ethically leading by example. This verse is a lesson in the Bible about the importance of leaders' influence on their followers and their behaviors' impact on individual experiences. Another reference to leadership impact and creating culture is when Paul advises Timothy to conduct himself as a servant leader and understand his responsibility in the Christian community. "Keep a close watch on how you live and on your teaching. Stay true to what is right for the sake of your own salvation and the salvation of those who hear you" (1 Timothy 4:16, *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*). The references throughout the Bible about the impact of leadership behavior, morals, and ethics demonstrate how critical having power and influence is and how fruitful it can be in the world if leveraged and used to serve God's plan.

Lastly, the study explored the business function of succession planning, and the Bible contains many principles and examples about preparing future leaders and passing on responsibilities. For example, Deuteronomy 34:9 states, "Now Joshua son of Nun was full of the

spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him. So, the people of Israel obeyed him, doing just as the Lord had commanded Moses” (Deuteronomy 34:9, *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*). In this verse, leadership is passed from Moses to Joshua, which signifies the importance of mentorship, coaching, and preparing the next leaders for leadership. In 2 Timothy, the apostle Paul is teaching Timothy about the importance of development, training, and identifying successors for continuity. The verse states, “You have heard me teach things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Now teach these truths to other trustworthy people who will be able to pass them on to others” (2 Timothy 2:2, *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*). The Bible contains many references to the various business functions related to people management, and it is easy to correlate this study with lessons from the Bible. God’s plan is for everyone to find meaningful ways to serve others while leveraging their God-given talents, all in the stewardship of God and his divine plan for the world.

Summary of Reflections

The researcher reflected on the doctoral journey and discussed the meaningful impact of conducting this research project personally and professionally. The researcher shared growth experiences related to enhanced listening and writing and personal growth spiritually and mentally. The researcher also discussed professional growth within the researcher’s role as a senior human resources leader and vessel to amplify the voices of non-academic employees to impact change in HEIs. Lastly, the researcher provided a detailed discussion on how the business functions of human resources, such as career pathing, leadership, and succession planning, are related to and integrated with the Christian worldview.

Summary of Section 3

Section 3 focused on the researcher's findings of this qualitative multiple case study that incorporated the perspectives and personal experiences from 20 semi-structured interviews with non-academic employees across five private HEIs in the Northeast United States. First, the researcher discussed the eight discovered themes according to the research questions: lack of formal succession planning, professional development opportunities, retention issues, resource constraints, leadership and culture, lack of formal succession planning, and inconsistent talent management. The researcher then presented findings through a detailed discussion and visualization of data that confirmed a lack of formal career paths to retain and engage non-academic employees, that resource limitations contributed to a lack of formalized programs, and that institutional leadership and culture play significant roles in the non-academic talent management and employee experience. The researcher also discussed how the findings related to the research questions, conceptual framework, anticipated themes, professional and academic literature, and the problem.

The researcher shared how the findings could improve general business practice for HEI human resources departments and the general professional by implementing strategic talent management strategies to improve career advancement and succession planning and refining institutional priorities to create supportive cultures for the non-academic employee. In addition, the researcher offered potential application strategies that included embracing transformational leadership and investing in strategic people management initiatives to optimize workforce capabilities and increase retention of non-academic employees. As areas for further study, the researcher identified managing long-term non-academic employee tenures, finding ways to break down silos across divisions, and exploring internal social systems that impact inclusion. Lastly,

the researcher reflected on how the research project impacted personal and professional growth and how the business functions explored in the study related to and integrated with the Christian worldview.

Summary and Study Conclusions

This qualitative multiple case study explored the perspectives of 20 non-academic employees across five private higher education institutions in the Northeast United States and captured their perspectives on the challenges and opportunities in formalizing strategic talent management initiatives like career pathing and succession planning. The researcher selected a qualitative, flexible design, multiple case study, which allowed for flexibility and agility based on the progression of the research field study. The study also used the JD-R theory because it helped the researcher understand the relationship between job demands and resources that influence employee performance, engagement, and retention.

The researcher conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with non-academic employees across five private HEIs in various divisions, including human resources, student affairs, facilities, academic affairs, information technology, and alumni engagement, to gain insight into their perspectives on the availability of career pathing, professional development, and succession planning. The researcher sent each participant a copy of the interview transcript to ensure accuracy and verify the conversation context. The researcher used two-cycle coding to compile a list of eight discovered themes related to the three research questions of this qualitative multiple case study.

The findings revealed that HEIs lack formalized talent management initiatives like career pathing and succession planning, impacting retention, engagement, and inconsistent talent management practices. Based on the study's results, resource constraints, leadership, and culture

were significant barriers to formalizing strategic talent management initiatives. The results also revealed that career advancement for non-academic employees is more limited at leadership levels where participants expressed interest in employment outside their institution for advanced opportunities. In addition, the study's results emphasized the critical role that leadership and culture play in cultivating employee experiences and creating a sense of belonging for non-academic employees in HEIs. As a result, HEIs struggle with retaining non-academic employees due to the lack of formalized career pathing and succession planning programs offering a clear career trajectory and required upskilling.

The researcher believes that the findings of this study provide practical recommendations for HEIs to enhance culture, strategic talent management initiatives, and the non-academic employee experience. Also, this study has some limitations due to its focus on private HEIs. Finally, the results of this study can help reduce the gap in the current professional and scholarly literature and effect change in academia for non-academic employees.

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Appendix A: Semi-structured Interview Guide

Introduction

The researcher will introduce herself and briefly explain the purpose of the study. This qualitative multiple case study aims to explore the non-academic employee experience and viewpoint on career pathing within 4-year private higher education institutions in the Northeast United States. Next, if not previously collected, the researcher will collect a signed copy of the participant consent form if the participant via email before the interview starts. Additionally, the researcher will provide a brief overview of the interview objectives and the overall process, member-checking, follow-up interviews, and protection of personal information and data through secure storage. In addition, the researcher will discuss the estimated length and number of questions and ask permission to record the interview to allow transcription for the participant to review and confirm an accurate portrayal of the interview. If the participant does not permit recording of the interview, the researcher will advise the participant that the researcher will take notes throughout the interview. Lastly, the researcher will ask the participant if they have any questions regarding the interview process and start the interview and recording if permitted.

