



THE ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT PLAYBOOK:

HOW TO FOSTER LIFELONG RELATIONSHIPS

WITH YOUR GRADUATES

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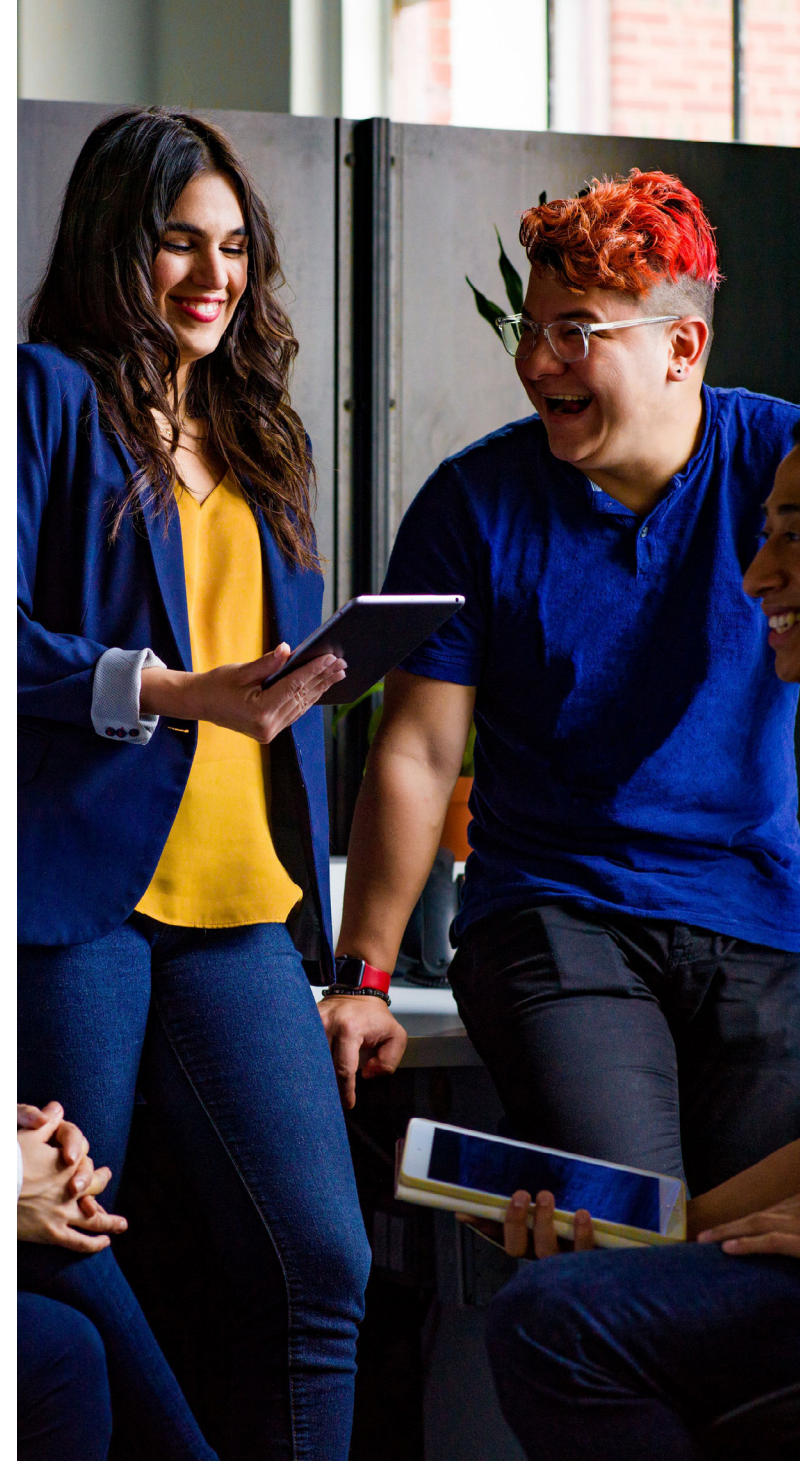
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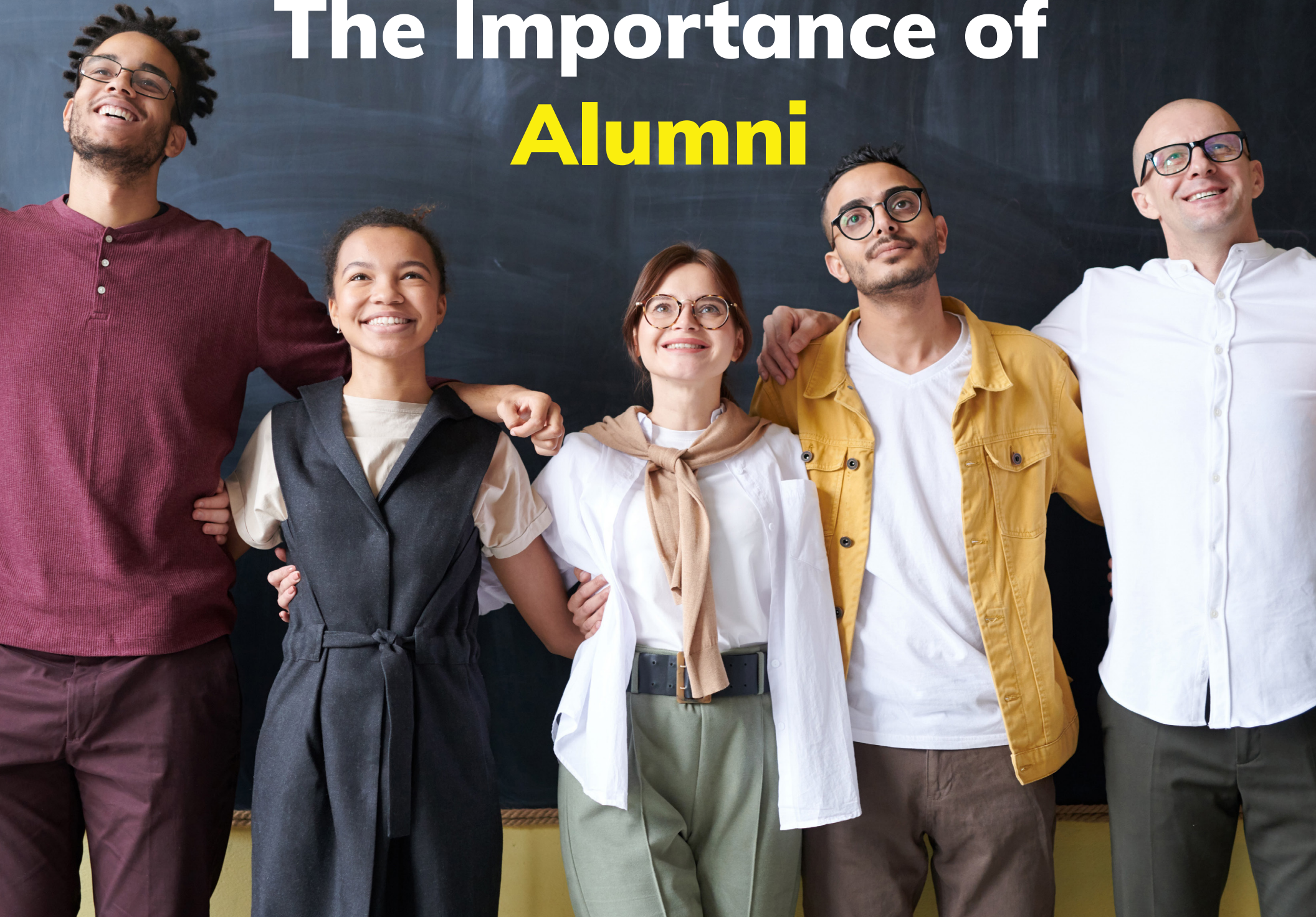
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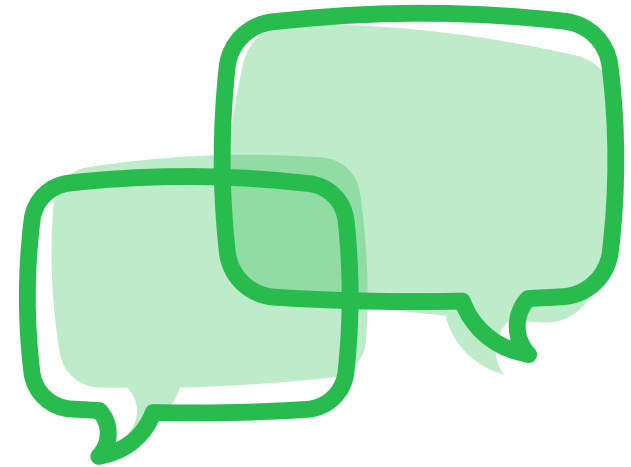
The Importance of Alumni



