President's Perspective: Overcoming the Undervaluing of Alumni Relations

Ten common mistakes in the field

By *John Lippincott*

Translations

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In previous columns I have identified the top 10 mistakes in fundraising and in communications at educational institutions. Here's my list for alumni relations.

1. Undervaluing.

Etymologically, alumni means foster children; it does not mean stepchildren. Often, however, institutions treat the alumni relations operation as the stepchild of advancement. In fact, alumni relations is the cornerstone of advancement. In this era of constrained resources, public scrutiny, global competition, and digital communities, a strong alumni relations program should be valued as critical to the success of educational institutions.

2. Underestimating.

Just as the alumni relations program may be undervalued, the importance of the alumni themselves may be underestimated. Graduates are among an institution's greatest assets and perhaps the only asset guaranteed to grow every year. Alumni are the single largest sources of philanthropic support for many, if not most, schools and colleges. And their value extends well beyond financial contributions. They are advisers, advocates, and allies in support of institutional mission, highly motivated not only by loyalty but also by a vested interest in seeing the equity of their diplomas grow over time.

3. Underutilizing.

When an institution underestimates the importance of its alumni, it likely also underutilizes them in pursuit of its strategic goals. Alumni, for example, can be an extraordinary resource for marketing the institution to prospective students. Graduates can serve not only as the "poster children" for the quality of the educational experience but also as an active and extensive sales force. Moreover, they can be highly effective spokespersons with legislative bodies, regulatory agencies, community organizations, media outlets, and other constituencies.

4. Under-communicating.

Graduates cannot be effective spokespersons if they have not been kept apprised of the institution's growth and development. They require regular, targeted, and timely information in ways that suit their interests and match their communication preferences, including social media platforms. Perhaps worse than no communication is communication limited to the annual fund appeal.

5. Under-differentiating.

Not all alumni are athletics boosters. Not all affiliate with their graduating class. Not all are graduates. Not all like to meet in local bars. In other words, alumni are not a "body"; they are individuals whose campus experiences, current life stages, and points of connection vary widely. To be successful, therefore, alumni relations programs must carefully differentiate among alumni and speak to the interests, needs, and affiliations of each alumna or alumnus.

6. Underserving (alumni).

It is easy to view the alumni relations program solely from the standpoint of its value to the institution. However, unless there is also clear value to alumni, then it is really not an "alumni relations" program, but an "alumni exploitation" program. Institutions should view their relationship with alumni as a lifelong contract that offers mutual benefit. In the aftermath of the global economic crisis, for example, alumni are looking for their institutions to provide career services, mentoring and networking opportunities, and retraining and skills development.

7. Underserving (students).

It is extremely difficult to create satisfied alumni out of unsatisfied students. The quality of the student experience will greatly determine the quality of alumni engagement. That's why some institutions need first to strengthen their student services before trying to build their alumni programs. And an important part of serving students is helping them understand that they are alumni in the making. Institutions that wait until the graduation ceremony to build awareness of the alumni program have wasted two years, four years, or more in setting the stage for a lifelong relationship.

8. Under-collaborating.

For many alumni, the strongest connection to the institution is not with the administration, but with the faculty. Therefore, failing to involve faculty in the alumni relations program will greatly hinder its chances for success. The program will also be hindered by failure to collaborate with other advancement offices. The alumni effort is strengthened, not diminished, by demonstrating its connections and contributions to fundraising, communications, and marketing.

9. Underreporting.

Alumni relations is strengthened by its contributions to the other advancement disciplines precisely because those contributions are measurable. Conversely, alumni relations programs are weakened when there is an absence of clear outcomes and regular reporting that demonstrate real return on the institution's investment.

10. Undernourishing.

Of course, to get a return on its investment, the institution must invest in the first place. Without adequate staffing, infrastructure, and financing, the alumni relations program simply cannot deliver on the enormous promise that alumni engagement holds for an institution. If, as noted earlier, alumni are the "foster children," then their alma mater should forever be the "nourishing mother."

About the Author

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