The interview will begin with the researcher stating the participant's designated pseudonym and the interview's date, time, and location. In addition, the researcher will remain professional throughout the interview and adhere to the established interview time frame.

Opening Questions

- a. How long have you been in private higher education as a non-academic employee?
- b. How long have you been with the institution?
- c. What is your current position and department?
- d. How long have you been in this position?

Appendix B: Interview Questions

| Topic | Guiding Questions | Possible Follow-up Questions |
|----------------|--|---|
| Career pathing | 1. How do you perceive the availability of career pathing for non-academic employees opportunities within your institution? | 1a. What factors might contribute to non-academic employees' perceived lack of career pathing opportunities? |
| | 2. What resources and programs does the institution offer to help non-academic employees identify and pursue career paths that align with their goals and aspirations? | 2a. Have you taken advantage of any available programs? 2b. If so, can you provide examples? 2c. If not, why? |
| | 3. Have you considered seeking career opportunities outside your institution due to non-academic employee career pathing concerns? | 3a. If yes, what influenced your decision or thought process? |
| | 4. What are the institution's main challenges in establishing formal career pathing and development opportunities for non-academic employees? | 4a. What actions can your institution take to overcome these challenges?? |

| | | |
|------------------------|--|---|
| Succession Planning | 5. How does the institution define and approach succession planning for critical leadership roles? | 5a. Can you describe the various career pathing opportunities available to non-academic employees in the institution? |
| | 6. Does the institution have a formal succession planning policy or guidelines? | 6a. What are some of the critical aspects of the policy? |
| | 7. What criteria and competencies are considered when evaluating non-academic employees for potential succession into leadership positions? | 7a. Are criteria and competencies required for internal mobility communicated by your direct leader? |
| | 8. What role does the institutional culture play in supporting or hindering the execution of succession management efforts? | 8a. What are some challenges your institution has encountered? |
| Closing | 9. What additional information would you like to share about career pathing for non-academic employees within private higher education institutions? | |

Closing and Follow-up Process

The researcher will stop recording and thank the participant for sharing the non-academic employee experience and perspective on career pathing within private higher education institutions. Then, the researcher will answer any remaining questions the participant may have and assure the participant of the protection of personal information and confidentiality of the interview. Furthermore, the researcher will inform the participant that the participant will receive a copy of the interview transcript or interview notes in the next 3-4 days. As part of the member checking and review process, the participant will review and confirm the accuracy of the transcript/notes or return the corrected transcript/notes to the researcher by email within 1-2 days of receipt. It should take approximately 15 to 30 minutes to complete the transcript/note review. Finally, the researcher will end the interview.

Appendix C: CUPA-HR 2022 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey



The CUPA-HR 2022 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey: Initial Results

By Jacqueline Bichsel, Melissa Fuesting, Jennifer Schneider, and Diana Tubbs
July 2022

Introduction

The CUPA-HR *Higher Education Employee Retention Survey* was piloted in May 2022.¹ The survey was created to better understand the proportion of the higher ed workforce that is at risk for leaving their current jobs, why these employees are considering leaving, and what higher ed institutions can implement to increase retention and improve the higher ed workplace. The survey was targeted to all higher ed employees who are not faculty — administrators, professionals, and non-exempt staff.²

¹ The data collection period for the survey was May 2 to May 20, 2022.

² We thank the following professional organizations who partnered with CUPA-HR in distributing this survey to their members: AACRAO, ACHA, ACPA, ACUHO-I, ACUI, CHEMA, EDUCAUSE, NACUBO, NASFAA, NCCI. We thank the members of those organizations who distributed this survey to employees at their institutions and the employees who took the time to provide responses to this survey.

The survey asked questions in the following areas:

- Likelihood of looking for other employment opportunities in the near future
- Reasons for looking for other employment
- Remote work policies and opportunities
- Work performed beyond normal hours and duties
- Satisfaction with benefits
- Well-being and satisfaction with job environment
- Challenges for supervisors
- Demographic questions on gender, race/ethnicity, and age
- Characteristics of the employee's position

This report focuses on the broad, initial results obtained for most of these questions. Descriptive analyses provide an overview of what proportion of the higher ed workforce is at risk for leaving, why they're considering leaving employment, and with which policies, work arrangements, and benefits employees are satisfied or dissatisfied. Differences by institution classification, affiliation, and employee department/area are discussed where these differences are notable.³

Respondents

Data from 3,815 higher ed employees were analyzed for this report.⁴ More than three fourths (77%) of the sample were female, and 80% were White (Figure 1).⁵ More than half (57%) were supervisors, with an average of 3.76 staff reporting to them. Nearly all (98%) respondents were full-time employees.

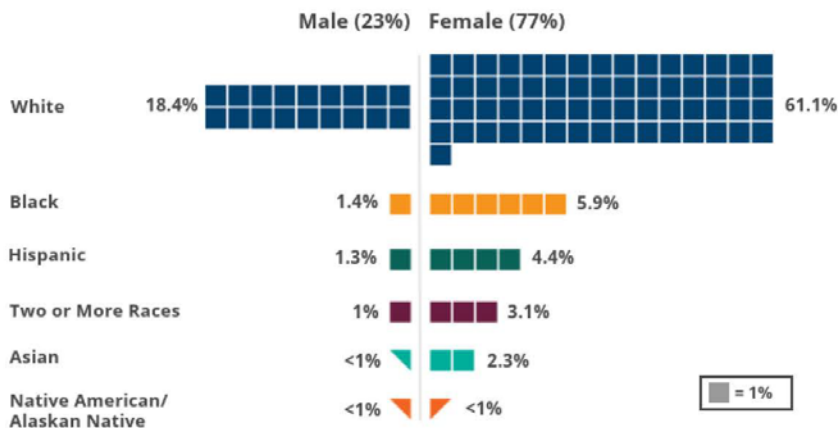
³ Future reports will take deeper dives into the challenges faced by supervisors; the relative importance of the various survey factors in predicting which employees are at most risk of leaving; and differences in responses by gender, race/ethnicity, and age.