Maintaining positive relationships with alumni over time is critically important to the success of higher education institutions. Alumni serve many valuable roles, such as helping to build and grow an institution's brand through word-of-mouth marketing. Positive posts in social media, for example, can help drive applications and admissions rates. Colleges also rely on alumni networks to provide important career counseling, internship experiences, and career opportunities to students—a benefit that is becoming increasingly critical as institutions are being held accountable for job placement rates.

Perhaps most important to a college's bottom line and long-term sustainability, however, is revenue driven by alumni, as many institutions today find themselves facing a “perfect storm” of financial stressors. State funding for higher education was drastically reduced during the recession, and, rather than returning to previous levels, continued to be cut during the recovery in many states.^{1,2} Likewise, birth rates that had already begun declining before the recession plummeted in 2008 and have not increased since.³ Fewer high school seniors means a shrinking pool of applicants and greater competition among colleges to meet enrollment needs. At the same time, international applicants—who have been a reliable, lucrative market in the past—are decreasing due to the current political climate and increased competition with institutions in other countries.⁴ Of greatest concern, low unemployment rates from a strong economy, combined with rising tuition rates and changing cultural values, have negatively impacted Americans' perception of the value of higher education.⁵ As a result, U.S. application rates in the have decreased by 11 percent since 2011.⁶

All of these issues are driving a historic level of college closures and mergers. Hardest hit are small, less selective colleges with limited endowments and those in geographic areas with shrinking populations. Because small private schools and regional public institutions lack economies of scale, it is more expensive to serve each student.⁷ Private nonprofits, who have increasingly relied on the business model of tuition discounting to maintain enrollment needs, are becoming dangerously at risk of pricing themselves out of the market. About

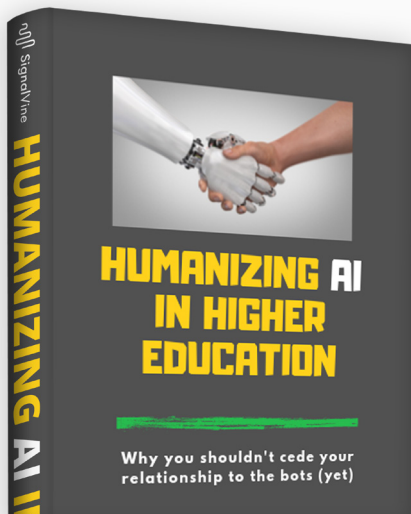


a third of small, private colleges operated with deficits in the 2016-2017 fiscal year (in contrast to 13 percent of large comprehensive universities), and 57 percent did not grow revenue enough over the past decade to keep up with the 3 percent inflation rate in higher education.⁸

As a result, colleges are increasingly relying on private gifts as a source of operating revenue. Alumni donations have grown significantly as a percentage of college's total budget over the past 15 years. Alumni donations now compose an average of 25 percent of total private gifts to colleges and universities, and they make up 3 percent of all incoming funds at public, four-year institutions and 12 percent at four-year private, nonprofits in 2015-2016.⁹ Yet the colleges who are most in need are obtaining private gifts at slower rates than their more elite counterparts. While the wealthiest universities increased gift revenue by 22 percent from 2012 to 2016, those with the greatest financial need increased private giving by just 4 percent in the same time period.¹⁰ Small, regional public universities and less competitive four-year private colleges need to perfect their efforts to reach out to and engage alumni in order to maximize private gifts.

The average percent of alumni who donated to their alma mater has steadily declined over recent years, down from 12 percent in 2007 to 8 percent in 2017.¹¹ While the total amount of donations has actually increased, private gifts are coming from fewer and fewer individuals.¹² There are several factors driving this change, including the recession and changes outlined in the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, which eliminated the incentive for middle class earners to itemize deductions. As a result, it is imperative that institutions work to raise participation rates in order to increase private gift revenue and remain competitive in university rankings, which take alumni donations into account.¹³

Seeing Alumni as Lifelong Clients



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The one area in which universities are thriving is the master's and professional degree industry, which is currently experiencing significant growth. Advanced credentials improve chances of moving up within a company, making a career change, and increasing earnings potential. Professionals with a master's degree earn 25 percent more than those without one.¹⁵ Master's degrees more than tripled from 1970 to 2015¹⁶ as more employers require them and technology makes them more accessible. Because these programs are mostly offered in hybrid or online formats, the client base can pull from an extensive geographic area. As demand for these degrees increases, so too do tuition rates. Because there is significantly less tuition discounting and financial aid that occur in these programs, they are highly profitable, and revenue can be used to offset deficits at the undergraduate level.

