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Alumni Giving: A Relationship between On-Campus Alumni Engagement,
Participation and Financial Support

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Abstract

The relationship of alumni participation in on-campus activities resulting in alumni giving will be studied. Graduates from a private institution in Providence, RI will be invited to complete an online questionnaire to measure their engagement and giving levels. Using a series of pointed questions and a Likert scale, alumni will rate their attitude towards specific alumni activities in relation to their willingness to give to the institution following each opportunity. This will help to determine which activities produce the highest number of annual donors. All responses will be statistically measured and results analyzed. The study will benefit alumni professionals and assist them in designing activities for alumni to participate in that will produce the highest number of donors possible.

Keywords

Alumni relations; engagement; donors; giving

Alumni Giving: A Relationship between Alumni Engagement,
Participation and Financial Support

Many research studies have been conducted supporting the direct causal relationship between alumni participation in university programs and financial support of one's institution. Unfortunately, there are few, if any, that takes the research a step further to show giving rates as the result of specific program types offered within the campus setting. To understand which specific types of programs yield the highest number of donations would prove beneficial for alumni professionals. With this information, alumni professionals will be able to design programs that will directly target increasing donors.

Statement of the Problem

This study will look at the most effective types of alumni engagement that will maximize a graduate's willingness to financially support the mission of their alma mater. As shown in the literature, many studies have been conducted to support the theory that a positive student experience leads to higher levels of alumni engagement. In turn, there is much research which also supports that a highly engaged alum has a higher inclination to financially support their university. However, it would be important to determine exactly which alumni activities show the highest return on establishing a connection between alumni and their university; ultimately getting more alumni to give. This study is aimed at measuring the most effective types of activities that alumni can participate in that will highly engage them and move them through the donor pipeline faster.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine the most effective types of alumni activities that will provide an alum of an institution with the highest level of engagement and connectedness,

ultimately bringing them to become a donor to their university. This is an important area to study because while many alumni relations professionals know that there is a correlation in these activities and giving, this end of the process has yet to be explored. To better understand the activities that could provide the biggest return, the more efficiently an alumni relations professional can engage their alumni and increase alumni giving. The preferred unit of analysis will be a questionnaire using qualifying questions and a Likert scale, since an alum's attitude towards specific programs and events, as well as their university, is to be measured.

Research Questions/Hypotheses

For the purpose of this study, the following question should be addressed:

1. Will a graduate's participation in an on-campus alumni activity increase, decrease or not affect their interest in financial giving to their institution?

As part of this study, investigation included one research hypotheses:

1. The more engaged an alum is through on-campus activities the more willing they are to donate to their university.

Definition of Terms

1. *Alum/alumnus* – a graduate of the university.
2. *Engaged* – the level achieved when a graduate regularly participates in university activities and programs.
3. *On-campus activities* – any activity, event or program held within the boundaries of the university campus.
4. *Donor* – a title given to one that has made a gift to the university. This title is assigned at the time of the first gift and is re-evaluated annually.

Literature Review

“Over the past decades, researchers have tested a wide array of variables to identify the most important factors predicting alumni giving to their alma maters” (Weerts & Ronca, 2007). While much research supports higher rates of giving as a result of participation as both a student and an alum, there is still much to be explored to fully understand what determines if one will give or not. “Financial contribution is the most recognized form of alumni involvement” (Gaier, 2005). Yet, it is not the only one. “Alumni influence is critical to institutions because professional and personal connections held by graduates can open doors to the legislature, governor’s office, corporations, foundations, and major gift prospects” (Weerts & Ronca, 2007). “Alumni also promote the university to key stakeholders such as prospective students” (Gaier, 2005). Institutions can utilize alumni through various opportunities both on and off-campus and can support student programming and initiatives through a variety of ways. “Alumni volunteers also serve in other important ways such as mentors, recruiters, and booster club leaders that raise the profile of the institution in their region” (Weerts & Ronca, 2007).

Through their time on-campus and interacting with institutional representatives, alumni strengthen their connection with their university and learn that their involvement is, in fact, an integral component in the development of a mutually beneficial relationship. Institutional leadership have come to realize that “the relationship with the alma mater will definitely influence future decision making regarding their interaction with the university” (Gaier, 2005). This includes decisions regarding giving. With this in mind, “alumni giving is related to emotional attachment and quality of relationship with the university” (Gaier, 2005).

Many believe that the key to developing a strong, lasting relationship starts for graduates when they are a student. “As university administrators look forward to future alumni relations it

would seem critical to begin building and planning for the alumni relationship with the institution during the course of the student's educational experience" (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001). Through various programs and extracurricular activities like student government and leadership organizations, athletics and Greek life, for instance, a student will become more immersed in the university's culture, tradition and legacy. It is through these experiences, that the relationship strengthens and the foundation for a solid, alumni affiliation with their university is formed. "The higher the level of satisfaction with the academic experience, the more likely alumni are to give and/or participate with the university" (Gaier, 2005). While this is highly supported and has been researched before, "further research should study specific organized student activities to determine which activities have a higher correlation with alumni giving and alumni participation" (Gaier, 2005).

