

Building Community: A Holistic Approach to the Online Student-Alumni Cycle

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Academic and support needs of online students are often neglected by the colleges and universities of which they are a part. Institutions often don't know how to contact alumni of their online programs. Yet, this group of students and alumni can donate generously to the institution. Alumni of online programs are an important donor group and should be cultivated in ways that recognize their unique academic experiences. This paper raises awareness of the multi-faceted process of the online student-alumni cycle and includes examples of ways to increase the bond between online student-alumni and institution from which they graduate.

Keywords: online students, online alumni, holistic approach, philanthropy

INTRODUCTION

Many of us think of currently registered students as a distinct and separate group from alumni and donors (Cho, Lemon, Levenshus, & Childers, 2019). Yet, they are part of a continuum in which the children of alumni become students and eventually alumni and donors themselves (Pinsker, 2019). Hence, the cultivation of prospective donors begins early as students engage in their studies, participate in extracurricular activities, and experience campus life, even though students are typically not treated as donors in those early years. In other words, colleges and universities are structured to support current students and to help them bond with their alma maters. That bonding process is a critical, early step in the donor cultivation pipeline. So even if there is not a focus on current students as future alumni per se, the acculturation and engagement process is part of laying the foundation for lifetimes of institutional support and engagement.

Support processes and mechanisms are often the same for students studying on campus and students studying online, yet the profile of students studying online is significantly different from their on-campus counterparts. At most institutions, on campus undergraduates are traditional: 18-24 years old, many live in residence halls, and most engage in campus activities and related events. For example, at the University of San Diego, a private, Catholic university, the average age of undergraduates is 20 and 95% live on campus. Similarly, the average age of undergraduates at the University of Michigan is 20 and only 2% are over the age of 25. In contrast, online undergraduates are typically older--the average age of online undergraduates is 32 years old--live away from campus, work, attend to family responsibilities, and typically do not engage in campus activities, (Friedman, 2017). Although some institutions provide student supports specifically for online students, most institutions shoehorn online students into a single set of support processes that focus on students studying on campus.

At the graduate level, the age discrepancy between graduate students studying on campus and those studying online narrows. Typical graduate students are in their early to mid-30s regardless of modality. However, most student support processes remain focused on on-campus students and require online students to fit into them (Peters, Crawley, & Brindley, 2017). There are some exceptions to this such as UC-Davis and IU-Bloomington, and among the large, online MBA programs, but graduate programs that do not have the resources to create their own support mechanisms must use the structures and processes that their campuses provide.

Higher education is a very traditional industry with cultures grounded in centuries of evolution. Relative to that history, online education is a new modality that still does not fit well into the dominant paradigm. Consequently, attention and resources devoted to online learning are significantly fewer than those devoted to face-to-face instruction, even though growth in online enrollments is outpacing growth in on-campus programs (Lederman, 2018). In 2017, 2.2 million undergraduates and nearly 900 thousand postbaccalaureate students studied in fully online programs. In terms of percent of college students, that is 13.3% and 28.9% respectively (Statistics, 2017).

The revenue generated through online programs is becoming increasingly important for schools that offer them, but the services devoted to students in those programs significantly lag. In addition, few institutions are paying attention to the donor power of online students, even though most schools are increasingly relying on their alumni, donors, and endowments. As noted above, enrollments in online programs are growing and hence so are graduates, i.e., alumni, of those programs. Yet little is known about the philanthropic behavior of alumni of online programs, and many institutions do not even know who alumni of their online programs are (Lesht & Schejbal, 2019).

Schools that do not specifically attend to the needs of students studying online or collect the data needed to identify them do so at their peril. Alumni of online programs are an important donor group and should be cultivated in ways that recognize their unique academic experiences.

Administrators, faculty, and staff members of colleges and universities would be well served by taking a holistic approach to the online student-alumni cycle. The bonding experience between students and institutions that occurs while students are matriculating is fundamental to nurturing potential donor behavior. Consequently, this paper focuses on ways that administrators, faculty, and staff members can foster the bond with online students and alumni of online programs and the growing need for customized attention to this group particularly in light of challenges facing higher education and implications for donor development.

