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Engaging Continuing Education Alumni

James L. Narduzzi

UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND

INTRODUCTION

AN EFFECTIVE ALUMNI RELATIONS program is the heart of all fundraising efforts. Every college campus in America has an office of alumni affairs. Today, active and engaged alumni create chapters across the country, contribute financially to both annual fund drives and capital campaigns, and generally serve their alma mater in numerous volunteer capacities. However, continuing education programs, both credit and noncredit, have historically existed on the periphery of traditional alumni groups or have been excluded from alumni activities altogether.

Continuing education units are being increasingly called upon to find new sources of revenue and are constantly striving to find political support for their missions, both on campus and in the larger community. This article suggests that continuing educators can turn to alumni of their various programs to help achieve these objectives. It is intended specifically for continuing educators contemplating investing the time, energy, and resources necessary to launch an alumni relations effort. The focus will be on alumni in the traditional sense of students who have earned

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degrees, although the general principles likely apply to engaging participants in noncredit and other programs as well.

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THE SCHOOL OF CONTINUING STUDIES

The School of Continuing Studies, a degree-granting school of the University of Richmond, is organized into three divisions. The Evening School offers associate's and bachelor's degrees and pre- and postbaccalaureate certificates at nights and on weekends. These degrees and certificates are also available online. The school currently serves approximately 1,000 part-time adult students. The Office of Community and Professional Education offers noncredit programs and courses for enrichment and professional development to 3,000–4,000 participants each year, both on campus and onsite. It also includes the School Technology Program, which serves approximately 7,000 students annually in independent schools in seven states. The Office of Summer Programs manages the university's summer school for both traditional and nontraditional students and is the home

for two residential Governor's Schools for gifted and talented students from across the Commonwealth. The school employs 14 full-time and 11 part-time staff, six full-time faculty/program directors, and several hundred adjunct faculty members. Gross revenues exceed \$5 million annually and the school must be self-supporting, which is one of the drivers behind the current emphasis on fundraising.

IT'S ABOUT FRIEND RAISING AND FUNDRAISING

At the most basic level, continuing educators have long justified their very existence by following a simple mantra: "More butts in the seats; more bucks in the till." In other words, most of us must be self-supporting, and we must continually find ways to serve ever-expanding constituencies. By its nature this strategy is incremental with our ability to grow and expand our reach limited by our ability to generate new sources of business.

Gifts, on the other hand, have the potential to be transformational. Higher education is replete with examples of institutions that have leap-frogged in quality

and reputation after a major gift from some benefactor. Moreover, gifts have the ability to perpetuate themselves, allowing the luxury of planning well into the future rather than constantly reacting to the vagaries of the marketplace.

Gifts also help position a unit on campus. Whether in the form of a major gift—in our context defined as \$25,000 or more—or annual fund contributions, participation by graduates of a program demonstrates an abiding commitment to the institution, something of note to presidents and development officers. Like us, development officers are constantly seeking new opportunities for support, and continuing education students are often quickly embraced as an untapped resource. And because our students are predominantly local, they have the potential to become involved in the many volunteer activities available to alumni on most campuses and can provide significant assistance in “town-gown” relationships for the institution. The fact is that any involvement by continuing education students raises visibility across campus and in the community at large.

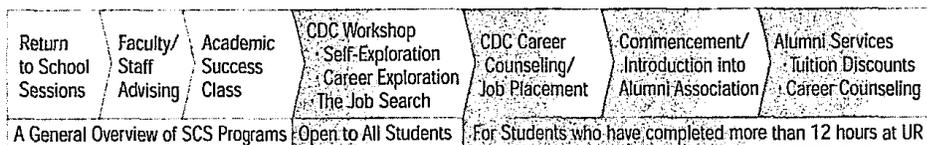
While we all have found isolated sources of financial support for specific initiatives from individuals, corporations, state and local government, and/or foundations, the basic building block of all fundraising efforts is an active alumni association. Alumni are the best prospects and most vocal supporters in the short run and can be called upon to open doors for you over time.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE PROCESS OF ENGAGEMENT

Loyal alumni abound on most campuses. That loyalty is typically not something that developed instantly, nor is it based solely on the fact that the institution helped the graduate find employment. Instead, it is usually the result of a process of engagement that began and was reinforced throughout the individual’s college career. So, while committed alumni exist and the process of engaging them can and should begin immediately, we also need to think strategically about creating that affinity with our current student population. We must first build a community of learners who will become a community of alumni, and ultimately, a community of givers.

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At Richmond, we conceptualize the process as follows:



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The first step is to work with prospective students while they are contemplating returning to school. Throughout the year, we conduct workshops designed to assist students in making the decision to return to school and help them develop an understanding of the commitment required to attend college. We also use this opportunity to highlight the benefits of a University of Richmond education and degree.

Ongoing advising by both faculty and professional staff throughout the educational experience strengthens the bond between students and the institution. In particular, the role of the faculty is critical in this regard, as many alumni remember individual faculty members who profoundly influenced their life and career.

All students are encouraged to enroll in a class on academic success. Adults often face numerous difficulties in making the transition from working adult to student; just learning to use a library can be a daunting task. The academic success class is designed to help students with this transition, focusing on the basic academic skill sets required of all students, and familiarizes the students with the support services available to them.

