



The Ultimate Guide to Navigating the New Landscape of Alumni Engagement

With Insights & Tips from over 150 Alumni Professionals



The role, activities, and structure of alumni relations have evolved significantly in the twenty-first century, and particularly in the past decade.

Historically, alumni associations have existed to maintain connections among fellow graduates, as well between former students and the university. Organizing reunions, keeping up-to-date on the personal and professional accomplishments of alumni, maintaining a directory, and overseeing regional chapters have, traditionally, been the primary purview of alumni associations and alumni relations teams at universities big and small. While much of this work remains within the scope of alumni relations, alumni professionals are increasingly facing new challenges and changes that are recasting the future of alumni engagement. To survive and thrive in this new era, universities and alumni associations need to adapt to these shifts, both to ensure their longevity and defend their continued relevance.

In 2020, universities endured the biggest change to their traditional practices in recent history: the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic has had sweeping effects on nearly every aspect of our lives, and alumni relations has been no exception. COVID-19, with all of its challenges, summoned a new age of digital engagement, forcing alumni professionals to rethink how they serve their constituents. More than anything, the pandemic accelerated trends and changes that were already in motion, necessitating experimentation with virtual experiences, new modes of digital communication, and novel technology tools. The pandemic is likely to have reverberating effects, changing the landscape of alumni engagement for the foreseeable future.

Even before the pandemic, however, many changes were already brewing. Driven by the rapidly changing world, alumni professionals should take note of important trends, such as the evolution of **alumni expectations**, the rise of data **analytics**, and the role of **new technology** in transforming engagement strategy.

Indeed, the modern consumer is quickly becoming accustomed to the conveniences that technology can provide. Accordingly, universities and alumni associations need to understand these shifting alumni expectations. Now more than ever, alumni professionals must reckon with the heightened demand for personalized experiences and reassess how they can deliver value in a digital world. As they work to meet the needs of today's alumni, industry professionals are also starting to recognize data and data analytics as indispensable tools. Likewise, technological developments like artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR), and augmented reality (AR) are still emergent but hold great potential for alumni engagement.

Our hope is that this eBook will provide readers with an updated understanding of trends in alumni relations and how to tackle alumni engagement using twenty-first century tools, tactics, and technologies. With data from over 150 alumni professionals, and with fresh insights, examples, and anecdotes from over 30 leading colleges and universities, this eBook will dive into digital engagement, the rise of personalization, tips to deliver value virtually, the fundamentals of data-driven strategy, the application of novel technologies, and the long-term impact of COVID-19.

Happy reading!



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CHAPTER 1

Exploring 21st-Century Trends in Alumni Relations



4 Important Alumni Relations Trends Every University Needs to Consider

In recent years, the models and structures that have historically guided alumni relations and alumni engagement have evolved significantly. In light of these changes, universities and alumni associations may be trying to understand what this new landscape looks like and seeking strategies to remain relevant. In order to keep up, alumni organizations need to recognize how conventional modes of engagement are shifting, anticipate changing constituent expectations, and determine how they fit into the new digital landscape. Looking to the present and future, here are four big trends in alumni relations:

1. New Organizational Models and Cross-Campus Collaborations

We're witnessing dramatic changes in how alumni relations departments are structured within universities. Rather than existing as an independent shop, alumni engagement activities are increasingly deepening their ties with development and advancement departments, as well as career services. In the 2020 VAESE Alumni Relations Benchmarking Study, 62% of respondents reported that their "alumni and development operations are fully integrated", while 11% are "in the process of integrating." This number has jumped 20% since 2017.¹

How alumni relations and advancement work together varies by institution. Whether through fully-fledged department mergers, formal or informal partnerships, or collaborative initiatives, strong working relationships between these two units are essential to aligning and advancing institutional goals and enabling a consistent stewardship experience for alumni.



For example, as Director of Engagement at Truman State University, Stacy Tucker-Potter oversees both alumni relations and annual giving, because *"they need to be working in concert with each other, and you need to make sure that your messaging is consistent across the board."*



¹ Alumni Access, "VAESE Alumni Benchmarking Study," 2020.

More recently, institutions of higher education are also breaking down silos between alumni relations and career services. This phenomenon is still a more novel approach, but it's picking up speed. Career services has historically remained in the purview of Student Affairs, but university professionals are increasingly aware of the important relationship between alumni relations and career programming. By working together, these units can not only drive alumni engagement, but create a more seamless transition from student to alumnus, while maximizing career outcomes for graduates.



Ryan Catherwood, Assistant Vice President of Alumni and Career Services at Longwood University, has led the charge in merging these two departments at his institution. Over the past five years, he has overseen alumni and career development as one, integrated department at the University. What are the advantages of such a model? According to Ryan, *Career programming, experiences, and education for students and alumni is a core aspect of alumni engagement.* By “collapsing the silos” between alumni relations and career services, Ryan has been able to serve both students and alumni better. What’s more, in a time of limited staff and budgets at many universities, *“The real advantage of merging alumni and career is utilizing scarce resources.”*²



In short, in many cases, alumni relations can no longer continue as an independent entity. Whether through merging with units like development and career services, or through closer cross-campus collaboration, alumni relations is becoming tied to other teams and departments within the university ecosystem.

² Ryan Catherwood, “FAQ: Merging alumni relations and career services,” June 7, 2019, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/faq-merging-alumni-relations-career-services-ryan-catherwood/>.

2. Rapidly Evolving Consumer Expectations

In the world at large, technology has given rise to rapidly evolving consumer expectations and demands. It's not just major brands and well-resourced corporations that have to cater to evolving consumer expectations – the landscape has changed for everyone. More than ever before, consumers desire personalization and connection.

According to [data by Salesforce, 64% of consumer and business buyers say companies need cutting-edge digital experiences](#) to keep their businesses.³ The latest data by Epsilon and GBH Insights also found that [80% of consumers want personalization](#).⁴ As [leading businesses like Amazon, Spotify, Snapchat, and Target take personalization to the next level](#), consumer expectations will continue to rise across the board.⁵ Alumni no longer want transactions, but instead appreciate personalized interactions they have come to know and enjoy as consumers.

In spite of this, Cuseum's November-December 2020 survey of over 150 alumni relations professionals revealed that 77% of respondents believe they need to offer more personalized engagement for alumni. Luckily, tools like data analytics, advanced segmentation, and marketing automation make it possible to personalize at scale, and universities need to jump onto this bandwagon!

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As Seneca Reyna, Alumni Relations Officer at New Mexico State University said it best,
“Building relationships of substance is the most important part of alumni relations.”

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To do this successfully, alumni professionals need to understand constituent expectations and deliver accordingly!

³ Salesforce, “The State of the Connected Consumer,” https://www.salesforce.com/content/dam/web/en_us/www/documents/e-books/state-of-the-connected-customer-report-second-edition2018.pdf

⁴ McKinsey & Company, “Personalizing the customer experience: Driving differentiation in retail,” April 28, 2020, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/personalizing-the-customer-experience-driving-differentiation-in-retail>.

⁵ Amanda Zantal-Wiener, “These 9 Brands Take Personalized Marketing to a New Level,” *Hubspot*, Oct 28, 2020, <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/marketing-personalization-examples>.

3. More Sophisticated Data

“Big data” is a buzzword for a reason! With the rise of sophisticated customer relationship management systems (CRMs), complex modes of data collection, and advanced data analytics tools, measuring, reporting, and understanding constituent data has never been easier. As a result, alumni relations professionals are learning to harness big data to deliver measurable impact. More than ever, universities are putting greater emphasis on developing Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), measuring Return on Investment (ROI) or Return on Engagement (ROE), and leveraging data to deliver the more personalized communications that graduates desire.

As industry professionals work to remain relevant and demonstrate their value, utilizing data and illuminating the impact of engagement activities is likely to become more and more important.

4. The Impact of Social Media and Other Technology

It’s impossible to overstate the impact of technology on traditional modes of alumni engagement. In particular, widespread adoption of social media has supplanted the ‘alumni directory,’ which was historically one of the most important ways universities served former students. In short, some of the most important traditional value propositions and benefits offered to alumni have been replaced by social networks over the last decade. At the same time, technology presents valuable tools to engage constituents and deliver new value.

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Kim Larson, Associate Vice President of Alumni Engagement Utah State University has observed this in her work: *“We watched all these social networks emerging, and we knew we had to get on board. There is a shift in how people communicate and they don’t need us for our directory. So we have to ask, what is the value of alumni associations? It’s the connection. We need to stay relevant and be a resource for alumni.”*

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In order to offer valuable information, opportunities for connection, and updated experiences, alumni professionals are turning to technology tools, digital communications, and virtual engagement to modernize alumni relations. As we’ll explore throughout this eBook, countless new and emergent technologies, including mobile platforms, data tools, artificial intelligence, mixed reality, and more are already making their mark on alumni relations. **For now, let’s dive into the ins and outs of digital engagement!**

Alumni Engagement is Going Digital - Here's 4 Ways To Get On Board!

As alumni professionals strive to adapt to the modern era, new technologies are playing a vital role. More and more, long-deployed engagement tactics, like printed newsletters, large in-person events, and on-campus volunteer opportunities, are being supplemented and replaced by new forms of digital engagement.

Through mobile communications, virtual events, virtual volunteering options, and virtual communities, alumni engagement is going digital – here's how:

1. Mobile Technology & Communications

First at foremost, universities are beginning to leverage mobile technology to reach their constituents. According to 2019 data by the Pew Research Center, 81% of Americans own a smartphone,⁶ and these numbers are significantly higher for younger alumni. Additionally, COVID-19 accelerated the adoption and use of mobile technology significantly – a [May 2020 report by the National Initiative for Cybersecurity Careers & Studies](#) showed that during the pandemic, texting increased by 37% and contactless payments rose by 150%.⁷

Due to the explosive rise in popularity of mobile technology and communications, alumni professionals have begun leveraging these tools to drive engagement. The latest data from the 2020 VAESE Alumni Relations Benchmarking Study revealed that alumni associations using SMS (text messaging) has increased 233% in the past five years, going from 6% of institutions using this method in 2015 to 19% in 2020. Similarly, the number of alumni organizations using a dedicated mobile app has increased 53%, from 15% in 2015 to 23% in 2020.⁸

Text messaging and push notifications hold great potential for alumni associations hoping to cut through to noise and capture constituent attention. Push notifications are highly visible, with [52% of mobile users enabling these types of updates](#). Push notifications also have an opening rate [50% higher than that of email marketing and their click rate was 7 times higher than that of email marketing](#).⁹

⁶ Pew Research Center, “Mobile Fact Sheet,” June 12, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile/>

⁷ National Initiative for Cybersecurity Careers & Studies, “The Evolution of Smartphones During a Global Pandemic,” accessed March 2, 2021, <https://niccs.cisa.gov/about-niccs/featured-stories/evolution-smartphones-during-global-pandemic>

⁸ Alumni Access, “VAESE Alumni Benchmarking Study,” 2020.

⁹ Cuseum, “Reaching Your Members with On-Demand Push Notifications,” March 2, 2021, <https://cuseum.com/blog/2021/3/1/reaching-your-members-with-on-demand-push-notifications>.

As a result, many alumni relations teams understand the importance of leveraging mobile technology. In a November-December 2020 survey of over 150 industry professionals, over 80% listed mobile technology as a key technology that “will become more important for my organization and/or the alumni relations sector over the next decade.”

