Preparation Meets Opportunity
Nick Bratvold | American Council of Trustees and Alumni

“I’m the first in my family to enroll in college.”

“I work [full/part-time] to afford tuition, room, and board.”

“I can’t wait to run for [officer position].”

Every spring I see variations of these phrases written on scholarship applications. As I read and take notes, I can’t help but wonder what the rest of their story is; although, I’m mostly concerned with what that story will become. It’s an impossible task, predicting the future, but it’s made easier if you can identify someone’s potential and help remove the barriers in their path.

Over the past two years, a story has played out that illustrates this point. In April 2019, after nearly two semesters working part-time, an associate member of Lambda Chi Alpha informed chapter leadership that he was unsure he could afford our initiation fee. We’ll call him John to preserve his privacy.

As the middle child of five siblings, John’s parents were unable to financially support his education. Still, he remained ambitious. You see, not only did John wish to learn accounting, he also hoped to learn how to lead and serve. He had potential and it showed. That year, we created the Rampant Lion Award to support all fees associated with initiation, and John became the first recipient.

In the year that followed, John was elected chapter vice president, served over 100 community service hours, and doubled his work schedule with a local disability service and support center—all while maintaining his 4.0 GPA. Last week, John, having been nominated by the chapter, was awarded our most distinguished scholarship: Man of the Year.

You might call John lucky — that is, if you believe Seneca’s adage: “luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.” If it is on our youngest brothers/sisters to prepare, it is our responsibility as alumni/ae to greet them with opportunity.

John’s story isn’t about making a safe investment; rather, it’s about adaptability. John faced a problem — one that could be solved with funds. If that seems to trivialize the point, consider this: how would you feel if your local alumni/ae association informed you that your donation
welcomed another brother/sister into your bond? After you’ve considered that, ask yourself how many other challenges our well-deserving undergraduates may need help navigating.

It should be acknowledged that our chapter is beyond privileged to have the culture of philanthropy that we do. It’s something that makes us unique. But our capacity and drive for leadership are not. In fact, I’m quite certain many chapters far exceed us in that arena. So, if our undergraduates are prepared to serve and lead, the question becomes: how do you create opportunity? Simply by reading this far, you must already know the answer.

Giving back is social: we recognize in others the needs we once saw in our younger self. It’s no coincidence that the donors of my chapter’s six endowments were also close friends. Yet, it isn’t enough to be nostalgic. Alumni/ae must ask questions with enough humility to assist where the needs of the chapter most align with their own capabilities. In doing so, they will discover the areas of greatest opportunity and be primed to make their most meaningful contribution.

University advisors, foundations, and chapter alumni should partner to establish local alumni/ae associations, who can then lead chapter giving programs. Although local associations have varying levels of sophistication, each should be principally concerned with maintaining a connected, informed network that can easily and meaningfully give back to their chapter. In the case of major or planned gifts, such as endowments, additional consideration should be given to long-term preservation of intent. The Fund for Academic Renewal is one such national organization that helps donors navigate gift agreements in order to preserve intent and create everlasting impact.

For those who may be nervous that their contribution might be too small, here is the final piece of John’s story: his initiation fee was $225. That’s all it took to gain a brother — and an outstanding one at that.

Some time later, on a May afternoon, you too might learn exactly how much impact your gift made on a brother’s/sister’s life.

“I’m the first in my family to graduate college.”

“I found a new home here.”

“I can’t wait to give back.”
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Nick Bratvold is the operation manager at the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. On June 1, he will join the Lambda Chi Alpha Education Foundation as a stewardship officer. Nick is a member of Lambda Chi Alpha and was initiated at the University of South Dakota, where he earned his B.S. in history and M.A. in educational administration. Nick has administered his chapter’s scholarship program since 2016, which awards between $22-25,000 annually to under/graduate brothers.