Another factor in strengthening a graduates bond with their alma mater pertains to relationships with faculty and staff. Faculty and staff play a critical role in the student experience and as such, they maintain contact and connection with many of their previous students long after graduation. This relationship provides continuous communication through the years and validation that the graduate still plays an important role in the life of the university. "Administrators should encourage the participation of key relationship partners (e.g. faculty and advisors) at alumni functions and other venues where alumni who have formed bonds with individuals from the institution can interact with them again and reinvigorate those bonds" (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001).

"Concurrent to their employee role, some faculty and staff also have relationships with their employing institutions, and with other colleges and universities, as alumni or as parents of students or alumni" (Borden, Shaker, & Kienker, 2013). Their own relationship, which they

have with the institution, is directly influenced by their satisfaction with their workplace adding another layer of satisfaction that the institution must achieve in order to increase their interest in giving. With all that said, “prior studies of faculty and staff giving have demonstrated that those who are also alumni donate at a higher rate, but not necessarily larger amounts” (Borden, Shaker, & Kienker, 2013).

In one recent study, researchers “have chosen to look at expressions of loyalty and have used two group variables: one asking about behavioral and the other addressing attitudes toward future behavior” (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001). By focusing on these variables, through their surveying of alumni, the researchers will not only analyze past behavior and attitudes, but will also be able to plan for future outcomes based on an alum’s current attitudes. In the study, “current behavior was assessed with questions that asked about wearing university logo clothing, current involvement in alumni functions, and donations to the university” (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001). “Behavioral intentions were assessed using four items that asked about future involvement in an alumni group, future donations of money, wanting their children to go to their alma mater, and a preference for future enrollment in continuing education at their alma mater” (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001).

These researchers found that “wearing university-logo clothing, participating in alumni functions, and donating money to the university are all strongly influenced by institutional ties and the feeling that the alumni enjoyed their time at the university” (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001). These factors showed the institutional pride and support of their alma mater. This pride is developed over the years as a student and continues after they graduate. They also found that “perceptions of present institutional/alumni relationships strongly influence: intentions to participate in continuing higher education and alumni groups, and to donate money”

(McAlexander & Koenig, 2001). This reinforces the importance of faculty and staff involvement with alumni even after they have graduated. By continuing to strengthen those student/faculty relationships past graduation, faculty are assisting in the donor conversion process, thus assisting alumni professionals and fundraisers with their work.

“Psychologists believe that donating behaviors involve perceptions, motivations, behaviors, and a person’s personal understanding of the consequences of making the donation” (Tsao & Coll, 2005). Since increasing the number of donors is as of much interest as increasing the average gift and ultimately raising the most dollars for the institution, it is imperative for a fundraiser to remember that “alumni who give and volunteer have formed deeper connections to their alma mater and this may impact their understanding about institutional needs and their role in meeting these needs” (Weerts & Ronca, 2007).

Many researchers have recommended that in order for an alum to be reminded of the emotional attachment that they have for their university, one should return to their campus and participate in alumni activities. Some researchers have found that “certain aspects of involvement – the number of recent campus visits and contact with a person from the college – correlate significantly with the magnitude of gifts among donors” (Wastyn, 2009). Reunions, campus speaking engagements and recruitment days are strong ways for alumni to participate on-campus and engage with current students. These activities strongly affirm that “alumni involvement with the school subsequent to graduation is a critical factor affecting the decision by alumni to contribute and the amount of the contribution” (Tsao & Coll, 2005). It is for this reason that this study will be conducted and will take the research a much needed step further in identifying specific alumni activities that will produce the highest number of donors.

Method

Research Design

The research will be conducted by questionnaire and will focus on measuring alumni attitude towards their alma mater as a result of attending alumni activities (within the last three years) sponsored by their university. Based on questions focused on the types of activities an alum has participated in and whether or not they are a donor, the results will point to which activities can be directly tied to this action taken. The questionnaire will be administered through a website link and participants will be invited to complete the questionnaire via email.

Since the purpose of the study is to determine whether participation in on-campus activities lead to donations, it is important to understand the attitude of an alumni donor and draw a correlation to the activities they have already participated in. A set of qualifying questions will kick-off the survey and the Likert scale will be used for the core study questions. The mean, median and mode of the responses will be calculated and used to draw correlations between attitude and activity.

Sampling

The study population is comprised of alumni that graduated from Johnson & Wales University in Providence, RI. There are 107,000+ alumni living all over the globe and the respondents will be comprised of a random sampling of men and women from a wide variety of ethnicities, cultures, decades, majors, industries and income-levels. The sample will be generated based on those who voluntarily respond from the email invitation that will be sent to all graduates.

Instrumentation

The instrument to be used in this study is a digital questionnaire. This digital questionnaire will feature qualifying questions of the respondent as well as questions that will measure the respondent's attitude towards each area using a Likert scale. The instrument will measure the study's independent and dependent variables. The independent variable for this study is the attendance of an on-campus program and the dependent variable is the donation being made to the institution.

