

HOW YOUR UNIVERSITY WILL FLOURISH IF YOU NOURISH YOUR ALUMNI

Within the etymological heart of the plural noun alumni is the Latin verb alere, which has the sense of “to nourish” or care – ideas which took root in the late medieval period when masters nurtured their upper-caste students through the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, logic) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music).

No longer the preserve of the aristocracy, modern universities attract students and staff from all segments of society. They care deeply about their students and aim to “nourish” them such that they are able to take their place in society as responsible and productive citizens. Graduates have good reason to be grateful: as well as all the educational benefits, some estimates indicate the financial value of a degree over an individual’s lifetime can amount to more than \$A1 million.

Universities work hard to stay in touch with their ever-growing number of graduates. This is not altogether altruistic – universities hope alumni will make monetary donations or otherwise help the institution when called upon. Given that universities always need more money and the enormous pool of graduates in society, good relationships with alumni are vital both as a source of income and in regard to reputation.

Marketers fully understand that successful, grateful graduates are a university’s best advertisement.

However, closely engaged with the sector as a professional recruitment and retention specialist, the Higher Education Consulting Group (HECG) believes many universities are nowhere close to optimising their relationship with their alumni.

DIVIDENDS FLOW FROM A THOUGHTFUL, SYSTEMATIC RELATIONSHIP

Focussed in the main on drumming up donations, universities are failing to reap the potentially far greater benefits that could flow from a properly “nourished” alumni body. The dividend from a thoughtful and systematic relationship with alumni is much broader and more rewarding than purely financial. HECG believes there is a better way of managing alumni relations, one that rewards both asker and giver.

We find it disturbing but not surprising that for many universities the cost of maintaining alumni associations is frequently far greater than the revenue they generate. This is not the fault of the associations. Rather, it is that universities fail to understand that much higher value – both direct financial revenues but also increased alumni social, academic, business, mentoring and life-skills contributions – can be generated if a different, more sophisticated approach is taken to alumni relations.

As just one example, in the pursuit of seeking increased donations universities tend to focus on “big fish” – super successful graduates – in the hope of receiving a massive cheque that ends up in consolidated funds, rather than directing their attention to that vast ocean of committed alumni who would readily support many of the causes their old university champions.

BROADEN AND DEEPEN RELATIONS WITH ALUMNI FOR MUTUAL BENEFIT

At a functional level, a primary objective is to develop a sophisticated and workable database – something more than a collection of names, contact details, year of graduation and degree type. For example, a series of “triggers” can be built in to automatically respond in a timely fashion to relevant significant events in a graduate’s career and life.

It is quite possible to estimate the time since graduation to career promotion, which then enables contact to be made concerning professional development. Suggestions can be made, for instance, on enhancing opportunities for career promotion through the graduate undertaking a Masters or MBA. Details of appropriate courses can be made available, perhaps even at a discount.

Information packages can be personalized and could focus, for example, on how best to prepare for a promotion, updates on latest management techniques, developing productive relations with colleagues, or how to deal with constant and changing inputs in a digital environment.

By offering practical solutions to real-world problems, the university is demonstrating it cares and values the relationship.

When the subject reaches retirement age (easily estimated through the database) suggestions can be made for further learning, perhaps for the graduate to pursue some long neglected passion such as Egyptology or Creative Writing. Further, if you are aware that the graduate has children (as you would in a well-maintained system) then they can instantly and in good time be made aware of study opportunities at your university.

This might seem like a lot of hard work, but the pay-off for marketing professionals is that they are protecting and preserving their own recruitment channels. They are ahead of the game, keeping competing universities at the back of the queue.

OPPORTUNITIES FLOW FROM THOUGHTFUL AND CONTINUING ENGAGEMENT

These can benefit both the university and the individual. If you are aware that various individuals have a passion for, say, Ancient History, they could be invited to be part of a “community of interest” that has grown around that subject, which involves people of all ages and backgrounds taking part in an engrossing learning experience.

There is solid evidence that such “communities of interest” are today a primary channel for student recruitment because members are so enthused they wish to pursue more formal study.

Many alumni possess great knowledge in particular subject areas, gained not just from study but also from working in specific areas, for example, business administration or advanced digital technologies. They have that vital attribute – “practical wisdom” – and should be invited to share that with faculty advisory boards, on developing curricula, and serving to inspire students to reach their potential.

Again, everyone wins: alumni feel appreciated and valued; the university develops more attractive and valuable courses.

Many alumni have reached the apex of achievement in their chosen careers (for example, investment banking or medical science) and so the university should recognise this by inviting appropriately qualified individuals to serve in expert advisory roles on relevant university boards. Again, they benefit through their involvement; the university benefits from their expertise. The graduate may have long since left the university, but they are still engaged and contributing to the institution’s success.

It is important that alumni engagement is not approached in an impersonal and unplanned manner. It must be systematic and measurable, with key indicators for success and failure. In this way, methods can be refined, engagement charted and results evaluated.

Such attention to detail is not about putting business models before people. It is about ensuring people are valued and wanted, that their efforts are not wasted, and that both they and the university – staff and students – benefit from their input.

PROVIDE TANGIBLE ADVANTAGES FOR COMMITTED ALUMNI

For example, alumni in business and industry could be given priority access to high achieving students for internships and employment opportunities. Further, special scholarships could be awarded to deserving family members of alumni, who should always feel they have a fair advantage in their relationship with the university.

Feedback from alumni should also be given high value especially when directed towards areas in which they believe the university can improve its performance. Simply, if alumni feel they are part of dynamic and growing university they will be even more invested in its future success.

Universities can give back to their alumni by publically recognizing their achievements and successes, career or otherwise. This in turn creates a culture of success attractive to potential future students. Many colleges in the US have benefited enormously from this approach.

With such increased care and attention many alumni may even feel inclined to leave a significant bequest—the icing on the cake rather than the cake itself.

To give back to an institution that has given much to you is rarely a burden.

THE LINKEDIN ALUMNI TOOL CAN HELP YOU FIND INFORMATION ABOUT WHERE ALUMS WORK, WHAT THEY DO, WHERE THEY LIVE, WHAT THEY STUDIED, WHAT THEY'RE SKILLED AT AND EVEN HOW YOU ARE CONNECTED. THE TOOL ALLOWS TO SEARCH ALL UNIVERSITIES AND TO FILTER THE RESULTS BY THE YEARS STUDENTS ATTENDED.