⁴ Although 3,926 people completed the survey, 111 responses were excluded for one or more of the following reasons: their institution could not be identified or classified, their department or work area could not be classified, or they could not identify whether they were full-time or part-time.

⁵ Reported for those responding to the questions asking for self-identification of gender (97% of the sample) and race/ethnicity (96% of the sample). A "nonbinary" category was included in the gender item of the survey, although the number of employees responding as nonbinary ($n = 43$) could not be meaningfully depicted in this intersectional graphic.

2022 EMPLOYEE RETENTION SURVEY

Gender and Race/Ethnicity of Respondents



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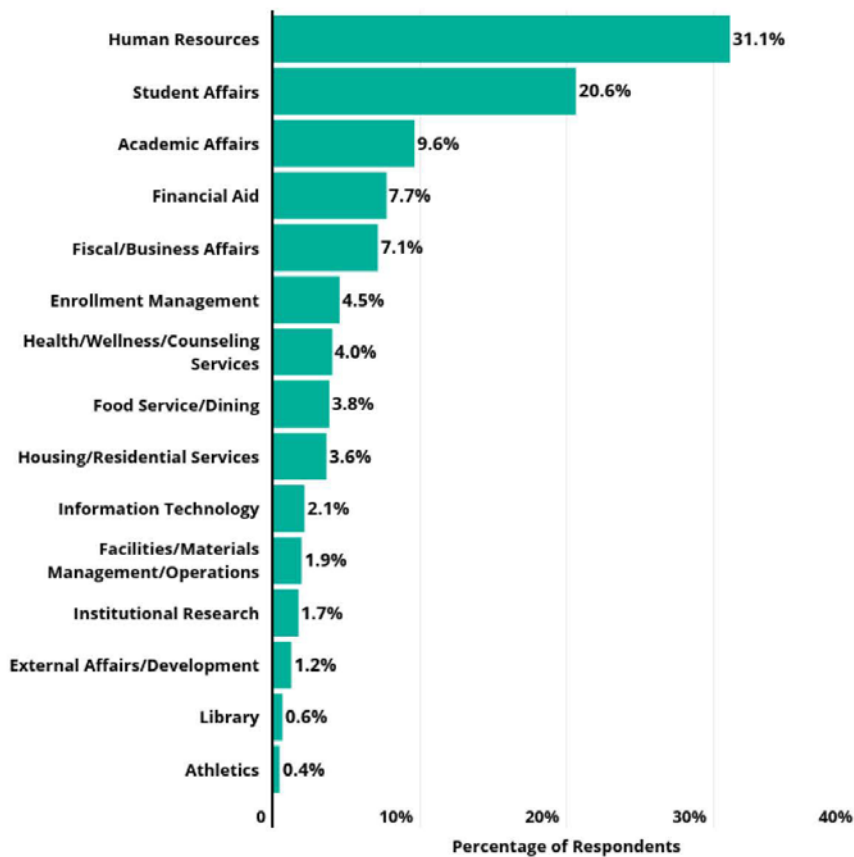
Figure 1. Gender and Race/Ethnicity of Respondents

Respondents worked in a variety of departments/areas (Figure 2). The department with the greatest representation in the survey was human resources (31%), followed by student affairs (21%).⁶

⁶ Departments/areas with $n < 100$ (representing $< 3\%$ of survey respondents) are not included in comparative analyses of departments/areas in this report.

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Respondent Departments/Areas



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Figure 2. Respondent Departments/Areas

Respondents represented 949 institutions, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Institution Classification and Affiliation

| | | Public | Private Independent | Private Religious | TOTAL |
|-----------------------|----------------------|---------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|
| Classification | Doctoral | 198 | 65 | 49 | 312 |
| | Master's | 130 | 56 | 56 | 242 |
| | Baccalaureate | 23 | 57 | 55 | 135 |
| | Associate's | 183 | 2 | 0 | 185 |
| | Special Focus | 13 | 54 | 8 | 75 |
| | TOTAL | 547 | 234 | 168 | 949 |

Likelihood of Looking for Other Employment Opportunities in the Near Future

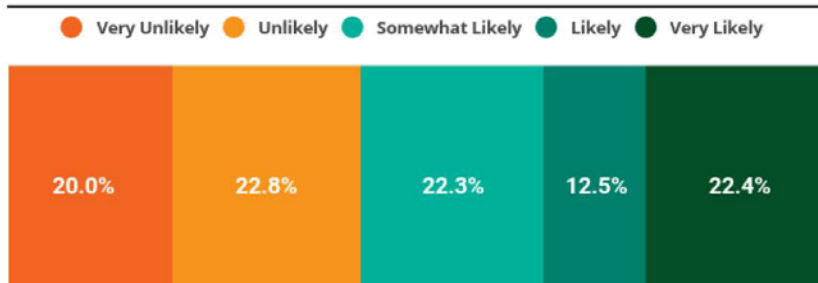
The first question of the Employee Retention Survey asked, “What is the likelihood that you will be looking for other employment opportunities within the next 12 months?” Figure 3 shows the distribution of responses to this question. Approximately 35% of higher ed employees are likely or very likely to look for new employment opportunities in the next year, and an additional 22% are somewhat likely to look for new employment in the next year.⁷ The proportion of higher ed employees at risk of leaving has increased since 2021, where only 24% reported that they were either likely or very likely to look for new employment opportunities, and an additional 19% were somewhat likely.⁸ These results indicate that higher ed institutions are at risk of losing half of their current employees in the next year. In addition, the problem of retention appears to be getting worse rather than better.

