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The characteristics of the current student population, the demographics and mindset of the alumni base, and relationships with the surrounding community are three basic strategic objectives any metropolitan university must address in building a strong and broad base of alumni support. The author examines each of these, and cites examples of pertinent activities at Boise State University.

Goals for a Metropolitan University: Three Strategic Objectives in Building a Strong Alumni Base

The alumni association of any university can be an invaluable source of information, resources, and talents to help an institution achieve its goals. Many universities have relied on this valuable resource for years. Presidents have used the alumni base as a fountain of support in critical times, as well as to endorse crucial decisions. For example, it is rumored that just recently the hiring of a football coach at a California university was first announced to the Alumni Association Executive Council before it was announced for the public.

But how does a university build an alumni association? How does a university gain a broad source of support from its alumni base? Anyone walking onto the Harvard campus can feel the commitment: one can not help but feel a sense of loyalty to the crimson of Harvard. But most metropolitan universities do not have the ivy-covered traditions found at Harvard, Yale, or even many land grant universities.

The metropolitan university must acknowledge many elements in order to build a solid base of alumni support. Three basic strategic objectives must be addressed:

- involve the current student population;
- be responsive to the demographics and mindset of the alumni base;
- work with the surrounding community.

The Current Students

“I thought this was an *Alumni* Association. Why spend time and resources on the students?” This was an exact quote from a board member as a young alumni director took control of a small fledgling alumni association in the state of Idaho. “Simple. These students will be alumni tomorrow. And I would rather get them excited about the alumni association and the university when I can look them in the eye. Also, now they are a part of the university and they can see how they can impact the university for students to follow,” replied the young alumni director.

It is imperative that the students are indoctrinated in the value of staying involved with the university while they are still on campus. There are three basic methods for the university and the alumni association to target current students:

- include them in the processes and direction of the university;
- get involved in their lives as students and help them become successful students;
- provide programs that encourage their involvement in alumni association events.

The time to get future alums involved in the leadership structure of the university is when they are students. This is a time when they can actually feel the benefits of the university and higher education and can also see the tangible results. Also at this time, the university must make efforts to allow students a voice in the direction of the university. For example, at Boise State University in Boise, Idaho, the associated student body president serves on the president’s cabinet. Also, there is student representation in the budgeting process for the university. This does several things, but

most importantly, it gives the students an insight into the difficulties and challenges of running the university. Furthermore, it gives the students a sense of ownership and pride in *their* university. After they graduate, they have a sense of accomplishment and pride in the fact that they not only attended, but helped form, the institution.

Secondly, the alumni association needs to take an active role in the lives of the students. If the association is supportive of the students and aids them during their time at the university, they will be more active once they graduate. This can be accomplished through many avenues. The goal of all of these activities is to put the alumni association's name in front of the students as often as possible. Again, it is never too early to start this process. For example, a metropolitan university located in Nevada hosts a welcoming celebration for its incoming freshman at the same time it hosts a reception for the parents of the traditional students.

At both events, the alumni association makes a pledge to help support the students so that they can be successful and outlines the existing student programs and opportunities. It is imperative that the students, and parents, feel that the association is a valuable tool at the disposal of students.

This process of maintaining contact with the students must continue throughout the student's academic career. Student alumni associations (SAA) have been developed at many institutions. These sponsor a number of events and programs throughout the year aimed at helping students while they are still on campus: events range from helping them move into the dorms, baby-sitting for those with children, and social gatherings, to the sponsorship of lecture series. The important element is to keep this a student organization. They are the ones who know the needs and desires of the student population. The alumni association, and the university, can use this body as a focus group for impending policy and decision-making purposes if they allow the students to be just that, students.

Probably the most successful example of a such a program is "Ask an Alum," sponsored by several universities, both traditional and metropolitan. The program directly pairs students with alumni, and it is centered around the occupational field that the student wishes to enter. The student is given a list of alumni who are currently working in the selected field/industry and can contact an alum for advice about current classes and how they apply to the real world. This program allows students to explore opportunities before graduation, and also generates support from the alumni, who can give back directly to their alma mater without writing a check.

