MISSION STATEMENT

The Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities (APSCU) has established a task force to promote the establishment of alumni communities among its member institutions. Alumni communities are structured to address the specialized needs and unique positioning of private sector postsecondary institutions. The communities’ focus is geared toward giving and showing appreciation to alumni, providing various services to promote their success, and maintaining long-term relationships with alumni long after graduation for the benefit of both the alumni and institution.

APSCU created this task force to offer a series of best practices so that private sector colleges and universities of any size can develop sustainable alumni communities that effectively serve both alumni and their institutions. This document presents and promotes these best practices for the purpose of institutional application.

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PREAMBLE

Postsecondary institutions exist to help change peoples’ lives—and alumni are evidence of that mission. Their career progression and achievements after graduation are key demonstrations of an institution’s success. Alumni personify the mission, vision, and values of their postsecondary education institutions, and alumni outcomes are one of the most important influencers on the institution’s reputation. These are just a few—but important—reasons institutions form alumni engagement programs to foster lifelong connections with graduates.

In these best practices, we use the term alumni community rather than alumni organization or association. We did this in order to differentiate private sector college and university alumni networks from traditional alumni groups, which tend to focus on fundraising.

One key objective of an alumni community is to provide the information, services, and benefits alumni need in order to become and remain engaged with the institution—and then cultivate that engagement into meaningful, mutual advocacy and support. Because alumni understand the challenges their institutions face, their multi-perspective input and solutions are valuable. The institution also gains ambassador resources to support current students and enhance institutional reputation.

Likewise, alumni also benefit from this ongoing relationship. Many private sector colleges and universities are committed to providing career and educational support to graduates long after their graduation. An alumni community can be an appropriate and effective tool for sustained connections between an institution and its graduates. When an alumni community is appropriately developed, alumni receive recognition, as well as career and business connections and support.

Keeping alumni engaged while developing services that address their needs and concerns is an important strategy for many institutions. However, our task force is mindful that member institutions vary in size, number of students and campuses, types of academic programs, and in other ways. This diversity may result in implementing many—but not necessarily all—of these best practices in the ways most appropriate to each institution. We recognize and celebrate this service diversity and are unified in our commitment to offering education that prepares students with the skills and knowledge appropriate for their chosen careers.

The best practices are organized into four areas:

I. Structure of an Alumni Community
II. Benefits and Requirements
III. Communications
IV. Engagement
STRUCTURE OF AN ALUMNI COMMUNITY

Given alumni’s importance to an institution’s identity, reputation, and success, alumni programs can contribute to an institution’s growth and improvement strategy. When setting up an alumni community, institutions—regardless of their size—typically see similar key results: increased enrollment and retention, better career placement, and more effective branding.

Forming the Community

A president or institution owner may want to create an alumni community for his or her graduates. Alternately, a professional in career services or placement may make the decision to build one. And in some cases, the graduates are the ones who express interest in creating a more formal vehicle to continue their relationship with their institution. Regardless of its impetus, a successful alumni community first needs organizing materials to guide its activities.

The first of these is its mission statement. Creating a mission helps everyone understand the goals of the alumni community and its expected results. We encourage the creation of a “Discussion Draft” mission statement—similar to a prospectus—that can help articulate the organization’s purpose. Once a more formal group is established, members are likely to provide input to a more formal mission statement.

Next, identify the key stakeholders in the institution who will contribute to and support the alumni community. These should also be individuals who will benefit from establishment of the alumni community.

Then, gain their support by sharing the mission, asking for help with some tasks, and communicating the benefits that will come to them with a thriving alumni community. Reach out broadly across departments, including:

- Admissions
- Marketing
- Student Services
- Career Services
- Education
- Administration

Putting Oversight and Governance into Place

There is no right way to organize the structure of an alumni community. It’s typically dependent upon the number of campuses within the institution and whether the institution is a ground campus or online program. We recommend spending some time researching institutions similar to yours to find what works best for them—and then adapting it to your institution’s needs.

