

Five Ways to Engage Young Alumni

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Universities have seen a steady increase in enrollment over the years, and therefore their alumni body has grown with it. With more students graduating each year, the population of young alumni increases, and advancement offices are tasked with finding ways to engage effectively. The office of Alumni Engagement at Elon University has found a steady increase in participation from younger alumni by using strategies coming from the mindset of the young alumni themselves. Here are some ways we've found success in starting and keeping our younger alumni engaged.

Individual Attention

Giving an alumnus or alumna individual attention comes down to making them feel important and not forgotten. The best way to achieve this is with face-to-face meetings. It's hard to ever get to know someone through just a phone call, or especially mass emails. Once you're with them, you can better relate their experience as a student to their experience as a graduate. Find out what mattered to them in school and you'll be able to build a stronger connection for them as an alumnus/alumna. For example, if fraternity/sorority life was a major part of their time at school, give them the opportunity for chapter reunions every five years to encourage them to come back to campus. Additionally, sharing your personal experiences relating to theirs goes far in focusing on what matters to them. Young alumni today really want to know where their money is going and how it is used. Finding what mattered to them in school allows you to target their gifts and make them feel more proud of every donation. Then, send a personalized thank you letter or email for every gift or contribution to show the extra effort and appreciation.

Relationship Building

Once you've established a connection with individualized attention, you'll have to build a relationship. Forming a personal relationship means you'll keep up with things like their career, kids, and relationship with the university. You'll celebrate their major life events, and most importantly be a constant reminder of the university whenever you're in touch. To do this, you can have information ready for them concerning one of their favorite professors, or the success of their favorite athletics team. Remember that you're the face of the university to them, and they're building a relationship with the university through you. Behind the scenes you have to make sure you know everything before the contact, and record everything new afterwards. These relationships will go on for years, and eventually many of them will be your most engaged alumni.

Local Programing

A large part of building an individualized relationship with alumni is doing it where they currently live. You'll need to create opportunities to connect at their front door. Take the time

to travel to them, and show your willingness to keep them engaged. Host events for local alumni to connect with each other, and bring the feel of being on campus to them. Go even further by being up to date on what's happening where they live. Read a local newspaper, or check how their local team is doing before you're there to show your interest. Elon has alumni chapters in 37 cities where we can organize socials, professional development opportunities, and volunteer opportunities for our alumni. Just recently we were able to host 38 events in one day for our Elon Day celebration. All alumni came together that day to celebrate Elon and support its advancement.

21st Century Communication

Most young alumni don't respond to emails anymore. The majority respond better to different types of communication. Social media is the biggest, and most well-known form of new outreach today, but there are other ways as well. We've started texting our alumni, and have seen them respond more since it pops up directly on their phone. Once a relationship is built, texting becomes very easy to send quick reminders about events or even donating. Texting can even be used with those you haven't met yet. Additionally, videos are a great way to send mass messages while still keeping the recipients engaged throughout the whole message. You can send those over email or social media, but instead of just text, they get to see your face adding a bit of personalization to the message.

Engagement isn't a One-Way Street

Showing an alumnus or alumna how their engagement benefits them personally and the school simultaneously is the best way to conduct all interactions. You can't expect young alumni to participate in everything you want them to if they don't feel the benefits and believe in the advancement of the school. Never underestimate a young alumnus or alumna's willingness to give back time until they can give gifts. Giving them varied opportunities to attend events, give back time, and make donations will allow you to show your investment in them as well as give them a chance to invest more in the school regardless of how much they're able to donate at the time. Young professionals want to feel appreciated in what they do, and it absolutely applies to engagement.

The above strategies of engagement have come into use over the past couple years, and have already started to show some success. Our success on Elon Day over the past couple of years shows this growth best. In 2014 we had 1,039 gifts. In 2015 we had 2,703 gifts and 364 regional event attendees. In 2016 we had 3,749 gifts and 42 regional & on-campus events with 3,325 attendees. Finally, this year we had 4,299 gifts and 42 regional & on campus events with 3,650 attendees, resulting a 313% increase in gifts from 2014 to 2017. All of these efforts will pay off years down the road. Building a young alumni network that grows old will solidify the next generation of students and engaged young alumni, and is achievable using the above steps.