Many schools, including the University of Michigan, the University of Tennessee, University of Texas San Antonio, and the New Jersey Institute of Technology have already chosen to distribute digital alumni cards, a mobile-wallet native solution that provides easy access to benefits and sends direct, personalized, push notification updates to graduates.

→ Read more: [How To Streamline Alumni Card Fulfillment With Digital Cards](#)

In addition to a meaningful engagement tool, mobile technology can boost donations significantly! [2020 data by Blackbaud](#) revealed that 28% of online giving occurs over a mobile device, which represents a 300% increase since 2014!¹⁰

In short, mobile engagement is taking over! With push notifications, mobile apps, and mobile giving platforms on the rise, universities are likely to utilize this technology at explosive rates in the coming years.

2. Virtual Events & Experiences

The enormous rise of virtual events and experiences is a newer phenomenon ushered in by the age of social distancing. In Cuseum’s November-December 2020 survey of over 150 alumni relations professionals, over 97% stated that they had “begun or increased their number of virtual events in 2020.”

Typically conducted over video-conferencing platforms like Zoom, virtual events have sparked a surge of alumni engagement, especially from those geographically far-flung individuals who previously could not attend in-person events. Due to the record levels of participation that so many virtual experiences have yielded, it’s likely that they’re here to stay!

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As Madeline Goldfischer, Assistant Director of Regional Alumni Chapters at Sarah Lawrence College noted, “By quickly pivoting to virtual programming, we have been able to engage alumni in locations where they could not previously participate in our events. We have had first time event participants from across the country and internationally.”

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¹⁰ Blackbaud, “Online Giving Trends,” 2020, <https://institute.blackbaud.com/charitable-giving-report/online-giving-trends/>.

Virtual events transcend the geographical barriers that have precluded maximum participation in the past, and moving forward, many colleges are planning to continue virtual and hybrid gatherings even after the threat of COVID-19 subsides!

3. Virtual Volunteering & Mentorship

Along with contributing philanthropically, engaging with communications, and participating in events, alumni volunteering is a key metric to assess engagement. What's more, volunteership is correlated to other forms of engagement, and **alumni volunteers are some of the best and most loyal donors**.¹¹ For that reason alone, universities place a high value on cultivating volunteers.

Unfortunately, volunteering for your alma mater has historically had a high barrier to entry. Volunteer opportunities can require travel, on-campus involvement, or reporting in-person to help out. Similar to participation in events, volunteer opportunities have often been located physically on college campuses, preventing enthusiastic alumni from deepening their ties with the university.

Now, this is changing. At increasing rates, universities are finding ways to offer volunteer opportunities remotely and virtually. For example, **American University has led the charge in offering a range of virtual volunteer opportunities** like virtual mentorship, virtual admissions assistance, the ability to host a virtual dinner.

Many institutions are also spearheading virtual mentorship programs, including Colgate University, UCLA, and Longwood University! These days, technology platforms like PeopleGrove, Graduway, Mentor Collective, and Almadbase (to name a few!) are making it easier to launch a virtual mentorship program and expand volunteership into the virtual realm!

When thinking up potential virtual volunteer opportunities, the sky's the limit. In today's digital world, it's easier than ever to empower alumni to facilitate virtual events, meetups, social occasions, career Q&A sessions, and anything else you can imagine!

¹¹ Jay Le Roux Dillon, "Alumni Identity: Meaningful Volunteer Experiences Are Best, But Far Too Few," *Evertrue*, June 26, 2018, <https://www.evertrue.com/2018/06/26/alumni-identity-meaningful-volunteer-experiences-are-best-but-far-too-few/>.

4. Virtual Communities & Networks

Last but not least, virtual communities! While social networks like LinkedIn have provided platforms for graduates to connect more easily, many universities and alumni alike have found new value in launching exclusive virtual communities to their alumni. These can be more private, curated, and friendly spaces for current and former students to connect over career opportunities, affinity, and more! The same platforms that offer virtual mentoring capabilities, including PeopleGrove, Graduway, and Almbase, often offer these types of virtual alumni spaces, which can play a critical role in driving student satisfaction and alumni engagement.

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Janet Kinard, Vice President for Engagement at Georgia Tech Alumni Association touted the benefits of their recently launched alumni community: *“This is a networking platform like LinkedIn, which allows folks to connect based on affinity and also contains a job board. We hear a lot that alumni want career development. This reduces the noise of other social media, and really provides value.”*

”

As colleges work to stand out in a sea of social media updates, emails, and digital communications, virtual communities will continue to skyrocket! There’s no doubt about it: alumni relations is evolving, and fast. From new organizational models to the mobilization of ‘big data’ to the upsurge of online engagement, alumni relations professionals are navigating shifting tides in order to keep up.

**Next up, let’s do a deep dive into changing needs and expectations!
To start, we’re exploring all things “personalization.”**



CHAPTER 2

Responding to Changing Alumni Needs & Expectations



The Rise of Personalization in Alumni Engagement – and How You Can Start!

Personalization is the backbone of modern marketing, and alumni engagement is no exception. Already, 80% of U.S. consumers are more likely to purchase from a brand that offers personalized experiences.¹² But, in Cuseum's November-December 2020 survey of over 150 alumni relations professionals, 77% believed that they need to offer more personalized engagement to their constituents.

That's a big disconnect!

To meet the expectations of today's graduates, higher education professionals know they need to get on board with personalization. That being said, you may be unsure what the value is and how to go about it. Luckily, personalization can be more straightforward than you may think. Moreover, many universities and alumni associations have already touted enormous success implementing simple tactics to customize alumni communications.

If you're interested in getting the lowdown on alumni personalization, we're here to help! In this section, we'll break down the what, the why, and the how of personalization – including some shining success stories from University of Georgia, Dayton University, and more!

What is personalization?

To start, what is personalization? Every day, American consumers are inundated with emails and advertisements. So many of these irrelevant mass communications fail to speak to individual consumers. Personalization is a way to engage constituents in this oversaturated modern market. In short, it's a mechanism to create a unique, customized experience for your audience that cuts through the noise of superficial advertising. According to Marketo, top marketing automation brand, “personalized marketing gives customers a sense of identity. They cease to be one of the masses, and instead become an individual with unique wants and needs.”¹³

¹² Blake Morgan, “50 Stats Showing The Power Of Personalization,” *Forbes*, Feb 18, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/blakemorgan/2020/02/18/50-stats-showing-the-power-of-personalization/?sh=6e48f292a942>.

¹³ Marketo, “How is Personalization Changing the Face of Marketing?” <https://www.marketo.com/articles/how-is-personalization-changing-the-face-of-marketing>.

Why personalize your alumni communications?

Personalizing messaging and communications has several distinct benefits. By offering more personalized outreach and content to your alumni you can:

- ✓ Reduce your “unsubscribe” rate (*As of 2020, the typical alumni organization’s unsubscribe rate is 0.5%, which is 150% higher than the average industry wide.*)¹⁴
- ✓ Establish relationships of substance
- ✓ Offer real value to your constituents
- ✓ Boost alumni engagement
- ✓ Show alumni you care
- ✓ Improve your donor pipeline

Starting to sound pretty good, right?

What are the best ways to personalize?

If you want to start personalizing alumni engagement activities, where do you start? Personalization strategies can range from simple to more sophisticated, so every alumni organization can start somewhere. Let’s dive into four ways to customize the alumni experience:

1. Establish Consistent Communication Habits

Because “personalization” may sound inherently elaborate, many universities overlook the first and most basic way to personalize: establishing consistent communication habits to build one-on-one connections. Every phone call, email, or meeting is an opportunity to go above and beyond for your former students, so make them count!



Building relationships with your alumni is just such a huge part of your job. Every time the phone is answered, we go above and beyond to make it a personal experience. When someone replies to our emails, we answer personally. I’ve started giving campus tours, and I tailor the experience to go above and beyond.



Seneca Reyna

Alumni Relations Officer @ New Mexico State University

In other words, personalization starts with creating an organizational culture where no email goes unnoticed and every staff person is empowered to foster positive connections when alumni reach out.

¹⁴ Alumni Access, “VAESE Alumni Benchmarking Study,” 2020.

2. Segment Content and Communications

Another way to personalize is through simple segmentation tactics. Using everyday tools like your customer relationship management (CRM) software or marketing platform, you can segment your alumni in a number of ways to customize the content they receive. For example, you may deliver relevant communications based on your graduates' field of study, affinity group, geographical location, graduation year, and more. This can help ensure that newsletters, event invitations, and solicitations are pertinent. **A survey from Mailchimp found that segmented campaigns had open rates 14.31 percent higher than non-segmented campaigns** - so simple segmentation can deliver!¹⁵



PRO TIP: Digital Membership Cards offer a way to deliver segmented, on-demand push notifications straight to every alumni's smartphone. [Learn more!](#)

3. Leverage Variable Data for Sophisticated Segmentation

If you're looking to scale your personalization, leveraging variable data can take segmentation to the next level. The University of Georgia, for example, was able to harness variable data to generate over \$250,000 in donations! Let's zoom in on how they did it:

UGA's 2020 variable data fundraising campaign started with the realization that they weren't making the most of their alumni data. According to Chatise Smith, Development Officer at UGA, this data included:

- ✓ Educational degree affiliation
- ✓ Interested causes
- ✓ Largest fund designation
- ✓ Most recent fund designation
- ✓ Degree affiliation designation

¹⁵ Mailchimp, "Effects of List Segmentation on Email Marketing Stats," <https://mailchimp.com/resources/effects-of-list-segmentation-on-email-marketing-stats/>.

Chatise decided to come up with a plan to leverage this data at scale. To do this, she spearheaded a direct mail campaign that utilized alumni data to personalize communications in mass: *“We figured out the best way to manipulate the data so that we could speak to each person personally and say, ‘We know that pharmacy students may be important to you. This is how you can help.’”*

Logistically, variable data functions like a very sophisticated mail merge, which is typically used to automatically add names and addresses from a database to letters and envelopes. According to Chatise, *“Variable personalization incorporates variable (interchangeable) data into specific areas of a mail piece such as the contribution card, copy, images, and more. Think of it as a ‘mail merge’ but more technical.”*

Using this strategy, Chatise was able to coordinate direct mail personalization based on each alum’s unique affiliations, and all mailings included suggested funds where alumni could donate to make the biggest impact on causes they cared about: *“For our contribution cards, we pulled in funds from each school or college affiliation, and then we pre-populated them with suggested places to give, based on what we knew about about each individual.”*

In the end, Chatise achieved enormous success: *“We raised over a quarter million dollars in about 10 days. This is proof that personalization works.”*

If you’re looking to start variable data personalization, the University of Georgia is all the evidence you need that it can deliver results!

4. Implement Marketing Automation

In commercial industries, marketing automation is quickly becoming the lifeblood of personalization, and it’s also picking up speed at universities and alumni organizations. In short, marketing automation is a way to manage and streamline advertising while deepening audience engagement. Marketing automation tools allow organizations to do more with less, to optimize engagement, and to nurture relationships at scale.

Many colleges have already begun to leverage marketing automation tools to customize their content and communications.