⁷ Analyses of this data found no notable differences in results due to institution classification, institution affiliation, or employee department/area.

⁸ Bichsel, J., Fuesting, M., & McCormack, M. (2021, November). [Providing Remote Work Opportunities Will Aid Your Retention Efforts](#). CUPA-HR.

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Likelihood of Looking for Other Employment Within the Next 12 Months



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Figure 3. Likelihood of Looking for Other Employment Within the Next 12 Months

Figure 4 shows the types of organizations in which employees would look for new opportunities.⁹ Approximately two-thirds (68%) would look for employment at another higher ed institution, and 43% of higher ed employees would look for new employment within their current institution. However, employees are not averse to seeking employment outside of higher ed: half (51%) would seek opportunities at non-profit organizations and nearly two-thirds (64%) would look for opportunities at a private for-profit company. Given the distribution of responses, results show no discernible difference between employees' preferences for staying in or leaving higher education. The good news is that most employees remain

⁹ Participants who reported they were either very likely, likely, or somewhat likely to look for new work opportunities in the next year were asked to complete survey questions about where they would look for work ($n = 2,183$). Response options allowed participants to select all that applied.

open to job opportunities within higher education, which indicates that efforts to retain these employees can be fruitful.¹⁰

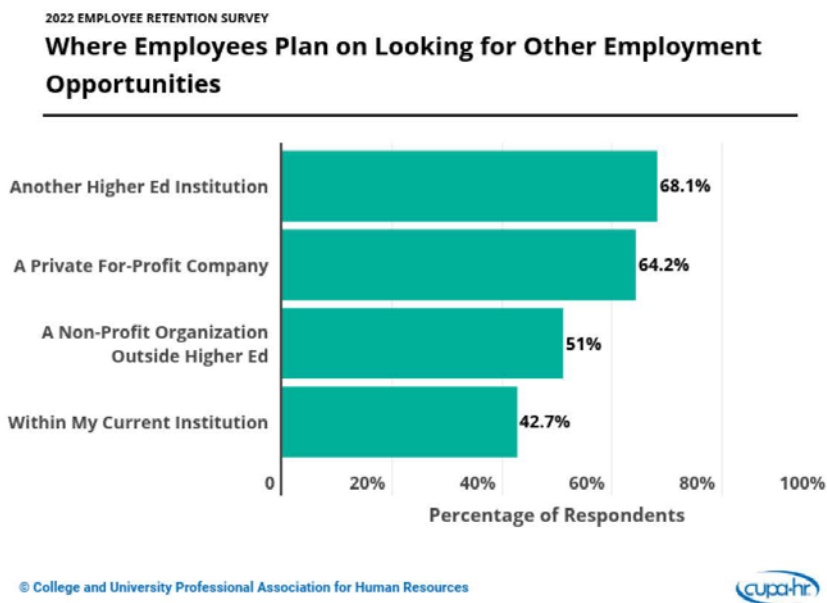


Figure 4. Where Employees Plan on Looking for Other Employment Opportunities

Figure 5 shows the reasons why higher ed employees are looking for other employment.¹¹ More than three-fourths (76%) are seeking new employment because they want an increase in pay. Close to half (43%) desire remote work

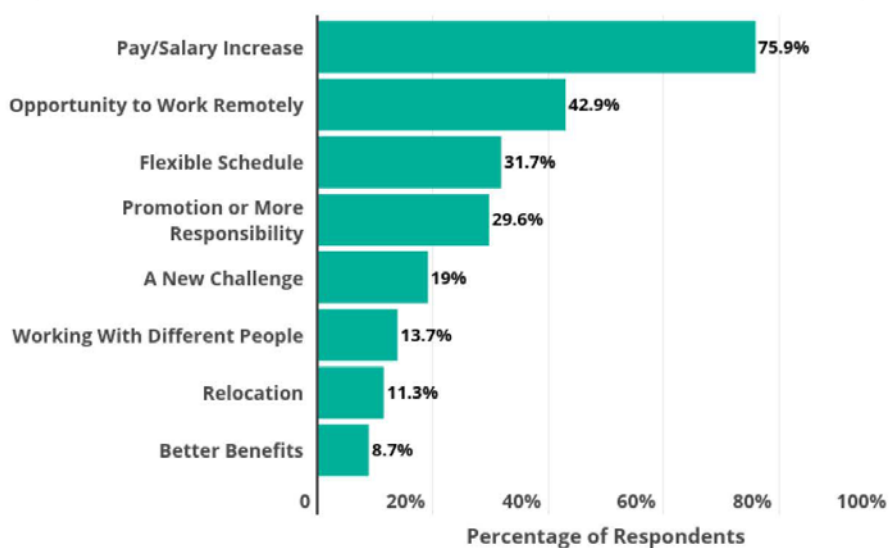
¹⁰ Analyses of this data found no notable differences in results due to institution classification, institution affiliation, or employee department/area.

¹¹ Participants who reported they were either very likely, likely, or somewhat likely to look for new work opportunities in the next year were asked to complete survey questions about the reasons why they would look for new work opportunities ($n = 2,183$). Response options allowed participants to select all that applied.

opportunities, nearly one-third (32%) want more flexible work schedules, and 30% of employees are seeking a promotion or more work responsibilities.¹²

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Reasons Employees Are Seeking New Opportunities



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Figure 5. Reasons Employees Are Seeking New Opportunities

¹² Analyses of this data found no notable differences in results due to institution classification, institution affiliation, or employee department/area.