Inviting students to alumni events is also an interesting way to include them. At a recent reunion for alumni graduating in the 1940's, selected students participated in all programs and were able to hear what the campus was like in that era and about many of the traditions then. They were also able to ask the participants questions about student life and compare it to their own. The interaction was vital. The students were also in charge of leading campus tours, and students and alumni together learned how much their university had grown. Interestingly, on the evaluation of the reunion, almost every alum either directly mentioned a student or that they had enjoyed the students second only to seeing old friends.

Involvement with students by the alumni office also directly benefits the office's database management. One of the biggest challenges in alumni work is keeping and maintaining a good—not even great, but a good—database. Most alumni associations would be very happy if only 10-15 percent of their alumni were “lost.” They would be even happier if they had complete information (e.g. employment, spouse, children) on 50 percent of their database. Why are these numbers so low? Simple. An alum usually has no particular reason to update the information. Recently, in fact, one of the staff people in our own office updated her record at her alma mater. Her spouse was furious! “Why did you do that? Now they will call us and ask for money!” The time to change that perception is when they are students. In order to keep an accurate database, we rely on the information provided by the alumni. If they do not have a reason to provide that information, or do not want to provide it, we have a problem. It is the role of the alumni association, therefore, to provide students with compelling reasons for maintaining contact when they are alumni. Continual positive contact with the students is key to forging a long-term relationship.

One event that directly helps the database is Boise State's Graduation Celebration. This annual event is sponsored by the alumni association to honor and congratulate the graduating seniors. In very simple terms, it is an old fashioned barbeque. Graduating seniors get two free tickets when they return a form on which they provide their new address and employment information. At the event itself, all of the senior leaders of the university cook and serve the food for the graduating seniors. Imagine the looks the president of the university received when he donned his chef's cap! Furthermore, the local press use this event as an ideal opportunity to show the positive personality of the university.

The Current Alumni Base

Now, what about the current alumni base? How does one go about developing a strong base of existing alumni? First, and before the alumni office goes out to start the building process, it should investigate the individual and unique characteristics of its alumni.

Typically, the alumni base of metropolitan universities has very distinct features that separate it from those of the traditional university. Most of these characteristics can be discovered through the registrar's office—the demographics of current students turn into the demographics of the alumni.

Metropolitan university students are older. On average they graduate in six years or more, with a wide range from less than four to more than ten years in some cases. Most students work full time and have family responsibilities in addition to taking courses. Graduating class sizes are increasing each year, and graduates come from branch campuses more often. Research also shows that many students are pursuing the degree to “get a better job.” These demographics all give the alumni of a metropolitan university a distinct mindset that an alumni office must take into account.

For example, because the alumni base is typically older than those of traditional institutions, they face different challenges at different times. This means that the alumni association must work to develop different programs to cater to those needs. For example, the alumni office may work closer with the career center in developing programs that are aimed at career changes of middle-aged alumni.

Another difference is that alumni of metropolitan universities, due to larger graduating classes and varying lengths of time in attendance, do not readily identify with their graduating class. Class reunions will soon cease to exist, and, furthermore, the alumni base will have more of an affinity with a college and department than with the university as a whole. A growing number of them will receive part or all of their degree on satellite campuses or by distance education. These factors will have a profound effect on the alumni programs and development efforts of an university.

The alumni office must also take into account the geographic distribution of the alumni base. A substantial number of the graduates of a metropolitan university will remain in close proximity to the campus; many stay where they worked as students. Furthermore, since many of them had families while they were students, they are already tied to the local community. Hence many opportunities for alumni office work will exist within a small radius of the university. For example, more than 50 percent of the alumni base for Boise State University is within a three-hour drive from

the main campus. All of these factors must be taken into account as the alumni office develops its strategy.

Instead of using class years as the basis for reunions, the successful alumni office will find other means of identifying and segmenting alumni. The identification of "key links"—what will tie a significant group of students to the university—is imperative. An example is the Student Body Leaders Reunion, when former associated student officers are invited back to campus for programs and activities. This can be extended to student newspaper editors, student organizations, or other key links. Programming for these reunions might also pair current students with alumni who held the same positions or common interests. This combination of "new" and "old" will encourage a dynamic sharing process beneficial to both groups and to the university.

