

Anatomy of an Alumnus
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A college looking to expand its donor base might not naturally look to Lauren Wong.

“I’m terrible at helping raise money,” concedes Wong, a 2010 graduate of Claremont McKenna College. “It’s not one of my strengths, but I am very good at listening to people.”

As it turns out, however, listening is all Claremont McKenna development officers want Wong to do. Wong is part of a cadre of current students and recent graduates who have been tapped to engage in an unprecedented alumni outreach for the college, which is using students to conduct hundreds of interviews with alumni young and old. The goal of the “Alumni Interview” project is to get feedback from graduates and potential donors on a variety of topics, including how they might prefer to be contacted – snail mail? E-mail? Facebook? The interviewers also want to know whether alumni are yearning for more interaction from Claremont McKenna or already feel overwhelmed by what they perceive as a barrage of calls and mailings.

After hour-long phone conversations, alumni interviewers like Wong hope to be able to tell the college something about what makes graduates tick. They’ll have a pretty good idea of what alumni’s interests are, how they feel about the college and what might potentially motivate them to contribute. What the interviewers won’t ask for is a check. Indeed, student interviewers are explicitly told to let alumni know up front that the call isn’t a solicitation of funds – it’s an effort to better get to know graduates who may not have heard from the college in decades.

“I really liked sitting down and trying to figure out their psyche through the information I received,” said Wong, who now works as a strategist and trend spotter for a New York packaging and graphic design firm.

While the college hopes to learn about individual alumni, a broader goal of the interview project is to find recurring themes and trends among alumni who share certain characteristics. The college has commissioned a faculty member with statistical expertise to use the responses for the creation of a database, dividing interview subjects into 43 individual strata based on majors, professions and other factors. The hope would be that Claremont McKenna would have an idea of what interests and appeals to particular alumni – say female sociology majors who graduated in the 1990s.

“I think it will go down as one of the more significant things that’s happened in the development higher ed field for quite some time,” said Patrick Roche, Claremont McKenna’s director of annual giving.

While the college’s approach may prove significant, there’s no magic bullet, according to Donald Summers, who consults colleges about development strategies. While unfamiliar with the details of Claremont McKenna’s project, Summers said he would be leery of any strategy

that tried to “automate” fund-raising through predictive formulas. Nothing replaces one-on-one human interaction, he said.

“Let’s not lose sight of the fact that the old-fashioned tools, the ones that have been around for a hundred years, are still the best,” said Summers, director of Altruist Partners LLC.

Engaging Young Alumni

The alumni interviews at Claremont McKenna are but a piece of a larger alumni engagement strategy that is unfolding at the college at the behest of Pamela Brooks Gann, who has been president since 1999. The college has been at pains to stay in contact with younger alumni, who move around a lot and would rather connect with friends on Facebook than return to campus for a reunion.

“These people are seemingly dropping off the face of the Earth, and that’s not good,” said Roche, echoing concerns many development officers have about recent graduates.

Claremont McKenna is increasing its focus on young alumni, and Roche says the strategy already appears to have borne some fruit. The 10-year average giving rate, which is used to capture young alumni, was 45 percent in 2010, compared to 38 percent in 2009 and 39 percent in 2008.

Rae Goldsmith, vice president of advancement resources at the Council for Advancement and Support of Education, said tracking down elusive “millennials” is a shared problem across higher education. Land lines and long-term home addresses are increasingly uncommon for this cohort, and that causes headaches for fund-raisers.

“The big issue is to really find and connect with people who live in a cell phone generation,” she said.

Moreover, colleges are trying to respond to the fact that young alumni are more likely to support causes that are global in scope, Goldsmith said.

“Part of what we’re hearing is educational institutions trying to shift their message to make clear higher education is a global cause,” she said. “But we are hearing anecdotally that institutions are concerned about young alumni giving. It’s an important concern to have, because giving when you’re a young alumnus is more likely to lead to greater giving when you’re an older alumnus.”

To engage these young alumni, Claremont McKenna is launching a new program dubbed the Forum for the Future. The college will select about 10 percent of students from each of the most five recent graduating classes, appointing them as both ambassadors and consultants.

The college is seeking a diverse pool of students, hoping that the group of approximately 30 alumni in each graduating class will collectively have some friendship or social connection to each member of a class of about 300. To help ensure connections across alumni with varied

interests and social circles, Claremont McKenna is assembling something akin to The Breakfast Club – a band of students that might include jocks, politicians and artists.

“It’s a great way to identify a group of movers and shakers and keep them involved and engaged,” said John Faranda, vice president for alumni and parent relations.

The college will solicit the students’ advice through social networking, online forums and online meetings. Additionally, Claremont McKenna will bring the students together at an annual meeting on campus, where they’ll meet with administrators, faculty and development officers. The project’s \$20,000 annual budget will help cover travel expenses for the forum members, and the college is also hiring a recent alumnus to organize the forum.

Roche calls the forum the “ultimate peer networking” tool. The goal is to reach beyond the traditional leaders who might have been involved in student government, finding a representative group that can become “standard bearers” of the college and help maintain connections to a diverse graduating class. While the endgame is to keep alumni connected to the college for future fund-raising or service, Claremont McKenna also hopes to groom young alumni for more prominent positions in the future.

