

Trends and Best Practices in Alumni Associations

1. Alumni organizations are focusing their efforts on market-related activities that have greatest impact, increasingly relying on market information and data to segment programs and create value-centric relationships with their alumni. The result is a shift toward lifetime relationships through a lifecycle model of programs and services. Associations are asking the strategic questions – Where is our greatest value? What should be our priorities? What do we “stop doing? How do we increase our relevance to our alumni and to the university?

2. Alumni engagement through lifecycle interests focuses on a continuum of involvement with the university, beginning as soon as a student enrolls (if not before) and extending through life, with programs provided for all age groups, in local clubs and top-tier regions. Through market research, other feedback from alumni, and ROI analysis, associations are making selected program investments for each life stage. Studies show that nurturing this bond, starting with young alumni, leads to consistent and increased philanthropic support over time. Technology is a prime facilitator.

3. As alumni seek meaningful relationships with their universities, alumni organizations are positioning themselves as “portals” between alumni and alma mater, through programming and communications. As an entry point for alumni into the university, the association’s website typically provides news and information about the university, multiple options for engaging alumni with each other (including social media), access to affinity programs and activities that interest alumni throughout their careers and lives, events on campus and regionally, career services, connections to state legislatures for advocacy work, and ways to give back to the university through involvement and donations. Best practices coordinate the association’s website with the institution’s brand and an “enabler” of services to alumni and their ongoing connection to the institution.

4. Information and data management and analytics are becoming critical success factors for alumni associations as they segment programs and become more market-focused. Shifts to centralized systems that provide key core services and outcomes reduce costs, improve efficiencies, and facilitate high-value alumni programming and communications.

5. Alumni surveyed nationally consistently report that the reputation of alma mater and the increasing equity of their diplomas are key motivators for connectivity. They seek to connect through career, social, and business networking provided by alumni associations. They are interested in learning more about their institution’s academic strengths, how it educates graduates for careers, exciting developments in student-faculty collaborations and research, and opportunities to be exposed to new things and be prepared for a complex and changing world.

6. Declining resources are forcing alumni organizations to thinking differently about alumni engagement. High-touch regional activities in top-tier markets, high-tech activities in smaller and/or remote areas, new technologies to communicate, and revitalized, well-managed alumni volunteer programs are leading these activities. By identifying top-tier regional markets and creating a “regional sales approach,” alumni relations and fundraising development offices are focusing and coordinating their activities, resources, and desired outcomes for both maximum impact and efficiency in target cities across the U.S. and internationally. Their joint efforts are sometimes placed under an “office of engagement,” and increasingly parents are included in these programs. Important to extending the work of the association is strong volunteer leadership and training. ROI analysis drives priorities for regional selection, association budgeting, and high-yield programs.

7. Both private and public universities are recognizing the need for private support and reevaluating membership models as state and federal resources decline and educational costs rise. The right model typically emerges from an association’s strategic plan goals, long-term thinking, buy-in from all institutional and association levels internally and externally, and alumni feedback through surveys. Trends include universal membership, which emphasizes engagement rather than dollars through free services and stratified benefits based on additional levels of support, in an inclusive environment, beginning with student membership. Student fee models begin fostering lifetime commitment. Some institutions have moved to university- or advancement-funded association models (without membership fees). Emerging hybrid models include those that bring in additional revenue through sponsorships and entrepreneurial efforts.

These realities have led to strengthened relationships between alumni organizations and university development offices. Numerous studies and institutional experiences have demonstrated the promise of alumni associations as growth engines for overall institutional support, both during and between fundraising campaigns. The annual fund is often the first step to engaged and involved alumni. Some institutions have merged alumni relations and annual fund staffs, adding support, for example, to reunion volunteers, instituting giving campaigns at each five-year reunion interval, creating “road shows” to develop relationships with students and young alumni, and investing in technology to facilitate these relationships. Others have created these mutual synergies through coordinated messaging and other structural approaches.

8. Boards of Governors (or other association governing boards) are reconsidering their roles, membership, committees, and structures to be more aligned with the association’s strategic goals and objectives. They are implementing best practice expertise from such groups as the Association of Governing Boards and BoardSource. Many boards are becoming smaller, base membership on valued talents and skills, and intentionally represent the diversity of the alumni base. They expect Executive Committees to lead and guide policy development, standing committees to engage in priority association responsibilities, and advisory councils to provide broader input on the spectrum of alumni interests.