For example, Anita Brothers, Director, Alumni Relations & Engagement at Dayton University, has used automation to make alumni newsletters hyper-attuned to evolving alumni interests and affiliations: *“Our newsletter is totally curated content based on your interests and when you want it delivered. It’s just like when Netflix provides you with custom recommendations. Say that I’m a business graduate, but I’m interested in sustainability, athletics and campus ministry. Our system pulls all that content from blog stories and webpages, and then sends a newsletter specific to those interests. It’s incredible.”*



In short, marketing automation allows you to segment your audience to deliver precise, curated content to specific segments of your constituency. By delivering specialized content accordingly, alumni organizations can take their engagement to the next level. Marketing automation software also offers other advanced analytics, including data and reporting that allow universities to measure and analyze the effectiveness of their segmented campaigns, which can be used to refine strategy.

Already, **more than half of companies are using marketing automation**, and alumni organizations are likely to adopt this technology more and more in the coming years!¹⁶

There are many layers of personalization in alumni engagement. At its most fundamental level, personalization is a way to stand out in the world of mass communications by offering connection and customization to your constituents. In recent years, technology has offered new, more sophisticated ways to personalize communications that respond to graduate needs and interests. As the world moves away from transactional relationships and alumni engagement demands more emphasis on connection, personalization is likely to grow in importance for alumni associations and colleges of all kinds.

¹⁶ Email Monday, “The Ultimate Marketing Automation statistics overview,” <https://www.emailmonday.com/marketing-automation-statistics-overview>.

5 Tips to Offer Valuable Alumni Benefits in the Twenty-First Century

What does it mean to offer value in the twenty-first century? This is a big question that alumni professionals are grappling with.

As graduate needs and expectations change, so does the traditional role and value proposition of the alumni association. With the rise of social media, new modes of connection, and novel technologies, many alumni professionals may be struggling to demonstrate value to universities and alumni alike! Many alumni associations may fear redundancy, as former students turn to LinkedIn and Facebook to connect before their alma mater.

That said, alumni relations is far from expendable. To remain relevant, serve constituents effectively, and support their universities, alumni professionals are reframing engagement as an iterative, evolving process.

Alumni relations has changed and it will continue to change. To survive and thrive into the future, alumni professionals must continuously reassess not only what benefits they offer, but how to improve access to these.

In light of this, let's examine five tips to offer value to alumni today:

1. Assess the Value of Current Benefits

Historically, alumni associations have provided value to their constituents by offering resources like an alumni directory and special offers on services like insurance, travel, and more. However, with the maturation of social media in the last decade, it has become increasingly difficult for alumni organizations to offer unique value with such services. As a result, many universities are tasked with reassessing the value of current benefits.



There's been a big shift in how people communicate and how they want to connect. One of the biggest things is that they don't necessarily need us for an alumni directory, which used to be a big source of value. Now they can go Google somebody, they can go get on LinkedIn and find another alum. So how do we add value?



Kim Larson

Associate Vice President of Alumni Engagement @ Utah State University

In other words, social media has diluted the value of alumni associations' long-standing benefits.

Additionally, with the rise of companies like Travelocity, Expedia, and Insurify, which make it easier to shop, travel, and compare insurance rates, alumni discount codes don't hold the value they once did. Today, comparable discounts and deals are easily accessible online. This means that the types of benefits that were once the exclusive purview of alumni associations have been superseded by digital modes of connection and commerce.

As a result, many alumni professionals are rethinking what it means to offer value.

“

We have our own set of people that have unique talents and experiences. So what we're really diving into is how can our alumni help each other? What people really value is connection. How can we help make those connections earlier, and easier, and deeper?

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Kim Larson

Associate Vice President of Alumni Engagement @ Utah State University

While LinkedIn might offer the opportunity to connect online, the alma mater is uniquely poised to foster community and meaningful relationships. As Kim noted, by focusing on establishing strong, resilient, and resourceful communities of graduates, alumni associations can create longer term value and avoid becoming reduced to a “coupon club.”

2. Demonstrate Value Early

As alumni organizations work to stay relevant, it's also becoming increasingly important to demonstrate value early, when future alumni are still students. Universities that are able to position themselves as a resource for students can set themselves up for success in creating a community of active and engaged graduates down the road.

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As Ryan Catherwood, Assistant Vice President of Alumni and Career Services at Longwood University noted, “Alumni relations is all about the students. Students become alumni. So, what can you do to add value? How can you add value while they're in your own backyard?”

”



Anita Brothers, Director, Alumni Relations & Engagement at Dayton University has deployed a similar model which views student and alumni engagement as both holistic and interrelated: *“At Dayton, think in terms of value propositions. How can alumni add value to the enrollment process? How can alumni add value in the student-to-alumni journey? And then, how do we provide services and benefits for life to our alumni?”*



Many universities have even begun rethinking what ‘alumni engagement’ and ‘alumni relations’ encompass in order to facilitate a more seamless student-to-alumni transition that nurtures active alumni. For example, in her role as Assistant Director of Alumni Engagement at Northwestern University, **Imani Davis focuses specifically on student-to-alumni transition**. In supporting graduating seniors and arming students with the tools needed to succeed in post-graduation life, Imani works to demonstrate value while students are still enrolled!

Moving forward, alumni relations is likely to place heightened importance on students and young alumni as they seek to add value and remain in touch with the changing needs of their constituents.

3. Improve Access & Communication About Existing Benefits

When seeking to add value, one of the biggest hurdles alumni associations face is sharing what benefits, services, and opportunities they offer. ***This means that in addition to reassessing their value, alumni associations are also working to improve communication about their value.***

In particular, many universities offer lifelong career services to their alumni. However, most graduates do not make the most of these benefits. In the 2020 VAESE Alumni Relations Benchmarking Study, 44% of respondents cited “career services” as the “most valuable but under-utilized service” offered by their organization. Coming in second, another 39% of respondents cited “networking events.”¹⁷

This indicates that alumni organizations must strongly consider how they communicate alumni benefits, since this impacts their perceived relevance. Ultimately, this will require a number of new measures: in addition to working closely with students and young alumni, schools may need to do a more comprehensive assessment of how they share and present benefits. For example, COVID-19 spurred a growing trend of making career resources available online through virtual events, online networking sessions, virtual mentorship opportunities, and more. Going forward, the channels you leverage to share and serve resources will increasingly affect how alumni weigh their value.

¹⁷ Alumni Access, “VAESE Alumni Benchmarking Study,” 2020.

4. Consider Adding More Virtual Benefits and Access

In the same vein, as alumni professionals reimagine how they deliver value to their constituents, it's imperative to consider how accessible these benefits are in today's virtual world. In the past, much of alumni relations remained attached to physical campuses and regional alumni chapters. Now, alumni benefits are trending towards the digital realm.

In Cuseum's November-December 2020 survey of over 150 alumni relations professionals, over 85% either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that they need to "update the technology solutions and/or digital benefits we offer our alumni."

In 2021 and beyond, a surge of universities are turning their attention to launching virtual communities, [digital alumni cards](#), and online programs in order to offer more digitally accessible value that can be accessed remotely.

5. Innovate Programming to Respond to Alumni Needs

Times are changing faster than ever, and priorities once outside the scope of alumni relations are being reconsidered. Nothing illuminated this more than COVID-19, when alumni associations had to think critically and act quickly to serve their constituents in the midst of a crisis. Offering value to graduates requires that universities think outside the box to truly meet the needs of the twenty-first century alumna.

For example, the University of Maryland Alumni Association never considered offering a summer camp before 2020. However, with the onset of the pandemic, it became clear that childcare and in-home child entertainment were the most urgent needs for much of their constituency, and they responded accordingly:

“

Due to the pandemic, a lot of their kids were home and our alumni parents were struggling. So we decided to start a virtual summer camp. We called it Camp Diamondback and we ran that for six weeks with the programming that we worked on with our fellow schools and colleges. We had an engineering week, a music week, and a dance week. So everything was themed out for the campers and they received personalized boxes with activity booklets. We had to adjust to meet the new and unprecedented needs for our alumni.

”



Natalie Ross

Senior Director of Alumni Events & Programs @ University of Maryland Alumni Association

This type of agility and responsiveness will become increasingly necessary as alumni demands continue to shift. Moving forward, alumni professionals may need to step outside their traditional wheelhouse to truly deliver value to their constituents.

Let's revisit the question we started with: what does it mean to offer value in the twenty-first century? More than ever before, offering value requires agility, creative thinking, and digital savvy from alumni associations. Additionally, it's important to note that revamping *alumni benefits* may not be enough. Indeed, *how those benefits are shared and accessed may be even more important.*

With these tips in mind, alumni professionals can be well on their way to delivering incredible value to their constituents!

Providing Value Virtually: How Alumni Professionals Can Overcome Zoom Fatigue to Create Meaningful Remote Experiences

One of the most important ways that alumni organizations offer value to their alumni is through events and programs. At an accelerating rate, such programs are being delivered virtually. In Cuseum's November-December 2020 survey of over 150 alumni relations professionals, over 97% stated that they had "begun or increased their number of virtual events in 2020." Many universities have touted the boom of digital gatherings as one of the biggest silver linings of the COVID-19 era, with countless alumni professionals citing heightened engagement, increased participation, and overcoming geographical barriers to entry as the greatest benefits of our new virtual world. As a result, many alumni organizations are planning to continue virtual and hybrid events after the threat of COVID-19 diminishes.

That being said, in 2021 and beyond, it will become harder and harder to stand out from the crowd with virtual events. In addition to universities, businesses, brands, musicians, theatres, museums, and more have hopped on the virtual engagement bandwagon. As the availability of virtual events increases exponentially, competition for alumni attention in this virtual world has spiked.

By the end of 2020, many alumni professionals began to experience declining registration, participation, and engagement numbers at their virtual events. This suggests that as the world becomes more and more digitally oriented, alumni demands and expectations for virtual productions will rise accordingly.

Moreover, **"Zoom fatigue" is a very real phenomenon**.¹⁸ Many alumni may already be devoting much of their time to participating in virtual meetings and classes, and they would therefore hesitate spending their leisure hours enjoying virtual programs. While online events still possess enormous potential for alumni organizations, it's becoming more challenging to hold the attention of your audience digitally.

How do you overcome Zoom fatigue to deliver virtual value?

Even in a sea of virtual meetings and programs, many alumni professionals continue to achieve high participation and engagement rates. So, what's their secret?

¹⁸ Jena Lee, "A Neuropsychological Exploration of Zoom Fatigue," Nov 17, 2020, <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/psychological-exploration-zoom-fatigue>.

Although there's no magic bullet to overcoming screen fatigue, successful virtual alumni events have many common ingredients:

- 1 They offer holistic remote experiences, rather than just screen time
- 2 They offer unique value & connection
- 3 They respond to topical & urgent alumni needs

Let's jump into each of these!

Offer Remote Experiences, Not Virtual Events

Many of the most successful alumni events and programs have expanded beyond the scope of "virtual events" to deliver more engaging *remote experiences*. What differentiates an event from an experience? In short, an experience offers more than just an on-screen event and embraces a more expansive idea of *remote* engagement. While a strictly virtual event may include a panel of speakers on Zoom, a *remote experience* often activates participants with a tangible component that provides an opportunity for deeper connection. Let's take a closer look at some examples:

Wine Down Wednesdays at Iona College

At Iona College, Kelly Beyrer, Assistant Director for Alumni & Advancement Events, initiated "Wine Down Wednesdays" as a remote experience, which exploded in popularity among alumni. Rather than a fully on-screen event, Wine Down Wednesday participants receive a tasting flight of eight wines through direct mail. The accompanying Zoom gathering, hosted by the college, then serves as an opportunity to connect over the experience of wine tasting, where participants can learn high level wine knowledge, fun facts and wine trivia, and tips for wine shopping.