Remote Work: What Exists, What Employees Want, What Is Possible

The Employee Retention Survey included three items on remote work:

1. Whether most job duties can be done remotely (responses range from strongly agree to strongly disagree)
2. Actual current work arrangement (completely on-site, mostly on-site, partially on-site and partially remote, mostly remote, completely remote)
3. Ideal work arrangement (completely on-site, mostly on-site, partially on-site and partially remote, mostly remote, completely remote)

Nearly three-fourths (71%) of respondents overall stated they agree or strongly agree that most of the duties of their job can be done remotely, and agreement with this statement varied somewhat predictably by job area (Figure 6). For example, 83% of human resources employees agreed that most of their duties could be done remotely, compared to only 23% of food service/dining employees.

Employees' agreement with whether most of their duties can be done remotely does not align with their actual work arrangements. Only 14% of respondents overall have mostly or completely remote work arrangements, 23% have a hybrid arrangement with some remote and some on-site work, and 63% work completely or mostly on-site (Figure 6). Fiscal/business affairs is the area with the most employees working mostly or completely remote (25%), and, predictably, food service/dining employees are the least likely to work mostly or completely remote (1%). Noteworthy as well are departments that have a high percentage of employees stating most of their duties can be done remotely with a much lower percentage of employees working completely or mostly remote. For example, 83% of financial aid employees state that most of their duties can be done remotely, yet only 11% of them have mainly remote work arrangements, and two-thirds are working mostly or completely on-site.

When comparing current and ideal work arrangements, a number of patterns stand out. First, the most desirable work arrangement for

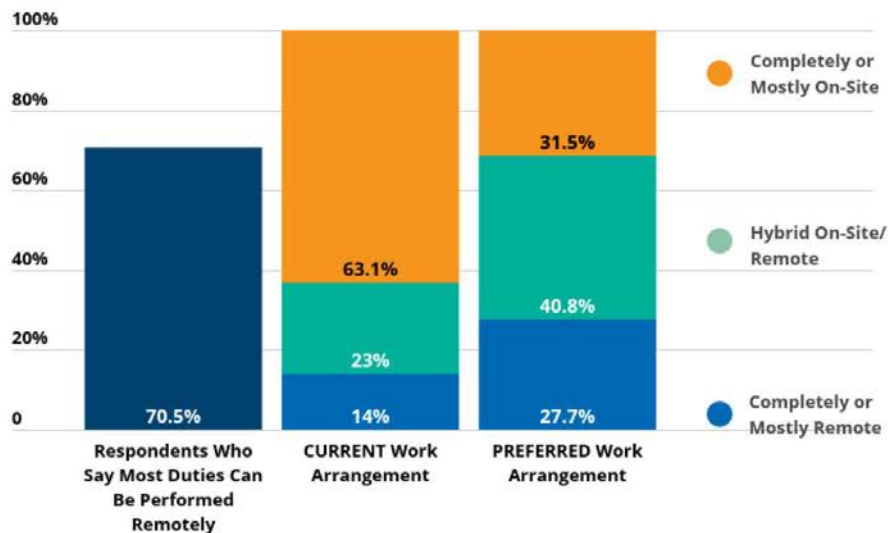
employees overall appears to be a hybrid one, having some days where they work on-site and some days where they work remotely. There are a few exceptions to this. More fiscal/business affairs employees prefer a completely or mostly remote work arrangement, and employees in health/wellness/counseling, food service/dining, and housing/residential services prefer a completely or mostly on-site work arrangement. These exceptions are best understood when viewing the alignment between preferred work arrangements and the percentage of employees who agree that most of their duties can be done remotely.

For many departments/areas, there is a clear misalignment between actual work arrangements and preferred work arrangements. For example, only about one-third (35%) of enrollment management employees prefer to work completely or mostly on-site, but two-thirds (66%) actually do. Previous research shows that such misalignment between actual and ideal work arrangements predicts an employee's likelihood of looking for other work in the near future.¹³

¹³ Bichsel, J., Fuesting, M., & McCormack, M. (2021, November). [*Providing Remote Work Opportunities Will Aid Your Retention Efforts*](#). CUPA-HR.

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Current and Preferred Work Arrangements



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Figure 6. Current and Preferred Work Arrangements
[The [online version of this graphic](#) is interactive by department/area.]

Beyond Full-Time: Many Higher Ed Employees Are Burning the Candle at Both Ends

Approximately two-thirds (67%) of full-time higher ed employees work more hours each week than what is considered full-time (Figure 7).¹⁴ Notably, 10% of employees work 16 hours or more of additional hours per week. Only 1% of employees typically work less than is expected of full-time workers at their institution.

