Understanding Alumni Relations Programs in Community Colleges

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Abstract

The purpose for conducting the study was to explore and describe the use of alumni societies and associations in community colleges, particularly focusing on the intended outcome of their implementation. To collect data for the study, the research-team developed a survey instrument that was distributed electronically to 250 community college advancement senior leaders. A total of 106 (42%) usable surveys were returned for use in the study, and the results described community college expectations for alumni societies, primarily focused on fundraising. The societies were also critical, however, in career placement for students, developing career-oriented programs, and reviewing curricula. Survey results also indicated that many community college leaders use alumni societies in creative ways, including assisting in faculty searches, hosting recruitment events, and teaching community education (lifelong learning) courses. Study findings are critical for college leaders who are often faced with difficulties in funding existing or new programing. The respondents to the study illustrated how alumni societies can serve as critical catalysts for improving existing programs and expanding the reach and value of the institution. Findings also suggest that alumni societies are perceived to be strong gateways to developing philanthropic support for institutions.

Keywords: Higher education funding, community college leadership, institutional advancement

1. Introduction

Funding for higher education has changed over the past several decades, and this is acutely true for the community college sector of the industry. In many states, funding community colleges through local taxation has changed to a reliance on state allocations, and in the process, there is a greater competition between institutions for the same resources (Miller & Holt, 2005). The result has consistently been the reliance on student tuition, program fees, and external funding.

External funding in community colleges has historically been business and industry related, where potential employers or businesses help to subsidize the educational or training programs that benefit them directly, and similarly, governing and foundation boards have been positioned to provide support to these colleges (Craft & Guy, 2019). Increasingly, though, these same colleges are turning to private individual donors. This prospective group of donors has a unique perspective on the college experience, as they are often the first-generation, multi-cultural, and part-time students who seek out the convenience and low cost of a community college. Additionally, they come from backgrounds that have not historically provided a philanthropic tradition, meaning that although they may have high levels of altruism, they do not have traditions of private giving to education (Gyllin, 2013). The result for community college leaders is that they must find a way to develop or create an introduction of former students to the culture of institutional support.

A prominent higher education tool for engaging alumni and introducing them to the idea of supporting the institution is an alumni association. These offices are arranged in different ways and undertake different types of social activities. They are typically designed to attract former students back to their alma mater by using events, social media, trips, magazines, and newsletters. Alumni associations can be dues-based or no-cost to former students, and strategically, are placed within a development process that begins the cultivation of former students moving them toward supporting the institution through financial contributions and other activities.

Community colleges, without the benefit of long-term residential experiences, have not made significant use of alumni programs (Perkins, 1990). As they begin to more actively pursue private contributions in the support of their

work, however, there is a movement to create and use alumni associations. Therefore, the purpose for conducting the study was to explore and describe the use of alumni societies and associations in community colleges, particularly focusing on the intended outcome of their implementation.

2. Background of the Study

Alumni programs were initially developed to help higher education institutions connect with their alumni. Using events, such as homecoming activities, alumni returned to their alma maters to support the institution through their actions, input, and financial resources. Homecoming programs, for example, provided opportunities for alumni to return to campus to, perhaps, judge the oratory skills of current students or to comment on what they perceived to be the quality of the institution's teaching (Miller, 1993). From the very earliest higher education institutions in North America, alumni have been active in helping to shape their former institutions.

Duffy (1979) identified that Kentucky community colleges were the first to create funds for alumni for their philanthropic gifts, and Vincennes, then a two-year college and now a university in Indiana was the early leader in creating an alumni association for a two-year college (Luskin & Warren, 1985). In both of these instances, the institutional leaders saw the commitment and loyalty of alumni as critical to furthering the mission and work of their institutions.

Contemporary alumni societies and associations are designed to harness the collective support of alumni, both in terms of their financial resources and physical presence. Alumni societies are used to lobby legislatures, to gather input on curriculum, and even to help raise awareness of certain societal issues. Formal Alumni Associations are also the primary point of contact for graduates, and through activities ranging from social events to professional networking opportunities, allow graduates to connect with the campus. The intention frequently is that this connection leads to the giving of both time and resources.

Bila (1999) explained the notion of hierarchical investment, noting that alumni associations, also called societies (terms used interchangeably), generally provide opportunities for alumni to become initially involved with an institution and to make small recurring gifts. These annual gifts lead to a heightened engagement and subsequently, a greater investment of personal resources, culminating in large and sometimes transformational gifts. Bila's depiction of alumni societies is that they are crucial in this pyramid of giving.