One of the main drivers of graduate and professional degrees can be attributed to increased global competition and rapid developments in technology, which are having significant impact on the workplace. Jobs and the skills they require are changing on a much faster timeline than ever before. In 2011, Doug Thomas and John Seely Brown predicted that the half-life of a learned skill was about five years and decreasing, meaning that what is a cutting-edge skill today could become obsolete in a decade or less.¹⁷ Not only are jobs themselves changing, but employees frequently hop from one job to another, spending an average of three years in the same position.¹⁸ At the same time, people are living longer and working longer into their lifespan. All of this means that continuous, lifelong learning is critical to career success. As Harvard Dean of Continuing Education Huntington Lambert predicts, higher education for each adult currently entering the workforce will need to occur on and off for about the next 60 years.¹⁹

Yet the education model historically used by colleges and universities has been to train adults one time, then send them into lifelong careers with the expectation that either job requirements will not change or the employer will provide needed professional development. Instead, private, for-profit providers, such as [coding bootcamps and IT certification programs](#), seeing a market need for short-term, “just-in-time” training, formed new companies and/or packaged new solutions that have taken over a significant portion of

the education space. The professional training and certification industry has grown to be a \$166.8 billion market in the United States.²⁰ These programs are less expensive than academic degrees and can be used to quickly and easily update skills as needed, when needed. They are also competency-based, meaning they allow students to display real-life skills that are actually used on the job, which gives graduates a leg-up in the job application process. Many economists and business leaders predict that short-term credential programs that offer professional certifications and badges will eventually replace the master's degree or at least draw enough students away from traditional graduate programs to negatively impact university enrollments, thereby deflating the “cash cow.”

There is much discussion about “unbundling” higher education in a similar manner to better compete in this market, and many universities are beginning to create short-term certification programs. Chris Dellarocas argues that a unique feature of colleges and universities that distinguishes them from other vendors in the crowded professional education field is their personal relationship with students. He stresses that the education provider “who own[s] the relationship with the customer [will] control the flow of revenues.”²¹ Trainees who are looking for professional development will turn to entities with which they have a trusted relationship, and what distinguishes colleges and universities from their competitors are add-on services beyond educational content. These include mentoring/advising, academic support, campus-based activities, and career networks.

Because they already have a connection with their alma mater, alumni are a prime market for certificate and professional programs. If a college or university offers short-term learning options, it is imperative to cultivate positive relationships with students and alumni and let them know they can return to campus (either online or in-person) to refresh their knowledge or gain the mentoring and networking support they will need throughout their careers. Yet not all institutions are successful in maintaining engagement with alumni over time.

Alumni Engagement

A whopping 87 percent of alumni relations professionals feel that they need to improve engagement with their members, and 70 percent report that member engagement is their highest priority goal.²² If institutions are to reap the financial benefits that alumni can provide, they must focus on building deep and meaningful relationships with students while they are enrolled, then maintain those connections over time. Colleges and universities need to change their culture to one that views student support as a commitment that does not end at graduation: Alumni are lifelong responsibilities that, like adopted children, can provide meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships. How can colleges and universities better reach out and connect with their alumni in order to meet private giving and other strategic goals?



The word “alumnus” stems from a combination of the Latin words “foster” and “child.”²³ Colleges and universities need to change their culture to one that views student support as a duty that does not end at graduation.



SERVICES

An important consideration is that **connections with alumni must be true, two-way, give-and-take relationships**. Donations are indeed a benefit of the relationship, but it's the relationship itself that is most valuable. A relationship can turn one-time givers into consecutive donors and motivate alumni to serve many other useful roles, including returning to campus as lifelong learners. Just like people are more likely to share time and resources with personal friends, they are also more likely to donate to a cause if they feel they are interacting with an organization that will provide something of value in return. In social psychology, this is known as the “norm of reciprocity,” a behavior that occurs when someone does something for you, and you feel obligated to do something for them in return. The norm of reciprocity has been used very successfully to sell products and cultivate donations by for-profit and nonprofit companies alike.

Another way to understand interactions with alumni can be found in social exchange theory, which describes the give-and-take nature of relationships. People often estimate the “costs” and “benefits” of a relationship and will start to question the value of a friend who is more demanding than supportive. Likewise, **alumni weigh the cost of volunteering or donating to their alma mater with the benefits that the institution provides**. In the end, institutions that can meet their alumni's growth and development needs will be more successful in cultivating engagement and private giving. Yet 46 percent of colleges and universities report that they do not offer their alumni any benefits.²⁴ In fact, 79 percent of alumni relations staff believe that appealing to alumni feelings of loyalty is all that is needed to motivate graduates to join alumni groups or donate to the institution.²⁵

Not only should alumni receive benefits in return for their time and contributions, but those benefits must be perceived as valuable. Gary Toyn proposes three factors that determine the value of services to alumni: Services 1) must help solve a problem or meet a particular need; 2) must be easily accessible; and 3) must be something unique or niche that can't be widely found anywhere else.²⁶ In analyzing results from a global survey of alumni relations and advancement professionals at colleges and universities, Toyn found that the highest rated benefits are the following:²⁷

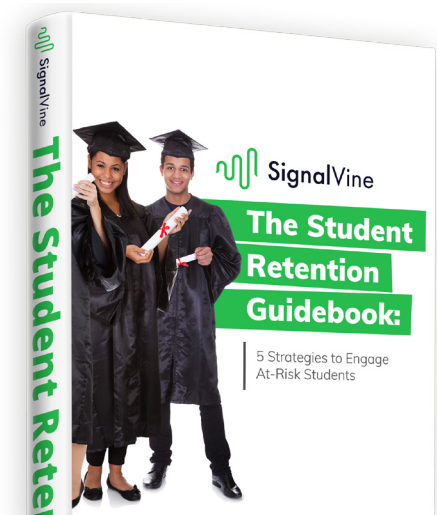
- **Digital Communications.** Eighty percent of alumni professionals report that digital content such as blogs, social media, and e-newsletters have “significant impact” or “some impact” on alumni engagement, with only 2 percent reporting they have “no impact.” In fact, emerging research shows that digital interaction with alumni via e-newsletters and social media can have the same level of impact on alumni engagement as face-to-face events do.²⁸
- **Face-to-Face Networking.** Events such as reunions help alumni feel they belong to a community. In-person gatherings fulfill basic social needs for friendships and help alumni grow feelings of prestige or achievement associated with one's alma mater. Most importantly, reunions help to grow an alumnus's professional career network. Sixty-five percent of alumni organizations state that mixers are their most popular benefit because of the networking opportunities they provide.²⁹
- **Career Services.** According to iModules, helping alumni improve their resume, increase their skills, or connect with fellow graduates who are hiring has a very strong appeal, particularly for younger alumni who are just starting out.³⁰ Career services are often rated as the most valued service by alumni.

