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FUND RAISING

Connecting to Young Alumni

By *Kathryn Masterson* | FEBRUARY 26, 2017

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Photographs by Travis Dove for The Chronicle

Matthias Bouska (left) and Tricia Teter, alumni-engagement officers at Elon U., talk with Nick Suarez, a student graduating this year. Elon has hired three such officers to better connect with young alumni.

Tricia Teter, senior alumni-engagement officer at Elon University, isn't frustrated when the young alumni she calls don't pick up their phones. Ms. Teter, who graduated from Elon in 2013, understands because when she doesn't recognize a number on her cellphone, she ignores it, too.

"We just never get anybody to pick up and reply," Ms. Teter says. "I do the same thing." So instead, Ms. Teter will text young alumni from her personal number. If she must leave a voice message, she will send an email

immediately afterward to let the person know.

Connecting to Young Alumni

Elon University and other colleges experiment with ways to keep recent graduates engaged.

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Reaching young alumni — literally and emotionally — is a challenge for colleges. The way people younger than 30 communicate, their motivations for giving money or time, their use of social media, and their different college experiences are bringing about a shift in alumni relations. Colleges and universities savvy enough to recognize these differences are looking for creative and entrepreneurial ways to reach and communicate with their alumni, tweaking and sometimes overhauling college standbys like reunions and annual-fund appeals.

"Younger alumni — and alumni in general — they're looking for something different," says James W. Dicker, vice president of advancement for Temple University. "The traditional things to give to and ways to give are kind of stale. Maybe they work for some of the over-50 crowd, but they don't work for the under-30 crowd."

At Elon, Ms. Teter's position of alumni-engagement officer is an example of new thinking around alumni affairs. The university treats young alumni, especially ones who were active in leadership roles during college, in the same way universities treat older alumni they are courting for major gifts — hands on and personal. Under this model, a major-gift officer meets one on one with potential donors to discuss their interests and ways they might help the university, and stays in touch.

Three years ago, James B. Piatt Jr., vice president for university advancement at Elon, created the position of alumni-engagement officer. Ms. Teter and two other alumni-engagement officers are each responsible for a portfolio of 1,000 young alumni.

Elon, which in the past did not have a tradition of robust homecomings or reunions, has set an ambitious goal of doubling its alumni participation rate in 10 years, Mr. Piatt says.

"Great universities have great alumni bodies," Mr. Piatt says.



Having a robust alumni body is critical to the long-term health of a university. Satisfied graduates promote and recommend their university, help create deep professional networks that benefit students and alumni, volunteer their time on boards, and give money. As every fund raiser knows, the young alumni of today are the major donors of tomorrow.

Yet nationwide, alumni participation, measured by the percentage of alumni

who donate in a year, has declined. In 2006, the alumni participation rate was 11.6 percent. In 2016, it was 8.1 percent.

According to the Council for Aid to Education, on average more alumni gave to their alma maters in 2016 than a decade earlier. The participation rate has not kept up for several reasons, including that universities now have better ways to locate alumni, so the total number of alumni sought out for gifts has grown. Also, the figure does not count alumni who give through family foundations or other philanthropic vehicles.

The models of alumni engagement have changed with social media, says Rob Henry, vice president for education for the Council for Advancement and Support of Education.

"I tell people, there was a time after you graduated from your institution when you needed your institution," Mr. Henry says. "Now, I think that's very different, especially for young alumni. Now why would I wait for the university magazine that's going to come out two or three times a year versus going to Facebook and knowing what my friends did yesterday?"

"I think for young alumni, institutions have to ask the question, how can we remain relevant?"

For Elon University, that question is especially pressing. Because of enrollment growth, 60 percent of Elon's alumni have graduated in the past 10 years. Two-thirds of their alumni are under the age of 40.

In its latest strategic plan, the university set a goal of building a better, more modern alumni-engagement program, Mr. Piatt says. That included doubling its alumni participation rate from 16 percent to 32 percent. Engaging young alumni through new channels is critical to Elon's long-term success.

Elon started asking its alumni to participate in three ways: as partners, as advocates, and as investors.

To be a partner means "keeping their Elon IQ up," says Mr. Piatt, by attending events (Elon increased its local chapters from 12 to 37), sharing tweets or other news about Elon on social media, and helping spread Elon's brand and message. To be an advocate means serving on a board or council and offering job opportunities to Elon alumni and students. And investors are those who make gifts.



Photographs by Travis Dove for The Chronicle

Tricia Teter (right), an alumni-engagement officer at Elon U., talks with Anna Rice, who will graduate this year.

Elon tries to capture the number of alumni who participate in at least one of the three ways by measuring alumni engagement. If an alumnus attended an event or volunteered for the university, that person is counted, Mr. Piatt said. In 2010, 2,500 alumni were engaged in the life of the university. Last year, that number was 5,807, Mr. Piatt said.

The university also created more ways for recent graduates to have a say in campus affairs, including a young-alumni council that advises the alumni staff, and a young leaders' council that meets with the university president.

"We found opportunities to have the alumni voice be louder than it had been in the past," Mr. Piatt says. But perhaps the biggest bet the university has made is with the hiring of the alumni-engagement officers, like Ms. Teter.

