

ALUMNI RELATIONS

A Newcomer's Guide to Success

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CASE[®]

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CHAPTER II

How to Build the Bridge

BETWEEN STUDENTS AND ALUMNI

Amy Button Renz • Kansas State University

IN 1949, Howard S. “Howdy” Wilcox, executive director of the Indiana University Foundation, established the first student advancement program that trained current students to become committed and contributing members of the alumni body. Wilcox knew what we all need to recognize: Students on campus today are the alumni of tomorrow, so it is vitally important to establish a relationship with them while they are at your institution. Engaging and cultivating students during their undergraduate years is critical to the success of a robust alumni program.

In order to maintain a lifelong link to the students of today, we need to understand the diversity of that population. College students no longer reflect the traditional model of a high school graduate who immediately attends a four-year institution and graduates four years later. Some students do fit this profile, but some are nontraditional students who return to college after being in the workforce for a number of years. Other students are working to obtain a degree while they are employed full-time.

The membership of our student organizations should reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of our student body as well. Every effort should be made to reach out to students so that the executive board of each organization will offer a blend of various backgrounds.

For example, the University of Wisconsin has an excellent student diversity program that provides a model of how diversity should be embraced within our student organizations. At Wisconsin's Student of Color Connections retreat, incoming students connect with returning students to socialize, network and even establish an informal mentor relationship when appropriate.

When considering potential student involvement, institutions should look at the scope of programming available to prospective students. Some programs might be directed toward children of graduates; others could be athletics-based, allowing prospective or future students opportunities to spend time with student athletes on campus. Early engagement often leads students to form an affinity with an institution. These students then become ideal prospects for our admissions office as potential recruits; and once they are enrolled, they are the students who become actively involved in our student organizations.

History of CASE ASAP

The first national meeting of student advancement programs was held on the Iowa State University campus in 1974. Nine years later, 300 students representing 67 institutions gathered at the University of Minnesota and established the Student Alumni Association/Student Foundation Network. Until 1991 the headquarters of the network moved every two years to the home institution of the elected network chair. In 1992, the SAA/SF Network came under the umbrella of CASE, which allowed the organization to expand and flourish. The SAA/SF Networks became the Association of Student Advancement Programs in 2000. It is now known as CASE Affiliated Student Advancement Programs (CASE ASAP).

CASE ASAP allows the leaders of Student Alumni and Student Foundation networks to meet and share programming ideas. They also learn the value of collaboration among a variety of campus units. Many students in our groups serve as recruitment ambassadors; often the association will partner with athletics to form spirit groups. Since 1986, our Student Alumni Board at the K-State Alumni Association has been partnering with the dean of student life to offer programs for high school sophomores and juniors. Before members can be involved in this program, they undergo extensive training, which includes a class on how to be an effective and informed recruiter for the university. Iowa State University's very successful spirit group, called Cyclone Alley, was formed to promote school spirit at basketball games and is an affiliate of the ISU Student Alumni Leadership Council.

These student groups at Kansas State and Iowa State offer tremendous leadership opportunities to engage students during their undergraduate years. Once they graduate, these former students often become the volunteers and board members of their alma mater. This early involvement also allows our younger graduates to assume leadership positions in our alumni associations much sooner than the students of the 1960s and

1970s did, before these organizations were established. The boards of our alumni associations are now more inclusive and mirror diversity in the occupation, ethnicity, geographic location and age of members. Recent graduates now have a place at the table. They bring a wealth of knowledge to these positions and have so much to offer at a young age.

Many of these students apply for the scholarships available to attend CASE district conferences to explore a future career in advancement. CASE ASAP also provides a wonderful networking organization for the leaders of both organizations. These students often become future alumni staff members or admissions recruiters or go on to work on an advanced degree in student or higher education administration. They become enamored with the value of a career working on a campus and helping engage students in quality programming. The creed for CASE ASAP says it best and embodies why the organization exists:

We believe that as students, we have a special relationship with our Alma Mater that represents a lifetime commitment in the fulfillment of our dreams and aspirations.

As students, we will represent the result of her mission and the embodiment of her spirit in the world. What she is, we are; what she becomes, we become.

Because we are the emerging essence of our institution, we will strive to enhance this special relationship between students, alumni and others so that the heritage of our Alma Mater will always be a part of our lives, for the present as we follow our dreams, and after graduation as we make them come true.

