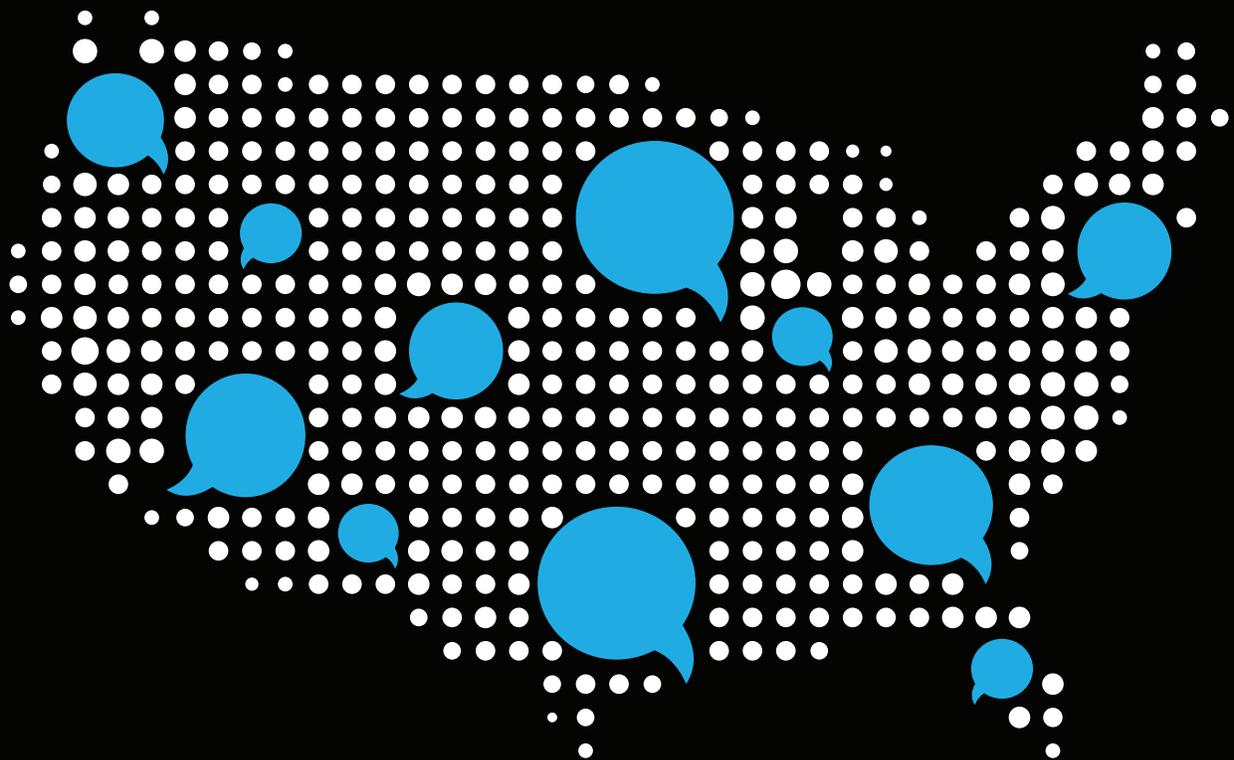


Adjusting Alumni Engagement Strategies During COVID-19

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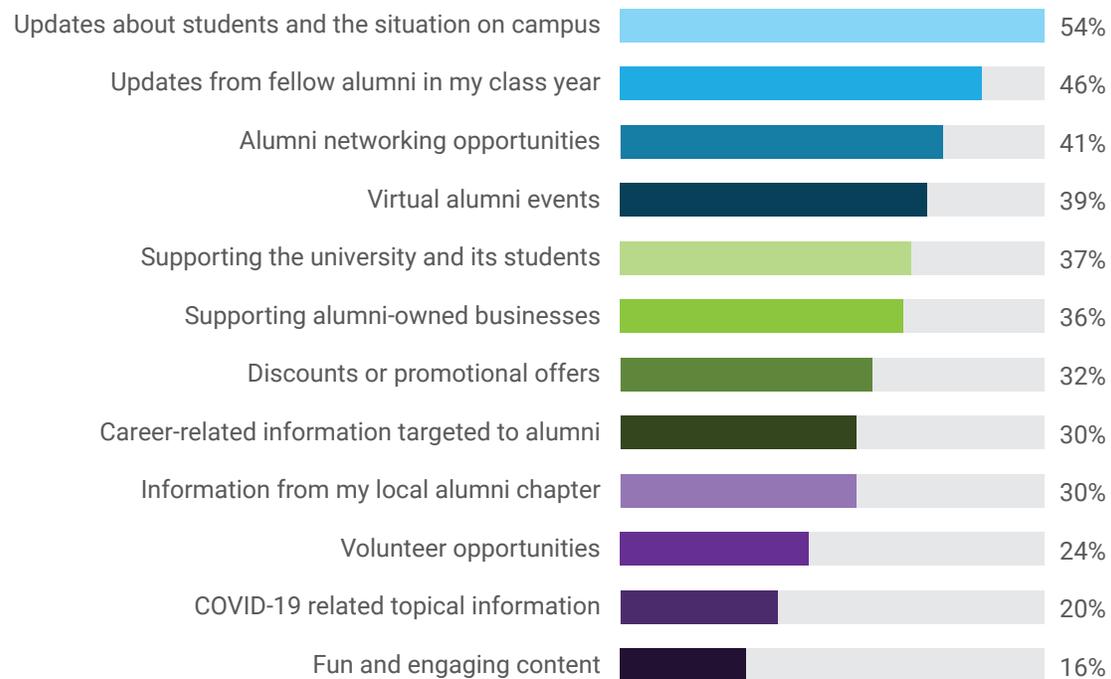


The pandemic has changed how universities seek to engage and support graduates. Anthology conducted a survey on alumni engagement trends during the pandemic to help higher education institutions better understand the level of interest in engaging with their alma mater and opportunities to adjust strategies for engagement and communications during this time. The survey targeted U.S. adults with at least a four-year degree. Based on the survey results, institutions have an opportunity to adjust communications and programming to continue to build and deepen relationships with their graduates.

Email Communications: What Are Alumni Looking For?

Email is the most prevalent way to communicate with alumni and is a key element of any engagement and fundraising strategy. The majority of survey respondents reported receiving less than one email a week but more than one a month from their alma mater—82% felt that this was the right amount of communications. Only those receiving one email per month had a higher percentage who felt it was the right amount of communications (85%). Institutions should review overall communications to ensure that they are messaging to alumni at least once a month, if not more often, based on this data.

TYPE OF CONTENT THAT ALUMNI EXPRESSED INTEREST IN





Graduates indicated that they are currently most interested in updates about students and the situation on campus.