Alumni giving is a critical component in the overall college or university development process. Gifts from alumni comprise 26.9% of all gifts to higher education (Kaplan, 2016), and this philanthropic support often is a critical element in institutional finance. Community colleges, however, do not have a history of aggressive fund raising, as illustrated by their ability to collect only 2% of all fundraising gifts (Klingman, 2012), and that 75% of all gifts to community colleges presently come from business and industry (Myers, 2014).

Not all alumni societies and activities, however, are focused on future fundraising. An increasing use for these societies is related to regional accrediting bodies that, in an effort to demonstrate institutional performance, try to follow former students to measure the impact of their education on work performance and quality of life. In such attempts, alumni societies serve as fulcrums for curricular and academic contact well beyond commencement and have at some institutions become a key partner in institutional research attempting to survey former students.

Alumni societies have also recently begun working more aggressively with young alumni to provide professional networking opportunities. Programs targeted to bring young alumni together with a career focus, and with more established alumni, demonstrates a further service of an association.

Associations have also been increasingly used as a private third party for an institution to attempt to influence legislative behaviors. Some associations, for example, bring alumni to state capitol buildings to meet with legislators or fill legislative chambers in a show of force to influence legislative decision-making. Associations have also been used for letter-writing and email campaigns, flooding legislator mailboxes with statements of concern in an attempt to influence votes.

Another growing trend for alumni associations is to work with young alumni, offering them career advice, career networking, and even mentoring services. Some associations will engage former students as mentors who sign up to help a new graduate navigate professional questions about what kinds of jobs to accept, how to negotiate a job contract, and resume help, to name a few. Young alumni societies bring those new in their careers together to network and build professional relationships that can help them advance their careers. Associations often find these kinds of programs helpful because they demonstrate a real value of the association, but also it serves to engage young alumni, and once engaged, the association hopes to keep them connected to the institution.

Alumni Associations are predicated on students having a deep connection with an institution, and being typically willing to pay a nominal membership fee to feel an affiliation with an institution. Two-year colleges can be significantly different, as most do not offer immersive living and residential experience. The majority of two-year college students are enrolled on a part-time basis (Ma & Baum, 2016), and the social development that often occurs in the 18-24-year-old age span is often different for the older, non-traditional aged community college student (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The subsequent result is that students feel differently about their experience with a two-year college than those who have lived on a college campus for four-years or longer. The difference is not necessarily better or worse in terms of what can be expected. Associations, therefore, must rely on a different type of appeal or understanding in order to make the connection between the institution and the student.

One of the key roles that alumni groups can play for community colleges is related to curriculum relevance. As graduates of often occupational-based programs, alumni are uniquely situated to respond to the quality and appropriateness of their training. These comments can be formal alumni satisfaction surveys, but can also be focus groups, open-response commentary, and even alumni panels critiquing their experiences.

Community colleges historically have not had the same fundraising functionalities of traditional four-year institutions which is largely attributed to their mission, scope of service, and funding model (Klingman, 2012). However, past studies have suggested that community college leaders were increasingly recognizing fundraising as a priority for the advancement of their institutions (Kerns & Witter, 1997; Gearhart, Smith, & Miller, 2019). In the past decade or so, community college foundations have gradually invested in fundraising strategies that rely on private-sector support instead of working to develop thorough, long-standing alumni-based fundraising strategies (Babitz, 2003). This could be viewed as a concern because community colleges are the gateway for many students to obtain careers that will increase their earnings substantially over several years (Klingman, 2012). With rising costs and shrinking budgets, community college leaders have begun to be more aware of the long-term value in having established alumni societies, and implementing more traditional types of fundraising efforts (Strout, 2006). Though students who attend community colleges have a much more transient relationship with their two-institutions, community college presidents must recognize the value of alumni programs, and shift their priorities into investing in growing and maintaining those relationships (Boyd, Williams, & Pennington, 2009; Van Houten, 1989).

Building an alumni base can be challenging for community colleges, and many institutions are only beginning, or recently have begun to make attempts at database development and management for fundraising purposes (Strout, 2006). Collecting data on students once they are enrolled at any institution is important, but it is critical for fundraising leaders at community colleges because of the transitory nature of the community college student base. Unlike traditional four-year colleges, many community colleges spend little to no monetary resources, strategically planning and executing alumni related fundraising goals. Understanding which fundraising projects to invest in and when to do so, has become a critical skill set for community college leaders (Boyd, et al., 2009). Gathering, separating, categorizing data requires both financial and human resources, and ultimately, an investment from community college leaders who want to diversify their portfolio of private alumni-based gifts. And as community college presidents can empower fundraisers to identify and solicit private resources for the college (Almquist, 2015), soliciting community college alumni is a responsibility that institutional leaders should shift to a well-trained professional fundraising staff.

