



Alumni Participation: Four Perspectives

WG: Pls provide 2-3 (new or old) strategies that you are finding successful in increasing your alumni participation.

Kelly Westerhouse, U Mass-Boston

Kerri Lehmbeck, Allendale Columbia

Chris Biehn, Drew University

Andrea Miller, Dartmouth

In our pre-shift meetings, we remind phonathon callers to stress participation in every call and particularly in those where they negotiate down the ask ladder.

Revamped Class Representative Program (putting alumni volunteers in touch with classmates to help with various tasks, including encouraging their classmates to participate in the annual fund)

We are improving our print communications and increasing our use of personalization and segmentation, to get the right message to the right people "where they are." In conjunction with Alumni Relations, we have also improved the quality and frequency of e-mail communications and provide more opportunities to give online.

Limited-time challenges proposed by alumni. For example: Make a gift during April and for every 10 gifts an alumnus challenger will give an additional \$1,000. There are variations on the theme and can be held at either a single class level or across the annual fund to all alumni. Key to success is that the challenge is simple, easy to communicate, and impact easily understood: "Your gift, no matter what size, can be worth \$100 more."

We are featuring two beloved founding faculty members in targeted appeals (above and beyond our regular DM mailing plans)

Alumni Challenge (for the annual fund)

We have instituted a team approach for reunion giving, with Annual Giving, Alumni Relations, and Major Gift Officers working together to create excitement and increase philanthropy among reunion classes.

Raffles of Dartmouth-related gifts. For example: make a gift this week and you will be entered into a raffle for a Kindle loaded with books by Dartmouth alumni and faculty."

We are collaborating on phonathon follow-up plans with small groups, like our clinical psych PhD program, in their aim for 100% participation among PhD alum for the program's 20th anniversary

Incorporating a "philanthropy day" approach to our annual appeal (most colleges are calling this a "tuition freedom day")

We are reconstructing a cohesive volunteer system of peer-to-peer communication and solicitation. Volunteer leadership, committee members, reunion and other volunteers (class secretaries, etc.) are being enlisted to reach out to their peers, to cultivate, or reestablish, in cases of those who have not been engaged with the university, a healthy relationship with their alma mater that will foster increased willingness to give.

Using giving behavior to segment. For example, we did an email solicitation on Cyber Monday targeting donors who gave online the year before. We acknowledged that they gave online, pointed out the benefits of giving online and early in the fiscal year, and – in keeping with the Cyber Monday theme – offered a Dartmouth-related trinket (Bumper sticker, tote bag, poster, etc) if they gave online by midnight of Cyber Monday.

WG: Compared to five years ago, is your alumni participation level, decreasing or increasing? To what do you attribute this?

Kelly Westerhouse, U Mass-Boston

Kerri Lehmbeck, Allendale Columbia

Chris Biehn, Drew University

Andrea Miller, Dartmouth

Our participation rate is fluctuating up and down by small measures. For example, last year, we did significant lost alumni research and increased our base, so while the participation rate looks lower, we have nearly the same amount of donors as the prior year.

I have only been here 10 months, but in my opinion, our alumni participation is pretty level overall, with the exception of this year. This year, we have struggled with our alumni participation and I attribute some of this to this to the economy. However, I think another reason we are behind this year is because the alumni association board and our office have spent a great deal of time putting together a class representative program (we had a very loose program before with no responsibilities outlined and the class reps were not dedicated). Although the immediate impact of the program is not evident, we do see the long term potential and hope to continue to roll this program out to all classes (are main focus, so far, has been to just those classes celebrating a milestone reunion in June).

Our alumni participation level has decreased over the past five years.

Participation increased between fiscal years 2005 to 2006, leveled out at 50% in 2007, and declined in FY08 and FY09. Increases were due to increased and more effective fundraising during the College's Campaign for the Dartmouth Experience, which ended December of 2009. Recent decreases were due to the poor economy, and a controversy within the Dartmouth community.

As far as overall participation, I am not content with our numbers and will be trying several new things next year to boost participation. However, since this is my first year on the job, I chose to run with things the way they have always been done in order to see where changes are needed. I have a laundry list of things I would like to change and try for next fiscal year.

We know that this is consistent with a national trend; the recent results of the Voluntary Support of Education (VSE) survey for 2009 indicate the lowest alumni participation rate ever recorded on the VSE survey. We attribute the decrease to a number of factors, including the overall decline in the economy and greater competition for fewer charitable dollars. In addition, in the wake of devastating national and international disasters, which have prompted brisk and persuasive fund raising efforts by disaster relief organizations, many individuals may be more likely to make "reactive" donations to those organizations, believing their gifts to such efforts have more immediate and meaningful impact than gifts to their alma mater. Finally, at our institution, there appears to be a general lack of understanding about the importance of alumni.

WG: What significance is social media playing in increasing alumni participation? How, if at all, are you using any social media to leverage participation?