“

Virtual Wellness Week at University of Maryland

The University of Maryland deployed a similar model for their virtual wellness week. To accompany four days of wellness programming, alumni who signed up received a branded yoga mat and water bottle to round out the experience: *"We're adding in a wellness week where you can sign up, and you'll receive your yoga mat, your water bottle and other things like that. The take home piece is big for us because we have found that alumni have a larger buy-in to the event and do attend the event when they actually receive something at home that they can use during their experience."*

”



Natalie Ross

Senior Director of Alumni Events & Programs @ University of Maryland Alumni Association



Alumni Charcuterie 101 at Central Michigan University

CMU's most popular virtual event has been their Alumni Charcuterie 101. In addition to offering hands-on engagement, the event participants were mailed goodies like a custom wooden board: *"The virtual event that has been a fan favorite was our DIY Charcuterie 101. For alumni who registered, they received a wooden, Michigan-shaped board with the Action C [university logo] on it. Then we had one of our chefs on campus provide a shopping list in advance, and walk us through how to build a charcuterie board. That one was a success."*



Summer Sharrard

Assistant Director of Alumni Engagement @ Central Michigan University

Other universities, like New Mexico State, are designing branded spirits that can be used to enhance virtual events. According to Seneca Reyna, Alumni Relations Officer at NMSU, *"New Mexico State is the only university to have our own beer, whiskey and wine tailored to the university."*

In short, tangible items that facilitate connection to the university and to the online event can take your offerings to the next level. Moving forward, one of the best ways to set your virtual events apart is to *holistically reimagine them as remote experiences.*

Offer Unique Connection & Nostalgia

Another effective way to enhance your virtual events is to assess what you can offer that alumni cannot easily access elsewhere. In many cases, the best way to do this is to capitalize on the unique nostalgia that your alumni feel and to incorporate this into your virtual events. Oftentimes, alumni feel a special connection to their alma mater, beloved professors, campus traditions, and their college towns. Successful alumni professionals have tapped into this nostalgia to deliver highly-praised virtual events.



Truman Traditions at Truman State University

Truman State University achieved their greatest virtual success through a Zoom event focused on campus history and traditions. It also included a physical element for local alumni: *"We have some great locally-known historians who wanted to do a panel on Truman Traditions. We adopted a really neat way of doing it to include hybrid elements. For local alumni, we partnered with a favorite local restaurant, Pagliai's Pizza, to deliver frozen 'Palonzas' [a calzone-like dish and student favorite] to alumni in the area. This was a virtual event, but it had a specific geographical tie. It was a global virtual event, but it was also very local. We made it special for our alumni."*



Stacy Tucker-Potter

Director of Engagement @ Truman State University



Evansville in World War II at University of Evansville

The University of Evansville did something similar when hosting their fan-favorite virtual event, enlisting a beloved professor to hold a lecture on the university town during World War II: *“We had a history professor who is beloved by many do a virtual lecture for us. He volunteered to do it on Evansville during World War II. It was kind of a topic that was of high interest, because students feel connected to our location. We had participants from Washington, California, New York, and Florida. We were able to reach a great expanse. We had nearly 300 people sign up for that lecture online, and we received an email right afterwards from an alumnus who had never been active with it with the university. After more than 10 years this was her first event. And she felt so reconnected to the university that it prompted her then to send a gift.”*



Jennifer Whitaker

Director of Alumni and Parent Relations @ University of Evansville

Nostalgia and reconnection are powerful motivators, and tapping into these can help generate engaging virtual events. As you think through virtual programming, find your niche by offering value that alumni cannot find elsewhere.

Address Topical & Urgent Alumni Needs

Last but not least, some of the most successful virtual events respond nimbly to fluctuating alumni needs. For example, many alumni organizations have doubled down on their virtual career programming to support alumni in a time of high unemployment.

Additionally, alumni organizations have been able to step outside their wheelhouse to address urgent constituent needs. After the death of George Floyd inspired a national reckoning with deeply-rooted systemic racism in our country, many people were seeking educational resources and a community with whom to process these difficult events. In response, **Duke Alumni launched a virtual lecture series called Black in 2020** with their Black alumni and the African American Studies Department at Duke. The popular six-part series had faculty and alumni speakers, and **garnered over 7,000 virtual attendees**.

As previously mentioned, the University of Maryland Alumni Association launched their first-ever virtual summer camp in 2020 to help alumni entertain their children while working from home. While this might typically be considered outside the purview of alumni professionals, Natalie Ross, Senior Director of Alumni Events & Programs at University of Maryland Alumni Association observed that, *“We had to adjust to meet the new and unprecedented needs for our alumni.”*

To keep up, alumni organizations need to put their finger on the pulse of evolving alumni needs and desires. In 2021 and beyond, universities are achieving some of their highest engagement when they stretch beyond the traditional boundaries of alumni relations to meet the ever-changing demands of their graduates.

Alumni expectations are shifting rapidly, and to deliver virtual value, universities are often expanding the scope of alumni relations beyond its traditional demarcations. As the competition for digital attention intensifies, alumni professionals will need to think imaginatively, play to their strengths, and respond quickly in order to keep today's alumni engaged.



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CHAPTER 3

Unpacking the “Big Data” Buzz



How Can We Leverage Data in Alumni Engagement?

“Big data” is a buzzword that has captured the focus of business leaders across nearly every industry. As defined by IBM, “Big data analytics is the use of advanced analytic techniques against immense, diverse data sets.”¹⁹ In the commercial sector, big data has applications in everything from product development and the customer experience to operational efficiency and innovation. According to Intel, “big data analytics is a technology-enabled strategy for gaining richer, deeper, and more accurate insights into customers, partners, and the business.”²⁰

Outside of the commercial sector, and across higher education, interest in “big data” is intensifying. Many universities have adopted cloud-based technology and Customer Relationship Management databases (CRMs), marketing automation tools, data analytics technology, and more. That said, the applications of data in alumni relations and alumni engagement are only beginning to be uncovered.

With all the rumblings about “big data,” industry professionals understand the urgency to start making data-driven decisions, but may be unsure of the benefits, the potential challenges, and how to get started.

We sat down with Jay Le Roux Dillon, Executive Director of Alumni Relations at University of California Berkeley and expert alumni relations consultant, to explore this in-depth.

Here, we’ll break down the basics of data analytics, what technology you need to get started, top tips to become more data-driven in alumni relations, and the biggest challenges alumni relations professionals face when trying to leverage data. Let’s get into it!

What does it mean to be data-driven in alumni engagement?

In a November-December 2020 survey of over 150 alumni relations professionals, over 76% listed data analytics as a key technology that “will become more important for my organization and/or the alumni relations sector over the next decade.”

While alumni professionals understand the importance of leveraging data and data tools, what does it mean to become *data-driven* and *data-informed* in alumni engagement?

¹⁹ IBM, “Big data analytics,” accessed March 2, 2021, <https://www.ibm.com/analytics/hadoop/big-data-analytics>.

²⁰ Intel, “Big Data 101,” <https://www.intel.com/content/dam/www/public/us/en/documents/solution-briefs/big-data-101-brief.pdf>.

In short, data-driven alumni organizations develop clear ways to measure success, implement solid data collection practices to gather relevant data points, and leverage analytical tools to measure their effectiveness against those metrics. This enables universities to refine their engagement efforts and harness scarce resources towards the most impactful initiatives.

Data is increasingly important to adjacent efforts focused on personalizing alumni communications and content at scale and offering value to alumni. As consumers, alumni are already accustomed to the benefits of big data and analytics. For example, personalized Netflix and Amazon recommendations are data analytics at work!

What problems can data help solve in alumni engagement?

To become data-driven, it's important to understand what data can help you achieve and what problems it can help you solve. After all, you're not just collecting data for its own sake!

First of all, as of 2020, 65% of alumni professionals' report that being under-staffed is either "very" or "somewhat concerning."²¹ When staff resources are limited, data can be the answer to many of your pain points. By making data-driven decisions, you'll be able to devote limited staff time towards the *most effective engagement activities* and avoid wasting your resources on projects that aren't helping you meet your goals.

What's more, data can help you stay up-to-date on current alumni interests, needs, and desires. Many organizations still exclusively segment their alumni communications based on outdated information, like degree programs or former on-campus affiliations, which may no longer be relevant to where graduates are years down the line!

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, there is a growing trend of breaking down silos in universities - these days, alumni engagement teams are more and more interconnected with development and career services. This means that their success is also correlated. Leveraging data can help align priorities across these units, so that alumni engagement can be working on initiatives that facilitate success in advancement, or career services can support alumni satisfaction. In short, leveraging data can help align different teams and units across campus in ways that benefit the university at large.

²¹ Alumni Access, "VAESE Alumni Benchmarking Study," 2020.

What technology do we need to start leveraging data?

To make data-driven decisions in alumni engagement, there are some basic technology tools required. That being said, many universities commonly make the big mistake of believing a new, expensive, and sophisticated “tech stack” is required to get started. Organizations frequently overestimate the barrier to entry when it comes to using data in meaningful ways.

Most universities are already equipped to start leveraging data and can implement more advanced software systems as needed:

“

Implementation of new data systems or software in higher education takes two to three years at minimum. So start with what you have, or you'll be set back before you can get started. Starting with what you have doesn't mean settling. It means discovering the full capability of the many tools that are already at your disposal and deciding how to leverage them, which might mean training. In my experience, every place I've worked in every school and consulted with, there has not been a great understanding of the power of the tools that the school already has.

”



Jay Le Roux Dillon

Executive Director of Alumni Relations @ University of California Berkeley

To put it another way, now is the time to start with what you have!

Depending on where you begin, as well as your evolving needs, you may eventually want to enhance your systems. This may include launching:

- **A more sophisticated database.** This can make it easier to collect, store, access, and secure alumni data.
- **New data analytics tools.** This can help you test, measure, visualize, and optimize your engagement efforts.
- **Data integration tools.** This can help bring together data points from other units and departments across the university to develop more holistic insights.
- **Data visualization dashboards.** Intuitive data visualization tools can help illuminate key data points and make important information digestible to colleagues and stakeholders across your team and university.

These days, so many CRMs have increasingly complex storage and reporting capabilities. Plus, so much data analysis can simply be done in Excel. That's why it's important not to get bogged down by technology prerequisites before you explore what you already have access to in terms of data tools.

How can my alumni engagement decisions become more data-driven?

So, you understand what data can help you do, and you have the basic technology to get started. Where do you go from here?

1. Start analyzing the data you already have.

Just as alumni organizations may not realize the extent of their existing technology capabilities, you may not fully comprehend how much data you have to work with. For example, Chatise Smith, Development Officer at the University of Georgia, executed one of the most personalized alumni campaigns to date using existing, but untapped, data in their system:

“

We realized that we have so much alumni data. We know so many things, we capture so much information from these people, whether it be their interests, their participation in surveys, their involvement. So the question was, how do we use this data to get our constituents to respond?

”



Chatise Smith
Development Officer @ UGA

2. Survey your alumni - and survey them effectively!

As of 2020, only 48% of alumni organizations survey their alumni at all.²² This leaves huge room for improvement! Surveying consumers is the backbone of the booming retail economy, and alumni professionals can emulate the survey models employed by major brands to achieve success:

“

Retailers always want people to post reviews. They're constantly asking you to review things and to rate things. And that's a feedback loop that is necessary for those companies to get better and better at engaging their constituents - their consumers. And in higher ed, we don't have that yet as a business practice. But this is a feedback loop that is necessary for these companies to get better and better.