Cultivating relations with former students of an institution has multiple challenges. Public perception of the role of a community college and how a community college attempts to define and market itself, may differ. As local taxes help support community colleges, alumni and community members may question the need give to two-year institutions (Klingman, 2012). Where a community college is located and how the public perceive the institution can vary. Additionally, emotive dispositions play a role in alumni relations building (Myers, 2014). Larger urban community colleges may function much more like a 4-year public institutions, and yet public perception of the institution is that it is a "stepping stone" type of place to attend college. In more rural areas, the community college could be much more of an educational home to many members of the community. Students in the community could appreciate the existence of the community college in a different, more endearing type of way. This suggest that building a successful alumni society can vary from institution to institution, and that the challenges in doing so will also vary.

3. Research Methods

To identify how community colleges are using alumni associations and societies, a survey instrument was constructed. The instrument was developed based on the functions and uses of alumni associations at various institutions (Akins, 2005; Gearhart, 1995; Owens, 2016; Singer & Hughey, 2002; Rowland, 1977), and adapted to

the degree offerings and structures of community colleges. The instrument was distributed to a panel of 10 community college presidents for review and modification. Multiple changes were made to the instrument, reflecting the often unique organizational structures of community colleges and the fund raising techniques used.

The first section of the survey instrument asked respondents to identify information about their institutions, including general information such as size, setting, and program diversity. The second section asked respondents to comment on the activities commonly undertaken by their alumni society, and the third section asked respondents to indicate the roles of their alumni societies in the future. The final section of the survey included an open-ended written response opportunity for respondents to comment on either challenges, opportunities, or areas for growth among their alumni societies.

Those individuals included in the study were drawn from a random sample of community colleges identified through an internet based listing of public community colleges. Once the colleges were identified, the college's administration was reviewed to identify the individual with responsibility for 'advancement' activities, possibly including alumni affairs, fundraising, news, and media relations. Initially, 250 colleges were identified, and using replacement colleges, this number was held constant although an additional 113 colleges had to be pulled from the comprehensive listing of all colleges due to their not listing or publicly identifying responsibilities for 'advancement' activities.

The survey was distributed in the spring of 2017 electronically to the sample, with three follow-up requests for participation ultimately yielding a response from 106 (42%) community college officials.

Findings

Of the responding institutions, the majority (69%) enrolled between 3,001-5,000 full-time equivalent students, were part of a larger community college system (58%), classified their geographical setting as "suburban" (57%), and nearly all had a commuter or non-residential campus (97%). Nearly a fifth of the colleges had a large enrollment over 5,000 students (22%), and approximately a third were in urban areas (28%). Program offerings were equally spread across those traditionally found at a community college, with just over a third of the programs being targeted at academic-transfer or a combination of transfer and occupational training programs (both 36% of respondents; see Table 1).

Table 1. Information from Responding Community College Leaders (N=106)

College Characteristic	*n*	*%*
Institution Size (FTE)		
Under 3,000	10	0.90%
3,001-5,000	73	69
5,001 +	23	22
Institutional Setting		
Rural	15	14
Suburban	61	57
Urban	30	28
Residential	4	0.3
Non-residential	103	97
Part of system	62	58
Stand-alone campus	44	42
Program Diversity		
Mostly transfer-oriented programs	38	36
Mostly occupational programs	30	28
Equal combination of both	38	36

Of the 17 activities commonly identified for alumni societies (as shown in Table 2), the most common were participation in different events such as receptions and seasonal social parties (n=52; 49%), use of the society for fundraising (n=44; 42%), to select or grant awards such as teaching or service recognition (n=41; 39%), career

assistance (unspecified as to whether it was for students or alumni; n=35; 33%), and student mentoring (n=28; 26%). The least commonly used activities for these societies were travel programs (n=6; 6%), publication assistance (n=9; 8%), and planning for the college and use for creating and sustaining alumni chapters (both n=10; 9%).

