Engaging alumni: remaining connected, not just reconnecting.

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Abstract

Alumni make invaluable contributions to the university community: not only financially, but also by sharing their experience(s) and their professional networks. Maintaining on-going contact with alumni is a challenge, due to the mutable nature of the alumni network, and because the relationship is often founded to a large extent on requests for contributions. Here we discuss strategies, currently employed or in the process of implementation, intended to address these issues. We seek to remain connected with our graduating students through a combination of student-faculty relationships and social media strategies, from the point of graduation. Furthermore, by providing opportunities aimed at helping our early-career alumni (rather than only seeking contributions from them), we hope to encourage an active alumni network with which our graduates will want to engage.

Introduction

Alumni are one of the most important assets of a University (Chi, Jones, & Grandham, 2012). They can play a number of significant roles in the University community, bridging educational institutions and their people with the wider professional community (Arceo, 2003). Senior, more established alumni provide essential support through bequests and public promotion of the University. They can connect the University with other institutions, raising awareness of or facilitating opportunities for current students, as well as serving as mentors and role models (Shannon, Kiper, Rebelsky, & Davis, 2016). Recent alumni can play an analogous role. Their more recent experiences transitioning from study to employment give immediate and authentic insights to students on the cusp of the same transition. Kiper (Shannon et al., 2016) singles out presentations by recent alumni on this transition as the most popular sessions in alumni conferences at Miami University. This concurs with our own observations of such presentations to final-year students at careers events we have run for our own undergraduates.

Maintaining contact and engagement with alumni is a significant challenge. Lippincott (2011) identifies alumni as highly motivated “advisors, advocates and allies in support of the institutional mission”, who (beyond their institutional loyalty) have a vested interest in preserving (and enhancing) the esteem of their qualification. However, as noted previously by Vanderlelie (2015), over 80% of alumni do not actively engage with their institutions (Coolman, 2011), and recent alumni see themselves as too inexperienced to contribute meaningfully (Irani, 2012). This situation can be exacerbated by alumni engagement focussing on fund-raising (Hall, 2016; Weerts, Cabrera, & Sanford, 2010), particularly as a first form of contact from the institution (Wampler, 2013). By contrast, alumni are much happier to engage when asked for contributions reflecting the esteem the institution holds them in (Gillian, 2018).

Such requests are more likely to emerge from the smaller organisational units of a university. We organise school-level employability events for current students, involving recent graduates invited through alumni networks developed from our own former students. We select recent alumni (1-5 years post-graduation) whose experiences provide useful insights to our current...
students. Their experiences may reflect challenges that current students will face: often such alumni do volunteer because they do not recognise the value in their experience, but are enthusiastic to contribute when asked. The importance of such interactions at the school level (or equivalent) has been recognised by various authors (Gillian, 2018; Vanderbout, 2010; Vanderlelie, 2015). Such targeted requests are difficult at broader organisation levels within the University, where requests can be more generic, seeking information about what style of contributions students are willing to make (financially, in University promotion, or in other activities) (Wampler, 2013). We see significant scope to better integrate these approaches to communicating with alumni, so that academic staff might have better reach toward our alumni, and our alumni might receive more appropriately targeted opportunities from the University.

The relationship between alumni and University is not just a one-way street, however. Beyond seeking contributions from recent alumni, there are opportunities for the University community to run events for the benefit of alumni. Students’ career pathways can typically involve a number of early stages, when advice or opportunities from University staff and senior alumni can prove invaluable. In this regard, the needs of recent alumni can closely mirror those of students nearing the point of graduation. However, while there is a growing body of literature on the inclusion of alumni in activities targeting current students (Chen, 2018), there is little regarding activities targeting alumni still finding their professional feet, even though this is something recent alumni desire (McDearmon, 2010). Vanderlelie (2015; 2017) highlights the importance of building an alumni community, and of academic staff acknowledging their role in supporting alumni during the early stages of their career development. The alumni conference described by Kiper in Shannon et al. (2016) provides opportunities for recent alumni to hear presentations from, and network with, more established alumni. It is unclear whether universities have seen supporting alumni as a part of their mission, although it is perhaps becoming clearer that, beyond any sense of altruism, supporting alumni can foster a stronger alumni community that can in turn support the university across its endeavours.

Timing is critical in developing membership of an alumni network. To improve the likelihood of long-lasting engagement, it is important that students are seen as future alumni (Gillian, 2018), so that there is an emotional attachment based on the relationships with staff that students develop during their studies (Vanderbout, 2010; Vanderlelie, 2017). Leaving alumni community building until after graduation is likely to be a case of too little too late.

