

WORKING TITLE: TOWARD A DEFINITION AND TAXONOMY FOR ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT

An October 29 2014 Discussion Draft prepared for The Council of Alumni Association Executives
Edited by JT. Forbes (Indiana University)

Introduction

Alumni relations practitioners need a unifying definition and taxonomy of alumni engagement that reflects the diverse and vibrant tapestry of alumni relations work. We cannot lead and manage without a common language and lexicon, at least at a high level. With a strong foundation of core concepts in place, innovation and professional practice will grow and thrive.

A working definition of alumni engagement¹

Alumni engagement means *activities and experiences designed to identify, cultivate, steward, solicit, and manage gifts of time, talent, and treasure from former students and graduates of a given institution or enterprise in service to the needs of both alumni and alma mater.*

A working taxonomy of alumni engagement domains

Alumni engagement domains are *specific areas of knowledge, expertise, and insight tied to identified alumni engagement activities, experiences, and initiatives.* The following alumni engagement domains are proposed to spark discussion about a taxonomy of alumni engagement:²

- Alumni community development (also known as “outreach”) – develops and maintains alumni groups based on shared affinity, geography, identity, and interest. This work most frequently takes the form of chartered alumni chapters, clubs, affinity, interest, and identity groups. Some alumni relations programs deploy technology to create online communities around unique hobbies and interests (brewing, cycling, investing, etc.) Social media allows alumni to connect and form communities with one another outside the mediating structures of an institutional alumni relations program.
- Career development (sometimes called “professional enrichment”) – involves activities to enhance professional awareness, competitiveness, and employment in the job market. Programming in this area tends to involve both online and on location panel discussions, workshops, and networking opportunities.
- Diversity and multiculturalism – creates acceptance and awareness of the value of differences among people and cultures, as well as strategies to engage alumni from groups traditionally underrepresented or underserved by postsecondary education. Identity-based groups and networking experiences, cultural awareness experiences, and recruiting initiatives are often programs and initiatives within this domain.

¹ The definition and terms focus on alumni engagement and principal domains of alumni engagement. We recognize an emerging trend of institutions calling upon alumni relations practitioners to work with other important university constituencies.

² In 2010, Indiana University alumni relations practitioners and alumni volunteers conducted a card-sort exercise, categorizing IU’s annual calendar of more than 1,000 alumni activities and programs into specific “domains of alumni engagement.” The result, with some modification based on feedback from other alumni relations practitioners, is offered here to spark discussion toward a taxonomy reflective of the diverse and varied range of alumni engagement functional activities.

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- Global and international outreach – identifies, informs, and involves alumni and friends either born or living outside the host country of a given institution. This work typically involves the development of locally-based groups, committees, and ambassadors, as well regional reunions, receptions, and mentoring/host programs for students studying abroad.
- Lifelong learning (also known as “personal enrichment”) – involves supporting ongoing lifelong intellectual and personal development. Examples include both online and on location lectures, seminars and workshops, as well as group travel and other immersive learning experiences.
- Philanthropy – is most frequently concerned with giving to institutional and organizational causes, especially at institutions with integrated alumni relations and annual giving programs. In addition to the major gift work done by development offices, philanthropy initiatives include annual giving campaigns, galas, golf outings, and other special event fund raising projects. Community service projects and partnerships are an emerging feature of this domain at some institutions.
- Spirit, pride, and tradition – Nurturing a dynamic and enduring sense of school spirit, pride, and tradition among students and alumni to foster a culture of commitment to one another, society, and their alma mater. Examples include Homecoming, receptions and reunions, and university ceremonies (commencement, convocations, first-year/freshman induction ceremonies, senior recognition awards and graduation celebrations, etc.). At institutions with large intercollegiate athletics program, this domain is closely aligned with rallying support for athletic teams and traditions. Athletic team game day events and game watches are common among these institutions.
- Student recruitment – Identifying, cultivating, referring potential students – and celebrating the matriculation of admitted students – to one’s alma mater. Alumni interview programs, college fair tabling, prospective student recommendations and referrals, and admitted student programs are some of the ways alumni are engaged in this domain.
- Student and recent graduate enrichment – Engaging and serving current enrollees and young alumni in programs they find meaningful and relevant. Examples in this domain include student alumni affiliate groups and leadership development programs, alumni-student mentoring initiatives, student-to-alumni networking activities, and programming designed specifically for alumni who are ten years or less from graduation.
- University advocacy, citizenship, and recognition (sometimes overlaps with the spirit, pride, and tradition domain) – cultivates a sense of citizenship in the affairs of the university through programs designed to develop alumni as positive public advocates of the university, participants in shared governance, and as exemplars and proof of the university’s claims of excellence and achievement. At some institutions, this area includes fostering pride and

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personal connection to an institutions unique rituals, traditions, and values. Examples include alumni award and recognition events, political and public advocacy initiatives, and programming designed to raise awareness of university achievements, needs, and priorities.

A taxonomy is an attempt to classify alumni work and not suggest that all institutions should be working on all these domains. Just as all fauna classified in a zoological taxonomy are not found in every corner of the world, not all domains of alumni engagement will be found in every alumni relations program in the world.

A shared definition of alumni engagement and common taxonomy for alumni engagement ultimately provides the foundation for assessment, growth, and innovation in our field. Without these in place, we will struggle to develop the communities of practice necessary to adapt and evolve.