However, the task force has outlined some steps most institutions can take to put governance into place for an alumni community:

- Determine where the alumni community will be located within your institution. First, settle on where the alumni community will fit in your institution’s organizational chart. Regardless of alumni community structure, the most successful connect alumni directly to their individual programs and/or campuses. How you do this effectively will depend on the structure of your institution:
For single and online campuses: An alumni community is most effective standing alone as a department and reporting to a key campus decision maker, such as the campus director or president.

For branch campuses: The initial alumni community might start up at the main campus, while stand-alone alumni communities could be set up at each branch.

For corporate institutions: A single corporate office typically oversees all campuses through regional or individual campus directors, so consider setting up an alumni community at one campus first. Make this a successful model, then launch at other campuses.

- Consider staffing: Determine if the alumni community’s staffing jobs will be full-time or part-time. Do you have enough bandwidth on your internal team, or will you need to hire additional or outside help? You can choose to either assign a current employee to the job, or hire a dedicated alumni community director.

- Create an Advisory Board: An important task is the development of an Alumni Advisory Board. Begin by establishing a clear definition of the advisory role and duties of the board, as well as the members who will make it up. Effective advisory boards have representatives from all areas of the institution, including staff, faculty, directors, students, graduates, such as community leaders, and employers. To help identify who will be a good fit, look to recommendations from faculty and staff.

When setting up the governance and oversight of your alumni community, also consider these questions:

- Will the alumni community be alumni-managed?
- Will administration oversee all activities in which the new community is involved?
- Will an alumni director position be created or will those responsibilities be added to a current administrator’s duties?
- Will a board of directors and/or advisory board be established?
- For large, geographically diverse alumni communities that may have regional chapters, consider using volunteers to manage the local chapter.
- We do not recommend collecting dues from members of the alumni community, as graduates should be welcomed as alumni members upon graduation. However, if dues are collected, appropriate oversight structures will need to be implemented.

We’ve detailed some other tips to consider when creating your Alumni Advisory Board:

- To preserve the continuity of an alumni board, consider making it volunteer-driven. These are the most successful groups, as this structure enables the group to self-perpetuate without depending on a single staff member.

- To understand alumni expectations, needs, and preferences, consider distributing a survey to gauge their interests and levels of engagement. Once you gather their feedback, analyze and share this information with the appropriate stakeholders.

- To keep up-to-date and effective, the board should meet often enough to gather and implement the feedback, ideas, and advice you need, but not so often that it becomes a burden to members.

Managing the Budget and Measuring ROI

To fully assess your investment in an alumni community, you will need to measure the return on investment (ROI). This can be a challenge, as measuring ROI requires you assess everything that happens as a result of your alumni community, even though some benefits cannot be quantified.
To best estimate the costs to set up and run the alumni community, design systems for both qualitative and quantitative evaluation so that progress against goals can be measured and data collected.

When creating the budget, take into account:

- Personnel and technology requirements
- Event planning, including outside costs such as catering and venue rentals
- Communication methods: Facebook or an added page on your current site offer low to no-cost methods for reaching alumni. However, an independent website—which can be a good central platform for exchanging information with members—and print materials, such as success story flyers, books and posters, event invitations, and even transcript requests, can add quickly to the budget.
- Staff travel or professional development for institutions with large alumni groups or more established alumni communities

Connect with your stakeholders upfront to determine together the key areas to measure for ROI, how you plan to measure them, and how often. Once identified, decide who will receive the ROI reports and what they can do with the information.

Here are some examples of measures you may choose to track:

- Enrollment referrals
- Retention as a result of alumni involvement
- Placement and job openings alumni provide, plus updates on employment status
- Percentage of alumni records updated and “in contact”
- LinkedIn group memberships
- Marketing messages
- Testimonials
- The number of graduates who:
  - Attend functions
  - Return as speakers, ambassadors, or mentors
  - Help with externships and internships
  - Review course content and curricula
  - Assist in the classroom
  - Participate in political action events

To help establish a tracking system, try starting from an existing student information system. Good ROI systems require coordination with the managers of student information systems in any case. You can adapt the system to track your alumni, as well as send periodic notices and requests. As your alumni community grows, however, you will likely have to consider implementing business processes and information systems specifically tailored to the needs of an alumni community.
II. BENEFITS AND REQUIREMENTS

Keeping alumni engaged with the institution while developing services to address their needs and concerns is a key strategy. Graduates and the institution alike will benefit from this type of ongoing relationship.