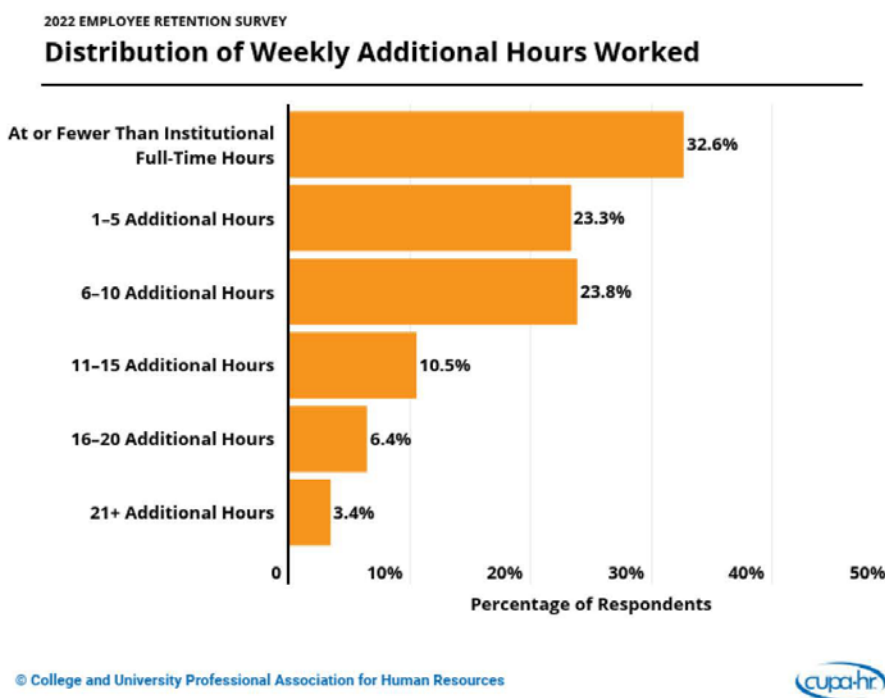


Figure 7. Distribution of Weekly Additional Hours Worked

¹⁴ Data in Figure 7 was obtained by calculating the difference between the number of hours each participant typically works per week and the number of hours their institution considers full-time.

Higher ed employees find it necessary to work additional hours to complete their current job duties. More than half (58%) of employees agreed that their job duties require additional hours, and only one-quarter (26%) disagreed that their job duties required additional hours.

Nearly two-thirds (63%) of higher ed employees agreed that they absorbed additional responsibilities of other staff who left since the onset of the pandemic, and nearly three-fourths (73%) agree that they have taken on additional responsibilities that emerged due to the pandemic. Higher ed employees today have fewer hands to share a heavier load.¹⁵

Satisfaction With the Higher Ed Work Environment

The Employee Retention Survey contained 14 items related to work environment and job satisfaction. Employees were asked to rate the extent to which they agree with statements such as "I feel a sense of belonging at work." Figure 8 displays the percentage of respondents agreeing with each statement.¹⁶ Overall, nearly two-thirds (62%) of higher ed employees agree with the general statement that they are satisfied with their job.

Approximately the same percentage (66%) would recommend their department as a place to work, and a slightly smaller percentage (60%) would recommend their institution. However, more than one-fifth (22%) of higher education employees are not satisfied with their jobs. Therefore, it is worth noting which aspects of their work environment receive more or less satisfaction.

Higher ed employees overwhelmingly agree (81%) they have a good relationship with their supervisor, which research shows is positively associated with job satisfaction for both in-person and remote

¹⁵ Analyses of this data found no notable differences in results due to institution classification, institution affiliation, or employee department/area.

¹⁶ Questions used a five-point Likert scale of agreement (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree).

employees.^{17,18} Further, more than three-fourths (77%) feel their work has purpose. In addition, approximately two-thirds of employees agree they are valued by others at work (67%), feel they can bring up problems and tough issues at work (65%), and feel a sense of belonging (64%).

There are four notable areas of discontent. Nearly half (46%) of higher ed employees disagree they have opportunities for advancement and a similar percentage disagree they are paid fairly (45%). Thirty-nine percent disagree that the institution is invested in their career development and one-fourth (24%) disagree that they are recognized for their contributions.

¹⁷ Stringer, L. (2006). The Link Between the Quality of the Supervisor–Employee Relationship and the Level of the Employee's Job Satisfaction. *Public Organization Review*, 6, 125-142. doi: 10.1007/s11115-006-0005-0

¹⁸ Golden, T. D. & Veiga, J. F. (2008). The Impact of Superior–Subordinate Relationships on the Commitment, Job Satisfaction, and Performance of Virtual Workers. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 19(1), 77-88. doi: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2007.12.009

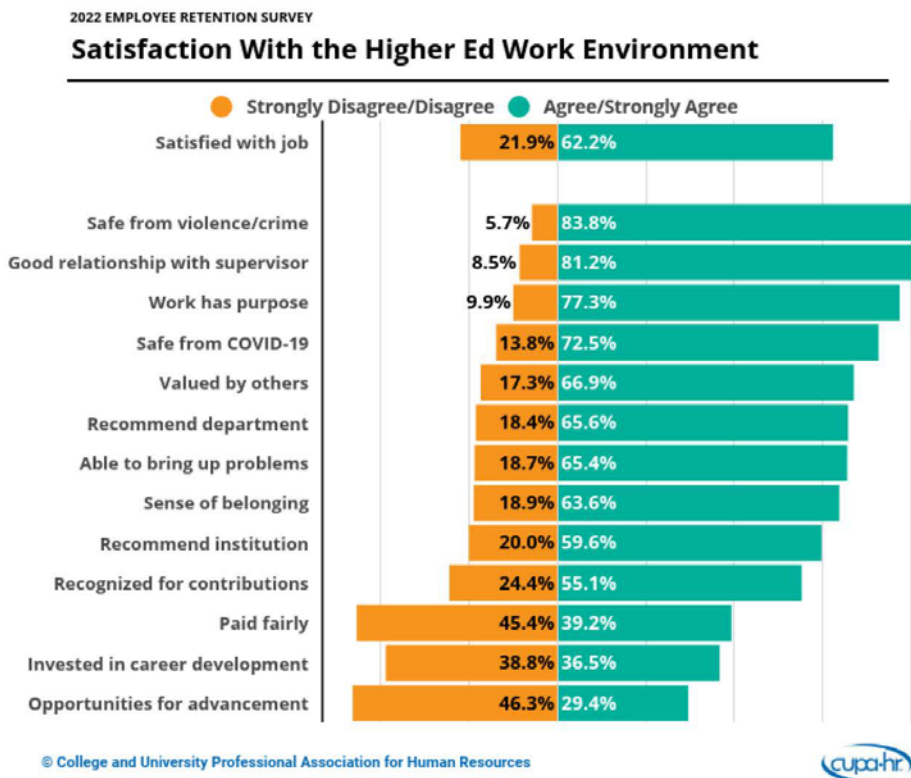


Figure 8. Satisfaction With the Higher Ed Work Environment

When comparing these results by institution classification, higher ed employees in baccalaureate institutions perceive their work environment most favorably (highest agreement to 10 of the 14 items), whereas those in associate's institutions perceive their work environment least favorably (lowest agreement to 10 of the 14 items). Likewise, those in private institutions (independent and religious) had more positive responses (highest agreement to 13 of the 14 items) than those in public institutions.