Student Alumni and Student Foundation Networks

Student alumni networks typically provide support to the alumni association in reaching out to prospective or current students. Activities of network members vary from serving as mentors and hosts to campus visitors to working with the admissions office to help recruit students to campus. Just as the activities vary, so do the ages of individuals with whom these volunteers come into contact, ranging from junior high or high school students to graduates attending their 50-year class reunion. Alumni particularly enjoy interacting with bright, talented and friendly student volunteers.

New student orientation is an ideal place for involvement. This allows incoming freshmen or transfer students to learn more about the traditions of their future alma mater. Working closely with the office of student life, the student/alumni association (SAA) can create a program to educate these new students about the importance of continuing a lifelong link after graduation. The University of Missouri in Columbia, for example, has an excellent program in which an alumni association staff member shares traditions that the incoming students will embrace during their time at Mizzou. The K-State Alumni Association has worked closely with the dean of student life to

incorporate many association-sponsored programs (such as the all-university ring and the Wildcat Welcome Day) into the orientation information presented to new students and their families. Another group that should not be overlooked is the community of international students as they transition onto the campus. Student alumni leaders can be wonderful ambassadors to help share information about the school and how to become better acclimated to campus life.

Additional programming that has dramatically increased in the past few years is the opportunity for students to interact with alumni at events. The True Tiger Networking Dinner, sponsored by the Missouri Alumni Association, matches students with alumni who may share similar interests or have careers in the students' field of study. Iowa State University has a similar program called Career Preview Days. Partnering with the career services office provides a tremendous value-added service for our students.

Most important, the students involved with these networks are the leaders of tomorrow, and their enthusiasm for their alma mater is a wonderful resource that should not go untapped. They are outstanding ambassadors, and using them to host potential students and alumni helps these groups connect with their future or to relive their past.

Student foundations have typically been formed to assist the development office in identifying students who can assist with donor relations. Often these students are also used as hosts and speakers at a variety of events to showcase and deliver a compelling message to potential donors. Programs vary, but they can include phonathons and senior class gifts. The K-State "Student Proud" campaign, which began in 2007, raised \$94,000 in its second year through the sale of a T-shirt that ultimately was worn by everyone at a designated men's basketball game. This student-coordinated program was recognized by CASE District VI and at the National CASE ASAP Convention in 2008.

Many student alumni and student foundation organizations are considered to be among the premier student leadership groups on campus. Some programs have a very competitive selection process, which can include a lengthy application as well as essays. Students, faculty, staff and alumni may conduct interviews, depending on the size of the organization. The groups are managed by one or more advisors.

Operating budgets for student alumni and student foundations groups are normally funded by an institution's alumni association or development office. Often, the SAA sponsors fundraising activities to assist with the budget. Specialty kits designed for students and normally promoted as a gift from parents have been a popular fundraiser for student organizations. Other revenue streams can be found by partnering with other campus departments. For example, a student recruitment event could be jointly sponsored by the alumni association and the office of admissions, and both groups could benefit from this arrangement. The bottom line is that the student groups need to have funding to carry out quality programs for other students as well as for the institution.

Homecoming

The first homecoming was celebrated at the University of Missouri in 1911. Missouri's program was also the first to be named a model homecoming program by CASE's Circle of Excellence Awards. Their programming allows alumni, students and friends of the university to come together to celebrate "coming home."

Oklahoma State University and the University of Illinois have also been recognized for providing outstanding homecoming programs. Alumni associations at both institutions work year-round with a student committee to provide a week full of activities for alumni, students and friends of the university to enjoy. The University of Wisconsin also has a model homecoming program (see chapter 14).

Homecoming programming opportunities have expanded since the early years of bringing alumni back to campus. There is an increased emphasis on family programming. The family emphasis can be more inclusive than the traditional Parents' Weekend, which is held during a fall football weekend. The K-State Alumni Association sponsors a special seminar on "traditions" as part of our Homecoming Weekend. We also conduct a special pinning program for legacies.

Some homecomings now include a philanthropic focus as well. For example, homecoming activities could incorporate a food drive for the local food pantry. The University of Missouri conducts a blood drive during homecoming, and since its inception in 1985, they have collected more than 90,000 units of blood, making it the largest blood drive in the country. At K-State a 5K run kicks off homecoming, and the proceeds benefit a local charity.