Ensuring Alumni Benefit

Graduates within an alumni community should be welcomed and appreciated. They should experience gains, whether these are concrete benefits, such as job search help, or intangible benefits, such as being a part of a larger network.

Here are some practices that help ensure alumni benefit from the community:

**Offer career services.**

Access to transcripts and help with job searches are the two largest types of assistance alumni seek. Helping with the first is fairly straightforward: Make it seamless for alumni to get to the right place online to request a transcript. For job search help, many institutions will provide lifetime job search assistance to alumni. There are many types of career services you may choose to offer your alumni, including:

- Online job boards solely for students and alumni
- Career and networking expos where employers from a variety of fields are invited to recruit students, alumni, and individuals from the community
- Workshops to update specific career skills
- Access to resources from the institution’s career services center—including resume and cover letter preparation, mock interviews, portfolio sharing, negotiation skills for job advancement and promotions, and guidance on re-entering the working world after an absence

There are also many ways to help your alumni develop professionally within their careers. One example is to offer career-focused webinars on topics like personal branding, writing effective resumes, developing and modifying a career plan, negotiating a promotion, networking, or professional and technical updates.

We’d also suggest creating in-person career events, which are highly valuable for making personal connections. Try piggybacking on existing career services events by offering similar workshops and information geared toward alumni.

Other ways to advance career services for alumni include:

- Providing an online portal for alumni to post their professional work and portfolios
- Using social media tools to create meaningful networking. For example, alumni can create their own LinkedIn groups, organize them by program major, create discussions and polls within them, and post relevant articles. They can also post details about their successes or job openings at their places of work.
- Promoting activities such as community service events

**Provide special discounts and benefits.**

You may also consider offering products or discounts to alumni. For those in careers with rapidly changing technologies, consider offering discounted or free courses to help alumni stay up-to-date. Or create special items with the institution’s logo for purchase through the campus bookstore—or through an e-store on your alumni website. Third-party vendors are also great sources through which to seek support for your alumni community.
Establish alumni awards and recognition programs.
Alumni awards fall into two categories: distinguished alumni awards and dedicated alumni awards. Distinguished awards are presented frequently to honor alumni who have gained prominence in their field, helped connect the institution to government officials or community organizations, or worked in political advocacy. Dedicated alumni awards honor those who have done exemplary work as volunteers in admissions, tutoring, helping to connect employers to the institution's career services office, or working with student organizations and at events.

Successful award programs have these following common elements:

- The award selection process must be perceived as fair and impartial, with a standard set of criteria. Consider early what criteria will be used to determine the award, including:
  - Minimum number of years since graduation
  - Employment
  - Self-nomination or anonymous nomination
  - Willingness to receive award in person
  - Graduation status
- The selection process should also have a predetermined group of impartial decision makers. Consider early who should make the final award decision. Typically, the decision committee includes alumni, faculty, and administrators. This committee will make recommendations to the institution's leadership, who will then have the final decision.
- There must be enough qualified candidates for the award.
- Each award should have clear communication and selection processes, from the call for nominations through to the final award decision.
- Every effort should be made to present the awards in person. And all awards and recognition should have appropriate news coverage. Some event and venue ideas include:
  - Graduations: Presenting the awards in front of the largest crowd of the year can be rewarding for the recipients and impressive for graduates and their families.
  - Dedicated alumni awards receptions: These provide an exclusive forum and opportunity for alumni to gather and celebrate the success of a colleague.
  - The honoree’s place of employment or at a community event: Presenting awards in front of a new audience can elevate awareness of an institution in a community.
Offer an alumni legacy and referral program.
Create an alumni scholarship program in which members of the alumni community can refer new students to receive alumni generated scholarships. Once students graduate, consider giving them special recognition by offering legacy scholarships— incentivizing continued education through tuition assistance.

You may also want to consider offering scholarship referral programs, giving alumni the ability to nominate candidates to participate in the program.