Institutions also should continue to adjust and tailor content and communications. Graduates indicated that they are currently most interested in updates about students and the situation on campus (54% of respondents), followed by news about classmates (46%), and information on alumni networking opportunities (41%). This information can help institutions tailor messaging to place more emphasis on this content. The strong interest in networking opportunities supports offering virtual events and other ways for alumni to network. The pandemic's impact on employment further underlines this—nearly one-

quarter of respondents reported being furloughed or laid off due to the pandemic, and 29% said they are currently earning less.

Perhaps somewhat surprising is that only 30% of respondents identified career-related information as a topic of interest, especially given the pandemic's impact on employment (although this increased to 50% among recent alumni—see section on recent alumni below). Among respondents interested in career-related information, networking opportunities and job postings garnered the most interest, with 69% and 63% indicating interest in these types of information, respectively.

In addition, information about supporting the university and its students garnered interest from over one-third of respondents. In a previous survey conducted in May of 2019, categories related to fundraising had the lowest expressed interest, indicating that respondents are more apt to support the institution at this time. Types of content that respondents did not express much interest in included fun content (such as information about coloring pages or other games), COVID-19 related topical information from the institution, and information about volunteer opportunities.

Institutions can use the above information to adjust the frequency of communication, add additional content based on respondent preferences, and consider ways to infuse career-related information into aspects of communications.