Enhancing Online Student Satisfaction

It is well known in the field of advancement that one of the foundational and critical success factors for effective philanthropy is student satisfaction with their educational experience (Monks, 2003; Moore, 2014). As noted by Hansen & Schifrin (2018), "...the goal of most colleges is to produce happy and successful graduates who give back." (p. 1) While online students may never step foot on the campuses from which they earn their degrees, they form bonds with their programs based on the experiences they have while students (Guild, 2018).

Research within the past decade has found that factors contributing to satisfaction on the part of online students include: Quality course design and relevant content (Barbera, Clara, & Linder-Vanberschot, 2013); relevance of course content and interactions with instructors (Kyei-Blankson, Ntuli, & Donnelly, 2016), interactions between students and instructors (Gayton, 2015), and, interactions between students—provided those interactions are based on assignments that promote genuine, rather than rote, discussions (Buelow, Barry, & Rich, 2018; Lesht & Schejbal, 2020; Swaggergy & Brommel, 2016). Finding ways for students to connect with each other meaningfully and with faculty and staff can reduce isolation and increase a broader sense of community (Croft, Dalton, & Grant, 2010; Overstreet, 2020).

Online student satisfaction is also influenced by factors “outside” the classroom. For example, in a study by Cole, Shelly, & Swartz (2014) it was found that convenience of online courses was a key influence of online student satisfaction. Student satisfaction is also influenced by interactions with staff members (Barger, 2019; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Spaulding, 2016). This can be challenging for colleges and institutions with shrinking budgets. However, ensuring support staff are available to students for questions regarding financial aid, library services, career advising, and navigating the institution’s website can strengthen the online student experience (Britto & Rush, 2013; Peters, Crawley, & Brindley, 2017).

Customized outreach to online students—including mentoring—also plays a powerful role in student satisfaction. The following section focuses on a case example of the way in which an institution transitioned to a proactive approach to making regular contact with online students in various forms, including mentoring, as well as segmenting data in order to continue to connect with students after graduation. While the case references one particular management system, there are many systems available from which colleges and universities can choose.

Enhancing the Bond With Online Students: A Case Example

Most of the students in Worcester Polytechnic Institute’s (WPI’s) online master’s degree programs are full-time working professionals, with families and other obligations. It is not uncommon for the online students to skip a semester and then return a semester or two later. Initially, WPI was not able to track online students and so students often felt disconnected from the university and often resented receiving emails and invitations geared towards full-time campus-based students. To worsen matters, students expressed that they often felt isolated in their courses, not knowing if other students were registered in the same classes.

Leveraging the Student Success Team

Initially, student success was addressed by a single individual using an Excel spreadsheet to track students. The position was mostly reactive to inbound student calls and emails. Eventually, a second person was hired on a part-time basis and the institution began to experiment with more proactive measures, such as calling students each semester to check-in on them and to talk about logistics. The calls were so well received, that when WPI decided to grow its online programs, it was clear that outreach was imperative. Soon WPI added a Student Success Manager and converted the part-time position to full time. Once the school had the manpower, it was able to switch from being reactive to proactive. Staff continued to call students and started looking for additional ways to assist them. They listened to student feedback and determined what they needed to do in order to help students succeed.

To keep track of students, WPI purchased Salesforce, a customer relations management system (CRM), which they customized. Part of the tracking process was to code students to identify the ones studying online and then to assign a Student Success Manager to serve as the go-to person throughout each student’s program. New students were introduced to their respective Student Success Manager and immediately received emails welcoming them to the program, informing them of next steps, and ~~the~~ offering to answer questions. Students’ names were entered into the CRM before the hand-off, and every transaction was logged. The system provides information on students through dashboards, reports, and tasks, which ensures that students receive regular and timely touch points. Data points regularly reviewed

include whether students log into course sites regularly, receive a low or failing grade, have GPA drops below a 3.0, fail to check-in at the beginning of the semester, and drop a course.