Those three AEOs, as the university calls them, each have a portfolio, similar to what a major-gift officer would be responsible for. But instead of consisting of wealthy alumni and other supporters, the engagement officers' portfolios each contain 1,000 young alumni who were considered active in the life of the college when they were students. The portfolios are divided by geographic area, and each year they are reassessed to take out alumni who have not responded at all.

The AEOs keep in touch with the alumni via text, email, social media, and in person when they travel to cities for events. The officers ask graduates to volunteer for committees, attend Elon events, share their school pride on social media, and give gifts for specific events, such as "Share the Chair," when alumni donors' names are written on stickers placed on every graduating senior's chair at commencement.

Of those 1,000 graduates in their portfolios, the AEOs have identified the 200 who are the most engaged and connected. The AEOs are expected to be up on the lives of those alumni. When Ms. Teter travels once a month for work, she schedules five meetings with

young alumni each day for coffee and conversations about their lives and interests.

"They want to feel known and appreciated by their alma mater," Ms. Teter says.

The alumni-engagement officers make job connections, too. When one alumnus mentioned being interested in development, an AEO asked Mr. Piatt for help. He shared several names of contacts in that person's area. And while the young alumni aren't typically in hiring positions yet, Ms. Teter says they are able to talk to their bosses about putting Elon students on their recruiting lists.

Ms. Teter also listens when alumni want to vent about something they don't like about the institution or their experience there. She hears alumni concerns about the amount of growth at Elon, or about how they felt unsupported when they went out on the job market during the Great Recession. In these cases, she makes the time to listen, and if possible, to explain to them how things are different now (in the case of career services) or still the same (in the case of concerns about growth changing the place) and the reasons behind that. Her bosses are also willing to talk with unhappy alumni.

"People want to be heard," Ms. Teter says.

While Elon and other colleges have expanded the definition of engagement by young alumni, they ultimately want to have the recent graduates contribute in the most traditional way: by donating money.

So what do young alumni want when it comes to fund-raising pitches?

"What we're seeing is a real desire to make a difference, to get involved and to feel they are having an impact," says Sue Cunningham, president of the Council for Advancement and Support of Education, referring to alumni preferences for donating as well as volunteering.

In practice, this can include crowdfunding, one-day giving events online, and opportunities to serve as student mentors.

Transparency is important. Alumni like to see where their money goes and be able to



Photographs by Travis Dove for The Chronicle

A video team at Elon records personalized thank-you messages for donors to specific programs. Young donors like to see right away where their money is going, say fund raisers.

direct where their donations are used, says Michael Ellison, president of Corporate Insight, a consulting company which offers research in alumni affairs and communication.

At Temple, Mr. Dicker sees young alumni motivated by the impact and effect their gifts can have, rather than a sense of loyalty driving their generosity. They are unlikely to make a general gift to an institution if they don't know specifically what it will be used for.

"They want to see it and feel it," Mr. Dicker says. Temple students respond best to giving opportunities that help the surrounding Philadelphia community rather than university budget needs.

One giving opportunity the university saw success with was buying "baby boxes," designed to reduce infant mortality, through the university's crowdfunding site OwlCrowd. The boxes, which cost \$50 each (or \$125 with extra supplies including diapers, a baby thermometer, and smoke alarm), were distributed to mothers who delivered babies at Temple University Hospital.

As a former commuter college that has changed to a more residential model, Temple is working to build a culture of philanthropy and alumni giving. Its current alumni participation rate is 7 percent, and the university's goal is to raise it to 10 percent.

Giving days — one-day events where small gifts are celebrated across social media, are finding success with young alumni, according to CASE. A growing number of universities use them. Both Elon and Temple have started these programs — Elon Day and Temple Toast — and have increased the number of donors each year.

These events, often tied to a founding day (or in Temple's case, its founder's birthday) generate a sense of excitement — Elon has a "command center" where gifts are processed immediately — as well as a sense of urgency. Matching challenges can last an hour, and at the end of 24 hours, everyone knows whether the university met its goal or fell short. University departments and current students can also be a part of the day, creating of a sense of everyone being able to make a difference. And they thrive on social media.

The first Elon Day, in 2014, had 1,013 donors and \$116,867 in donations. Two years later, it had 3,749 gifts totaling \$955,099. The university also reported the number of #ElonDay mentions on social media (2,241 tweets and 879 Instagram mentions in 2014; 4,500 mentions across all social-media platforms in 2016).

As the program gets more established, there is a small downside, says John H. Barnhill, assistant vice president for university advancement. Now, when alumni are asked for gifts at the end of the year or other key giving times, they say they're waiting until Elon Day to give.

In all, since Elon started its focused alumni efforts in 2009, the university's alumni-participation rate has gone from 16 percent to 22 percent. But as the total alumni population gets larger with each graduating class, the goal of reaching 32-percent participation becomes harder.

It's a slow build, and for universities measuring immediate ROI, Mr. Piatt says Elon's model might not make sense. His hunch is that these efforts will pay off for the university in the long run, but right now it is too early to say for sure.

"This is a long play for Elon," Mr. Piatt says. "We are making an investment here."

This article is part of:

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