”



Jay Le Roux Dillon
Executive Director of Alumni Relations at University of California Berkeley

Surveying alumni is particularly important to understanding your alumni now, as compared to who they were as students. In today's world, when the average person changes careers 5–7 times, the degree program that alumni graduated from 20 years ago may not be relevant!²³ Surveying can help you keep updated records of alumni career paths, interests, affiliations, and more!

²² Alumni Access, “VAESE Alumni Benchmarking Study,” 2020.

²³ Dawn Rosenberg McKay, “How Often Do People Change Careers?,” Jan 2, 2020, <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/how-often-do-people-change-careers-3969407>

3. Refine your data collection practices.

In addition to collecting survey data, there are many ways to compile meaningful data points. In 2019, the The Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) launched a new Alumni Engagement Metrics (AEM) survey, which focuses on collecting alumni engagement across four “modes”: Philanthropic, Volunteer, Experiential, and Communications. These recommendations by CASE can offer a strong foundation to guide alumni data collections practices! [Read CASE recommendations and study.](#)

4. Develop metrics of success, and a ‘North Star KPI’

Again, being data-driven doesn’t just mean collecting data for its own sake. As Madeline Goldfischer, Assistant Director, Regional Alumni Chapters at Sarah Lawrence College note, the key to becoming data driven is to “*start with making sure your organization is aligned on what metrics will best represent success.*”

Jay Le Roux Dillon, Executive Director of Alumni Relations at University of California Berkeley, agreed. In his work, he has identified “Alumni Identity” as the key metric of success for alumni relations. [In his words](#), “*Alumni identity scoring offers a reliable and valid quantitative measure of a graduate’s feeling of connection towards their alma mater that requires no pre-existing wealth screening or giving data.*”²⁴ In his extensive research, he has also pinpointed “alumni identity” as the most important indicator of an alum’s inclination to give. Because alumni identity is an engagement metric that corresponds with propensity to donate, tracking this as a key performance indicator (KPI) can be a successful way to align alumni relations and development activities at a university. This is one example of a powerful “North Star metric” that can drive a data-driven culture:

“

I encourage my colleagues in higher education to develop some type of North Star metric for engagement. If you are going to go about the business of becoming more data-driven in alumni relations, you need that one metric for engagement that mirrors the dollar sign on the philanthropy side. The bottom line engagement in philanthropy is: how much money did you raise last year? If you’re going to be data-driven in alumni engagement, you have to answer the question: what is our bottom line metric?

”



Jay Le Roux Dillon

Executive Director of Alumni Relations at University of California Berkeley

²⁴ Jay Le Roux Dillon, “Alumni Identity: Meaningful Volunteer Experiences Are Best, But Far Too Few,” *Evertrue*, June 26, 2018,

While the North Star metric might vary by institution, aligning priorities, establishing clear metrics of success, and measuring engagement activities against these goals is key to becoming data-informed at any alumni organization.

Alumni Organizations Want to Be More Data-Driven - ‘Tradition’ Might Be Getting in the Way

Despite the clear benefits of making data-driven decisions, many alumni organizations may still come up against challenges as they attempt to reorient their activities based on evidence. More so than businesses and commercial brands, universities have long-standing and weighty historical traditions that continue to guide alumni relations activities, even when the data says otherwise.



The reason that data-driven decisions and data analysis are not really driving engagement the way that we say they should be is because data always runs up against very, very strong contemporary or historical anecdotes about what works. This is not any different than using data to make decisions at a retail brand or consumer brand, but it carries with it the weight of the institution and the culture of the place.



Jay Le Roux Dillon

Executive Director of Alumni Relations @ University of California Berkeley

For example, data almost universally indicates that soliciting young alumni for donations leads to higher “unsubscribe” rates. Yet, in 2020, 78% of universities still engaged in this practice.²⁵ As alumni relations teams work to become more data-driven, they often have to contend with “traditional” modes of doing things, and may need to work hard to create updated and iterative best practices that correspond with the latest evidence.

Alumni engagement professionals are only just beginning to explore the transformative potential of alumni data. By understanding the purpose, technological 101, best practices, and common barriers to becoming more data-driven, alumni organizations can be well positioned to begin the basics of making more informed decisions that make alumni relations such a critical asset for universities.

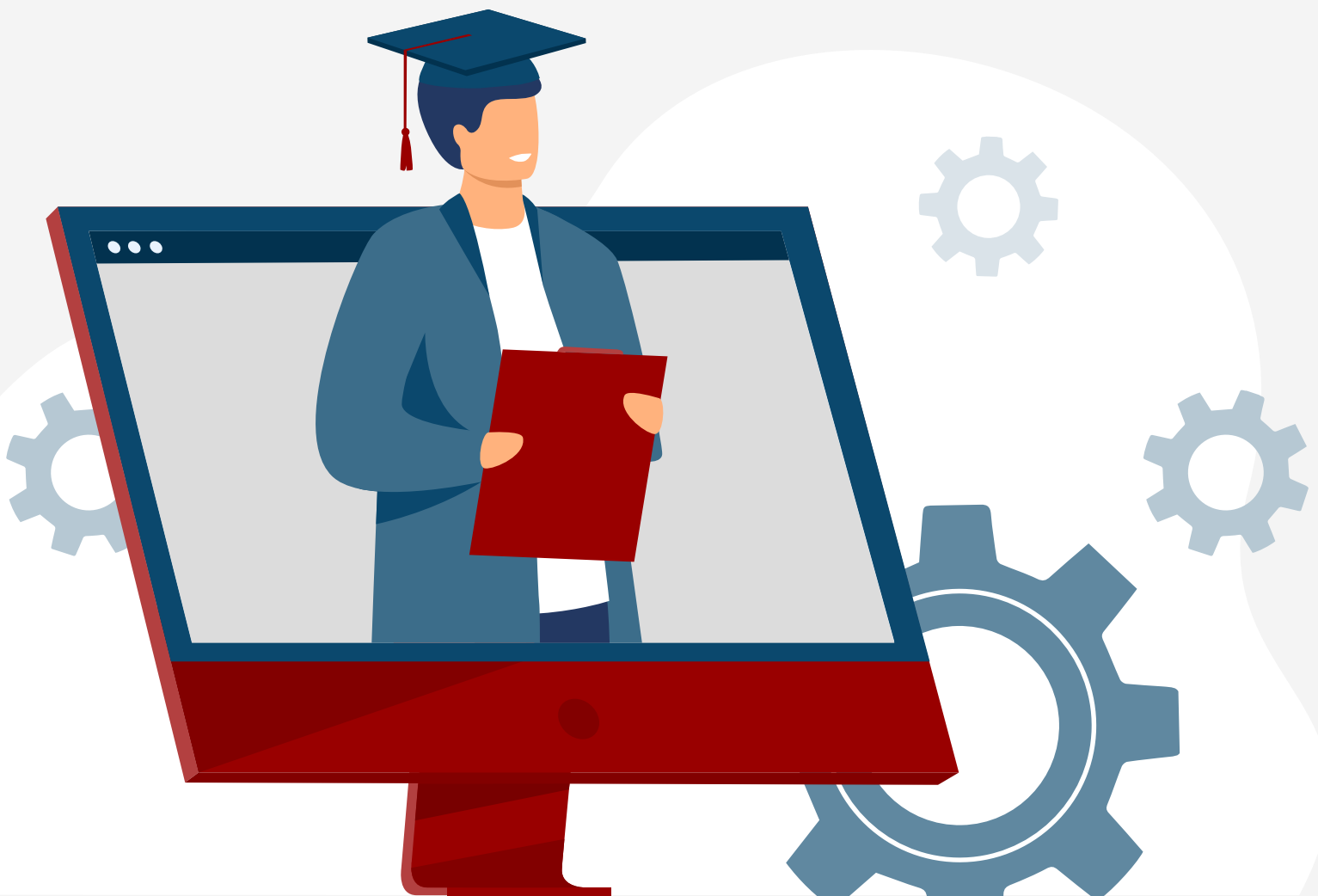
²⁵ Alumni Access, “VAESE Alumni Benchmarking Study,” 2020.



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CHAPTER 4

Emerging Technology in Alumni Engagement



4 Ways Artificial Intelligence is Changing the Landscape of Alumni Relations

As we've discussed throughout this eBook, alumni organizations have increasingly adopted sophisticated modern technologies that enhance their effectiveness. Tools like cloud-based CRMs, marketing automation, and data analytics, are quickly becoming more commonplace in the world of higher education. At the same time, more novel technologies are beginning to have an impact on alumni relations activities. Chief among them? Artificial Intelligence (AI).

While it may not be mainstream yet in alumni relations, AI has a growing number of applications in alumni engagement, advancement, and more.

If you're already skeptical, take a look at how AI underlies so many routine aspects of our lives in ways we don't even realize! Perhaps most prominently, chatbots are now one of the go-to ways for consumers to receive customer service. **By 2019, 40% of large companies had adopted one intelligent assistant or AI-based chat robot, and by the end of 2020, 80% of entrepreneurs were using chatbots.**²⁶ AI also enables customized marketing messaging for almost every major brand - in 2020, **60% of marketers planned to leverage AI** - and that's only the tip of the iceberg!²⁷

From supporting better product and service development, yielding optimization in manufacturing, facilitating the logistics of supply chain management, and streamlining financial fraud detection, **the business sector is driving innovative applications of artificial intelligence technology as we speak.**²⁸

As AI is adopted at record rates in the commercial sector, industry leaders, entrepreneurs, technologists, and innovators are also beginning to explore its widespread applications in nonprofits, universities, schools, cultural organizations, and more.

In the world of alumni engagement, AI has enormous potential that we're only beginning to tap into. From saving staff time, generating fresh insights, personalizing content at scale, to enabling more intelligent fundraising, alumni relations had much to gain from considering the potential applications of AI:

²⁶ Dana Jovic, "The Future is Now – 37 Fascinating Chatbot Statistics," *Small Biz Genius*, November 20, 2020, <https://www.smallbizgenius.net/by-the-numbers/chatbot-statistics/#gref>.

²⁷ Louis Columbus, "2020 Is The Year AI Goes Mainstream In Marketing," *Forbes*, March 15, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/louiscolumnbus/2020/03/15/2020-is-the-year-ai-goes-mainstream-in-marketing/?sh=78884af83664>.

²⁸ McKinsey & Company, "The state of AI in 2020," Nov 17, 2020, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/mckinsey-analytics/our-insights/global-survey-the-state-of-ai-in-2020>.

1. Save Staff Time & Enhance Alumni Services with a Dedicated Chatbot

Chatbots have quickly become the foundation of customer service in the commercial world. Also known as “conversational AI,” these bots are increasingly sophisticated and handle requests and questions from clients, as well as offer advanced assistance with processing healthcare claims and negotiating mortgage rates.²⁹ By 2025, it’s likely that AI will power 95% of customer interactions.³⁰

Already, chatbots are starting to take higher education by storm. As Inside HigherEd has reported, universities initially launched chatbots to serve specific units or departments, such as financial aid, IT services, or the library, but “now institutions are looking to deploy chatbots with much broader capability.”³¹ Increasingly, colleges are harnessing chatbots that serve as an entry point for students or alumni to ask any number of questions and direct them to resources outside the scope of any one department. Companies like AdmitHub, which started by offering chatbots to streamline the admissions and enrollment process, have seen a heightened demand for conversational bots that touch “all stages of the student’s college-going experience from the first expression of interest in an institution to enrollment, retention and even alumni relations.”³²

So, how can chatbots help alumni engagement?