Be Informed: The Importance of Alumni Data

In order to provide the right services, colleges need to know exactly what alumni need. Yet 58 percent of alumni organizations report that they have not surveyed their members,³¹ and 38 percent do not collect data on alumni engagement.³² [In order to build an effective communications program, it's critical to ask alumni what benefits they feel are most valuable, how often they want to receive communication, and in what format they want to interact with their alma mater.](#) It's also important to evaluate what aspects of an alumni engagement plan are working and which ones are not in order to improve services and events. Seeking input also has an added benefit in that it shows alumni their alma mater cares about their personal needs.

Identity. In addition to knowing what information and services graduates are looking for, it's important to know exactly who they are. As student bodies become more diverse, so too will alumni. More refined strategies may be needed to address cultural and other differences.³³ For example, [low-income and first-in-the family students, who now make up large percentages of current enrollments, may lack the social capital that higher income students can take advantage of when looking for a first job.](#) These students might need greater support with career networking; they might lack understanding about workplace culture and need professional development advice. They might also lack the financial ability to contribute immediately upon graduation, so a donation drive might need to be tailored to smaller amounts or changed to a simple ask for volunteer support.

People tend to define themselves by constructs such as ethnicity, personality traits, hobbies and interests, and social roles like family role (i.e., mother), job role (i.e., teacher), etc. All of these traits combined make up what psychologists call the “self-concept” or “identity.” While development offices tend to treat older alumni by past identity profiles from their student days (softball player, physics major, etc.), adults change over their lifespan. A more effective approach is to learn about alumni’s current self-concepts in order to tailor communications to specific topics of interest or to help similar alumni connect with one another. Characteristics such as career field, job role, parent/nonparent, hobbies and interests, etc., are typically more meaningful than traditional categories like class year and distance from campus, which are becoming less relevant, particularly in the digital space.³⁴ This means that it is crucial that institutions keep their alumni data up-to-date, and one way to do this is by using an integrated platform linked to a CRM such as iModules' Encompass.



[Read More](#)



Research shows that volunteering for the institution, participating in a social media group, attending a campus event, and reading e-newsletters all strengthen feelings of alumni identity.³⁶



One social role especially relevant to alumni relations professionals is “alumni identity,” the degree to which a person sees their alma mater as a part of their self-concept—for example, alumni who mention their college or university when describing themselves. People who have stronger alumni identities are more likely to donate to their alma mater, both in terms of frequency (number of donations) and total lifetime amount.³⁵ Alumni often have feelings of pride and strong emotional ties to their alma mater because of its reputation or because their college experience helped to shape the person they have become.

Not only do self-concepts change over time, but they are also subject to influence—alumni identities can be shaped by colleges and universities. Research shows that volunteering for the institution, participating in a social media group, attending a campus event, and reading e-newsletters all strengthen feelings of alumni identity.³⁶ This means that events and communications, when used strategically, can increase alumni engagement and financial giving.

Communicating with Alumni

Not all alumni benefits have to be costly services. Information is also very valuable. This is supported by research that shows that graduates who open and read alumni publications are more likely to donate.³⁸ However, the content must be relevant and useful. Seventy-two percent of donors report that they would stop giving to a charity if its social media and e-newsletter content was “poor” (i.e., vague, irrelevant, or dull).³⁹ Information that helps to advance a career is consistently ranked by alumni as being valuable across numerous studies. According to research conducted by iModules, the higher ed fundraising and engagement leader, brief updates about current campus developments, student achievements, institutional awards, etc., are also highly rated (See Table on p. 12).⁴⁰ These types of stories are useful because they help to shape a positive institutional brand.

Campus updates are also useful because they are persuasive; updates show the real-life impact that alumni involvement makes. Research shows that donors become involved with charities for highly personal reasons. People are more likely to donate if: 1) the cause is something that they care deeply about; 2) the organization clearly needs

their support; and 3) they can see the direct impact that their gifts have.⁴¹ Several studies have found that alumni choose not to donate to their alma mater for three main reasons: they feel that the institution is financially profitable without their support; they are unsure of where and how their gifts will be used; and they believe that small donations do not make an impact.^{42,43} Therefore, it is important to publish authentic stories that show how alumni contributions are helping individual students. Personal stories have an added benefit in that they are more likely to make an emotional impression and be more memorable than are data and statistics.

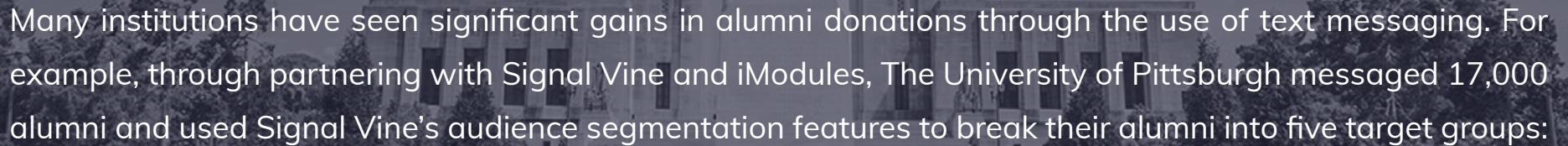
Using Technology. Sixty-four percent of alumni offices state that being understaffed is either very or somewhat concerning to their daily operations.⁴⁵ They are also stressed about budget shortages and not having enough time in the day to complete necessary tasks. Because computer software can automate processes and easily scale communications, it is having a large impact on the field of alumni relations. One-on-one phone calls are being replaced by text messaging, mobile apps, bulk email software, and social media. But 73 percent of alumni relations professionals state that they need to improve how they use technology to interact with alumni.⁴⁶

Texting. Charitable giving in all nonprofit sectors is increasingly taking place via text messaging. In the past year, fundraising from a mobile device increased 205 percent, and 49 percent of all mobile giving occurred in response to text links.⁴⁷ One of the advantages of texting is the almost-instantaneous open rate as compared to email or phone calls. Research shows that 98 percent of all text messages are read, as compared to just 20 percent of all emails.⁴⁸ While an email is typically responded to within 90 minutes of being opened and read, texts are responded to within 90 seconds.

Text messaging is convenient and efficient. An international survey of more than 6,000 people in seven countries found that 89 percent of consumers would like to use SMS messaging to communicate with businesses.⁴⁹ Trends point to a growing number of alumni who are not only interested in receiving text messages from their alma mater, but also prefer it as a primary form of communication. Thirty-seven percent of alumni say they prefer receiving information from their alma mater via periodic text messaging, as compared to 28 percent via a mobile app, 19 percent via website, and 3 percent via Facebook messaging. Yet only 6.5 percent of alumni relations staff report using SMS text messages to communicate with alumni.⁵⁰



Source: (Modules' national survey of adults with at least a four-year degree.



