Building Alumni Loyalty in an Online World

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Abstract

In an era of decreased funding for schools, and in a move typically reserved for four-year

institutions, community college leaders are focusing attention and resources on alumni

engagement. Yet, there has been a significant increase in the use of online courses, which may

challenge community college leaders in engaging an alumni segment of the student population

who may never have stepped foot on a college campus. This practice brief will explore the link

between online student experience and perceived connectedness to a school, and the impact that

has on future alumni loyalty. With the spotlight now on alumni building, engagement of the

online learner may need to be a focus that community college leaders address when investigating

ways to build a strong alumni base and increase donations from this sector.

Building Alumni Loyalty in an Online World

Research shows that students who had positive educational experiences and who feel connected to their alma maters will become active, engaged alumni, some even donating financially. Those funds can help two-year schools, which overall, during the last decade, have experienced significant decreases in state funding. Yet, before community college leaders can expect to reap alumni donations, an investigation into the increasing use of online courses and programs, and how that may impact future alumni activity needs to be explored. This practice brief addresses the issue of the importance of engaging students who are enrolled in online courses/programs, and if that engagement is significant enough to create loyal alumni who want to give back to their alma maters. This is important because alumni can help schools address the financial hardships due to decreased state aid. In her dissertation, Skari (2011) said alumni of four-year colleges and universities provide those schools a revenue stream, something the community colleges have yet to achieve. Jenkins and Glass (2010) surmised, "It may be beneficial for community colleges to take another look at their alumni."

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reported that, after adjusting for inflation, state aid to public two- and four-year colleges for the 2016-17 school year was almost $9 billion less than the state aid received in 2008. The available research regarding state funding provided specifically to community colleges is limited. However, leaders of all higher education institutions are faced with the dilemma of how to do more with less.

Enter the alumni.

In his foreword, Heaton (cited by Paradise, 2016) of Benchmarking Alumni Relations in Community Colleges, described the potential for community college alumni engagement as "staggering," with more than 12 million students annually. Heaton said, "Given the shifting

funding climate for community colleges, that is a statistic that these institutions literally cannot

afford to ignore."

The purpose of this paper is to provide community college leaders and education scholars

with recommendations for student engagement, regardless of how the students receives their

education, in an effort to increase loyal alumni bases. These recommendations will stem from

literature reviewed that is related to the link between student engagement and experiences and

alumni activity and donations.

Four-year institutions know this practice as their alumni show school pride not only by

wearing team sweatshirts during football season but with their dollars year round. The Council

for Aid to Education reported colleges and universities raised $43.6 billion in 2017 with gifts

from alumni increasing 14.5 percent and totaling $11.37 billion. The generosity of alumni of

four-year institutions could be a glimpse into what could be reality at two-year schools. Lindahl

and Winship (1992), as cited in Skari (2014), listed data, including student experiences,

motivations and characteristics, to determine why alumni of four-year schools donate. Skari

(2014) said, "By knowing what characteristics affect giving, institutions prioritize their time and

efforts to those alumni most likely to give."

While there is limited available research on the donor motives of community college

alumni, Skari (2014) referenced the social exchange theory regarding a study on those motives.

In relation to student experience, motives such as age, wealth and donations to other entities

were much the same for alumni from two- and four-year schools. Factors solely related to

community college alumni likely to donate include that students who earn associate degrees are

twice as likely to give, and those who ultimately earn a higher degree at a four-year school and

give to that entity, are four times as likely to give to their two-year schools. Binns, as cited in

Gardner (2013), expressed frustration with the myth that alumni of both community and four-year schools only give to the four-year institutions. Binns stated, "They give to the four-year because the four-year asks for it and the two-year doesn't."

