Alumni Engagement is More Important than Alumni Participation

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In a previous article, I argued that relying exclusively on alumni participation to gauge alumni affinity to an organization was no longer a viable metric. Simple math, as discussed in that article, is causing participation rates to decline no matter how actively we pursue alumni donations. Certainly we want our alumni to give – and they do, but not always in a way that “counts” for US News and World Reports (USN&WR) purposes (gifts from donor-advised funds, family foundations, and employers do not count). But more to the point, giving is not the only way in which alumni show their affinity and love for their alma mater.

USN&WR may have been right to consider donations as a strong measure of affinity over 30 years ago when they began their ranking efforts. In fact, beginning in the 1990s many institutions began taking issue with the entire USN&WR ranking methodology. In 2009, Kevin Carey of Education Sector wrote a paper on College Rankings Reformed calling the premise behind the ranking formula “deeply flawed.”

Recognizing the flaws inherent with the USN&WR methodology, a new ranking system, the Wall Street Journal and Times Higher Education joined forces and announced a much different approach to college rankings in 2016:


The methodology for this new system does not consider alumni participation! Instead, the formula evaluates how effectively the college engages with their students. Alumni “opinions” are not considered. Their philosophy is that, “Decades of research has found that the best way to truly understand teaching quality at an institution – how well it manages to inform, inspire and challenge its students -- is through capturing what is known as ‘student engagement’. This was described by Malcolm Gladwell (New Yorker, 2011) as ‘the extent to which students immerse themselves in the intellectual and social life of their college—and a major component of engagement is the quality of a student’s contacts with faculty.’”

Student engagement accounts for 20% of the overall ranking, as compared to USN&WR that attributes 5% to alumni participation.

While I agree with this new methodology as possibly a better way to rank colleges for the benefit of prospective students, I do believe – especially from an Advancement perspective – that tracking Alumni engagement is just as important. However, the one deficiency here is that it is largely impossible to compare alumni engagement across institutions. The metrics used to track engagement simply vary too significantly between institutional cultures. For example, many engagement models I have developed place a good deal of significance on attendance/participation in reunion programs. Well, that’s great – if you still have a reunion program! Increasingly, though, these are going away or declining in importance thanks to social media.
Alumni engagement models, then, are important as measures of your own performance and success. Tracking engagement scores at the individual level will, over a period of time, serve as an early warning system for programs that are beginning to fail – as well as tell us quickly which programs are having the greatest positive impact.

Development of an engagement model must be an institutional exercise – not just one department deciding what they think is important. And the selection of data elements to track must be thoughtfully considered. In June, 2013, CASE published an article on this topic titled, “Track Alumni Engagement to Improve Outcomes”:

http://www.case.org/Publications_and_Products/June_2013/Research_and_News_of_Note.html#Article2

In that piece, the authors offered these five points for consideration:

- Start with outcomes: Understand the outcomes you want and work backwards to define the data that will help you track your progress; for example, if your goal is to raise private support from alumni, look at the engagement patterns of current alumni donors to help you identify other alumni with similar patterns who are not yet donors. This approach will help your institution focus its time on those who are most likely to give.
- Start small: Figure out what you've already got in your database and use it, whether it relates to updating an address or attending an event.
- Keep it simple: Don't waste time on collecting and recording data you won't use, and don't collect so much that you become paralyzed when you try to interpret it.
- Involve others with the creation of your metrics: Build buy-in by engaging campus leaders in conversation about what they would find useful.
- Use data strategically: It's not enough to collect the data; use it to make decisions that will enhance outreach and efficiency. Remember that data is a management tool.

When I was at NC State (2008-2013) the above was precisely the approach we took when developing our methodology. We decided on a total of 11 engagement categories. 5 of these pertained to giving, but included soft-credits and often were based on cumulative giving. 4 categories were related to volunteer activities, and 1 was whether the individual was a member of the Alumni Association. The last category pertained to event attendance. But not just any event. Attendance at only 7 different (listed) events “counted,” with a maximum of 3 events being factored in.

Each of the categories had a point assignment ranging from 1-4. The maximum number of points anyone could achieve was 14. And then, for tracking purposes, we came up with 4 tiers of engagement (1-3, points, 4-7, 8-10, 11-14). That was it. Pretty simple and straight forward. Much more so than one of my clients who consider 60 variables! But no matter. If you adhere to the suggestions offered in the CASE article mentioned above, you can’t go wrong.

In closing, I simply want to reiterate that it’s not all about alumni participation any more (even though some of your board members think that’s ALL it is about). If we want to understand how effectively we are communicating and connecting with our alumni, it is time to start tracking alumni engagement!