Many institutions have seen significant gains in alumni donations through the use of text messaging. For example, through partnering with Signal Vine and iModules, The University of Pittsburgh messaged 17,000 alumni and used Signal Vine's audience segmentation features to break their alumni into five target groups:

- Those who had never donated
- Alumni who had given before, but their gift designation was unknown
- Those who had given a known gift designation
- Alumni who gave in the previous year, but their gift designation was unknown
- Those who gave in the previous year whose gift designation was known

As a result of their outreach, the University of Pittsburgh achieved a yield 13 times larger than previous email efforts. In addition, many alumni texted back to comment their satisfaction with texting over other forms of solicitation.

Texting with alumni requires both personal and automated approaches. While bots can reduce workload, they do not create relationships with alumni. In the private industry, 52 percent of customers get frustrated when they are not able to communicate with a real person.⁵¹ Bots are good for answering common questions that are asked repeatedly, but if questions become more complex and nuanced, alumni prefer to connect with a real person. **This is Signal Vine's approach to text outreach, blending automation and AI with manual messages authored by a real person to ensure that alumni have positive, helpful interactions with their alma mater.**

Furthermore, young alumni are more mobile. They move more frequently than previous generations and often do not officially register a change of address. Obtaining and keeping their mobile number is quickly becoming the best way to stay in touch for the long term because mobile numbers typically do not change over one's lifetime. In fact, less than half (41 percent) of U.S. households still have a landline.⁵² It's imperative to collect mobile numbers and keep the database up to date over time.

Young alumni are mobile. Millennials move more frequently than previous generations and often do not officially register a change of address. A cellphone number is quickly becoming the best way to say in touch with alumni for the long term because these numbers typically do not change over one's lifetime. In fact, less than half (41 percent) of U.S. households still have a landline.⁵² Therefore, it's imperative to collect students' mobile numbers immediately upon graduation and keep the database up to date over time.

Social Media. Social media is useful for “pushing” information out to raise awareness, promote events, and create excitement. It is also useful for nudging alumni to act, such as getting alumni to click a link to join their Alumni Association or make a donation. But there is another use that is becoming increasingly popular. While large public posts are still useful, “closed” online communities, which are open only to alumni and accessed by invitation, are seeing significant growth. Closed groups allow two-way, interactive communication that colleges can use to facilitate deeper connections and sense of community among alumni. Private spaces on Facebook and LinkedIn can be segmented by shared interests in order for similar alumni to connect, share ideas, and support one another.

Alumni who participate in alumni networking groups on LinkedIn or who follow their alma mater's social media posts report high levels of alumni identity. In fact, their identity levels are comparable to those of alumni who attend more costly in-person events.⁵³ This shows the cost-effective impact that technology-mediated communications can have on feelings of attachment and likelihood to give. But again, research points to the importance of relationships in increasing alumni engagement. Simply being a social media user does not increase the likelihood of donating to charities; rather, donors who actively interact with charities via social media are more likely to donate.⁵⁴

An added benefit of social media is that it provides rich quantitative data analytics that can help alumni organizations to measure and refine communications. Alumni relations offices are also using the qualitative data captured by social media to identify and re-engage formerly lost alumni, find ideas for crowdfunding campaigns and communications content, and more precisely define giving brackets.⁵⁵

Young Alumni

If colleges and universities can engage alumni early on, they are likely to remain engaged over time. Young alumni who donate, even if it is a very small amount, are generally consistent givers and can become larger donors later—for example, first-time donors typically increase gifts by 10 percent in the second year.⁵⁶ But the VAESE survey of alumni relations professionals found that 24 percent feel they are doing a poor job in attracting and engaging young alumni, 63 percent state that they need to do more, and only 13 percent feel they are doing well in connecting with recent graduates.⁵⁷ How can colleges increase young alumni engagement and participation?



It's important to understand that alumni need to have a **strong emotional connection with their alma mater** first before being asked to contribute time or money.



75% of those who volunteer will eventually donate.

True alumni engagement is a long-term process that requires significant planning and effort by the institution. When working with recent graduates, it is more important to focus on relationship building first because a close relationship now can pay off in many different ways later.

Today's alumni are often burdened by significant loans. Alumni who are in debt are focused on paying off their own education and not likely interested in helping to fund another person's. But there are other ways to interact with and stay connected with alumni while they are paying off their loans. For example, colleges can communicate and offer useful guidance and support, such as help with starting and growing a career. Furthermore, alumni who are unable to financially contribute can volunteer their time and expertise in many useful ways. Research shows that recent alumni report greater interest in volunteering opportunities than those who have been out of college for a longer period of time.⁵⁸

One way to engage young alumni is to use a crowdfunding model in which nonprofits strive for smaller individual amounts from a larger number of donors. Companies like Kickstarter and GoFundMe have grown in popularity as technology makes it easier to reach large numbers of people quickly and easily. Young alumni are experienced with and often prefer to give in this manner. They are also interested in pooling their small donations for a specific, meaningful purpose, such as improvements to a campus structure that holds particular importance to certain class years or social groups.

Volunteering

Current involvement, particularly attending in-person events, is strongly related to giving.⁵⁹ Volunteer events provide an opportunity for alumni to re-affiliate and re-engage with an institution as they learn about new developments and achievements at their alma mater. Volunteering for the institution, furthermore, is the strongest indicator of alumni identity.⁶⁰ Initially asking alumni to contribute their time rather than their money can create a relationship that will lead to financial donations later (75 percent of those who volunteer eventually donate).^{61,62}

Volunteer events don't necessarily have to occur at or directly benefit the institution. Alumni chapters and satellite groups are often interested in getting together to volunteer for any cause because they enjoy spending social time together in a way that has a positive impact on other people's lives.



Current Students

It's hard to reach out and re-engage alumni who have already moved away and detached themselves from an institution. And, once a specific brand impression is set in memory, it can be difficult to change. While institutions should continue to support and engage alumni, they should simultaneously focus on shaping a positive brand value with current students who will soon become alumni.

Satisfaction and Attachment

Decades of research show that two factors in particular drive and alumni giving and loyalty. The first is satisfaction with one's undergraduate program, which encompasses both social and academic experiences.^{63,64} Satisfaction can be defined as the degree to which an institution meets or exceeds a student's expectations; it is also defined as the perceived value of the undergraduate experience—whether alumni feel their education was worth the money invested.⁶⁵ Yet recent research has found that only 40 percent of graduates of four-year institutions strongly agree that their education was worth the cost.⁶⁶

The second, highly related determinant of alumni giving is psychological attachment, a deep and enduring emotional bond that connects a student to their institution.^{67,68} Students who are emotionally attached are far more likely to volunteer and donate as alumni, but only 18 percent of graduates state that they feel attached to their institution.⁶⁹

Clearly, there is much work to be done. Colleges and universities need to ensure that undergraduate experiences are truly valuable to their students. Remember social exchange theory and the norm of reciprocity: Alumni are willing to give back to their alma mater if they feel the institution gave them something of value, and if the benefits accrued from their degree were worth the cost of attendance. The good news is that almost all strategies that cultivate a student's love for their institution are related to student support, which also increase student retention and engagement rates. In fact, emerging research shows that investment in support services can grow institutional revenue and improve financial stability.⁷⁰ Therefore, if colleges and universities can nurture strong feelings of attachment among students before they graduate, the long-term gains could be exponential.