Step up Engagement Efforts

Yet, community colleges are stepping up their alumni engagement game. The Benchmarking Alumni Relations in Community Colleges (Paradise, 2016) study reports that although slow to emerge, community colleges now are focusing time and resources to developing alumni relations. Some colleges have delegated the duties to staff while others have added staff positions whose sole jobs are building alumni relations. The increase in efforts to reach alumni − 61 percent of survey participants reported having fulltime alumni relations staff in 2015 compared to 54 percent in 2012 − as well as the increase in fundraising efforts, may be working. Participants in the 2015 study noted in Benchmarking Alumni Relations in Community Colleges (Paradise, 2016) reported an increase in the number of financial gifts made to their community colleges or foundations during the fiscal year. In addition, the study reported an increase in the total amount contributed during the same time frame.

Although many community colleges now have designated alumni engagement staff, leaders of the schools may want to concentrate first on engaging current students, particularly the online learners. Yet, engaging those students, who may or may not have an attachment to their school because they never enter brick and mortar facilities, might prove to be a huge challenge.

Online Education, Satisfaction and Engagement

According to the Community College Research Center, during the fall semester of 2015, approximately 6 million students, roughly 30 % of all community college students, took at least one online course. In addition, the 2018 Online Trends in Education Report noted 76 % of survey

participants reported an increase in demand for online education, and 25 % of two-year schools would increase their budgets for online program development.

But, don't assume the use of and demand for online courses/programs means student satisfaction as research is conflicted. Moskal et. al (2006), cited in Tiger and Preston (2013) reported 83% of online students surveyed were satisfied with their online courses because of "convenience and flexibility" yet only 39% of online students "felt their courses were equivalent to the traditional classroom setting." In contrast, Nowell (2011), cited in Tiger and Preston (2013), claimed uniformity between student satisfaction for online and traditional courses. Tiger and Preston (2013) report satisfaction discrepancies are relative to the satisfaction levels of online versus traditional students.

Increase Student Satisfaction for Future Alumni Donors

Despite the need for research specifically regarding online student satisfaction, there is agreement on the link between student satisfaction and alumni donors. According to Sun, Hoffman, and Grady (2007), "An argument exists that alumni who were treated favorably as students, who were satisfied with their academic experiences, and who believe their college education contributed to their career success are more inclined to give as alumni than those with less favorable feelings and beliefs."

Brawley (1981), cited in Drezner (2011) said if relationships aren't developed while alumni are students, there is slim chance of active alumni participation after graduation. According to Brawley, "If you are going to develop responsive alumni you don't do it by talking to them when they are in their caps and gowns ready to go, and then expect them to respond by giving handsome gifts to the college."

Generate Positive Student Experiences

Literature shows the importance of generating positive student experiences and acknowledges the link to creating strong alma mater bonds starts with peers. McAlexander and Koenig (2010) said students form bonds, many that last a lifetime, through diverse relationships, including commonalities in program study, areas of hobby/interest, and sports and recreation. Without those relationships that develop while in school, students have a hard time connecting to their alma mater after they have graduated (B. Kruse, personal communication, November 13, 2018). Kruse, who serves as Mid-Plains Community College director of institutional advancement and alumni coordinator, said, "An alumni's engagement with their college connects to the experiences they had with their friends. It's not about the experience with their instructors as much as with their peers."

Research by Lohnes and Nekvasil (2016) emphasizes the engagement link between students and their schools can be attributed to instructors as well. Lohnes and Nekvasil outlined six positive undergraduate experiences that could increase the likelihood of a student being emotionally attached to their alma mater: A professor who cares about them as a person, a mentor who encourages their goals, an instructor who incites learning excitement, being active in extracurricular activities, undertaking a longer-than-a-semester project, and participating in an internship that has them use the knowledge they've gained. The 2014 Gallup-Purdue Index (Great Jobs Great Lives) study showed only 3% of all U.S. graduates reported experiencing all six elements of support and experiential learning. Acting on this information could provide substantial opportunity for colleges to increase the percentage of graduates who strongly agree with all six critical experiences, and could, potentially, increase the percentage of alumni who feel attached to their schools and want to donate.

Engage the Online Learner

Engagement of students is crucial regardless of course delivery, yet, may be more important with online learners who are in a "physically isolated environment," according to Mandernach (2009). "As such, online educators must be especially diligent in their quest to actively engage students in the learning process," Mandernach said. Ruhe (2006), cited in Mandernach, (2009), said cognitive engagement of the student goes beyond learning information to include "intrinsic motivation, positive affect, persistence, effort and self-confidence" traits.

