

Trends in Alumni Relations

At a time of major change for alumni associations, there is not a one-size-fits-all solution, and there are numerous legacy issues related to traditional approaches practiced over decades. Yet in this context, alumni associations are rethinking and, in some cases, radically changing, their longstanding models for programs and services, organizational structures and relationships with their colleges and universities. Alumni needs, interests and approaches to their alma mater's relevance to their lives are changing; at the same time, institutions are more strategically embracing the opportunities and benefits of alumni relations to engage their largest and most enduring constituency.

In short, alumni organizations are reshaping their role from simply delivering popular or targeted programs and services to serving as a portal between the institution and its alumni. This role necessitates and demonstrates value for strategic partnerships at the executive and academic levels across the university (or within the individual college or school) – and operationally with admissions, development, government relations, student life, career services and other units that both contribute resources and create opportunities for meaningful alumni engagement. Alumni relations offices are exploring how best to harness this “ecosystem” – **a culture fostering loyalty, commitment and contribution** (of alumni to the institution and each other) and built around the alumni association's vision and mission.



Among the key influencers and highlights:

1. **Relational over transactional: Satisfied customers today expect information on demand, thanks to digital tools directed at “now,” “me” and “ease.”** The massive changes in relationship building in a digital world are reflected in Millennials' behavior, for example. As 27 percent of the population, Millennials check their

smartphones an average of 43 times each day and expect the customer experience to be consistent across online, store or mobile.

Rapid conversion to these changing appetites clearly has been challenging for many industries; in fact, once industry-leading businesses, such as Circuit City and Radio Shack, failed to adapt. For colleges and universities and their advancement organizations, customers – i.e., alumni – expect the same ease of interaction and personalization they enjoy in their other relationships, as there is simply too much competition for their time.

Alumni offices repositioned as “relationship managers” are applying new communications tools and sophisticated data for segmented marketing strategies that serve individual alumni and affinity groups. Through services, communications and programming, the alumni association delivers and presents online and on-location experiences consistent with the association’s and institution’s brand experience. Another new role is the Vice President for Engagement, who often has a broader portfolio aligned with development.

2. **Maturing of social media: The reality that alumni independently engage with each other through social media – with or without the involvement of the alumni association or alma mater – has had a profound effect on alumni relations.** This trend has reduced the singular importance of alumni magazines, alumni directories and events and has underscored the “relational” role of alumni relations. An “online manager,” a new group or individual position within advancement, guides a comprehensive program to develop, monitor and direct communications content (from print to social media) based on affinities, age and generational lifestyle habits (such as those of the Gen X, Millennials and Baby Boomers generations). Through content curation, useful information is developed or repurposed strategically for all platforms, with linkages and interactivity among them.
3. **Sophistication of metrics: Alumni relations is quickly understanding its role as a data-driven, measurable, results-oriented business to track, report and reframe relationship building.** As universities invest in software systems that link across the enterprise, rather than systems confined to unit “silos,” the core elements of a sustainable alumni association infrastructure are increasingly focused on data-gathering and analytics, supported by versatile customer relationship management systems. Providing this expertise and knowledge to the institution about advancement-related constituencies – and directed at measurable outcomes and return on investment (ROI) – has contributed to the more valued role of alumni

relations in overall institutional positioning and growth. In turn, alumni relations in many institutions is assuming a more prominent seat at the strategy table along with administrative, academic and board leaders.

4. **Strategic integration with Development: It is widely understood that alumni are part of the engagement pipeline, from the annual fund to the seven-figure gift, but how this integration with development occurs varies from defined and structured activities to informal collaborations.** Such partnerships facilitate seamless stewardship, foster internal alignment and guide engagement priorities. Even where alumni associations remain independent, these cross-functional interactions join alumni relations and development in joint planning and/or shared services for mutual benefit. Integrated advancement has traditionally been more common in private higher education, unlike the foundation model that often has kept them separate in public institutions. However, that is changing in several public universities in which alumni relations and development are merging or signing contractual partnerships for certain functions.
5. **Collaboration with Student Affairs: While this partnership seems logical, it remains in its infancy in many institutions.** The progressive view starts student-alumni activity early in student orientations, career mentoring, senior class events and boosterism (“spirit, pride and tradition”), even student alumni associations; then by the time they graduate, students understand the value of giving back to the university. In graduate and professional schools, this relationship takes on heightened importance as part of career networking and mentoring relationships.
6. **Alumni advocacy on behalf of university priorities: Alumni and foundation boards in both public and private colleges are asking the question, “How can we become better advocates for the institution?”** With dwindling dollars from legislatures and government-supported research and skepticism about higher education’s ROI, informed advocacy is vital for increasing funding, enhancing public opinion and expanding external partnerships. Alumni volunteers are facilitating understanding in their communities and regions about the university’s “story,” its priorities and how both the institution and the world will benefit. Alumni advocates also “model” their institution’s achievements: As alumni are visibly successful in their professional and personal lives, the perceived value of their degree to themselves and others is enhanced.