Since the alumni identify with the colleges more than the university, alumni programming for each individual college is a critical component for success. The development of alumni chapters centered around academic units is a way to accomplish two major objectives. First, it ties the alumni to the university via the college or academic unit. Second, it channels support so that the alumni office and the college can direct it to the benefit of the university. Without this or some type of check and balance system, the alumni group may pursue objectives that are neither the priority of the college nor of the university. Furthermore, the cooperation and coordination between academic units and the alumni office is crucial. Without it, events and programs may be scheduled at the same time, setting up a competitive situation in which nobody wins and the university loses.

Given the geographic distribution of the alumni base, a geographic chapter system may not suit the needs of the university or the alumni association. Thus, instead of setting up formal geographic chapters, the "geographic coordinators" may better use the alum's time and also that of the alumni office. For example, more than 70 percent of Portland State University alumni live in the Portland metropolitan area. The PSU alumni office does not pursue a geographic chapter strategy, but instead uses coordinators in key areas where a core group of alumni lives. The difference between the coordinator system and a chapter system is the level of formality: chapters must maintain a set of bylaws and periodic meetings, while the coordinator system is much more adhoc.

A new concentration for alumni chapter development is through corporations in the surrounding area. Because a company is located near a university, many alumni will end up working for large local corporations. By developing a solid relationship

with alumni in company leadership positions, alumni programming efforts can be targeted. For example, alumni working for a national grocery store chain based in the Boise area established an alumni chapter for Boise State University, and planned several major events around company events, university events, and community events. Synergies can be created both by utilizing the corporate culture and by tapping into the alumni base. For example, during the Homecoming parade, the alumni from one company assembled a “shopping cart drill team,” which was not only fun for alumni and spectators, but also displayed the company's commitment to the community and to the university.

Three tangible benefits have been realized by this alumni/corporate relationship. First, the level of interest in Boise State has grown at the company, as has recruitment of students and alumni, and there are other opportunities with academic programs. Second, the chapter has endowed an academic scholarship and is planning to add substantially to it every year. Also, the probability of receiving corporate gifts has dramatically increased, undoubtedly through the alumni office working with the leadership of the company and demonstrating the benefits of the university to the business.

Finally, given the demographics of the metropolitan university, the successful alumni office will have a strong academic component, which is necessary because social or athletic events interest only a small fraction of alumni while academic and cultural events appeal to a much wider and deeper audience. This does not mean that the alumni office should not be involved with the athletics of the university; it does mean that in order to reach a new audience, an academic element must be incorporated.

The best example of academically-based alumni programming efforts is Portland State University's Homecoming. Instead of promoting the traditional reunions and activities, they developed “PSU Weekend,” which, like any successful homecoming program is a total and inclusive celebration of the university, its traditions, and its alumni. Basically, PSU Weekend is an intensive compressed college experience. By using many popular professors and successful alumni and community leaders, the alumni association puts together a strong academically-based homecoming festival—last year over 1,500 alumni and community members participated in 28 courses (three of which were “walking tours” in downtown Portland), taught over a four day period. The director of alumni relations at Portland State has produced this event for the last seven years, and each year it has grown and developed. Now it is one of the university's most anticipated events.

The Community

The third and final strategic objective in building a strong alumni base of support is to work with the surrounding community. The line between alumni office and university spokesperson is blurred in the eyes of the community and the community can be a valuable source of support, both financial and vocal. Furthermore, by working with community leaders on events and programs, the alumni association can use these venues to support the university and the alumni base. For example, homecoming festivities should not be limited to those who attended the university, but should reflect a community-wide perspective that allows a total celebration of the university and all that it adds to the community.

To accomplish this task, the Boise State University Alumni Office works very closely with the Boise Downtown Business Association (BDBA) and the Chamber of Commerce, both of which are interested in finding new ways to promote businesses located in Boise. The alumni association works in conjunction with these two organizations to create synergies in promoting homecoming weekend and increase participation at its events. The BDBA enjoys the extra exposure it receives from alumni activities held downtown, and it publicizes the events to all of its members through mailings, newsletters, and speeches given by its executive director. Furthermore, the BDBA hosts a weekly 20-minute radio talk show that is totally dedicated to promoting and supporting the alumni association during the two weeks prior to homecoming. The partnership's synergies continually benefit the university and the alumni association.