There are five specific undergraduate experiences that create emotional attachment and satisfaction with a postsecondary institution.

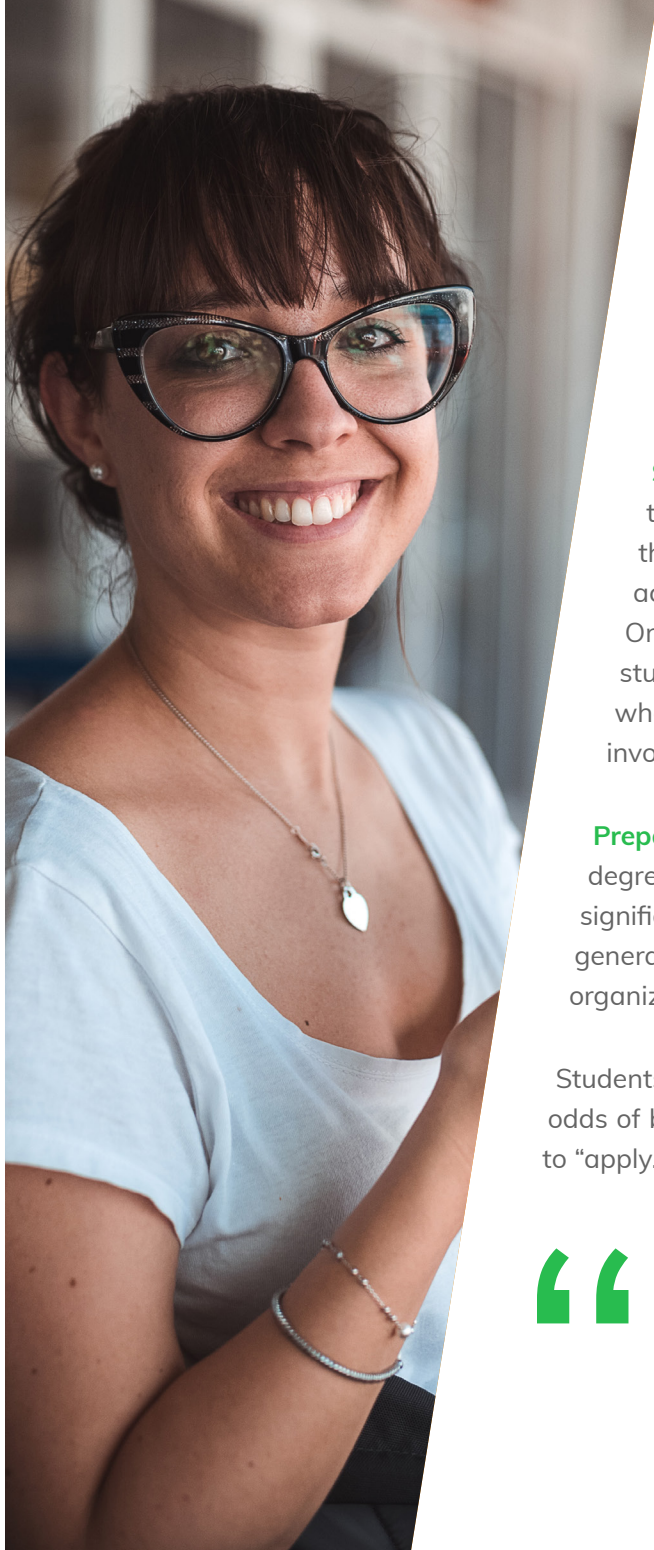
Faculty and mentor relationships. Faculty play a significant and influential role in students' lives. Of all campus staff, students typically spend the most time with their professors because they see them on a regular, ongoing basis. Students appreciate faculty expertise and actively seek their professors' opinions about topics of interest, academic majors, and career decisions, all of which loom large and create anxiety at that time in students' lives. Research shows that **students who receive quality academic advising are more psychologically attached to their institution.**⁷¹

Students place a high value on time with faculty. **Students who have the opportunity to interact with their professors outside of class are much more likely to donate to their alma mater as alumni.**⁷² This is partly because students seek relationships with faculty; they want to feel that their professors care about them personally and are emotionally invested in their success. Students want college and university staff to provide not only academic support services but also emotional support. In fact, the odds of being psychologically attached to one's alma mater are 6.2 times higher if a student feels that their "professors care about me as a person" and 4.1 times higher they "had a mentor who encouraged me."⁷³

Academic experiences. Whether or not alumni believe their undergraduate instruction was effective has a strong impact on both satisfaction and attachment.^{74,75} The odds of being emotionally attached to one's institution are 5.5 times higher if alumni agree with the statement "I had at least one professor who made me excited about learning." Furthermore, **alumni who feel that they were challenged academically and received academic support from their institution are more likely to financially donate.** Specifically, research has found that alumni who agree with statements such as "the campus environment emphasized devoting time to academic work" and "the institution provided support to help [students] succeed academically" are significantly more likely to donate to their alma mater.⁷⁶

Deep and experiential learning opportunities are particularly important. Research shows that **participation in varied educational experiences—such as work-based internships, study abroad opportunities, senior research projects, learning communities, and community service/volunteering—are all linked to alumni giving.**⁷⁷ Specifically, when students are strongly interested in a topic, they want the opportunity to engage deeply and learn as much as they about it. In fact, the odds of being emotionally attached to one's alma mater are 2.2 times higher if students work on an engaging project that takes a semester or more to complete.^{78,79}





Interestingly, college GPAs correlate with alumni giving—the higher the GPA an alumnus achieved as a student, the greater likelihood that they will donate as a graduate. In fact, students who earn higher GPAs in college than they did in high school give larger average gifts than those who had the same or lower GPAs in college as compared to high school.⁸¹ Again, the norm of reciprocity shows that **students who feel gratitude for, and satisfaction with, the value of their academic experience are more motivated to give back in return.**

Social experiences. The degree to which students feel they know what is happening on campus and the ease with which they can get involved in activities significantly predict alumni satisfaction.⁸² In fact, the odds of being emotionally attached to one's alma mater are 2.7 times higher if a student is "extremely active in extracurricular activities."⁸³ **Involved students are also more inclined to donate as alumni.**^{84,85} One factor that makes participation so rewarding is the sense of belonging and the positive friendships students develop as a result. Simply living on campus increases the likelihood of alumni giving,⁸⁶ as those who live on campus are more likely to form social bonds with peers and have more opportunities to get involved in activities.

