Admin 101: What to Know About Alumni Relations

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Alumni relations is the misunderstood sibling of fund raising. The two have much in common — interacting with people who are no longer studying and working at your campus — and one can lead to the other. But they are different. Good alumni relations has many nonfinancial benefits, and if it becomes "all about the money," you risk alienating both regular alumni and major donors.

Administrative work can be partitioned in many ways — one of which is to distinguish between internal versus external tasks. If, for example, you chair a chemistry department, you may spend most of your time on internal functions, reacting to the needs of chemistry majors, professors, and staff members. Externally, you may talk with alumni at commencement or when they come back to guest lecture in a class. Occasionally you will meet with a graduate to "seal the deal" on a potential donation.

If you're a dean, on the other hand, you very likely have significant and constant outside concerns — fund raising, alumni relations, industry engagement. The balance can depend on the campus and the situation. In my previous position, when I became director of a school within an arts-and-sciences college, only about 20 percent of my job was externally directed. Now, as a dean, the external work can take up to 40 percent of my time.

This month, the Admin 101 series on higher-education leadership turns to alumni relations, including how it differs from development. (I tackled the latter in a previous series of columns, "Don't Fear Fund Raising.") Good alumni relations will not only benefit your

department, school, college, or university, but also make you a better leader.

Don’t underestimate the value of alumni relations. Its benefits are not always obvious to a regular faculty member but become readily apparent to a department chair. Among the many ways your unit can make good use of its graduates:

- As they progress in their careers, alumni can serve as invaluable mentors and role models for students. You can make the extent and loyalty of the alumni network a selling point of your program. In the classroom, too, students react well to alumni making connections between the curriculum and employment outcomes.
- Alumni are the ultimate and fairest "student evaluation" of the strengths (and weaknesses) of your program. Talking with alumni two, five, 15 years out and beyond gives you a 360-degree view of the quality and relevance of what you purport to teach.
- Graduates can be brand ambassadors and recruiters. Peer-to-peer marketing is the most powerful persuasion tool. Satisfied alumni who feel grateful (and still engaged) to their major or to the institution will recommend you to parents or potential students.
- Alumni can help you, as a leader, make the case to senior administrators that investment in your program pays off. Deans and presidents pay attention to what they hear from alumni (positive or negative) and that may affect your unit’s standing and budget — and your career.

Don’t conflate alumni relations and fund raising. On the previous list, I didn’t mention appealing to alumni for money. That was intentional. It’s easy to think alumni relations are donor relations. The two can intersect, but it’s important to conceive of them as separate enterprises with different rationales, until they organically converge.

When I first took office as director of a journalism and mass-communication school, I was given the following prescient advice from a senior development professional: "You will get 95 percent of your money from 5 percent of your people." It is an industry commonplace that I have found to be true in action.

Further, to land a major gift you have to inculcate somebody who has the following qualities: affinity, capacity, and philanthropy. In brief, a donor must (1) care about your program, (2) have discretionary money available to give, and (3) have the will to donate.

Some alumni have none of those qualities. The vast majority of alumni have the first quality. Many appreciate their education in, say, political science or electrical engineering, but they don’t have a large sum of discretionary money lying around to give you. Others may have the capacity to give but don’t see your cause as the worthiest option.

Yes, many alumni will eventually give *something,* and a few (that 5 percent) will give a lot (that 95-percent figure). Good alumni relations should be an end in itself, and not just because you hope it will bring in money.

Ration your time and effort. You will hear plenty of advice, praise, and criticism from alumni. I once asked a university president how she gets through her email each day. She smiled and answered, "I don't."

As a dean, I try to be timely and responsive to the blizzard of texts, emails, phone calls, and personal drop-ins I get, but I also accept that I can't "do it all" for everybody instantly. Time management, as I wrote in a previous essay, helps you survive professionally and mentally. Rule No. 1 of managing your day (and your evening and night) is to accept that you won't be able to get everything done and please everybody — so priorities and levels of urgency matter.

Thus, a common caution you hear in regard to fund raising also applies to alumni relations: Administrators who get too caught up on external work — to the point of ignoring internal concerns — put the success of their program and the viability of their career in jeopardy. Thriving at your institution and in your career is about keeping both of those types of responsibilities in balance.

Define the limits of what you are willing to do to "help." The sensational admissions scandals of the past year have probably made most academic administrators in America extra thoughtful about the kind of "assistance" we are sometimes asked to give alumni and their children.

My own policy: Always be helpful to alumni or to anyone else who contacts me about college admissions — but within hard limits.

I can explain the admissions process and delineate the published criteria, but I won't overrule a decision made by admissions software, staff, or committees. I would say that 99 percent of the alumni to whom I have explained this rationale over the years have understood my policy of noninterference.

As soon as you become an administrator with alumni (or really any external) responsibilities, make a list of potential zones of ethical trouble. Circumstances will differ, but knowing "the rules" by heart is your basic task and will save you upset and confusion later on.

For most alumni, their last deep, engaged experience with the institution happened in their early 20s. And as students, even graduate students, they may not have been privy to the politics, folkways, and mechanics of academe. Your job is to champion your program's important causes and explain the challenges to the alumni, and then help them find ways to re-engage, if they are so inclined.

At the same time, just listening to alumni is itself rewarding. Many of them will predate your arrival on the campus as a faculty member or administrator. Learning your institution's back story from "outsiders" will give you perspectives you may not have heard as an "insider."

David D. Perlmutter is a professor at and dean of the College of Media & Communication at Texas Tech University.

He writes the "Career Confidential" advice column for *The Chronicle.* His book on promotion and tenure was published by Harvard University Press in 2010.

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