Kelly Westerhouse, U Mass-Boston

Kerri Lehmbeck, Allendale Columbia

Chris Biehn, Drew University

Andrea Miller, Dartmouth

<p>At this point, we are using social media primarily as outreach tools to engage and reconnect with alumni.</p>	<p>We just really started a presence on Face Book, LinkedIn and Twitter this year. Face book is where most of the action takes place and we have just over 600 friends. We will continue to use these sites as tools for communicating with our constituents, since this is where people are, but it is hard for me to say if having a presence on these sites is increasing our alumni participation. We, currently, do not statistically analyze which friends are alumni, current students, current parents, prospective families, etc. In order to justify if Face book is working, we would have to dig deeper into the data and at this time we do not have the staffing in our office to accomplish this task (we are an office of 3 full-time employees). Hopefully, with some of the changes happening at our school this might be an area we can look into, as I don't think people will be parting ways with the social networking sites anytime soon and we need to figure out a way to "meet" and "cultivate" our constituents in a location where they are already located.</p>	<p>Our presence on social media sites increases our ability to get our message out quickly, in a way that is more meaningful to that audience. It is also a way to keep them feeling engaged with the university as part of their regular routine.</p>	<p>Face Book: We use stewardship and solicitation ads on face book to keep Dartmouth top of mind with alumni. Ads are usually just one aspect of a multi-media program. With alumni seeing program messaging through direct mail and/or email as well. Some alumni volunteers use face book as a communication tool with their prospects but that driven by the individual, not by the Dartmouth College Fund staff. Within the few months we plan to initiate a donor badge program for face book users.</p>
<p>We are collaborating with Alumni Relations on using Face book fan groups to re-engage reunion alumni in an effort to ultimately increase participation.</p>		<p>We are exploring the possibility of giving via text messaging, which could potentially save on printing costs and reduce our overall cost per dollar raised, in addition to boosting participation rates by making giving much easier for the donor.</p>	<p>Twitter: The alumni and parents funds each have Twitter accounts targeting our respective audiences. We use Twitter to keep those constituencies engaged and informed about Dartmouth news, accomplishments of students, faculty and alumni, and any other point of interest. At this point, Twitter is primarily a relationship building tool. However, through the alumni fund's Twitter account (@SupportStudents) we are building internal lists of alumni, parents, and students who opt to follow us. In the future we may use those lists for solicitation, but that idea is in its infancy. Like face book ads, we use Twitter as another medium to announce/remind about alumni participation challenges and other solicitation programs, but using Twitter for solicitation is deliberately infrequent.</p>
<p>We have also created a significant presence on You Tube that is drawing new members daily.</p>			<p>You Tube: We frequently load flash presentations and videos on You Tube to encourage alumni and parent participation. Typically we create a flash piece, load it onto You Tube, create a custom landing page on our website that links to the piece and also has solicitation language and a "Give now" button. Here's an example of a video: http://www.youtube.com/user/Dartmouth#p/c/9AD5F91C71826CEA/0/0KXObfY0Dbc</p>
<p>WG: Any other comments, thoughts, ideas on increasing alumni participation?</p>			
	<p>Kerri Lehmbeck, Allendale Columbia</p> <p>I have been in development and alumni relations for over 8 years at the higher education level and what I have learned in coming to an independent school is that there has been a tremendous amount of focus on current parents/families and not enough on alumni. It is my opinion that our alumni program is in the very infancy stage and we need to continue to build a foundation so that when it comes time to solicit alumni they feel inclined to participate. We, currently, do not host regional events for alumni, and I think this is one area we can improve. Additionally, we do not effectively market what alumni relations and development is to our current students and families. Also, we do not use our alumni magazine or other school communication tools (like Web site or pamphlets) to highlight some of the fabulous alumni that have graduated from our institution (partly because we do not know who these people are and we need to do a better job at researching and staying in touch with individuals when they graduate). Ideally, it would be great if we could have someone on staff dedicated to working with just alumni; however, we are not in that position at this time. There is a lot of work we have yet to do and I realize that it takes time to build a program from the ground up, but I am confident that in trying some ideas learned in my experiences in higher education, we can build a stronger, more committed alumni base.</p>	<p>Chris Biehn, Drew University</p> <p>We are integrating marketing and communications efforts between Annual Giving and Alumni Relations, for a more strategic, cohesive approach.</p>	<p>Andrea Miller, Dartmouth</p> <p>Having accurate and complete email addresses and phone numbers is critical to alumni participation. If you can't reach them, you can't solicit them. And the most effective solicitation is verbal, from a peer.</p>
		<p>We are creating a program for alumni who are also on staff at the university. At our institution, this is a fairly large group, and we see them as potential ambassadors in creating a far-reaching culture of philanthropy.</p>	<p>We are in the (very) early stages of experimenting with alumni soliciting using a combination of profession and geography. For example, a group of Dartmouth alumni (across classes) who are in the entertainment and media industry in the Los Angeles area may, with our encouragement and help, form a networking group and hold events. Once established, this may be used as a platform for peer solicitation.</p>
		<p>We are creating a 'Student Philanthropy Council', to instill the importance of giving back, from the students' early days on campus. The impact of this program on alumni participation rates will be felt in the long-term as opposed to the short-term, but we are confident that cultivating student givers will result in higher and more sustained participation rates when they become alumni.</p>	