Event Participation

Typically, a key part of alumni engagement and fundraising efforts focuses on alumni programs to build relationships and increase attendee engagement with their alma mater. Institutions quickly shifted to virtual events following the start of the pandemic in March. Survey respondents indicate that webinars on academic-related topics have been the most popular choice, followed by discussions with campus representatives. In contrast, virtual events such as happy hours have garnered lower participation among

those who reported participating in a virtual activity after March 1. In fact, for every decade of graduation since 1980, academic-oriented webinars were the preferred option for respondents. Of note is that 1960s graduates who responded to the survey preferred discussion with campus representatives (president, athletic director, etc.), while graduates from the 1970s expressed the same interest level.

Of respondents, 41% indicated that they are somewhat or very likely to attend a virtual alumni event in the fall of this year, with 65% of these respondents indicating that they are more likely to participate in a virtual event than before the pandemic. This shows one of the impacts of the pandemic—a greater interest in virtual engagement. It will be fascinating to see whether that interest remains after the pandemic. Still, institutions should continue to offer virtual programming, especially webinars featuring faculty members and other campus personalities.

While in-person events were the norm prior to March, there is little indication among respondents that they are currently looking to gather in person with fellow alumni. 78% of respondents stated that they are somewhat or very unlikely to attend an in-person event for the remainder of 2020—of these, 65% indicated that their likelihood to attend an in-person event has decreased due to the pandemic. If institutions are considering restarting in-person alumni programming before the end of 2020, they should first determine the level of interest. Of all individuals who stated that their likelihood to attend in-person events has decreased since the pandemic, nearly half of respondents indicate that they will not consider attending in-person events again until advised that it is safe by the government or CDC. In contrast, almost the same percentage (47% compared to 48%) indicated that they would not be comfortable attending until a vaccine is developed.

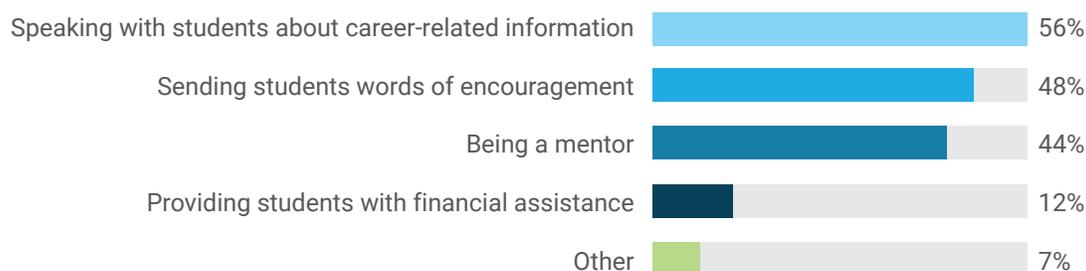
Helping Current Students

Another opportunity for alumni engagement is connecting graduates with current students, and 57% of respondents expressed interest in doing so. The area with the highest interest was speaking to students about career-related information (56%), followed by sending students words of encouragement (similar to the 20 for 20 campaigns of sharing twenty words of encouragement with the graduating class of 2020). Being a mentor was of interest to 44% of respondents. Alumni relations offices should continue to explore opportunities to connect alumni with students for career-related purposes. With the pandemic impacting course delivery at many institutions, there may be more significant opportunity to have graduates participate in classes, providing real-world insights and talking about their experience post-graduation.



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HOW ALUMNI ARE INTERESTED IN HELPING CURRENT STUDENTS



Recent Alumni

Recent alumni, or individuals who graduated between 2011 and 2020, make up a key part of most alumni engagement strategies. This group has more recent ties to the institution and if engaged early on, they will be more likely to remain engaged. The pandemic has more highly impacted this constituency than other decades—31% report that they or someone in their household has been furloughed or laid off during the pandemic, compared to 23% of all respondents.



Recent alumni preferred hearing about alumni networking opportunities.