Although online education is increasing in popularity, college leaders may be realizing the importance of engagement and now are promoting and utilizing hybrid/blended courses to bring online students to the physical campus, even if only rarely. The 2018 Online Education Trends Report claims 64% of students currently enrolled in an online degree or certificate program visited a campus location by choice or because of an in-person requirement, an increase from 52% last year. In 2017, 36 % of online students reported their online courses were completely online and that they never visited campus compared to 47 % in 2016.

Community college leaders could benefit from the literature on programs developed specifically to address engagement of the online student. Betts (2008) detailed the Online Human Touch (OHT) framework, which was developed to ensure engagement of students in an online master program. The premise is that online education must reach beyond discussion boards and email communication with instructors, and should be personalized to ensure that student engagement occurs in and outside of coursework. The OHT concept, which Betts deemed as a "holistic approach," begins in the application process and develops concurrently with relationships between the student and the program director, instructor and support staff.

"It is a bond based on human interaction fostered through instruction, programming, and personalized engagement with potential students, matriculated students, and alumni," Betts said.

While there are many recommendations and theories regarding engagement with the online learner, Shiels (2016) said more research is needed on how to specifically reach alumni of online programs, despite increasing popularity of such programs. Shiels recommends leaders not wait, but to form "emotional connections and lasting bonds" while the alumni still are students. According to Shiels, "Given that the No. 1 reason alumni stay connected to their colleges and universities is a positive student experience, how can we build lasting relationships with alumni whose interactions with their alma maters have taken place largely online?"

Kruse (personal communication, December 13, 2018) acknowledged that the influx of online learning has made it is more difficult for students to engage with their peers, instructors, really anyone associated with the college, and vice versa. "With online students, you don't have the same opportunities as with those on campus. They don't know who we are," Kruse said.

Conclusion

Community colleges are imbedded in their communities and through the open-access mission often are the main providers of higher education to the most diverse of students. They are important in their communities, as are the alumni. "Students are the best voice for recruiting students," Kruse (personal communication, December 13, 2018) said.

Pastorella (2003) said local alumni of community colleges take pride in their financial donations not only because they are supporting their school but also the communities where they live. These alum are passionate about their college, and appreciate the accessibility to education. Still others experience a "life-altering" event, perhaps through the guidance of an educator who influenced them on the trajectory of their lives and careers. "Those who achieve success often will reflect on the community college's importance in shaping their lives, and their resulting gratitude will stimulate support," said Pastorella.

Lohnes and Nekvasil (2016) recommend alumni relations organizations be entrenched with the entities tasked with the student experience − admissions, advising, career services and student affairs. According to Lohnes and Nekvasil, "They should further encourage efforts to engage students' hearts (support) and minds (experiences) beyond academic learning to ease the burden of attempting to engage students only after they become alumni."

Agreeing with the sentiment, Pastorella (2003) stated, "The task of developing effective community college alumni relations does not rest solely with development and alumni professionals; it requires a college-wide effort with a significant emphasis on faculty involvement."

In addition to a college-wide effort, research also shows that building a loyal alumni base begins in the classroom and continues after graduation or student transfer. Pastorella (2003) suggested that community college leaders who want to increase their schools' active alumni base target influential, prosperous graduates as a reflection back on the college, utilize alumni volunteers at large-scale events, create fundraising opportunities for alumni donations and develop great alumni relationships. According to Heaton (as cited in Gardner, 2013), "There are very clear correlations between how often a school communicates with and engages with alumni, and how much they participate, especially philanthropically."

Kruse (personal communication, December 13, 2018) said while donations are appreciated, the goal of alumni building is not all about money. It is about celebrating the students and their achievements and sharing those stories and building the image of the community college. "For many, this might be their only post-secondary experience. We want them to know it's a benefit to be part of the MPCC family," Kruse said.

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