Inclusive Communication

The WPI CRM ensures that students are coded correctly and have an active email address. This allows staff to send customized correspondence to students, ensuring that students receive correspondence relevant to them. Emails are sent inviting students to department events, symposiums, and professional development live stream events. Students receive invitations to Ask A Subject-Matter Expert webinars, Panorama, a digital journal, and blogs, with articles, information, and interviews with experts in their majors and information geared towards adult learners. Reminders to register for courses are sent each semester to ensure that students working full-time and studying part-time do not lose track of the semesters and an opportunity to take courses.

In addition to the registration reminders, students that are not registered during a semester receive emails from their Student Success Manager checking in with them and trying to get them to register. Anyone not registered for one year is put into a “drip” campaign and receives a series of automated emails addressing some of the common reasons students stop taking courses to re-engage with the student.

Relationships are built with students through the personalized outreach calls. The calls are used to talk about satisfaction with courses and faculty, to manage student expectations, track progress, and build connections.

Staff survey their online students at the end of each course for course-specific feedback. In addition, students are surveyed annually to provide feedback on their programs and on their Student Success Managers. The survey also allows staff to gather qualitative responses to learn what students need to be successful and feel connected to the university. For example, staff heard that students wanted a way to connect with other students, but that information had not been collected in a systematic way. Consequently, questions were added to the annual survey that allowed students to opt into a focus group. As a result of the focus group, a Facebook Community for online students was created. This showed students that staff were listening and finding solutions to support them.

In response to student interest to attend campus events virtually, the institution has since provided part-time students with live streamed events on academic research, negotiation skills, financial aid, academic strategies, and symposiums and colloquiums.

Commencement Celebration

To further connect students with the university, staff started personally inviting students to attend the commencement ceremony and to join other students pursuing a degree online to meet for pictures. Once students and families gathered, introductions were made allowing students to connect face-to-face for the first time with their Student Success Managers and peers. A sense of belonging was created. This small celebration was so well received that it has since transformed into meeting in an old historic house on campus. Students who were not interested in attending the commencement ceremony initially became interested in traveling to campus from as far away as Alaska and England. This event now provides students with an opportunity to eat together before commencement, take a guided tour of the campus, meet faculty and the support team, receive a gift of a university pennant, and have pictures taken with the school mascot, their families, and peers.

Technology

Growing the programs and increasing student satisfaction would not have been possible without the use of better technology. Keeping track of students’ progress using an Excel file limits the ability to be proactive and knowledgeable about students. Implementing Salesforce as the WPI CRM was a game changer for transitioning staff to the next level of service. With it, they are able to track students, intervene when students receive poor grades, or determine when students are not registered or drop courses. The CRM also frees up staff time by sending automatic emails, uses templates for email

correspondence, keeps a record for each student, sends reminders and provides targeted information to students.

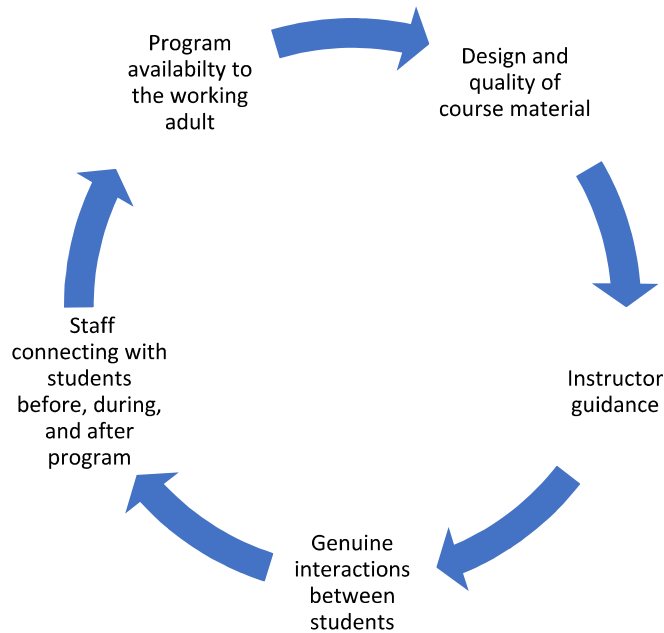
What Students Are Saying

Students are feeling more connected to the university and no longer slip through the cracks as evidenced by program retention rate which went from 77% in 2016 to 86% in 2020. In addition, student satisfaction rate increased from 4.49 in 2015 to 4.72 (on a scale of 1-5) in 2019.