Gaining Institutional Benefits
Having an involved community of alumni not only benefits the graduates participating in such a program, but it also benefits the institution in substantial ways. Here are just a few examples of how alumni can support their institutions.

• Help maintain accurate graduate contact information and gather updated employment information

• Support an institution’s community outreach: Each alumni association can engage in partnerships with its local community and charities.

• Provide direct scholarship fund support: Many organizations establish a scholarship fund as a 501(c)3, allowing alumni and outside organizations opportunities to assist students directly.

• Cultivate and maintain employer partnerships: Those who are engaged and informed on an institution’s programs and goals could be perfect potential employers for students. Maintaining strong alumni relationships can lead to more partnerships for new programming, externships, and internships.

• Serve as ambassadors and mentors for a program, campus, or entire institution, helping with recruiting, retention, academics, and student services in the following ways:
  – Each academic department can organize or form a mentoring group of alumni to help students in its program.
  – Alumni can be a valuable information resource for new and prospective students, providing them with guidance and networking opportunities, as the alumni have already been through the program.
  – Alumni can be ardent advocates with business and government.
  – Alumni can make effective faculty as they are familiar with the institution and understand the need for specialized education.

• Support the institution’s communications and public relations: They can serve as guest speakers or panelists for events, and it can also be helpful to compile a repository of success stories from your alumni.

• Provide strategic planning for the institution: Once you have identified key alumni, cultivate them to help with strategic planning. Alumni can leverage their institutional and post-graduate experience to offer improvements in programming, services, and workforce development.
COMMUNICATIONS

Building relationships is key to successful alumni interactions. And central to a good relationship is communication. How do you establish and maintain a regular communication with your alumni? How does your institution spread the word about the benefits of being part of your alumni community? How do you use communications to strengthen your alumni community overall?

Making the Communications Plan

An effective communications plan helps organizations identify appropriate audiences, develop the proper strategies, and maintain focus on overall goals.

Here are some steps to consider when creating your own alumni community plan:

- **Determine the goal.**
  - Why are you implementing this plan?
  - What is the purpose?
  - What do you hope to achieve?
  - How will you provide the background or research needed?

- **Identification of appropriate audiences.**
  - Who are you communicating with?
  - What do you want them to do?
  - Is there more than one set of demographics? If so, who are they?

- **Set strategies and tactics.**
  - How will you communicate best with your audience(s)?
  - What medium(s) will you use?
  - What will you say/write?
  - How often do you plan to communicate?

- **Define what success means for your institution.**
  - What constitutes a success?
  - How will you measure that success?

Successful development and implementation of a communications plan typically involves several factors:

- Seeking the advice of and enlisting your key stakeholders, including the advisory board if established
- Using the metrics identified in the ROI as a part of measuring success
- Combining efforts where possible with existing programs, such as those offered by career services, to gain early successes and traction for your alumni community
• Conducting an environmental scan of the communications resources currently available. Consider existing communications platforms students are already accustomed to using—i.e., Facebook and LinkedIn.

• Establishing a consistent communications cycle

Meaningful interaction with alumni, whether online or in person, is always the end goal for an alumni community. Alumni should feel like they are appreciated and valued members.

Determining Tools and Channels

With the advent of email and social media, engaged communication is easier and cheaper—but it can have more unpredictable results. Consult your overall communications plan to choose the right channels and to know how to use them appropriately. Here are some basics:

Newsletters or emails: To ensure alumni are informed, establish a consistent communications cycle through regular monthly or quarterly newsletters, alumni websites, and social media. Newsletters can be mailed, emailed, or posted and may include information about your alumni successes, upcoming events, or benefits.

Websites: Dedicated alumni websites are a prime tool in running a successful alumni community. They provide alumni with easy answers to the most-often asked question: “What’s in it for me?” Websites can also offer alumni the ability to request transcripts at no cost, to sign up for volunteering and events, and provide their contact information updates.