Preparation for the workforce. One of the greatest predictors of satisfaction with their alma mater is the degree to which alumni feel they were well prepared to enter the workforce upon graduation. Alumni are significantly more satisfied if they feel their coursework helped to develop 1) job-specific expertise and 2) general analytical skills,⁸⁵ which have been shown to predict job success across almost all industries and organizational levels.

Students also want to know how the topics they are studying now can be used in future careers. In fact, the odds of being emotionally attached to one's alma mater are 2.4 times higher if a student has the opportunity to "apply...learning in the classroom" to "an internship or job."⁸⁶ Students who are able to apply learning to real

“ “ The degree to which a student feels they know what is happening on campus and the ease with which they can get involved in activities significantly predict satisfaction.



Graduates who feel comfortable sharing ideas or opinions in class are more than twice as likely to feel emotionally attached to their institution.



world situations are also more likely to donate as alumni. Data from nearly 100,000 alumni who completed college in the past 20 years as part of the Gallup Alumni Survey show that graduates who see clear connections between their coursework and later employment “place the highest value on their college education.”⁸⁷

This is particularly important for liberal arts majors, who face scrutiny in a current culture that values practical, demonstrative skills such as those acquired in science and technology or business fields. Alumni of liberal arts institutions report higher levels of satisfaction if they received career advising while they were enrolled or if they were shown how their studies in college would relate to future careers.⁸⁸ It’s important to note that perception of value is not about the amount of income earned after graduation but the relevance of what was learned to their careers.

Inclusive culture. Inclusive campus environments produce attached alumni.⁸⁹ The degree to which alumni feel that their campus culture was student-centered predicts likelihood of donating back to their alma mater.⁹⁰ Students want to feel they are valued members of their campus community in many different ways, ranging from social inclusion, to input in campus decisions, to feeling respected in the classroom. Being invited to campus social events and actually attending them each predict future giving independently.⁹¹

Students also want to know they have a voice and that their opinions will be heard and respected. Seventy percent of college students state they prefer a learning environment in which they are exposed to different points of view.⁹² They also want to feel comfortable sharing their own beliefs, even if those beliefs are not commonly held. **Graduates who report they were comfortable sharing ideas or opinions in class are more than twice as likely to feel emotionally attached to their institution.** Yet the 2019 Gallup Alumni survey found that only 30 percent of students felt comfortable expressing minority viewpoints.⁹³ Colleges and universities, therefore, have a significant opportunity to increase student satisfaction, retention, and alumni engagement by improving campus culture so that all students feel welcomed and included.



BEST PRACTICES FOR ENGAGING ALUMNI

1

Make sure your relationships are two-way. Interaction with alumni should not solely be about asking for money. Remember the norm of reciprocity: If graduates' needs are fulfilled, they will be more emotionally connected to the institution, which can pay off in multiple ways. Beyond asking for monetary donations, make sure that offices of alumni relations are providing alumni with the services they need most, such as career counseling, mentoring, and skill development.

- Information is king. Invest in building and maintaining a digital communications program, and make sure that your content is relevant. Keep in mind that the most useful content helps to solve a problem and is not easily found elsewhere on the Internet.
- Offer free programming such as short “how to” professional development videos led by career services or lecture series by professors on the latest developments in their fields. Offer these in an online format such as on-demand webinars or digital blogs so they are both inexpensive to provide and easily accessible by alumni. Make sure to include information about how graduates can return to their alma mater for professional learning certifications.
- Consider packaging and pre-selling various hours of professional learning bundles to alumni that they can use at any time in the future. This helps ensure that graduates turn to their alma mater rather than other competitors.
- Explore the possibility of offering personalized skills assessments and professional development plans to alumni. These could include customized learning maps that clearly identify the skills an alumni needs to master or improve as well as a plan for how obtain those skills, either by short continuing education courses or by leveraging mentoring/internship opportunities via alumni networks.

2

Collect and analyze data. Know your alumni in order to ensure that services and benefits provided by alumni relations and career services are truly valuable. Data should be used to segment, then customize communication, information, and services.

- When alumni join an association for the first time, ask them to complete a brief survey as part of the registration process. Ask what topics they are most interested in (career counseling, sports, campus updates, alumni news, etc.) Be sure to also ask non-campus questions such as their current hobbies and life stage demographics (parent/non-parent, current job industry and job role, etc.). Use this data to customize and segment future communication. Follow up by sending the survey out every five years or so after the date it was first completed in order to keep information current.

- Evaluate what's working and what is not. Make sure that all interactions include a specific, measurable component that can be tracked. Outcomes to measure include event registration, event participation, social media indicators (such as number of opens and shares), text message responses and opt-outs, open and opt-out rates for email, and the number of clicks of links within a text or email. Where events and services are not having the desired effect, find out why, and make changes to improve their impact.
- “Social listening” is the process of monitoring online conversations to understand what customers are saying about a brand. Use social listening to see what alumni are saying on closed Facebook and LinkedIn groups as well as on public forums like Twitter and Reddit. Social listening is an excellent source of qualitative data that can be used to get ideas for innovative campaigns and newsletter content and to better tailor alumni benefits.

3

Make communications personal and interactive. Personalization increases both alumni engagement and likelihood of giving.⁹⁴ Be sure to use each person's name (and use it correctly) rather than mass mail or email with impersonal greetings such as “graduate.” Send communication that is directly relevant to various subgroups in terms of what they did while on campus—specifically the events, groups, and structures that they are tied to emotionally—as well as who they are now, including their current financial capability.⁹⁵ Respect that some students are paying down debt. Alumni, particularly young alumni, are interested in pooling small donations for a specific purpose. Find out what is important to them personally, then ask for support for that.

- Crowdsourcing and competition between class years is very effective, particularly with young alumni and particularly when the funding will go to a purpose that is of personal importance. Give donors a concrete goal such as one merit scholarship for a student in need, support for a particular campus organization, or repairs to a specific campus structure that has emotional significance. When working with recent graduates, be sure to communicate that donations of any size, even less than \$100, are valuable and can make a difference.

4

Create a data-driven, strategic communications plan. Effective communication actually takes much time and effort to plan and implement. The most successful communication campaigns are created by using current data; they are also evaluated in order to measure their impact and refine messaging over time. Since alumni identity can be shaped and strengthened by one's alma mater, it's important to make sure that communications grow feelings of affiliation.

- **Frequency.** “Push” communication, such as mass email or texting messaging, should occur no more than once or twice a month. While younger alumni are open to more frequent communications, older alumni prefer updates monthly at most.