Students provide feedback on their Student Success Managers in the annual survey. Their responses reflect their appreciation and that they feel connected to the university. Typical feedback from the survey included comments on managers such as: “they are just amazing and wonderful to work with. They respond in a timely fashion and have been super helpful throughout my time at the university.” “Checks in with me. That helps me know I'm not forgotten, and someone is aware of my progress” and “they really care about the students”.

In summary, essential to creating a holistic approach to the online student-to-alumni cycle is paying attention to the students. This includes attending to course design and content, supporting interactions between students and faculty, and structuring the types of interaction among students so that they are meaningful and authentic (Lesht & Schejbal, 2019). Of course, it is prerequisite to be able to identify online students in order to provide them with the mentoring and support services they need. All of these components (see figure 1) contribute to building community for online students in a holistic way.

FIGURE 1
ELEMENTS OF A HOLISTIC ONLINE STUDENT-ALUMNI CYCLE



We now turn to capitalizing on the online student experience after graduation by focusing on strategies to cultivate alumni of online programs. It should be noted that when online students bond with their institutions, it can result in significant donations once those students become alumni of online programs. For example, Morrison (2013) reported sizable contributions from alumni of a distance program at an institution in Liverpool, England. More and more employers are recognizing degrees earned online as legitimate (Flavin, 2019) and this allows alumni of online programs advancement opportunities. In a multi-institutional study comparing giving patterns of graduates of online to on-

campus programs, it was found that alumni of online programs give generously, especially within the first one to three years after graduation (Lesht, Schejbal, Shiels, & Mailloux, 2018).

Starting Small With Alumni Relations Efforts

Consequently, a clear reason for beginning an alumni relations program is that it may be the case that any emotional connection an institution has created with students declines over time if it is not nurtured, and an institution may permanently miss its window of opportunity to engage its alumni of online programs. At the same time, we realize not all institutions are positioned to invest in this way.

If an institution does not have an alumni relations office to engage alumni of online programs per se, there are several actions that an institution may take to maintain the relationship with recently graduated alumni of online programs. For instance, it may be easy enough to continue to allow alumni to participate in some of the same engagement programs they enjoyed as students, such as special events hosted by the online student clubs and online lectures with guest presenters. If not automatic, with minor collaboration it may be possible to have students and alumni of online programs participate in local alumni chapters and their services and events in person and/or online. Hopefully, these alumni are already invited to participate in any centralized alumni functions and are also part of the institution's annual giving campaign. Alumni, especially those benefiting from scholarships, may embrace the opportunity to give back.

In addition, alumni of online programs may also be leveraged to support the student experience. At Penn State World Campus prospective online students can tap into alumni knowledge and experiences through the Penn State World Campus Alumni Ambassador program to answer critical questions at the admissions stage such as, "What is it like to be a World Campus student?" and "How were you able to juggle your family, career, and class obligations?" This not only helps improve student conversion but also helps students to envision themselves being part of the largest dues-paying network in the world and an active and inclusive system-wide alumni base of more than 700,000 people. The alumni body is also a source of virtual and in-person internships and career networking for students leveraged through Penn State's Career Services and augmented with support from Penn State World Campus' career services office.

Creating More Formalized Alumni Relations Efforts

To begin the creation of a more formalized alumni relations effort, it may be worth employing the marketing and research resources used for students to survey alumni interest in alumni engagement. Simultaneously, an institution may elect to create an alumni of online programs advisory group to envision what an alumni relations program might look like. Of course, positively serving alumni through the creation of community is reason enough to have an alumni relations program. However, the emotional connection of engaging volunteer leaders, such as through an advisory group, cannot be underestimated from a philanthropic perspective.

Institutions desiring to build an advancement office specifically for alumni of online programs may ask whether it is more important to hire a major gifts officer first or an alumni relations professional. The answer likely depends on the culture of the institution. Ideally, both should be in place concurrently to most successfully cultivate alumni of online programs. At Penn State World Campus, the major gift officer was already well established. Penn State's history of providing education to distance learners, with a focus on adult learners, led to the creation of Penn State World Campus. Lead gifts were and continue to be predominantly made by more traditional alumni.