One of the roles of a metropolitan university is an increased level of interaction with the community, evident in the level of outreach in continuing education programs and special events sponsored by the university for the benefit of the community. For the alumni association and alumni office, this is an opportunity to be embraced and to expand upon. For example, many associations partner with the continuing education division and offer abbreviated courses demonstrating the quality of the courses and professors, programs that are marketed to alumni and also to the overall community. Typically held once a month at a selected restaurant or campus site, topics are timely and are marketed to increase their value. In late October, for example, an expert in political campaigning discussed the upcoming elections, and, during the O. J. Simpson trial, two professors, one from journalism and the other specializing in legal ethics, discussed "Media and Legal Relationships."

Portland State University's PSU Weekend is also heavily attended by community members who did not attend Portland State. The alumni office is excited by

this development because it accomplishes two major objectives. First, it opens the doors of Portland State to a constituency that may never have visited the campus before. Second, it brings a sense of pride to the alumni—if non-PSU alumni are exclaiming about Portland State, alumni definitely gain an increased sense of pride.

The actual location of many metropolitan universities in the midst of commercial and residential areas is another key reason to develop a strong community tie—the community literally surrounds the campus. As student populations grow and expand, the campus is increasingly burdened. Parking is almost always a key issue. And as the university struggles with the issues of growth on campus, the surrounding community is struggling with the same issues. Through an open dialogue with the university, however, many issues can be resolved before they become major problems. The alumni office can be used as a tool to begin this dialogue, sponsoring activities and programs that bring the “neighbors” on campus to learn more about the university and show them that the university is also addressing the same concerns.

This philosophy can be extended to working with the legislative body. It is one thing for the university to press an issue, but it is another for a community member to bring it to legislative representatives. However, this cannot be done until the university allows the dialogue to begin. And it will only begin if the university instigates the process.

A Time of Change

These are exciting times for alumni and advancement professionals. The job is changing rapidly. The challenges and opportunities are changing even faster. We must be market driven, which means we must continually analyze the needs and desires of our alumni and find creative ways to meet them, as well as those of the university and the communities it serves.

The changing demographics of our current students are the driving force for what will happen to our profession over the next decade. The process of creating strong bonds to alumni cannot begin when they graduate. Current students must acquire a sense of ownership in their university, be empowered, and be involved in the lifelong process of being an alum while they are yet students.

The process of marketing to the alumni base is also in flux. The continually changing economic and political environments have forced the alumni office to rethink its strategic focus and objectives in order to reach its goals. For example, most alumni offices now offer some type of career counseling where ten years ago many did not.

In order for a university's alumni efforts to succeed, it must at all times develop key links back to the university. Key links are the way the alumni base identifies with the university, and, be it their college, major, or student organization, links should be identified and utilized.

The alumni office must also be open to the general public, so that alumni office and university are seen as positive and good neighbors. By developing a solid communication link with the community, the university can avoid many adverse situations, and the alumni office can assist in that process.

All strategic objectives, however, are useless if the alumni office is not creative and imaginative. These times are new for all of us. It does not matter whether you have been in the business for 20 years or 20 days, there are always new challenges and opportunities. Ideas and programs from 20 years ago are a solid foundation, but, without reexamination and fine tuning, it is unlikely they will be effective in today's environment. We need to be flexible and to take chances. PSU Weekend, for example, was doomed to fail, according to one development officer. However, the alumni office took a chance and it has more than paid off for the institution.

To demonstrate the power of creativity, a seasoned alumni professional, speaking of his retirement at a Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) meeting, recently commented about looking towards the future:

"Nearly twenty years ago I entered this business. I sat down early in my career one day and thought to myself about this crazy business of alumni relations. 'What would make my job easy?' I asked. 'Imagine if I could give every graduating senior an address that never had to change. Imagine if then I could push some magical button on a box and send each one of them a message. Imagine then if they would get it in a matter of seconds. Imagine if they could see the campus from anywhere in the world. Imagine if they could communicate with each other with the same push of the magical button. Imagine if we could have current professors talk with our alumni base without leaving campus. Imagine that. Would that not make my life easy?'"

What he was dreaming of did happen. In today's alumni office, computer systems are crucial parts of the communication process. The alumni office must always be thinking about the impact of new technology. Developing strategies to communicate and involve the alumni base ten years from now is also crucial. Without foresight, technology will become a nemesis, not a tool.

Therefore, the last, and most important alumni strategic objective is to imagine. Because with imagination, it will happen.