The long-standing tradition of choosing royalty at homecoming is becoming a thing of the past and has been replaced with an election of students who serve as official ambassadors for the institution at student and alumni events. Others simply serve as hosts on the campus and provide official tours to visitors. No matter what the function at which they help, these students provide the alumni association with highly motivated and vibrant individuals to represent the student body in an official capacity.

Student-Sponsored Activities

Most alumni associations are membership dues-based or organize an annual fund drive. Those with membership programs encourage recent graduates to join and retain their membership. Associations that conduct annual fund drives hope to secure that first gift to establish and maintain a giving history to alma mater. If a graduate who is solicited for a first-time membership or donation has no previous knowledge or involvement with the alumni association, that new alum will have little or no interest in belonging or donating. Connecting with students while they are on campus is imperative to the process of engagement.

Activities sponsored by associations range from welcome events for new students to send-offs for graduating seniors. The Purdue University Alumni Association has a “Freebee Friday” to encourage students to stop by the alumni association for free gifts. Finding ways to encourage traffic at your building provides another connection with the student body. Taking the message directly to the students is an effective way to reach out as well. The University of Virginia, for example, provides each student in the residence hall system a mug with a special message from the alumni association.

Understanding the culture of your institution is critical to determining the type of programs that should be developed. The size of your leadership organization that oversees the programs should be taken into consideration. The scope of your efforts and your ability to deliver quality programming is largely dependent on staff resources as well as on access to a well-trained group of student volunteers. The ultimate focus should be to offer opportunities for the association to reach out to students while they are on campus and to provide an awareness of your goals so these students will want to become engaged after graduation.

Student Alumni Membership Associations

Many associations have developed a special group that is open to all students, much like an alumni membership program. Typically the leadership is provided by the student alumni organization through a committee structure, or there may be an officer assigned to serve as a liaison to the student alumni association. There is normally a fee for membership, but the group also provides incentives to join, such as an exclusive T-shirt, special glassware or discounts to a variety of businesses. Specific days can be designated on which students wearing a student alumni association T-shirt on campus receive a special gift or are eligible for a prize. You can also recognize members of this group by giving special study snacks to them during finals week, which could be picked up at the alumni center or association offices. Again, the main purpose of these efforts is to start students thinking about a lifelong connection with the school through the alumni association.

In most cases the student membership programs have been based on special discounts or events that do not have a programmatic function. True Tigers, sponsored by the Missouri Alumni Association, actually built programming into its model. This group currently has 5,500 members. Students can bond during special road trips to certain athletic events or through participation as a student organization during homecoming. True Tiger events include a “speed networking” activity for students and key alumni leaders; a Restaurant Prowl where students can purchase a ticket to visit select downtown restaurants; and a Dinner with 12 Tigers program, in which local alumni invite students into their homes for a meal. Quality programming enhances the students’ experience and solidifies their ongoing relationship with the association.

Alumni Membership Programs

At K-State, the ultimate goal of engaging students during their undergraduate years is the hope that, when they graduate, they will become alumni association members or make their first gift to the annual fund through the alumni association. In 1988 the K-State Alumni Association was approached by the College of Agriculture to provide a gift membership to its graduates. The association partnered with the college to create the College Gift Membership Program. Before the creation of this program, less than 10 percent of the graduates joined the association as dues-paying members. Now all nine colleges at K-State pay \$7 per graduate to cover direct costs and provide a complimentary one-year membership for their graduating seniors. At commencement, each new graduate receives an exclusive lapel pin from the alumni association and a gift membership. Today the association retains 25 to 40 percent of these graduates; and with the dedication of the K-State Alumni Center in 2002 and additional programming efforts directed toward current students, K-State hopes this retention rate will continue to increase. The University of Texas Alumni Association has a similar program, which is a relatively new endeavor. Transitioning students from a membership during college to a lifelong membership following graduation can be better achieved through this type of programming.

Conclusion

Alumni involvement begins with a positive student experience. Students who are engaged and involved during their time on campus tend to become more active alumni. The alumni association’s programming efforts are vital to the success of the entire institution’s efforts to maintain a lifelong link to this most important resource. Students are the future volunteers in our clubs and chapters, the members of our school’s advisory councils, future mentors to our students and, ultimately, donors who are also members of the alumni association. They recognize the importance of giving back to their alma mater, not only financially but also through their ongoing involvement as volunteers willing to share their expertise, experience and time to enhance the future of their alma mater.

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