Alumni Participation and Giving Survey (see Appendix A)

This instrument will be comprised of questions developed to demonstrate the theory that alumni participation in on-campus activities affects financial donations to their institution. These questions will relate to not only the overall participation and giving correlation, but also the specific activity types that an alum can participate in on-campus. Predictive validity will be measured against the university's alumni participation rate in on-campus activities (by activity type) and annual giving rate. This tool will be useful to capture attitudinal ratings for analysis. The results will be used to inform a multitude of areas, especially useful in planning future activities for alumni participation that will yield a high return of gifts post-activity.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The plan for collection and analysis will be executed online utilizing a digital survey tool. In this instance, the tool will be administered through NetCommunity, a system already utilized by the university. As an incentive, all participants will have the option to include their name and contact information to be entered into a random drawing to win an iPad Mini. This component is not a requirement for participation.

The letter of consent will be administered when the alum enters the site and can electronically sign that they accept the terms. Without this acceptance, an alum will not be able to proceed with the survey. Their acceptance will be recorded within the online tool for future reference if necessary. Responses will be quantified based on the number assignment following the Likert scale (1-5). Statistical analysis (mean, median and mode) of all responses will be recorded and used for comparison purposes. A chart of all statistics (by question) will be provided in the final report.

Protection of Human Rights

In an effort to protect the human rights of our study participants, all participants will be made aware that their participation is voluntary and they can choose to withdraw from this study at any time. In addition to the letter of consent, participants will be prompted to a message before submitting their completed questionnaire. This message will provide them with another opportunity to opt-out of fully submitting their questionnaire.

Considering that some participants may elect to include their name and contact information which will connect them to their answers, one could argue the issue of beneficence. In this study, however, beneficence is of no concern considering that the questions are centered on past participation and will not be focused on direct indicators of an individual's future participation or giving. There is justice in this study as criteria for participation is singularly based on graduation status and not on any other factors, such as graduation year, ethnicity, affluence and more. Protection of a participant's confidentiality will be of the utmost importance and information concerning their participation will not be shared with anyone outside of the study. Any participant requests for a copy of the study will be granted and studies will sent via email unless requested by mail.

Discussion

If the results of the study are as predicted, alumni activities that yield a high rate of return for alumni giving will be identified and will inform alumni relations professionals when creating and scheduling future activities. This will greatly impact their work load and giving results for alumni within their portfolio. Combined with previous research, this study will provide a comprehensive look at the giving pipeline and confirm the theory that meaningful engagement, like a campus visit, leads to alumni giving.

A weakness to the proposed study could be its scope. Since it is analyzing attitudes of an alumni body of a particular university, the findings may not be scalable. This consideration wasn't addressed in this study, but it would be addressed in future studies when the questionnaire is applied to a sampling of alumni from a variety of institutions in the northeast. The study will fare well in terms of internal validity, but in terms of external validity, there is a scenario that could cause a concern. The scenario to be considered is if an alum hasn't attended an on-campus university activity, yet still gives financially to their alma mater. That would limit the results of this study and would need to be addressed in additional tests or future studies.

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Appendix A

Alumni Participation and Giving Survey

1. Have you participated in a Johnson & Wales University alumni event or program on the Providence campus within the last three (3) years?

*If yes, system moves them to question #2

*If no, system moves them to question #4

2. If so, which event(s) did you attend? Check all that apply.

Homecoming Legacy Reception ___ Wine Tasting Event ___
 Athletic Homecoming ___ Alumni Reunion ___
 SEEM Alumni Reception ___ Classroom Speaking Engagement ___
 Alumni Leaders on Campus ___ Career Fair/EE&CS Event ___
 Other ___ Specify: _____

3. Using the following scale, rate your satisfaction with each of the events that you have participated in:

1 = Strongly dissatisfied 2 = Somewhat satisfied 3 = Undecided/Neutral

4 = Somewhat satisfied 5 = Strongly satisfied 0 = Not applicable

Homecoming Legacy Reception ___ Wine Tasting Event ___
 Athletic Homecoming ___ Alumni Reunion ___
 SEEM Alumni Reception ___ Classroom Speaking Engagement ___
 Alumni Leaders on Campus ___ Career Fair/EE&CS Event ___
 Other ___

4. Have you made a donation to Johnson & Wales University within the last three (3) years?

Yes ___ No ___

Use the following scale to answer questions 5 & 6:

1 = Strongly disagree 2 = Somewhat disagree 3 = Undecided/Neutral

4 = Somewhat agree 5 = Strongly agree

- 5. As an alum of Johnson & Wales University, I am satisfied with the programs and events that I have participated in ____

- 6. I made a donation to Johnson & Wales University because I participated in one or more on-campus alumni event(s) or program(s) ____

Thank you for completing our survey, if you would like to be entered to win the iPad Mini, please provide the following information:

Name _____

Class Year _____

Home Address _____

Phone _____

Email _____