Table 2. Use of Different Alumni Society Activities (N=106)

Activity	n	%
Event participation	52	49%
Fundraising	44	42
Awards/recognition	41	39
Career assistance	35	33
Student mentoring	28	26
Professional networking	27	25
Event management	26	25
Social networking	24	23
Legislative relations	18	17
Curriculum review	17	16
Reunions	17	16
Publicity assistance	15	14
Lifelong learning classes	12	11
College hosts	11	10
Chapters/small groups	10	9
Planning assistance	10	9
Publication assistance	9	8
Travel programs/educational tours	6	6
Other	5	5
Faculty search help	1	1
President's advisory board	1	1
Town-gown citizen committee	1	1
Alumni satisfaction survey help	1	1
Unidentified	1	1

Also listed in Table 2 are four activities for alumni societies that were not previously identified in the literature and included on the survey. The activities (each with an n=1) included assistance with faculty searches, serving on the college president's advisory board, serving on a town-gown committee, and helping with an alumni satisfaction survey.

The third section of the survey instrument asked respondents to identify to what extent certain alumni society roles would be in high priority in the future. Respondents were asked to use a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale, where 1=Strongly Disagree that the role would be a high priority in the future, progressing to 5=Strongly Agree that the role would be a high priority in the future. As shown in Table 3, the highest priority roles in the future were perceived to be offering career assistance to students ($\bar{x}$=4.74), raising money for the institution ($\bar{x}$=4.62), mentoring current students ($\bar{x}$=4.56), and offering professional networking opportunities ($\bar{x}$=4.50). Respondents perceived that alumni societies were least likely to be engaged in offering travel or educational programs ($\bar{x}$=2.88), providing assistance for the development and creation of publications ($\bar{x}$=3.25), and making use of alumni chapters or small group meetings and events ($\bar{x}$=3.41).

Table 3. Alumni Society Roles in the Future

To what extent will this be a high priority in the future?		
Activity	$\bar{x}$	*SD*
Career assistance	4.74	0.4544
Fundraising	4.62	0.872
Student mentoring	4.56	0.6888
Professional networking	4.5	0.6781
Social networking	4.29	0.8986
Event participation	4.25	0.5201
Legislative relations	4.01	0.7782
Awards/recognition	4	0.9001
Event management	3.99	0.7567
Reunions	3.99	0.9111
Publicity assistance	3.98	0.8106
Planning assistance	3.98	0.6819
Lifelong learning classes	3.96	0.2302
Curriculum review	3.87	0.8977
College hosts	3.54	0.4599
Chapters/small groups	3.41	0.8762
Publication assistance	3.25	1.114
Travel programs/educational tours	2.88	1.001

Based on primary institutional course offerings (academic transfer, occupational, or a combination of both), and as shown in Table 4, transfer oriented institutions, the most used alumni societies for fundraising (n=26; 68%) and event participation (n=22; 58%) were most frequently used, although providing career assistance was the most likely to selected for future use of these groups ($\bar{x}$=4.90). Occupational-focused institutions used alumni societies most frequently for providing career assistance (n=18; 60%) and event participation (n=16; 53%), and perceived that they would use alumni groups for career assistance ($\bar{x}$=4.72), fundraising ($\bar{x}$=4.62), and professional networking in the future ($\bar{x}$=4.62). Institutions that focused on both occupational education and academic transfer work reported using alumni societies mostly for event participation (n=18; 37%) and fundraising (n=12; 31%). This group of college leaders perceived using alumni groups for student mentoring ($\bar{x}$=4.66), fundraising ($\bar{x}$=4.4.64), and career assistance in the future ($\bar{x}$=4.63). An Analysis of Variance identified one significant difference; between the future use of career assistance by academic transfer colleges ($\bar{x}$=4.25) and occupational education focused colleges ($\bar{x}$=3.90).

	N=38		N=30		N=38		N=106	
	n	$\bar{x}$	*n*	$\bar{x}$	*n*	$\bar{x}$	*n*	$\bar{x}$
Event participation	22	4.28	16	4.2	14	4.26	52	4.25
Fundraising	26	4.61	6	4.62	12	4.64	44	4.62
Awards/recognition	19	4.25*	11	3.90*	11	3.66	41	4
Career assistance	8	4.9	18	4.72	9	4.63	35	4.74
Student mentoring	9	4.44	11	4.58	8	4.66	28	4.56
Professional networking	7	4.37	12	4.62	8	4.43	27	4.5
Social networking	7	4.3	10	4.27	7	4.3	24	4.29
Legislative relations	6	4	8	3.94	6	4.1	18	4.01

significantly different $p>.05$

4. Conclusion and Discussion

One of the key findings of the study is that the community college leaders who participated in the study had high-levels of agreement that alumni groups have a future role in their organizations. Although this has been an anecdotal observation in the media, the finding is important for several reasons. First, the importance placed on working with alumni reflects the changing role of the college president, moving further away from internal operations management toward that of the external relations role of the office. Second, it reflects public calls for accountability in higher education, as even community colleges attempt to keep track of their former students at least partially to track what they do post-enrollment, and how well they do it. And third, the findings suggest that funding will continue to be an important issue for college leaders to address, and this was highlighted by all types of institutions strongly agreeing with alumni as a group to be relied upon for fundraising.