To begin with, chatbots can help with soliciting and updating alumni contact information. Traditionally, maintaining an updated record of alumni data has been a time-consuming task, but automated bot prompts can ensure graduating seniors and alumni are regularly invited to share their latest contact information.

Chatbots can also aid short-staffed alumni relations teams in providing top-notch interactions and direct alumni to career services, specific academic programs, and more! This can save valuable time while efficiently assisting alumni in navigating resources across the university.

²⁹ Kathryn White, “How conversational AI takes chatbots to higher level of service,” *Accenture*, August 17, 2018, <https://www.accenture.com/us-en/blogs/technology-innovation/white-conversational-ai-smarter-chatbots>.

³⁰ Servion, “What Makes Emerging Technologies The Future Of Customer Experience?,” July 25, 2018, <https://servion.com/blog/what-emerging-technologies-future-customer-experience/>.

³¹ Lindsay McKenzie, “Chatting with Chatbots,” *Inside HigherEd*, Sept 6, 2019, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/09/06/expansion-chatbots-higher-ed>.

³² McKenzie, “Chatting with Chatbots.”

2. Gain Fresh Insights on the Student-to-Alumni Journey

Another part of artificial intelligence that could potentially transform alumni engagement is machine learning. In particular, machine learning tools can help generate fresh insights that will allow institutions to understand and improve the student-to-alumni journey and cultivate more loyal alumni.

Already, innovative colleges have deployed machine learning and augmented analytics to predict academically at-risk students and aid in student retention. For example, Ivy Tech Community College leveraged their Google Cloud Platform to collect 12 million data points from student interactions. They then developed “a flexible AI engine to analyze student engagement and success.” By examining key data points, like how often students logged into their learning management system and their class attendance rates, the college was able to flag struggling students with 83% accuracy.³³

This example illuminates the early possibilities of AI to analyze student behavior. Such forms of predictive analytics also have enormous potential to help universities understand the relationship between student engagement and alumni loyalty later down the line. For example, do particular on-campus services yield higher alumni engagement? Do certain markers of student engagement during the college years - such as participation in on-campus clubs, leadership activities, study abroad experience, or use of academic support resources - result in more engaged alumni five, ten, or twenty years later? Just imagine gaining a holistic view of the journey from student to alumni. Not only could universities predict alumni engagement and inclination to give, but they could also start making data-driven decisions to refine enrollment practices, on-campus services, career resources, and alumni relations activities to yield consistently engaged alumni with a high lifetime value.³⁴

Already, businesses are using machine learning to predict and grow the lifetime value of their customers.³⁵ Moreover, universities are utilizing machine learning and other predictive modeling tools to help optimize discrete processes related to enrollment³⁶, student retention³⁷, and alumni engagement.³⁸ It's only a matter of time before institutions leverage more sophisticated algorithms to understand the entire student journey and harness these insights to maximize alumni loyalty, engagement, and giving.

³³ Micah Castelo, “A 5-Year Vision for Artificial Intelligence in Higher Ed,” *EdTech Magazine*, Feb 26, 2020, <https://edtechmagazine.com/higher/article/2020/02/5-year-vision-artificial-intelligence-higher-ed>.

³⁴ Kieran Hanrahan, “Why You Should Be Investing in Alumni Lifetime Value,” *SwitchboardHQ*, April 26, 2017, <https://switchboardhq.com/blog/why-you-should-be-investing-in-alumni-lifetime-value>.

³⁵ Express Analytics, “Using Machine Learning To Grow Customer Lifetime Value,” <https://expressanalytics.com/blog/using-machine-learning-to-predict-customer-lifetime-value/>.

³⁶ Shailaja Neelakantan, “Successful AI Examples in Higher Education That Can Inspire Our Future,” *EdTech Magazine*, Jan 2, 2020, <https://edtechmagazine.com/higher/article/2020/01/successful-ai-examples-higher-education-can-inspire-our-future>.

³⁷ Melissa Delaney, “Universities Use AI to Boost Student Graduation Rates,” *EdTech Magazine*, May 31, 2019, <https://edtechmagazine.com/higher/article/2019/05/universities-use-ai-boost-student-graduation-rates>

³⁸ Daniel Cohen, “Can We Predict Alumni Engagement?” *Graduway* <https://graduway.com/predict-alumni-engagement/>

3. Deliver Hyper-Personalized Value at Scale

We've talked about the importance of personalization in alumni engagement, and artificial intelligence is an increasingly important part of this! The commercial sector has already spearheaded the use of AI to enable automated, hyper-personalized content. This is essential, since **80% of consumers are more likely to do business with a company if it offers a personalized experience.**³⁹

Artificial intelligence can be key to truly engaging alumni in a customized, one-on-one capacity. AI and machine learning-powered platforms can collect data in key areas around alumni behavior, social media activity, and evolving career interests, allowing you to deliver curated communications, volunteer and giving opportunities, and event invitations to each alumna. At a time when so many universities rely on outdated information about degree programs or majors to segment alumni years after graduation, these types of dynamic personalization capabilities will become increasingly necessary to achieving your engagement goals.

This isn't just futuristic speculation - AI is already here, transforming commercial industries and higher education at this very moment! Applications of AI to personalize alumni communications are likely to skyrocket in the next few years, so now may be the time to start exploring these tools.

4. Enable More Intelligent Fundraising

Increasingly, alumni relations offices are becoming integrated with advancement departments, and alumni engagement goals are often inextricably related to donor cultivation. For this reason, it's vital to explore the rise of intelligent, AI-enabled fundraising.

In 2020, **85% of private institutions reported a loss in tuition and fee revenue.**⁴⁰ At the same time, **universities are investing incredible financial resources to mitigate the effects of COVID-19.**⁴¹ When so many universities are in financial distress, cultivating and soliciting the right donors has never been important.

³⁹ McKinsey & Company, "Personalizing the customer experience: Driving differentiation in retail," April 28, 2020, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/personalizing-the-customer-experience-driving-differentiation-in-retail>.

⁴⁰ Emma Whitford, "Private Colleges Report Lost Revenue, Increased Expenses This Fall," *Inside HigherEd*, Dec 16, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2020/12/16/private-colleges-report-lost-revenue-increased-expenses-fall>.

⁴¹ Emma Whitford, "Pandemic's Fall Financial Toll Adds Up," *Inside HigherEd*, Jan 12, 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/01/12/colleges-spent-millions-covid-19-expenses-fall-even-sources-income-shrank-data-show>.

AI is a game changer here! [According to the Stanford Social Innovation Review](#), AI can be deployed in a number of ways to facilitate more intelligent fundraising, including to identify prospective donors from internal data sets and social media platforms, and to “analyze donor data and suggest how to personalize appeals.”⁴²

Technology platforms like [Gravyty](#) have already begun to tap into the potentials of AI in higher education advancement by offering innovative tools that help fundraisers identify the best donors to solicit, frame the appropriate ask, and understand donor behavior.

As alumni relations and advancement staff search for ways to be more effective in their outreach and stewardship, we’re likely to see an explosion of smart fundraising in the coming years, made possible by AI!

While it may be easy to assume that an AI-powered future is a long way off, it’s already here! AI is not just a shiny buzzword, and it’s not just for the commercial industry. Applications of AI can radically transform alumni engagement and advancement, so now is the time to start exploring how it can enable, simplify, and streamline your operations.

⁴² Allison Fine and Beth Kanter, “Rehumanizing Fundraising With Artificial Intelligence,” Oct 26, 2020, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/re_humanizing_fundraising_with_artificial_intelligence.

6 Ways Mixed Reality is the Next Big Game Changer in Alumni Engagement

Have you ever heard of virtual reality for alumni engagement? How about augmented reality?

If this is new to you, you're not alone! The applications of virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and mixed reality (MR) in higher education and alumni engagement remain largely untapped and unexplored. Even more so than AI, these technologies may sound futuristic and unrelated to your day-to-day job.

While mixed reality in higher education might just be starting to take shape, these tools could very well change the game of alumni relations in the next five years.

What is mixed reality?

According to Microsoft, mixed reality can be defined as “a blend of physical and digital worlds, unlocking the links between human, computer, and environment interaction.”⁴³ Mixed reality encompasses a spectrum of experiences enabled between augmented and virtual reality.

So, what's the difference between AR and VR?

AR “overlays digital information on real-world elements,” and it has already gone mainstream in a number of ways. For example, Pokemon GO and Snapchat filters are some of the most well-known everyday applications of AR. VR, on the other hand, is fully immersive and “tricks your senses into thinking you're in a different environment or world apart from the real world.” VR is typically delivered through a headset, a variety of which are quickly becoming affordable and familiar to the average consumer.⁴⁴

The pandemic has accelerated innovation and adoption of MR in a variety of industries. As of March 2020, **29% of 169 million gamers in the United States owned a VR system**.⁴⁵ Moreover, VR has been deployed as a tool in behavioral healthcare, with many doctors citing “the health benefits of VR for ailments ranging from severe pain, to PTSD, to substance use.”⁴⁶ COVID-19 isolation has also given rise to a new era of social VR apps and experiences like VRChat and Horizon, which offer virtual spaces to

⁴³ Microsoft, “What is Mixed Reality?,” Aug 26, 2020, <https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/windows/mixed-reality/discover/mixed-reality>.

⁴⁴ Intel, “Demystifying the Virtual Reality Landscape,” <https://www.intel.com/content/www/us/en/tech-tips-and-tricks/virtual-reality-vs-augmented-reality.html>.

⁴⁵ Noah Smith, “Virtual reality is starting to see actual gains in gaming,” *Washington Post*, Feb 4, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2021/02/04/virtual-reality-future-games/>.

⁴⁶ Brennan Spiegel, “Virtual Reality and the COVID Mental Health Crisis,” *Scientific American*, Nov 15, 2020, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/virtual-reality-and-the-covid-mental-health-crisis>.

socialize, gather, and create. As a result, Statista has forecast that the augmented reality and virtual reality market will hit \$72.8 billion in 2024, when as many as 43.5 million headsets will be sold.⁴⁷

With the **uptick of mixed reality in 2020**, it's even *more imperative* to understand how this technology might change the landscape of alumni engagement. Already, schools are leveraging mixed reality for pedagogical purposes. For example at Case Western Reserve University, mixed reality has transformed medical education, allowing the institution to “teach human anatomy without a cadaver utilizing our innovative 3D mixed-reality software.” According to Kris Reiber, Assistant Director of Chapter and Regional Programming at Case Western Alumni Association, the rise of MR in the university's teaching has created fresh urgency to harness this technology in alumni engagement. In his words, “AR and VR have great applications in alumni work, because we're training students to do things with technology that we're not yet doing ourselves at the alumni association.”



Thomas Deneuville, Director of Web Solutions and User Experience at Cornell University, and one of the earliest visionaries experimenting with mixed reality in alumni relations, feels even more strongly about the future of MR: *“If you missed the social media wave in the early 2000s, you cannot afford to miss this mixed reality wave. Even if it's very early, there are still things you can do to build knowledge and skills around this technology, that you'll be very happy to have in five years when AR and VR are mainstream.”*



How might mixed reality be leveraged in service of alumni engagement? Let's explore the possibilities:

1. Revisit Old Campus Haunts in VR

One of the primary ways we're already seeing universities leverage VR in alumni relations is by creating immersive campus tours. For example, the **University of British Columbia has used VR magic** to offer “a drone's-eye view of campus and take you to familiar places, such as the Rose Garden, the Library, and Thunderbird Stadium.” What's more, they advertise just how easy VR makes it to relive the best campus experiences: “You'll come across reminders of the traditions that make UBC awesome — including Day of the Longboat and Homecoming.”