“You might not think about whether someone is a good candidate for a trustee two years out of college,” he said. “We might have to start thinking along those lines now.”

There’s also a desire to keep alumni attuned to the developments at the college, in part so they won’t be wedded to the idea that the Claremont McKenna they remember is the way the college should stay forever.

“Alumni think their experience should be sort of fixed in amber and cherished,” Faranda said. “And one of our goals in alumni relations is to [show them] evolution is good for a college; it’s not really bad.”

Commentary

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In today's resource scarce environment, it is no surprise that colleges and universities are seeking innovative ways to bolster charitable giving among their alumni. Stripling's article focuses on how alumni research conducted at Claremont McKenna College aims to find out what graduates need and expect from their alma mater. Claremont McKenna leaders hope, in part, that such information will be useful in designing cultivation strategies to increase giving among their graduates. The central question underlying their effort is: "What can our institution do to increase alumni giving?"

In perilous economic times, this question is on the forefront of every advancement executive's mind. Research on alumni giving would underscore consultant, Donald Summer's point in the article that "there's no magic bullet" when it comes to understanding what makes alumni give. Rather a complex set of factors collectively explain alumni generosity for their alma mater. Drezner's (2011) recent monograph summarizes several categories of theories as they seek to explain giving among alumni. Some of these theories examine how intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are played out in giving decisions. That is, to what degree is giving altruistic versus self-interested? Alternatively, social psychological theories such as relationship marketing, social exchange theory, and organizational identification focus on how institutional-alumni relationships may influence giving behavior. Collectively, the theoretical frames outlined by Drezner (2011) consider how individual attributes combined with institutional factor strategies may influence alumni giving.

Overall, research would suggest an alum's giving behavior is likely the result of long-term development of civic and philanthropic skills, behaviors, and attitudes gained prior to and after college. Alexander Astin's (1993) classic Input-Environment-Output (I-E-O) model is especially informative in this context, illustrating how pre-college and college experiences may influence philanthropic behaviors of college alumni. In short, Astin's (1993) model posits that pre-college experiences (inputs-I) are mediated by the college environment (E) which result in college outputs (O). College environment refers to institutional characteristics including mission, size, diversity of the student body, and overall campus culture. Outputs refer to values, beliefs and behaviors of students upon completing college (in this case, philanthropy).

Applied to alumni giving, the I-E-O model suggests that predispositions for giving are formed among students prior to college. While in college, institutional environments shape philanthropic intent and capacity. The interaction between pre-college experiences (inputs) and overall experiences in college (environment) will influence a student's overall capacity and inclination for giving to their alma mater (outputs). Past work documenting the importance of socio-economic and early life experiences in predicting civic and philanthropic behavior illustrates the importance of "inputs" in this model (see Weerts, Cabrera, & Sanford, 2010). As for college environments, Drezner (2008, 2009, 2010) provides evidence that engaging college students in civic activities (e.g., community service, civic engagement) prepares students for

future service to the university. Service-learning programs, in particular, have been shown to be positively associated with graduates' philanthropic behavior (see Astin & Sax, 1998; Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 2008). Overall, these studies suggest that leaders of advancement offices would be wise to consider a "pathway to philanthropy" among future graduates. In other words, how might skills, attitudes, and aspirations of incoming students be mediated by institutional environments, and ultimately impact giving decisions? Claremont McKenna's interviews with alumni will likely get at some of these critical issues.

Finally, a particularly intriguing discussion highlighted in Stripling's article is the idea that Millennial alumni (individuals born between 1982 and 2001) "are seemingly dropping off the face of the Earth" as stated by Patrick Roche, Claremont McKenna's director of annual giving. Alternatively, young alumni are said to be "more likely to support causes that are global in scope" according to Rae Goldsmith, vice president of advancement resources at the Council for Advancement and Support of Education. What these two observations suggest is that there is a wide gulf between what colleges and universities offer, and what young alums desire from their alma mater. If it is true that future generations of alumni are increasingly drawn to global causes, institutions might redesign themselves to become a resource for graduates who seek to connect their giving to important societal issues. Such a strategy aligns with research suggesting that today's major donors are more interested in solving problems than promoting institutional ambitions (Strickland, 2007). The national movement toward public engagement in higher education could provide advancement officers with models for constructing mutually beneficial relationships that serve alumni, institutions, and society at large (see Weerts, 2007; 2011 for a complete discussion). Such a strategy may truly "get at the anatomy" of the alum, connecting graduates with larger sets of problems for which higher education could be a solution.

References and Suggested Readings

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Discussion Questions

For those that may wish to use this article for teaching and/or professional development related purposes, here are some guiding questions that may be helpful:

1. What set of assumptions guide alumni programming as hinted in Stripling's article? How might these assumptions be challenged in light of alumni research?
2. Considering the literature discussed above, what sets of questions would you suggest Claremont McKenna College leaders ask their alumni?
3. Review Astin's I-E-O model as summarized above. What special challenges might exist for some campuses compared to others in connecting alumni with giving and volunteering opportunities?
4. What is the role of college in shaping the pathway to philanthropy of college alumni? What are opportunities and/or ethical issues related to this role?
5. Review Drezner's (2011) monograph related to giving motivations of historically underrepresented populations in higher education. How might changing student demographics impact alumni engagement strategies in the future?