The highest rated overall future use for an alumni society identified was for career assistance, which suggests that colleges are looking for creative ways to help their students be successful. The finding also suggests that even at transfer-oriented institutions, there is a strong consideration for the idea of job training and placement, certainly a common call from state and federal policy makers. How this might work can vary greatly, from alumni networks in specific occupational fields, using alumni to "practice" interview completing students, and even providing programs such as job fairs that give preference to former community college students.

Similar to career assistance, the college leaders participating in the study agreed that there is a future for alumni groups to play in mentoring students. These might include apprenticeship programs, speaker series to bring alumni back to campus, alumni as guest speakers in class, and even using alumni to provide mentoring to those transferring to four-year institutions. To some extent, the agreement with curriculum review is also related to student performance, as presumably the institutions that use alumni societies for this type of work are making an attempt to use practitioners in reviewing what is taught to assure its relevance and currency.

Respondents did not perceive a strong use of alumni groups for helping with publications or working with small chapters, and considering the historical use of these societies, this is not surprising. Somewhat unexpected, though, was the relatively low agreement with the lifelong, continuing leisure education function of alumni societies. Few responding institutions used alumni groups for travel programs (n=6), which is counter to the common practice of providing these types of tours at four-year institutions. Similarly, respondents did not see this changing much in the future, and also 11% of responding institutions use alumni groups to offer or coordinate lifelong learning programs (although there was moderate agreement that they would in the future). This could be that other mechanisms exist to provide these types of leisure education programs, such as offices of continuing education, but if that is indeed the case, then the target market for such programming is directed more to the community rather than former students.

Implications for Practice

Study findings certainly advance the general understanding of the use of formal alumni groups in community colleges, but there are also three primary implications for practice. First and foremost, alumni societies are in use and have a number of roles that they could fill, but college leaders need to have a serious conversation about how to use such groups in the most effective manner. Too often organizations such as alumni societies are left to evolve, moving in directions of opportunity, but the use of alumni bodies for academic advancement, alumni placement, and fundraising means that presidents must make deliberate uses of alumni societies and need to make the decisions on how to use them early in their organizational development.

Second, academic leaders in community colleges need to begin exploring how to best use alumni networks for curricular relevance. Too often, higher education institutions see a separation between alumni and fundraising and the academic enterprise, with the possible exception of discussions of scholarship opportunities. As these findings highlight, alumni networks can be crucial to curricular relevancy, job placement, and a student's education. This means that academic leaders, such as vice presidents for academic affairs and department chairs, need to become involved in the management of alumni lists and directories, and need to be an active partner in finding ways to keep alumni engaged so that they can contribute to the student's education.

And finally, college leaders perceived alumni to play a critical role in fundraising, which means that programs need to be developed, tested, and validated that effectively do this. Programs frequently used at four-year institutions that are based on the creation of an allegiance developed through residential experiences and a long-term engagement will not be effective for community colleges, meaning that leaders must find creative ways to demonstrate the value of their institutions, and subsequently, work with alumni to have them invest in the opportunities they can provide.

These study findings are important because they not only point to an extended discussion about the strategy of engaging alumni in community college advancement, but also that there are specific individuals who need to be working with alumni. Those in academic leadership, as well as traditional advancement offices, need to become fully engaged in helping to realize the potential that exists with fully developed and active alumni societies and networks.

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Table 4. Comparison of Most Frequently Used and Expected of Alumni Activities Program Diversity

	Transfer N=38		Occupational N=30		Combination N=38		All N=106	
	n	$\bar{x}$	*n*	$\bar{x}$	*n*	$\bar{x}$	n	$\bar{x}$
Event participation	22	4.28	16	4.20	14	4.26	52	4.25
Fundraising	26	4.61	6	4.62	12	4.64	44	4.62
Awards/recognition	19	4.25*	11	3.90*	11	3.66	41	4.00
Career assistance	8	4.90	18	4.72	9	4.63	35	4.74
Student mentoring	9	4.44	11	4.58	8	4.66	28	4.56
Professional networking	7	4.37	12	4.62	8	4.43	27	4.50
Social networking	7	4.30	10	4.27	7	4.30	24	4.29
Legislative relations	6	4.00	8	3.94	6	4.10	18	4.01

*significantly different $p>.05$