7. **Rethinking “engagement”**: As a convener, facilitator and broker of information, relationships and priorities among their constituents, alumni relations practitioners continue to redefine and secure their value to alumni and their institutions. With a focus on “relational,” alumni relations’ support of digital alumni communities and electronic programming across a global network allow alumni to participate in the life of the university without having to “show up” at location-based events or on-campus activities.

This new thinking has upended the traditional alumni relations model, which generally has been built around alumni programs, marketing, communications, retail revenue-generating programs (such as credit cards), alumni engagement, young alumni/student programs, career services and alumni giving. Instead, new paradigms embrace both programmatic and structural changes.

One example is **regional programming**, often in concert with development, popular with alumni because of the more localized access and beneficial for institutional strategies for deepening engagement. Another example involves **“experience groups” or “communities of practice” interacting on digital platforms** that are expanding affinity relationships among alumni in multiple areas. They gather online to share knowledge, information, professional practice, personal and career enrichment experiences and more. They join in online book clubs, crowdfund to support causes or design local volunteering activities in their communities. As a sponsor of these types of engagement activities, alumni relations serves as a “convener” and applies both business intelligence and analytics to “curate” content or develop programs relevant to alumni across their life stages. Such attention to alumni interests fosters the series of relationships with the institution that also can move them from “transactional” to “very connected” involvement, and which ultimately can also translate into philanthropic support.

Another area involves events. With a wise use of resources a constant necessity, events are resource-heavy in terms of staffing, logistics and costs. Some alumni associations have shifted from broadly inclusive events to activities that appeal to targeted segments based on profiles (built from data analysis) of the most “connected” alumni – for example, the rapidly expanding popular alumni travel offerings (especially attractive to Baby Boomer retirees) and travel/study camps for families. Some are dropping reunions altogether, while holding reunions for certain classes, such as young alumni in their 4th and 5th years after graduation, when they often begin to fall away, at a time that their careers and families are growing. Instead, such reunions provide continuity and become an important engagement pipeline.

8. **Recasting business and organizational models: To be strategic and use resources wisely, alumni organizations are assessing where they yield the highest rate of “return on engagement” and focusing their priorities in those areas.** Some also are conducting internal and external reviews to determine the best organizational structure for alumni relations at this time in their institutional lifecycles. There are several considerations that relate to institutional culture and advancement strategies:
- Centralized alumni relations offices or decentralized alumni responsibilities within colleges, schools and large units within the institution: What fits the institutional culture, and how can alumni relations design and leverage that role, using best practices and experiences of peer associations, since no one size fits all?
 - Related to this is the degree of integration with development. With a wide variety of hybrid solutions emerging in practice, assessing institutional strategies, needs and the pros and cons of different systems, processes and structures are central to defining the appropriate model for each institution.
 - Some associations also are reevaluating membership dues. While dues models came into vogue in the mid-20th century when many public and private institutions had strong independent alumni associations that operated with little or no institutional investment, only about 25 percent of associations at larger institutions remain independent and must rely on their own funding sources; among them, only a handful can claim a level of self-sufficiency that does not require institutional investment.

One of the successful membership models at some institutions is the life membership, for which there are different forms. Offered to students at reasonable rates (under \$500) before they leave college, these programs get students involved early but also provide one-time investment funds for the association’s programs and endowment. Under most formulas, these life memberships equal 5-10 years of annual dues.

Research by The Napa Group shows that alumni associations are continuing to move toward an interdependent financial model, in which universities or foundations provide some level of funding based on the demonstrated – and growing – “value proposition” of innovative alumni relations and engagement programs. Institutional investment in alumni relations helps offset the loss of dues revenue, but it also conveys an important message: that the university endures to a large degree because of its alumni and welcomes their engagement in a lifelong community.