Also critical is the means of maintaining contact with alumni. Institutional approaches tend to operate through databases of contact details, which are time-consuming and onerous to maintain (Coolman, 2011). Social media has significantly improved this landscape (Chi et al., 2012), making lasting contact more feasible. There is growing momentum to use professional social media (such as LinkedIn) to maintain alumni networks (Lauder, 2013). Undergraduate employability programs based around LinkedIn can serve a secondary purpose of connecting students to alumni networks at an early stage. However, the potentially passive nature of social media interaction raises difficulties: strategies to encourage engagement must be considered to engender active participation in alumni networks (Hayden, Kitchens, & MacLeod, 2010).

**Initiative**

Currently, we organise several employment-foocussed activities for our students throughout the academic year. Recent alumni play an important role in these activities, providing mentorship and sharing experiences with the students. Surveys of attending students indicate that the contribution from these alumni is highly valued, because it is authentic and current. We anticipate increasing the number of alumni participating in these events and liaising with our
Faculty Alumni office to improve our engagement capabilities. We will also then invite these alumni to reflect on their post-graduate engagement with the University, and on their interest in participating in a professional networking event involving more senior alumni.

While our recent alumni have experiences to share, they also have more to learn. Feedback sought from alumni at our career events indicates they are keen to engage in employment-themed events, to network with more senior alumni. Such events could promote engagement between alumni (newer and older) and the University, and provide a focal point for future collaborative events. They also serve to strengthen our alumni community and willingness to participate in student events. They encourage participation of alumni at an early stage, through events whose primary purpose is to support alumni, rather than seeking contributions. They could encourage our alumni to remain connected, rather than leaving us with the need to reconnect at a later stage. For optimal benefit, it is important to promote these activities to as broad a section of relevant alumni as possible. It is therefore important that we maintain connection with as many of our graduating students as possible.

Our initiative was developed in response to these challenges, with three key activities:

1. Developing strategies to encourage the establishment of social media connections with our graduating students;

2. Seeking feedback from school alumni more broadly, regarding their interest in specific possible alumni activities (including networking events); and

3. Running an alumni networking event in conjunction with welcome-back activities for final-year students toward the start of the 2019 academic year.

*Developing social media strategies*

As part of the growing focus on employability, our academic staff encourage students to engage with professional social media, developing LinkedIn profiles and connecting with staff, Faculty and University LinkedIn organisations. At both a University and School level, alternative contact details such as non-University email addresses have been requested from students on graduation (online and in person, respectively), and the Faculty alumni office has a graduate database from alumni LinkedIn profiles. This provides a strong foundation for a social media strategy connecting students with our virtual alumni community, but challenges remain.

Student engagement with LinkedIn is widespread, but not all students engage actively with LinkedIn. Developing a LinkedIn profile is not a formal requirement for students, despite being incorporated within components of various school programs. We would like to create further incentives for students to join at least one of the University LinkedIn organisations. A broader issue is the role of these organisational sites, beyond serving as a virtual corral for School alumni. The intention should be for these sites to become a focus for alumni information, including promotion of networking activities, but their content and administration is currently somewhat ad hoc (due in part to recent school restructuring). We would also like to improve the liaison between School and Faculty alumni strategies, combining Faculty strengths of collecting contact data from our graduating students and connecting them to virtual organisational sites with the School’s capacity to offer more directed incentives for (recent) alumni to remain connected with more relevant information and networking opportunities.

*Seeking further feedback*
We will survey our alumni on their interest in activities specifically targeting alumni. Based on informal discussions with School colleagues, and alumni who have attended recent career events, we have developed a range of potential School-level alumni activities. We will record alumni feedback regarding potential activities and their availability to participate, which will inform the nature of the alumni event that we hold in the first half of the 2019 academic year.

Running alumni networking event

We envisage running a networking breakfast for recent alumni, to which we would also invite more experienced alumni as panellists and a high-profile alumnus as keynote speaker. This event would be joint-hosted with the University alumni office, which has experience co-organising such events, can help identify potential keynote speakers and panellists, and other opportunities of interest to our alumni. We would follow up with attending alumni to gauge interest in future events, involving our current students or exclusively for our alumni.

Questions

1. What are the pros and cons of the strategies for establishing and maintaining lines of communication with our students, as they become alumni? How best can we seek and evaluate feedback from out alumni? What (balance of) approaches might work best? What means of contact work best? How can this contact information be collected? Who should be responsible for maintaining this information, and its currency?

2. Having established a means of remaining in contact with students, how can we encourage students to actively maintain associations with the University as alumni? In what activities, contributions and opportunities can we involve our alumni, for our mutual benefit? What impact might this initiative have into the future?

References


Engaging alumni: remaining connected, not just reconnecting, Emerging Initiatives