In the age of COVID-19, we witnessed a greater uptick of VR campus tours. Schools like **University of Oregon sent university-branded cardboard VR headsets** to accepted students,⁴⁸ along with instructions

⁴⁷ Kyle Wiggers, “Virtual reality and simulation see an uptick during the pandemic,” *VentureBeat*, Jan 28, 2021, <https://venturebeat.com/2021/01/28/virtual-reality-and-simulation-see-an-uptick-during-the-pandemic>.

⁴⁸ Wade Tyler Millward, “As Coronavirus Closes Colleges, the Campus Tour Goes Virtual,” *EdSurge*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2020-03-18-as-coronavirus-closes-colleges-the-campus-tour-goes-virtual>.

to [access the accompanying UO 360 app](#), and they invited prospective students to explore campus remotely - yet immersively - to aid in their college decision.

As universities seek ways to help alumni relive campus traditions, recruit prospective students, and more, mixed reality campus experiences are likely to become increasingly common.

2. Bring On-Campus Experiences to Life with AR

For in-person campus engagement experiences, augmented reality is changing the game. For example, Thomas Deneuve, Director of Web Solutions and User Experience at Cornell, pioneered AR [to enhance Cornell's 2018 Homecoming](#): *"We relied on Campus AR to deliver a fun experience: By pointing at the Cornell Athletics logo, users would summon Touchdown the bear who would dance and cheer for them. The experience worked for both front and back end cameras, and let users share video or photo captures on social."*⁴⁹

In 2019, Penn State's Department of Geography created an augmented reality app to give users more background about the Obelisk, "one of the oldest and best-known monuments on the school's University Park campus."⁵⁰

In addition, schools like [Cal Poly Pomona and SUNY Orange](#) have created AR experiences to aid in student recruitment and orientation.⁵¹ And in 2020, [Baylor University launched a COVID-19 friendly, AR-based recruitment initiative](#), allowing prospective students "to see, hear, and step into unique Baylor moments." The experience has allowed potential recruits to experience unique Baylor traditions "through a variety of AR portals."⁵²

From enabling more immersive homecoming and alumni reunion events to aiding in student recruitment and enrollment, AR is already making a mark on campus experiences. As universities prepare to welcome alumni back to campus after the COVID-19 threat subsides, as well as recoup their fallen enrollment numbers, AR could play a large part in creating state-of-the-art experiences that bring campuses back to life.

⁴⁹ Thomas Deneuve, "Extended reality in advancement and alumni relations," <https://thomasdeneuve.com/ar-vr-advancement-alumni-relations/>.

⁵⁰ Laura Ascione, "5 ways augmented reality apps are changing the game on college campuses," *eCampus News*, April 2, 2019, <https://www.ecampusnews.com/2019/04/02/augmented-reality-apps-changing-game-college-campuses>.

⁵¹ Ascione, "5 ways augmented reality apps are changing the game on college campuses."

⁵² Groove Jones, "Baylor University Student Recruitment Green Door AR Portal Experience," Aug 25, 2020, <https://www.groovejones.com/baylor-university-student-recruitment-green-door-ar-portal-experience>.

3. Make Graduations, Homecomings, & Reunions Accessible from Anywhere

COVID-19 gave birth to a new form of mixed reality in higher education: the VR graduation. In May 2020, Purdue University in Los Angeles pioneered the virtual reality graduation. For the occasion, participating graduates received a branded VR headset to use during a VR ceremony, along with a detailed program, tassel and honor cord.⁵³ New York University was also one of the first to host a virtual reality graduation party, which enabled 2020 graduates to fly around a “Virtual Reality Grad Alley.”⁵⁴ And in August 2020, at the The Indian Institute of Technology in Bombay, 2,000 students were awarded their certificates by an avatar of the school’s director.⁵⁵

These virtual graduation experiences are still in the experimentation phase, and many have received mixed reviews from graduates. But, as universities refine these offerings based on student and alumni feedback and invest more time and resources into the user experience (in 2020, many virtual experiences were a hastily organized response to cancelled in-person ceremonies), VR graduations will likely show even more potential. Even unrelated to the pandemic, the share of college students enrolling in online courses,⁵⁶ and the number of master’s degrees offered online has grown steadily.⁵⁷ This growth in online degrees is likely to drive demand for corresponding virtual graduations.

In the coming years, we can expect to see even more experiments with VR graduation experiences. Moreover, as universities find success with virtual homecoming weekends and reunions, many may be planning hybrid versions of these traditional events to activate alumni well beyond the age of COVID-19. In such cases, VR shows enormous promise to create more immersive experiences for alumni.

⁵³ Terminalfour, “Purdue University is the first to experiment with virtual reality graduations,” May 13, 2020, <https://www.terminalfour.com/blog/posts/purdue-university-is-the-first-to-experiment-with-virtual-reality-graduations.html>.

⁵⁴ Theo Watt, “NYU’s uncanny 2020 virtual reality graduation celebration,” *Business Insider*, May 21, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/new-york-university-2020-virtual-reality-graduation-celebration-practically-empty-2020-5>.

⁵⁵ Jack Guy, “University creates student avatars for virtual graduation ceremony,” *CNN*, Aug 25, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/25/asia/india-university-virtual-reality-graduation-scli-intl/index.html>.

⁵⁶ Education Data, “Online Education Statistics,” <https://educationdata.org/online-education-statistics>.

⁵⁷ Paul Fain, “Master’s Degrees More Popular, Increasingly Online,” *Inside HigherEd*, Dec 12, 2018, <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2018/12/12/masters-degrees-more-popular-increasingly-online>.

4. Take Engagement and Entertainment Events Above & Beyond

In Cuseum's November-December 2020 survey of over 150 alumni relations professionals, over 97% stated that they had "begun or increased their number of virtual events in 2020." Many of these events have been social in nature, from virtual networking events to online trivia with former classmates. As of now, many virtual events are produced through video conferencing software, like Zoom. However, social VR shows great potential to take these types of digital alumni engagement events to the next level.

Even before the pandemic, VR experiences were becoming more popular, but in 2020, VR adoption rose significantly. Companies like Spacial, "which creates something like a virtual reality version of Zoom," saw a 1,000% increase in usage between March 2020 and July 2020.⁵⁸ Some innovative brands and startups are arming every employee with a VR headset, to enable remote workers to have formal meetings, as well as team bonding events, in a more immersive virtual space.⁵⁹ Leading thinkers, technologists, and marketers are now forecasting an explosive growth in social VR adoption among consumers,⁶⁰ and the list of social VR apps on the market is ever-growing.⁶¹ Moreover, it's already possible to host birthday parties, trivia nights, and interactive carnivals through VR, and we've even seen the birth of virtual reality nightlife,⁶² with some legendary clubs being relaunched in VR.

As social VR rises to prominence for work and play, and universities look for ways to overcome Zoom fatigue while they deliver remote events to their alumni, social VR might be the key to revamping alumni engagement in the years to come!

⁵⁸ Justin Higginbottom, "Virtual reality is booming in the workplace amid the pandemic. Here's why.," *CNBC*, July 4, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/07/04/virtual-reality-usage-booms-in-the-workplace-amid-the-pandemic.html>.

⁵⁹ Brian Walsh, "The virtual reality office," *Axios*, Dec 12, 2020, <https://www.axios.com/virtual-reality-office-coronavirus-1f55859b-4097-46fd-b3e8-f66042e01e1f.html>.

⁶⁰ Cathay Hackl, "Social VR, Facebook Horizon And The Future Of Social Media Marketing," *Forbes*, Aug 30, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/cathyhackl/2020/08/30/social-vr-facebook-horizon--the-future-of-social-media-marketing/?sh=68b4f1c45b19>.

⁶¹ Scott Hayden, "10 Apps to Hang Out with Friends in VR," *RoadtoVR*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.roadtovr.com/10-apps-hang-friends-vr>.

⁶² DJ Mag Staff, "A new virtual club is being launched in the coming weeks," *DJ Magazine*, May 1, 2020, <https://djmag.com/news/new-virtual-reality-club-launching-online-another-home>.

5. Drive Participation & Revenue with Sporting Events in VR

It's no secret that college sports are the lifeblood of alumni engagement for many universities, and particularly, Division 1 schools. For many colleges, tailgating traditions bring many alumni back to campus annually, "game watch" gatherings remain popular alumni chapter events, and branded university merchandise sales bring in tens of thousands of dollars of revenue each year. That's not to mention the millions of dollars that universities generate from ticket sales, media rights fees, and other conference-related revenue streams!

With cancellations and restrictions on football, basketball, lacrosse, and other popular sports, many universities are suffering enormous losses of revenue. For example [Ohio State's athletic department projected to lose out on over \\$130 million](#) in revenue following the cancellation of the fall sports season by the Big Ten Conference.⁶³ [Penn State, too, has projected losing over \\$70 million](#) in sports related revenue,⁶⁴ and the [NCAA is in dire straits](#).⁶⁵

Could virtual reality help recover some of these losses?

VR shows immense potential to serve as a new revenue stream for universities as they seek to attract alumni and fans to their sporting events. As we speak, VR is revolutionizing the sports business. Right now, [NextVR, Fox Sports, and Oculus are vying to attract fans](#) of NBA, NFL, Boxing, Soccer, WWE, and NASCAR,⁶⁶ and college programs are already [incorporating this technology into their practices](#).⁶⁷ With these developments, we may see the emergence of ticket sales for VR sports experiences, something schools like the [University of Michigan have already started to consider](#).⁶⁸ This would not only be a boon in the era of COVID-19, but VR could provide the excitement of game day to alumni and fans who aren't local or aren't able to travel.

Moreover, as universities experiment with the concept of a [virtual tailgate](#),⁶⁹ social VR has the potential to create truly immersive offerings for alumni, from the social traditions of game day through the communal game-viewing experience.

⁶³ Joey Kaufmann, "Ohio State athletic department projects loss of \$130 million in revenue," *USA Today*, Aug 24, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaaf/bigten/2020/08/24/ohio-state-projects-130-million-revenue-loss-due-college-football/5626415002/>.

⁶⁴ Shannon Soboslay, "Penn State Athletics Reintroduces Fundraising Initiative To Recoup Revenue Losses," *Onward State*, Oct 29, 2020, <https://onwardstate.com/2020/10/29/penn-state-athletics-reintroduces-fundraising-initiative-to-recoup-revenue-losses>.

⁶⁵ Alan Blinder, "Hammered by Pandemic, N.C.A.A. Revenue Falls by \$600 Million," *New York Times*, Jan 25, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/25/sports/ncaabasketball/ncaa-revenue-falls.html>.

⁶⁶ Joe Newbury, "How to Watch Sports in VR," *The Sports Daily*, Nov 27, 2020, <https://thesportsdaily.com/2020/11/27/how-to-watch-sports-events-in-vr>.

⁶⁷ Jane Zorowitz, "It Just Got Real: Coaches like Bret Bielema and Bill Belichick are getting on the virtual-reality wave," *NBC Sports*, <https://sportsworld.nbcsports.com/virtual-reality-sports-arkansas-kentucky>.