- **Specificity.** Be sure content of messaging includes a specific call to action for a specific purpose. Do you want alumni to donate? Volunteer? Attend an event? Enroll in professional learning? Increase awareness about new faculty research or institutional achievements? Be clear about what you are asking alumni to do, and make sure that they know how to do it. Alumni also prefer to know exactly where their donations are going and how the funds are used, so be targeted and specific in any fundraising drive.
- **Value.** Make sure that the content of publications are valuable to graduates. Information must help alumni solve a problem or meet a need in some way, such as career advice or professional skills development. Messaging must also strengthen emotional ties to the institution. In order to develop feelings of reciprocity, remind students of the value of their education how it shaped who they are now, including how well it prepared them for careers. It's important for communications to invoke positive memories and feelings of affiliation. Institutional brands can also be shaped by communicating the prestige and accomplishments of an institution and its graduates.
- **Impact.** Communicate that alumni participation, whether donations, volunteering, or event attendance, is of great value to the institution. Graduates must feel like the institution needs their participation, so tying an ask to the specific reason why it is needed, such as current decreases in state education funding, etc., can make a difference. It's important for messaging to not only show how needed funding is but also the impact it is having, such as keeping tuition affordable and providing financial aid to academically qualified students. Consider featuring personal stories of current students and how they are benefitting from alumni contributions because personal stories are memorable and persuasive.

5

Provide volunteering opportunities. Volunteering is a way for alumni who aren't financially able to donate to "give back" in some way. Volunteering increases alumni identity and can lead to future donations.

- To involve alumni as volunteers, connect them with current students or other graduates in order to offer career advice, internships, and job networking support.
- Ask recent graduates to volunteer by leading peer-to-peer fundraising events that make use of their social networks via texting and social media.
- Social media savvy alumni can also serve as volunteer marketers, or "Marketeers," to shape a positive institutional brand and increase application rates. Use short webinars/videos and downloadable how-to guides to train alumni on correct messaging, specific hashtags and keywords, and your institution's social media policies. Keep in mind that online forums such as Reddit and Quora are heavily used by prospective students and could serve as valuable places for alumni to post positive (but honest and authentic) reviews.

- Consider organizing volunteer events at alumni chapters for various charities other than the college or university. Alumni enjoy the combination of social time with making an impact in their community. These events also strengthen alumni identity and likelihood of donating to the institution in the future.

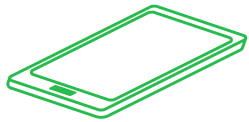
6

Break down departmental silos. Institutions are starting to merge offices of fundraising/development with alumni relations. That can be very beneficial, but make sure not to throw the good out with the bad. Interacting with and serving alumni—having an ongoing relationship—is still important and should not be overlooked. Consider collaborating with offices that can benefit from sharing information and working more closely with alumni relations, such as career services and continuing education. For example, UC Irvine has a single dean who oversees both career services and continuing education, which allows continuing education students to access needed career advising support.



BEST PRACTICES FOR TURNING CURRENT STUDENTS INTO FUTURE BRAND ZEALOTS

When institutions focus on providing student support, meaningful relationships, and deep, experiential learning, students are more likely to become emotionally attached graduates who are lifelong donors and volunteers. Consider the following best practices for student engagement.



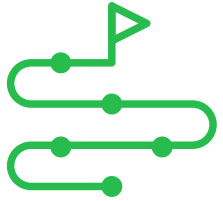
Communicate often. Two-way texting is an excellent low-cost, low-resource solution that can shape a positive institutional brand. It can also increase student attachment by informing students about campus news and events; nudging them to participate in extracurricular activities; encouraging them to use academic support services; and, of utmost importance, showing students that their institution cares about them personally. Make sure students know about campus events and support/enrichment opportunities, and convey the brand that you want your students to remember.



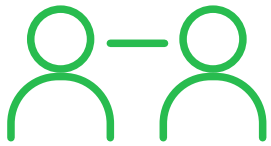
Show students you care. Institutions need to create engaged campuses where students feel both included and heard. Communicate with students early on that they are a valued part of the community. Show students that the institution cares about them personally by taking an annual student survey to identify the issues that students feel are most important. Surveys are a great way to assess satisfaction with academics, campus services, extracurricular learning opportunities, and campus activities. Also, keep in mind that two-way texting also collects valuable information in student responses. Track and analyze the qualitative data in student text messages, looking for recurring themes. Finally, where gaps are identified, work to make campus improvements. Campus staff should be trained to value and respect all students for their individuality. Let students know that diverse opinions are welcomed and valued because different viewpoints are an important part of the learning process.



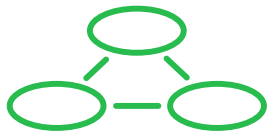
Meet students' academic needs. Drive students to make use of academic support services and ensure that they know whom on campus they can turn to for help. In all communication, strive to convey how important both seeking help and asking questions are to the learning process. Make sure all aspects of the campus environment are conducive to academic work and that academics are a central aspect of the school culture. Ensure that classes are challenging and that students have the opportunity to engage in deep learning experiences, such as senior research theses.



Help students determine a career path and help them get there. Help students see relevance of skills they are learning in the classroom to future jobs. Train faculty how, then incentivize them to, use examples in class that demonstrate relevance and make connections to real-world problems. Likewise, train academic advisors, especially those in the humanities, on the connections between academic concepts and skills used on the job. Quality academic advising can produce lasting consequences, including career success and likelihood of donating as an alumnus. You can use texting to drive students to visit the career services office early in their college years. Make sure that students know the institution will be there for them for future retraining and professional development opportunities over their lifetime. Also, connect students with alumni who can provide internship opportunities and applied learning experiences outside the classroom.



Foster student-faculty and staff relationships. Provide opportunities for faculty and students to interact outside of class. For example, Elon University hosts a weekly campus-wide College Coffee social in its commons. The event lasts 40 minutes, does not conflict with class time, and allows faculty, staff, and students to spend time together to build community and develop relationships. Also, train faculty and staff on how to build positive relationships with students. Academic advisors should get to know their students both in and out of the classroom, express care for them, and check in on students on a regular basis. Simple text messages that ask how students are doing—not just academically but also socially and mentally (such as “How is your family?” “How did the test go?” “How was that job interview?” etc.)—can be highly effective.



Break down departmental silos. Alumni relations should be deeply involved with other departments such as admissions, advising, career services, student affairs, and diversity and inclusion offices. For example, alumni can meet with prospective students during the admissions process to answer questions about the institution. Alumni can also serve as mentors to current students and provide them with internships and experiential learning opportunities in order to apply what they are learning to the real world. Most importantly, coordination between career services and alumni relations can ensure that alumni networks are utilized most effectively to hire recent graduates or help them land a first job.

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