



Building Stronger Alumni Relations

Alumni are one of the most important stake holders of an university. Once someone has received a degree from a university, they are part of it for life. Therefore, it is important for the universities to maintain an ongoing relationship with alumni, and seek their participation in achieving excellence. Alumni are often keen to play their part not just because the enhanced brand name of the university helps them professionally, but also because they have nostalgic memories and feel emotionally connected to the place.

Alumni can help a university by mentoring current students, organising recruitments and internships, building collaborations between their employers and the faculty members at the university, and giving funds.

Stay Connected

To have a fruitful relationship with alumni, it is necessary that the university knows who they are, where they are, and what are they doing. When a student body graduates, universities must collect contact information from them. This should include all the e-mail addresses that the student may be using, phone numbers, where the student is going to (job or higher education), and

a permanent address. Periodically (once or twice a year) they must verify and update the database. If they lose touch with an alumnus, her batchmates should be approached for updates.

Rather than just approaching alumni for funds, universities should engage with them in multiple ways for a broader and deeper relationship. Alumni should be involved as advisors and given representation in various administrative and academic bodies. They should be made to feel that this engagement is making a real difference in achieving excellence.

Universities usually publish newsletters to keep stakeholders informed of their activities. These newsletters should also be sent to all alumni. These days newsletters can be electronic to cut costs. Websites can become a repository of previous newsletters. They could also produce newsletters specifically targeted at alumni, which may include news about alumni themselves.

Different people prefer to communicate in different ways and these preferences must be respected. While some prefer printed materials others prefer e-mails or direct phone calls.

University's alumni relations office must also have an active presence on various social networking and professional networking sites, and use services like LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. Putting in a professional alumni relations software can also help. Alumni could also be divided into

subgroups other than batches. While geographical groupings could help in organising local events, industry groupings could facilitate professional networking.

Organising large scale on-campus reunions is the most effective mechanism to ensure emotional bonding. However, if these are held too frequently, many people will not attend them. If they are held too infrequently, the bonding may be lost. Typically, once a decade is a good frequency.

Raise Funds

When it comes to fundraising, most alumni make small contributions. Very few make large contributions. While it will consume significant resources to approach large number of alumni for small contributions, it is still extremely important to have a large number of people “connected” with their alma mater and in a habit of giving gifts. Those who make a small Rs 500 contribution from their first salary are more likely to contribute a million rupees when they are able to do so. “Catch them young,” as the saying goes.

For those who are likely to make small contribu-

who makes the contribution, the option to name the initiative after him (or another person of his/her choice). The fundraising office should have several alternatives to offer to any alumni who shows an interest in giving a gift.

The office must do a detailed background study before approaching a potentially large donor. It should try to find out the net worth of the individual, and any other major philanthropic gift that the person may have given. The US has professional agencies, who do the background research for universities. In India, one may have to use more informal mechanisms.

However, information gathering should be discreet, since the university should not be perceived as an intelligence gathering entity. The office should also collect details specific to the student days of that alumni in the institute. Which hostel did they stay in? What activities did they participate in? Which faculty members supervised their projects? This information will help in preparing a specific proposal for an alumni. A person who was always on the playground is more likely to give a larger gift for improving sports infrastruc-

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tions— there can be funds for specific activities. There should be options so that people can contribute to what they care about. But the options should not be so many that every option gets a very small amount.

If that happens, the stakeholders at the university would not be excited to maintain alumni relations, and alumni might not see how their funds are making a difference. It is best to start with fewer options, gauge alumni interest, and then slowly increase the number options. A good alumni management system would allow such appeals and campaigns to be personalised.

For alumni who can contribute larger amounts, there should be customised options. These could include establishing student scholarships, starting a new department, constructing a new building or a research facility, or even setting up a “Chair Professor” position. It is important that the university is flexible and offers the alumni,

ture. If the person did a research project with a particular faculty member, inviting that faculty member during the meeting with that alumnus, could help in creating the right mood.

It is extremely important to take quick decisions on gifts and facilitate permissions from Income Tax Office to help donors who require Income Tax rebates. The other important thing is to keep the alumni informed of how their contribution has made a difference. Send them updates, if the impact is on a long term (like a building construction). If it has directly helped an individual (like in case of student scholarship), get that person to write a personal note to the person who gave that gift.

To summarise, universities should have a professionally run alumni relations office, create a good database, preferably with an alumni management software. Communication is extremely important. Plan a broad and deep engagement with alumni, and do not focus only on gifts. ■■■

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