Things began to shift, however, when alumni relations efforts began in 2013. A director of World Campus alumni relations was added once a critical mass of alumni was reached and a scope of alumni engagement projects was defined. In that same year, an advisory board, consisting of alumni from Penn State World Campus, was formed. Within three years of getting to know one another, an inaugural member of the alumni board had committed to a multi-million dollar estate gift for Penn State World Campus students. If both elements had not been in place at the same time, Penn State may have missed out on cultivating an alumna who would not have been identified as a prospect. This was the perfect

example of an alumni relations professional strengthening an existing affinity to Penn State World Campus and teaming with a major gifts officer to further discover the World Campus alumna's passion and align it with the perfect gift-giving vehicle. This established the first major gift as a direct result of the World Campus alumni efforts. Other gifts of six figures or more have occurred in the last four years, with another seven-figure gift expected within several months.

It is important to keep in mind demographic characteristics of online students. At some institutions, students of online programs are older than residential students and may be more established in their fields. In other words, recent graduates of online programs (alumni) may be ready to consider larger gifts sooner than alumni of on-ground programs, making it all the more important to engage them early to understand their situations and ongoing interests.

Beyond Philanthropy

There are numerous other benefits stemming from supporting online student satisfaction and continuing to cultivate positive relationships that reach beyond philanthropic success. For instance, the power of word of mouth marketing is immeasurable, and alumni can become the perfect brand and product advocates for recruitment of new students to online programs.

To reinforce the importance of building community (focusing on) online students and alumni of online programs for the benefit of higher education, we conclude with a focus on financial issues facing colleges and universities.

CONCLUSION

A key challenge faced by many colleges and universities is managing rising costs while reaching market ceilings on tuition due to wage stagnation over time. Some schools are trying to keep tuition lower by either using donor funds for scholarship dollars or directly underwriting operational costs through endowed funds.

The price of tuition rose precipitously from the 1970s through the first two decades of the 21st century. In 1971, for example, average tuition, room and board at public 4-year schools was \$8,734 adjusted to 2017 dollars (\$1,410 unadjusted). By 2016, the same package cost \$20,967 in 2017-adjusted dollars (ProCon.Org, 2017). While the average cost of public 4-year higher education increased 140% from 1971-2017, median income for women increased only 74%. Median income for men actually *decreased* 5.4% during the same period. In 1971, the median income for men was \$42,757 in 2017 dollars, and for women it was \$14,915. In 2016 women were earning on average \$25,901 in 2017 dollars, and men were earning \$40,445. In 2016, the cost of attending a private college was more than double that of public schools, which put it above what an average male earns in a year and twice what a woman earns, (ProCon.Org, 2017).

Thus, the cost of higher education is becoming increasingly unaffordable for many Americans, and the pool of prospective students who can pay for college is shrinking.

Philanthropy and Tuition

Many institutions use private donations to offset costs. Sometimes the funds are linked directly to tuition in the form of scholarships; other times the funds are used to offset operating and other costs in order to reduce tuition or at least limit increases. Schools with very large endowments and deep-pocketed alumni can offer extensive packages to low and middle-income students. For example, Princeton provides free tuition to students whose families earn less than \$120,000 per year. At Brown, Cornell, Columbia, and Duke, a student gets a free ride, including room and board, if his/her family income is \$60,000 or less. Harvard, Yale, and Stanford increase the threshold to \$65,000 per year, and other schools have variants of similar policies (Hakes, 2020). A few schools are directly linking fundraising campaigns to institution-wide tuition reduction efforts. For instance, St. John's College with campuses in Santa Fe and Annapolis cut undergraduate tuition by one-third and launched a \$300M campaign to make up the difference (Eichensehr, 2018).

Although there are many formulae for how schools reduce tuition by using development funds to make up shortfalls, what is clear is that university fundraising efforts are an essential part of efforts to provide access to needy students and to compete with similar institutions. The importance of building and developing donors has never been greater, and the path from student to alumni to donor has never been clearer.

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