Employee job satisfaction varies by department/area as well. Higher ed employees working in Human Resources and Food Service/Dining are most satisfied with their job (71% and 68% agreement respectively), whereas only 55% of those in Financial Aid and in Academic Affairs agreed they were satisfied with their job. Employees in Human Resources, along with Food Service/Dining and Enrollment Management, are also the most likely to recommend their department as a good place to work (72%, 69%, and 67% respectively); however, only 54% of Financial Aid employees recommend their department as a good place to work.

Satisfaction With Benefits

When it comes to employee satisfaction with benefits, there's a clear distinction between satisfaction with benefits that have remained fairly constant in terms of their importance over the past few years and benefits that became more salient over the course of the pandemic. For the most part, there is high satisfaction with the following: retirement benefits, amount of paid time off, health insurance, work-related equipment, and tuition reimbursement (Figure 9). More than two-thirds of higher ed employees report being satisfied or very satisfied with these benefits.

However, benefits that have become more salient since the pandemic — childcare discounts or subsidies, remote work policies, schedule flexibility, and parental leave policies — received the highest levels of dissatisfaction. This is noteworthy when one considers the research showing that women were disproportionately burdened with unpaid childcare, eldercare, and other home responsibilities during the years of the pandemic, resulting in promotion, pay, and morale gaps that continue.¹⁹

There are some notable differences in satisfaction with benefits based on institution type. Although 81% of employees overall reported they were either satisfied or very satisfied with their retirement benefits, only 68% of public institution employees reported this level of satisfaction with

¹⁹ Miller, C. C. (2021, May 17). [The Pandemic Created a Child-Care Crisis. Mothers Bore the Burden.](#) *The New York Times*.

retirement benefits. Similarly, only 62% of employees at public institutions reported satisfaction with their health insurance, compared to 75% overall.

Those who work at doctoral institutions report higher levels of satisfaction with their institution's remote work policies (46% of doctoral institution employees are satisfied, compared with 35% of associate's, 36% of baccalaureate, and 32% of master's institution employees). Similarly, higher levels of satisfaction with parental leave policies are reported at doctoral institutions (46%) than at associate's (33%), baccalaureate (41%), or master's (35%) institutions. In regard to childcare discounts/subsidies, only 9% of associate's institution employees reported they were satisfied or very satisfied. Private religious institutions reported the greatest level of satisfaction with childcare discounts/subsidies (24%); however, this is still a very low level of satisfaction.

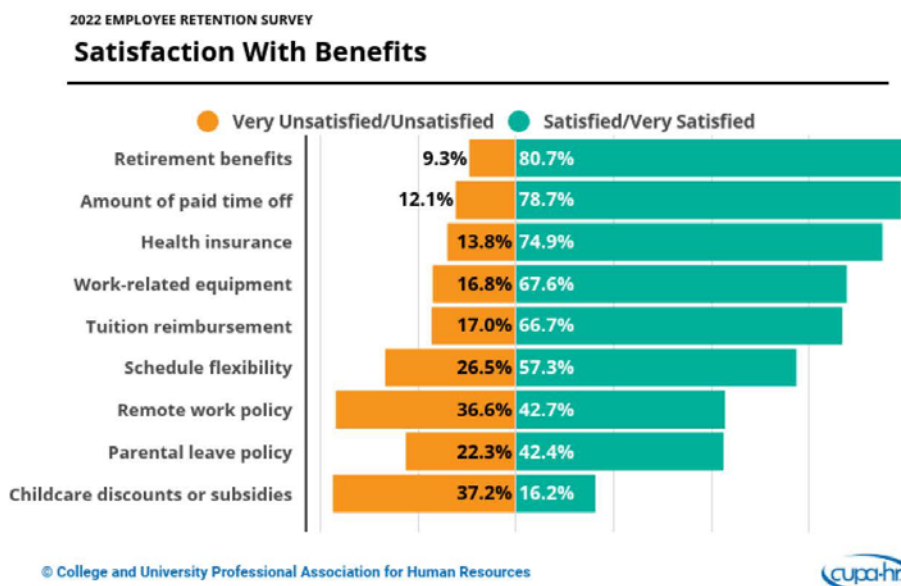


Figure 9. Satisfaction With Benefits

Conclusions

This initial report from the CUPA-HR *Higher Education Employee Retention Survey* provides data supporting the following broad conclusions about the higher ed workforce.

Higher ed employees are looking for other jobs, mostly because they desire a pay increase. More than half (57%) of the higher ed workforce is at least somewhat likely to look for other employment opportunities in the next 12 months. The most common reason for seeking other employment (provided by three-fourths of those likely to look for another job) is an increase in pay. Other reasons are that they desire more remote work opportunities, a more flexible schedule, and a promotion or more responsibility.

Higher ed institutions are not providing the remote work opportunities that employees want. Nearly three-fourths (71%) of employees report that most of their duties can be performed remotely, and 69% would prefer to have at least a partially remote work arrangement, yet 63% are working mostly or completely on-site.

Higher ed employees are working longer and harder than ever. Two-thirds (67%) of full-time staff typically work more hours each week than what is considered full-time. Nearly two-thirds (63%) have taken on additional responsibilities of other staff who have recently left, and nearly three-fourths (73%) have taken on additional responsibilities as a direct result of the pandemic.

