Students and Alumni – Enhancing Each Others’ Experiences

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Engaging alumni and students to create a pipeline of support in terms of giving, volunteering, and advocacy is vital to sustaining and growing institutions of higher education.

In their attempts to engage students and alumni, many schools have focused on their relationship to the alumni office. But by facilitating relationships between students and alumni during the university experience, institutions can help create deeper connections between students, alumni, and the school itself. This paper explores ways alumni and students can enhance each other's experiences as well as their connection with the institution.

The student to alumni experience is unique for each student or alumna/us going through your school's system, and there is the potential for each individual to influence and be influenced by others in the system. Students can help drive alumni to engage with their alma mater. They are the living, breathing evidence of what a university is like and are the justification for the institution's priorities. Alumni can enrich the students' overall experience. They embody a continuing, reciprocal relationship with the school.

Student-alumni engagement must go beyond inviting students to alumni events. Potential donors and volunteers need to hear the student story so they can understand the dynamism of their alma mater and, as a result, be more likely to support the institution's needs. Alumni should be a part of the student experience before students graduate, and should interact on a deeper level than sponsoring student events and offering freebies.

The best ways to foster student-alumni engagement is to involve alumni at all stages of the school's student cycle: recruiting; mentoring, modeling, and guest teaching; career planning/networking; and transitional rituals and ceremonies.

Admissions

After students navigate through the myriad of college admission booklets, apply to their list of schools, and finally receive acceptance letters, it is time for the big decision – which institution to choose. Academic program offerings, prestige of school, name recognition, life outside the classroom, financial considerations, location, tradition, and winning sports teams are just some of the important considerations in the student decision.
Aside from these more traditional deciding-factors, alumni can and should be a key consideration for students making their final admission decision. Students today want tangible outcomes and experiences. What is more tangible than a successful, involved person who graduated from your institution? Having experienced the institution themselves, alumni volunteers can provide firsthand knowledge of what the college experience can be like and can demonstrate what sorts of doors may open to students upon graduation. Regional alumni associations and the alumni office can be actively engaged in the recruitment, admission, and yield of a university.

At Colgate University, regional clubs host prospective students at alumni homes. The clubs meet with admitted students and their families to explain more about the university. Over the summer, accepted students attend Bon Voyage parties, at which the regional club welcomes new students to the greater Colgate family.

Colgate and Wesleyan Universities tried to diversify their student pipelines by involving alumni from the cultural groups they were trying to attract in the admissions process to illustrate the institutions’ diversity and opportunities. Pulling in alumni from minority groups that haven’t been engaged by the institution shows alumni that their alma mater is serious about diversity and is taking steps to create a richer student body.

At Brandeis University, alumni are trained to hold informational and/or evaluative interviews with prospective students during the admissions process.

Schools with limited budgets and larger application pools can benefit tremendously from alumni support in the admissions process. The more you can convince a student that they’re not just going to attend your institution for a few years but will be a part of a larger community that does not start and end with orientation and graduation, the further ahead you are in your mission to engage and maintain engagement with students and alumni.

**Mentoring & Modeling**

Once you’ve shown students that your institution is a community and that alumni are a vital component of it, you need to maintain alumni presence in the students’ experience. An effective way to bring alumni into the student experience is to position them as mentors and models.
In looking through the student life curriculum, where does it make sense to bring in alumni speakers or invite alumni to specific student events? Students oftentimes look for real-life application for the principles they’re learning in class. Alumni can provide that illustration.

At Colgate, alumni are heavily involved in the sophomore year experience. After the newness of the first year has worn off, students often seek personal direction and mentorship. The sophomore year experience brings alumni back to campus for small group meetings and dinners, where they begin to form mentoring relationships with students and help provide guidance and direction.

Colgate alumni also teach an eight week non-credit course on self reflection for sophomores. Each alumna/us has a particular background that helps students explore their own vision and life direction. Students from the course make deep connections with alumni who teach the course and whom they meet through career exploration assignments.

The Office of LGBTQ Affairs at Colgate, staffed by an entry level position and with limited funds, reaches out to alumni for various programs: being out at places of employment, adopting children, and same gender marriages as well programs that related to the alumni employment, which was interesting to many students who did not necessarily identify as LGBTQ. The initiative helped re-engage alumni and helped develop a database of supportive and out alumni.

When alumni are included in the student experience, some natural mentoring relationships may occur – most certainly at a broader level, if not at the individual level. Either way, alumni are engaged with their institution and students are shown what it means to be an active and engaged alumna/us and a part of the community post-graduation.

Academic Impressions

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Career Planning & Networking

Career networking creates a natural opportunity to develop a connection between alumni and students and positions alumni as not only mentors and models, but as career resources. Since career networking becomes a priority for graduating students and young alumni, career resource programs serve to create a smoother transition from student to alumna/us, keeping students and young alumni connected to the institution as they move into the working world. Career networking creates a valuable volunteer opportunity and engagement tool for the alumni involved and shows students and young alumni how they can stay involved with their institution.

While senior year experiences that involve career programming are common, career development can start earlier in the undergraduate experience. Simple programs like career shadowing opportunities with alumni during semester breaks allow students to explore specific careers and connect them with alumni.

SUNY Geneseo uses a Spring break externship opportunity. Students are paired with alumni in careers of interest and are included in a large group meeting with alumni in different industries. Externships are set on a rotational basis in geographic areas with large concentrations of alumni. The externship experience is based on a cohort model. Students learn about and share their individual experiences and build cohesion through common experiences, which helps them see the importance of being part of the alumni community.

A host of opportunities for student/alumni career networking can occur on campus, as well. At the University of Texas at El Paso, the office of alumni relations and the office of career services has partnered to host the Alumni/Student Connection Reception. The reception connects UTEP alumni representing corporations and employers nationally with current UTEP students in an informal setting and provides opportunities to make connections and develop possible mentorship relationships for future employment.

Transitional Rituals and Ceremonies

Going to college and graduating from it are rites of passage, and alumni shops should involve alumni in the rite of passage experience. Some institutions have alumni speak at orientation or convocation or find other ways to involve alumni in the rituals and traditions created for new students. By involving alumni in orientation, convocation, and commencement rites, you can create a meaningful impression of what alumni mean to the institution.
Senior year and graduation bring with them a multitude of rituals and ceremonies, and with them more opportunities for enhancing the experience and how students see their institutional community by involving alumni.

According to Gardner and Van de Veer's book *The Senior Year Experience* (1998), there are three main components of the SYE movement: to bring integration and closure to the undergraduate experience, to provide students with an opportunity for reflection on the meaning of their college experience, and to facilitate graduating students’ transition to post-college life. Each of these components is critical to the culminating event of a student graduating from college. Emory University uses a powerful ritual called Candlelight Crossover to illustrate these values for their graduating seniors. After a reception for seniors with a speaker and a presentation of the senior class gift, seniors are given lit candles and cross a bridge from the reception site to the alumni house, where they are welcomed on the other side by alumni with lit candles and enjoy a dessert reception together.

Other opportunities include using alumni in any real-world classes or preparation offered to seniors, as presenters or in other capacities. Alumni should also be involved in graduation ceremonies and in inductions to the alumni association. In the midst of this transitional time, alumni offices should try to position the experience as one of a student taking a new role in the institutional community, not of moving on or leaving the institution.

## Stronger Connections in the Student to Alumni Lifecycle

By connecting alumni and students in different ways, the alumni and student experience can be enhanced at your institution and can create a stronger community of support for your institution. You can develop a student to alumni lifecycle where engaged and supportive students transition to engaged and supportive alumni that in turn help develop more engaged and supportive students.

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