⁶⁸ Eric Rutter, "Are Virtual Reality Tickets The Answer For Watching Michigan Games This Fall?," *Sports Illustrated*, May 20, 2020, <https://www.si.com/college/michigan/football/michigan-football-are-virtual-reality-tickets-the-answer-for-watching-games-this-fall>.

⁶⁹ Mary Helen Sprecher, "Virtual Tailgates Allowing College Traditions to Continue," *Sports Destinations*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.sportsdestinations.com/sports/football/virtual-tailgates-allowing-college-traditions-cont-18613>.

We're only beginning to discover how VR might transform the sports industry, and college sports will be a part of this evolution. With such huge implications for alumni engagement, universities should keep a close eye on how virtual reality might enable deeper engagement for alumni fans.

6. Innovate the Giving Experience

Last but not least, alumni giving! Just like artificial intelligence, mixed reality promises to disrupt and improve the giving experience. Thomas Deneuve, Director of Web Solutions and User Experience at Cornell University, has piloted a "Giving in VR" experience, asking the question, "What would making a gift in VR look and feel like?" Taking inspiration from eCommerce VR experiences, he built a proof-of-concept webVR giving experience optimized for Google Cardboard, a particularly low-cost VR platform.⁷⁰

There is a growing body of research studying the gamification of philanthropy and the applications of VR to drive charitable giving. Research suggests that deploying gaming concepts in fundraising can lead to longer engagement and increased loyalty.⁷¹ Other research indicates that VR may be able to transform the giving experience by evoking greater empathy.⁷² Indeed, virtual reality can serve as a canvas for storytelling, and it can play a critical role in connecting donors with a cause. For example, Unicef used VR in face-to-face fundraising and saw an increase in giving of between 30 to 70% across many variables.⁷³

As innovative fundraisers begin to experiment with philanthropic applications of mixed reality, it's becoming clear that this technology may very well be the next frontier of nonprofit development, with the potential to transform university advancement and alumni relations as we know it.

There are already myriad applications of mixed reality in alumni relations and advancement coming to the fore, and it's an exciting time to imagine even further possibilities. While these use cases were in motion pre-pandemic, COVID-19 spurred fresh interest and consumer adoption of virtual reality, a trend that is likely to continue in the coming years. While it may still sound futuristic, over the next five years, mixed reality may very well become a critical component of alumni engagement strategy.

⁷⁰ Thomas Deneuve, "Extended reality in advancement and alumni relations," <https://thomasdeneuve.com/ar-vr-advancement-alumni-relations/>.

⁷¹ Elizabeth A. Freudmann and Yiorgos Bakamitsos, "The Role of Gamification in Non-profit Marketing: An Information Processing Account.," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 148 (2014): 567-572, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.07.081>.

⁷² Laurie Schneider, "How Nonprofits Can Use Virtual Reality to Evoke Greater Empathy," *Nonprofit Pro*, March 3, 2020, <https://www.nonprofitpro.com/article/how-nonprofits-can-use-virtual-reality-to-evoke-greater-empathy/>

⁷³ Thomas Deneuve, "Extended reality in advancement and alumni relations," <https://thomasdeneuve.com/ar-vr-advancement-alumni-relations/>.



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CHAPTER 5

Effects and Lessons from Pandemic Response



4 Ways COVID-19 Has Transformed the Future of Alumni Engagement

Throughout this eBook, we've touched on the countless ways COVID-19 has transformed alumni engagement. More than anything, COVID-19 has accelerated and amplified trends that were already developing before the pandemic, serving as a forcing function to expedite digital transformation in alumni engagement.

COVID-19 has reshaped the activities and priorities of alumni professionals in a number of significant ways, with reverberating effects. Indeed, even as normal life may begin to resume in 2021, universities won't return to pre-pandemic practices.

From centering priorities around digital engagement to activating geographically far-flung audiences, spurring new partnerships, and altering how alumni professionals measure success, alumni relations as we know it has changed. Here's how:

1. Centering Priorities Around Digital Transformation

In less than a year, the COVID-19 crisis has prompted years of change in companies and organizations across every sector. According to a new McKinsey Global Survey, companies have accelerated the digitization of their customer interactions and of their internal operations by 3 to 4 years due to COVID. Moreover, the use of digital tools and products has accelerated by *as much as 7 years*.⁷⁴ Higher education, and alumni engagement in particular, have been a part of these massive shifts.

In our November-December 2020 survey of over 150 alumni relations professionals, 94% strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, "I believe my organization has become more digital-forward as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic." Moreover, 80% strongly agreed or agreed that "digital transformation is a top priority for my organization."

This shift towards digital encompasses many parts of alumni engagement. To begin with, over 97% of surveyed organizations indicated that they had "begun or increased their number of virtual events in 2020." Beyond this, many have turned increasingly to social media, digital content, SMS messaging, and e-newsletters to deliver relevant content to their alumni.

That's not to mention many of the digital tools alumni organizations have adopted to improve internal processes and external communications. From exclusive online communities, virtual networking

⁷⁴ McKinsey & Co., "How COVID-19 has pushed companies over the technology tipping point—and transformed business forever," Oct 5, 2020, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/how-covid-19-has-pushed-companies-over-the-technology-tipping-point-and-transformed-business-forever>.

platforms, [digital alumni cards](#), to marketing automation software, interest and adoption of enhanced technology and software has skyrocketed.

The trend towards digital transformation is likely to continue. According to a recent report by Accenture, post-COVID, *“as organizations shift from recovering to rebuilding, the role of digital will continue to accelerate and will require a sustainable digital strategy that capitalizes on out of the box technology solutions.”*⁷⁵

2. Transcending Geographical Barriers to Activate Alumni

Historically, the biggest opportunities for alumni to engage have been tied to physical campuses. For example homecoming, athletic events, and reunions have all been large, in-person occasions. This all changed with COVID-19, as many organizations began to completely rethink their engagement strategies. Many universities have experimented with virtual alternatives to these signature events, or even developed a series of online micro-events to stretch their budgets.

“

The turn towards remote engagement experiences has yielded one of the biggest silver linings of the pandemic: the ability to transcend geographical barriers to participation and activate more alumni. For example, Madeline Goldfischer, Assistant Director, Regional Alumni Chapters, Sarah Lawrence College remarked, *“By quickly pivoting to virtual programming, we have been able to engage alumni in locations where they could not previously participate in our events. We have had first time event participants from across the country and internationally.”*

”

This same sentiment has been echoed by countless other alumni professionals.

Due to the outstanding success of digital engagement for so many colleges, many are bracing themselves for a hybrid future. In other words, even with the return to normalcy on the horizon, organizations will need to strike a balance between virtual and in-person engagement opportunities, and determine how to channel resources accordingly. With so many new alumni engaged for the first time, it will be critical to continue serving this segment of constituents using modern modes of communication.

“

In the words of Michael Smullen, Executive Director of Alumni Relations at New Jersey Institute of Technology, *“We’re probably going to end up with [virtual events] never going away now. This is a part of how we’ll operate.”*

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⁷⁵ Accenture, “The Nonprofit Imperative: How Nonprofits Can Maximize the Value of Digital Transformation,” https://www.accenture.com/_acnmedia/PDF-136/Accenture-Pro-Bono-POV-Canada-GEO-Marketing-Covid-Updates.pdf.

3. Spurring New Partnerships

More than ever before, COVID-19 illuminated the ongoing value of strategic partnerships. As demand for digital content soared in 2020, alumni organizations discovered the renewed importance of fostering relationships with partners on and off campus. Such partnerships can allow alumni professionals to expand their digital capacity, stretch limited budgets, and deliver greater value to alumni.

According to a recent report by Accenture, 91% of high-performing nonprofit organizations excel beyond their peers when it comes to “collaborating with partners beyond traditional industry boundaries” in comparison to 66% of other companies.⁷⁶ How have we seen this play out in the era of COVID-19?

For starters, we’ve witnessed heightened collaboration among on-campus units, including alumni relations, career services, student affairs, and academic departments. For example, Leslie Smith, Executive Director of Alumni Engagement at DePauw University has been partnering with the university admissions office to create virtual programming that will appeal to prospective students. Over the course of 2020, she and her partners in admissions spearheaded an [Alumni College Series](#), created a letter writing campaign, and developed networking opportunities between students and alumni: *“Being in this COVID-19 quarantine situation has not only allowed us to extend our offerings to alumni all across the nation and across the world; it’s also caused us to go beyond our individual goals, break down those silos, and work more collaboratively on the different programming initiatives that we have for students and alumni.”*

Universities have also partnered with other businesses and nonprofits to provide value for their constituents. For example, we’ve witnessed a fresh wave of partnerships between universities and cultural organizations. For example, in 2020, Central Michigan University partnered with a local Ohio zoo, the African Safari Wildlife Park, to offer a virtual tour for alumni. Similarly, the Barry University Alumni Association has partnered with a local institution, the Miami Children’s Museum. During Barry’s reimaged virtual homecoming weekend in 2020, the partnership yielded the production of a virtual theatre show for the children of alumni. This pirate-themed show amplified Barry’s brand (their mascot is the buccaneer, Bucky the Parrot), while attracting new audiences to the museum!

In addition, an increasing number of universities are developing partnerships to expand their suite of digital tools. According to Accenture, “to support their digital strategies and succeed in achieving their missions, organizations need to think about how partnerships could help them accelerate the required capabilities.” At the start of the pandemic, many technology brands began offering free or discounted services for nonprofit organizations. Now, the accelerated digital transformation spurred by the pandemic is likely to give rise to a new era of partnerships between universities and digital providers.

⁷⁶ Accenture, “The Nonprofit Imperative.”

4. Transformation Metrics of Success

With the explosion of new modes and channels of alumni engagement during the pandemic, how alumni professionals set goals and measure success is changing rapidly. For many organizations, counting the registrants, attendees, and participation on a Zoom webinar event is entirely new territory!

Now, more than ever, alumni organizations are working to recalibrate their metrics of success to fit today's digital-first environment. How can digital magnify your impact? How can digital tools improve internal processes? Is your team equipped with the skills and savvy to succeed in a digital environment?



In the era of COVID-19 and beyond, alumni organizations will need to redefine how they measure alumni engagement, determine how digital can help their teams achieve strategic goals, and identify specific objectives around digital investment and transformation. As Michael Smullen, Executive Director, Alumni Relations at New Jersey Institute of Technology, noted, *“Depending on how long this will last, we may be in a position to recalculate or to reestablish how we’re setting goals and measuring success. This is a learning curve and it’s something that we’re figuring out.”*



In short, the future is digital, and in alumni relations, how we measure success will need to reflect this new reality!

Conclusion

There's no doubt about it: universities are changing, alumni expectations are changing, and alumni engagement teams have their work cut out for them!

As you defend and redefine the role of alumni relations, respond to a world transformed by digital technology and big data, navigate the repercussions of a sweeping pandemic, and envision new ways to deliver value virtually, we hope that the resources in this eBook help you out along the way.

There is a vast community of fellow alumni relations professionals willing to exchange ideas and offer support to their colleagues, and this eBook is a testament to that. This project would not have been possible without the contributions of countless alumni engagement and higher education professionals, quoted and referenced throughout these pages. We'll end this book with a special thanks to the creative, committed, and generous individuals who contributed their valuable time and insights to this publication.



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