Career development—whether helping students progress within their current organization or identify alternate employment opportunities—is a common need for many adult students and is often a primary motivation for pursuing a college degree. Our students are surveyed annually about their specific interests, and then workshops are planned around these areas. As students near graduation, career counseling and job placement assistance are often in high demand.

Graduation and the activities surrounding it provide an excellent opportunity to reinforce the commitment to students. Our annual banquet honors our graduating seniors, celebrates their accomplishments, and provides us with

an opportunity to induct the students into our alumni association, complete with a free one-year membership.

Lastly, the commitment must extend to graduates. Discounted tuition for both credit and noncredit classes and continued access to career counseling and job placement services are two ways to demonstrate an institution's ongoing commitment. Routine surveying of alumni can provide information about specific needs and interests, and is also an opportunity to communicate positively with graduates.

GETTING STARTED

The key to launching any volunteer group is identifying a cadre of engaged individuals and supporting them in their organization-building efforts. In our case, one of the first things we did when I arrived on campus was to survey alumni. When asked about their interest in continued involvement with the university, the responses clustered around three main areas: ongoing career development support, continuing personal and professional development, and establishing a separate and distinct alumni association. Several alumni actually approached me with a proposal to create an association, and we set about making that happen.

After organizing themselves with a mission and set of by-laws, the group focused on programming. These activities tend to fall into three broad categories: social activities and networking, volunteering as mentors or speakers, and fundraising, particularly in the area of scholarships. In our case, the group organized a career support network, a speakers' bureau, an annual football tailgate party, an annual scholarship dinner and auction—which has raised more than \$25,000 to date—and a website. Additionally, the group established a distinguished alumnus award presented at commencement and distributed a newsletter to all alumni twice each year.

The association has grown from an initial membership of 30 to more than 150 dues-paying members out of a pool of approximately 1,200 alumni. While

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THE ROLE OF THE DEAN

Institutional support for the association is obviously essential. However, the dean is critical to the successful launch of the association and its ability to flourish over time. While alumni want to see each other, they always need to see the dean, to connect with the dean’s vision, and experience the dean’s passion for that vision, especially during the formative stages of the organization.

Besides attending alumni meetings and events regularly, the dean can support the association’s activities in several ways. One is through an annual “state of the union” letter to all alumni, whether active members or not. In addition to showcasing the successes of the school or division, the letter provides an opportunity to reinforce the goals of the alumni as-

sociation, including the recruitment of new members. Second, alumni can be featured in print and video testimonial ads, not only as a central feature of a positioning strategy but also as a way to bring graduates back into the fold. The dean can also monitor the accomplishments of graduates—everything from job changes and promotions to volunteer activities—and write them notes congratulating them on their success.

Perhaps the most critical consideration for the dean is the amount of time and effort required to engage effectively in these activities. Cultivating alumni is both expensive and time-consuming and can easily consume the majority of one’s time. Institutional support, in the form of staff from the offices of alumni affairs, major gifts, and the annual fund, is necessary to be able to devote the time required. Prospect research is but one example among many in which the development office can provide invaluable service. But even with significant institutional support, a dean will likely devote at least half of his or her time to the cultivation process. That means having the confidence that the organization can run itself as well as provide support for the dean’s fundraising

efforts. In our case, this has included creating the position of director of external relations, focused primarily on coordinating our efforts with those of the development office.

In the end, the decision to include alumni relations and fundraising as a large portion of the dean's portfolio must include careful consideration of the potential, balanced against the level of institutional support available and the ability of your organization to function effectively without daily oversight from the dean. In most situations, however, it seems likely that the long-term benefits, both financially and politically, will justify the effort.

THE ROLE OF THE ADVISORY COUNCIL

Alumni groups inevitably focus their energies on building the organization and programming for the membership. Their usefulness as fundraisers is therefore somewhat limited, and a separate arm will likely be required to assist in specific fundraising efforts. The group's primary purpose is to contribute financially and to create networking opportunities for you with both alumni and nonalumni who can support your agenda.

While the core group should be composed of alumni, the creation of advisors allows the inclusion of individuals outside of the alumni base who can complement and extend that base. Ultimately, this group can become primary ambassadors among alumni and in the larger community. Expectations of the members of this group must be high from the beginning, including the expectation that they will take a leadership role in making gifts and in encouraging others to give.

CONCLUSION

A unique opportunity exists for many continuing educators seeking both new sources of revenue and to expand the influence of their units. On the one hand,

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ENGAGING CONTINUING EDUCATION ALUMNI

continuing education and lifelong learning are currently highly valued, perhaps enjoying their greatest levels of support. On the other, both credit and non-credit alumni represent a huge and often untapped resource that can be engaged in support of a school's mission. The commitment required to engage alumni is considerable, and a dean must be prepared to devote the time necessary to the cultivation process. But the payoff can be enormous in terms of funding needs—in our case, more than \$100,000 raised in endowments over the past two years—and in creating ambassadors for a school's agenda on and off campus. The good news is that all of us possess the basic skills to be effective—alumni relations and fundraising are all about building relationships with prospective clients, which is the core of all our endeavors. ☞