The website can also offer alumni a place to post success stories that may fall into the following categories:

• Good Deeds: Listing graduates who volunteer in the community and have been recognized by outside organizations

• Good Starts: Listing graduates who started their own businesses or advanced quickly on the job

• Good Experience: Listing areas in which graduates credit the institution with having dramatically turned their lives around

The more information shared on a regular basis, the more active the group becomes. A consistently updated website will increase both traffic and interest.

Social media: You may also consider using alumni-branded social media to expand the audience for networking and collaboration:

• Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, which are updated by the individual user, make alumni access much easier to maintain. Make sure to give users the ability to post success stories and photos of alumni events and activities in their places of work.

• Social networking groups provide good venues for collaborating, conversing, and sharing ideas with professionals who share common interests and are experts in their fields.

• Maintaining a LinkedIn presence can aide in tracking alumni employment data.

• Facilitating a professional networking group for alumni from similar industries is also a good way to engage graduates.
ENGAGEMENT

Your alumni community must be strong both within itself and have strong ties to the institution. Engagement is an ongoing process at all levels; it requires continually feeding in new energy and participation. Here are some ways to keep your alumni community effectively engaged:

Understanding Your Alumni

Questions to consider when developing your alumni engagement plan include:

- What do alumni want? And what do you want alumni to do?
- What services, solutions, and networking opportunities can you offer alumni? Are alumni coming from specific disciplines or industries? If so, how does an institution cater to that?
- Depending on the type of program offered (online or in person), where are alumni located?
- How and when are students transitioned to alumni status? (Automatic membership is the most effective.)
- What alumni data will be required (such as alumni population size) and how is it stored? How accessible is this information?
- What and how will you communicate? And how often?
Leveraging Events for Engagement
Alumni events can provide meaningful face-to-face interaction between alumni and staff, faculty, current students, employers, and the community. Alumni programming provides graduates with the information, services, and benefits to remain active with the institution.

Here are some things to consider when planning an event:

• Consider what might draw alumni to return and engage with you.

• All events should show alumni that they are appreciated and that the institution still cares for them long after graduation.

• A carefully planned event will take into consideration factors such as:
  – Whom to invite? Will you include all alumni to date or alumni from just one campus or program? Keep staff informed of the activity, and invite them, too.
  – Will you include employers? If employers attend, follow up with a personal note or visit.
  – Determine the metrics by which you will evaluate your success, such as:
    ° Number of attendees
    ° Number of employers
    ° Job referrals
    ° Registration
    ° Re-enrollments
    ° Number signing up for volunteer opportunities

• Once alumni are present, allow them to update their contact information and give them the ability and the means to share their successes since graduation.

Engaging Over the Full Lifecycle
Graduates should be automatically inducted into the alumni community at the graduation ceremony. It’s effective to follow up with alumni packets, including a membership certificate and registration information. To receive benefits, all alumni must be registered, so make sure there are easy ways to keep profiles updated with the most current contact information.

But successful alumni community engagement starts long before graduation. Let current students in on the benefits of alumni relationships. Consider introducing the concept of the alumni community at multiple touch points from enrollment through to graduation in order to cultivate an expectation of post-graduate participation. Here are some tactics to try:
• Gather graduate success stories to be widely shared across campus and communication materials. Success stories can be posted on walls on every campus—especially in the admissions office—published in books, and put up in places of employment (with employer approval).

• Integrate the alumni community concept into every part of a student’s experience:
  – Admissions can use alumni to assist with the admissions process.
  – Student Services benefits from working with alumni mentors and coaches to positively impact student retention.
  – Career Center staff can ask alumni to assist with employment skills training and the job search process, as well as provide externships and internships.
  – Academic departments can use alumni as a knowledge source, since they are graduates who know the institution.

**Maintaining Engagement**

Lastly, it is important to maintain the alumni relationships you’ve built. A successful alumni community maintains contact with all of its key stakeholders, including the advisory board, alumni, current students, and involved departments. Foster positive collaboration by keeping all faculty, staff, and administration updated on your alumni activity, as well as by providing continued reports on meeting metrics for each department.

For developing relationships over time, try growing your employer and business partnerships by segmenting alumni by employment. Mapping the extent of engaged alumni around the region, country, or world may also help increase awareness.