Higher ed employees have clear areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Employees are generally satisfied with most traditional benefits, and 81% have a good relationship with their supervisor. Approximately two-thirds report being satisfied with their job and would recommend their department and their institution as a good place to work. Three-fourths feel their work has purpose, and two-thirds feel valued, feel like they can bring up problems, and feel a sense of belonging. However, there are several areas in which a great deal of dissatisfaction exists:

- Investment in career development
- Opportunities for advancement
- Recognition for contributions
- Fair pay
- Parental leave policies
- Childcare discounts or subsidies
- Remote work policies
- Schedule flexibility

Recommendations

The results of the Employee Retention Survey suggest that higher ed in general is facing a crisis in retaining its talent. The results also suggest some targeted recommendations that could help mitigate this crisis.

Provide salary increases wherever possible. Many higher ed employees do not feel they're being paid fairly, and a higher salary is by far the primary reason they look for other employment opportunities. An obvious solution would be to budget for salary increases. Higher ed institutions overall provided little or no pay increases at the height of the pandemic and pay increases since that time have not kept pace with inflation.²⁰ Implementing targeted equity increases wherever possible may be one of the most effective ways of addressing problems with retention. However, many higher ed institutions are coping with both short- and long-term budget issues that prevent large-scale pay increases. Fortunately, the results from the survey indicate other solutions that may improve retention without breaking budgets.

Offer more in the way of remote work options and flexible schedules. Employees who *can* work remotely now *expect* to be provided with opportunities to work remotely. The results from this and previous research suggest that a misalignment between employees' preference for remote work arrangements and their actual work arrangements relates to their likelihood of looking for other employment opportunities.²¹ Results from these surveys also suggest that huge shifts in work arrangements are not

²⁰ CUPA-HR. (2022). [Annual Pay Increases by Position Type](#) [Interactive graphic].

²¹ Bichsel et al., 2021.

necessary. Providing even small accommodations — such as one day a week when an employee can work from home — can go a long way in improving employee satisfaction.²²

There are also other options for providing flexibility in schedules that can improve retention. Reducing the number of hours in a work week (e.g., changing the conception of full-time work from 40 hours to 36) or allowing employees to work a half-day on Fridays are just two examples of this. Asking employees what they want or need in terms of schedule flexibility would provide you with localized data that will help you target these efforts.

Results from this survey, as well as anecdotal examples from CUPA-HR members, suggest that many institutional leaders are not shifting from a culture of exclusively on-campus work to a culture of increased flexibility. The data make it increasingly clear that these leaders will need to weigh the importance of retaining talent with the importance of requiring all employees to complete all, or the majority, of their work on-site.

Be mindful of employee workload and expectations around working hours. Two-thirds of higher ed employees are working more hours than what is considered to be full-time; some are working many more. This can be attributed to the fact that employees are absorbing the responsibilities of staff who have left and additional responsibilities that emerged over the course of the pandemic. Supervisors should consider strategies to reduce employee workload. Working long hours is a key predictor of employees' work stress, mental health, and general occupational health.²³ In addition, leaders concerned about retention must consider the message sent when the employees who stay receive higher workloads for their loyalty. An increase in workload without an accompanying increase in pay — particularly when this condition is sustained — is a recipe for an employee who will be open to considering a new position elsewhere.

²² Ibid.

²³ Wong, K., Chan, A. H. S., & Ngan, S. C. (2019). The Effect of Long Working Hours and Overtime on Occupational Health: A Meta-Analysis of Evidence From 1998 to 2018. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16, 2102-2124. doi: 10.3390/ijerph16122102

Look for new ways to recognize employees for their achievements, invest in their career development, and offer opportunities for advancement. One quarter of the respondents on the Employee Retention Survey do not feel their institution recognizes them for their contributions; nearly 40% do not feel their institution invests in their career development; and close to half do not believe they're offered opportunities for advancement. Supervisors sometimes confuse equality with fairness and may unduly prioritize treating all their staff equally over the importance of recognizing individual contributions and the need for individualized programs of development and flexibility.²⁴ Workplace cultures that emphasize the importance of treating all employees the same risk losing top talent who need individualized recognition, development, and opportunities to advance in order to thrive.²⁵

Enhance your institution's parental leave policies and childcare discounts or subsidies. Women have always been disproportionately burdened by dependent care responsibilities, and this condition was exacerbated over the course of the pandemic, leading many more women than men to leave the U.S. workforce.²⁶ The provision and enhancement of benefits that would mitigate this burden and address these gaps might help improve retention rates for women in the higher ed workforce.

Find ways to communicate and promote the things you're doing right. Do you provide benefits that exceed those provided by your regional and local competitors? Do you have remote work options or other flexible work arrangements that are attractive to current employees and potential applicants for open positions? Do you provide excellent opportunities for career development and advancement? Are you providing employees with pay that exceeds the market median? Do you have recent climate survey results that are stellar? You may already be promoting the things your institution is doing right when you develop job descriptions or postings designed to attract *applicants*. How often, though, are you communicating

²⁴ Phillips, A. (2020, September). [How to Ensure Your Employees Are Treated Equally and Fairly](#). *The HR Tech Weekly*.

²⁵ Lowisz, S. (2022, February). [Why HR Should Not Treat Everyone the Same](#). *Forbes*.

²⁶ Fields, S. (2022, February). [Child Care Disruptions Have Been Driving More Women Than Men to Quit Their Jobs](#). Marketplace.

these assets to your *current staff*? Keeping the benefits of working at your institution salient for the employees who currently work for you increases the chance that these benefits will be top of mind if and when they consider other employment opportunities.

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Graphics were created by Kate Roesch, data visualization developer at CUPA-HR.

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Appendix D: IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

December 6, 2023

Sheraine Gilliam
Oluwakemi Daniel

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-666 Developing and Retaining High-Potential Non-Academic Employees in Private Higher Education Institutions to Create Sustainable Non-Academic Leadership Pipelines

Dear Sheraine Gilliam, Oluwakemi Daniel,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your Information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office