This is just one indication of different needs and opportunities for engaging this group. 33% of recent alumni report receiving, on average, less than one email a week, but more than one a month, with a higher percentage reporting receiving communications more often than the overall population. While those receiving emails more than once a month but not weekly generally feel this is the right amount of communications (74%), this is a lower percentage than for the overall population. Therefore, institutions should review communications to this cohort and identify potential ways to streamline communications, and ensure that communications to recent alumni provide relevant content. Recent alumni

are interested in a different content mix than the overall population. While there is still a strong interest in updates about students and the campus situation, this is third in importance among recent graduates. According to survey respondents, the preferred type of content is information about alumni networking opportunities (51%), likely as this is a group that is still developing their network while also being more financially impacted by the pandemic. Therefore, institutions have an opportunity to offer targeted

programming—45% of recent alumni respondents are somewhat or very likely to participate in a virtual event this fall, with 67% indicating that that likelihood has increased due to the pandemic. The interest in networking may also be tied to a strong interest in career-related information, as 50% of respondents indicated an interest in that type of information. As seen with all graduates, networking opportunities (73%) and job postings (71%) were the most important types of career-related information cited by recent alumni respondents. While the primary concern for recent alumni during the pandemic was their families' health and well-being, more than twice as many expressed concerns about the pandemic's impact on their career (20% compared to 6% for non-recent alumni respondents).

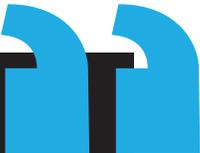
Also, 70% of recent alumni respondents indicated an interest in helping current students. This is a very high percentage and presents another opportunity. Respondents were primarily interested in speaking about career-related information (62%), being a mentor (56%), or sending words of encouragement (53%). Taken together, institutions have a clear opportunity to engage recent alumni by offering career-related programming and communications, and by giving them opportunities to connect with current students.

Donors

One-quarter of all respondents indicated that they had made a gift to their institution in the current year, while 29% have never made a gift. Based on responses from those who made a gift at some point in the last five years, institutions should communicate with this population either monthly, or slightly more than once a month, but less than once a week.

Current and recent donors are a key population for institutions, especially given the pandemic's financial impact on higher education institutions. Individuals who reported making a gift at some point in the last five years are most interested in updates about students and the situation on campus, followed by updates about fellow alumni. This is in line with the overall population. However, the third content area identified differs from the overall population—donors indicated an interest in continued support and in the impact that their support has had. This shows

an additional opportunity for institutions, coupled with the information that for nearly three-quarters of this group, the likelihood to give has not changed due to the pandemic. Seventeen percent of respondents did indicate that they are less likely to make a gift, compared to 10% who stated that they are more likely to make a gift this year.



Likely donors expressed a high willingness to support the annual fund during the pandemic.

Among the overall population, 23% indicated that their likelihood to make a gift is lower, while only 7% of respondents are more likely to make a gift. For those who are more likely to make a gift, 63% expressed interest in supporting student emergency funds, while 48% of respondents indicated they would consider supporting the annual fund. This provides institutions with guidance on how to frame solicitations in the coming months. Of note is that there seems to be a relatively high willingness to support the annual fund, traditionally a fund that resonates less with donors. Institutions have the opportunity to highlight the need for student support and the direct impact of support on the institution and its students in a different way in the current environment, making the annual fund a higher area of interest.

Final Thoughts

The COVID-related alumni survey results highlight opportunities for institutions to adjust engagement strategy during the remainder of the pandemic and following the pandemic. Institutions should review communications to focus on messaging that resonates with constituents. In addition, communications to recent alumni should be segmented and include information on careers. Institutions should continue to offer various virtual programming, with more of a focus on webinars by faculty members. In-person programming should be avoided until at least 2021, and before restarting in-person programming, institutions are encouraged to survey their constituents to determine the level of interest in participating. Maintaining ties to donors is even more important in this environment. There are clear opportunities to do so by tailoring communications to individuals who have supported the institution over the past several years.

Every constituency has had a different student and alumni experience, but data from this national survey can inform new strategies and support existing ones. While the pandemic has changed how institutions engage their graduates and how donors and non-donors alike are solicited, there is a great opportunity to use this time to adjust engagement strategies in the near term and consider longer-term changes that will impact alumni for years to come.

Data was collected through a nationwide survey conducted in June 2020 using a national survey platform and through dissemination by 19 U.S. universities in August and September 2020 to their graduates. To qualify for the survey, respondents had to indicate that they had at least a four-year degree. 17,362 responses were considered valid and used in the analysis. For each data point, null values were excluded.

About the Author

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Mirko Widenhorn, Ed.D., joined the Anthology team in 2013, bringing more than 11 years of higher education experience to the organization. Prior to Anthology, he was the Director of Alumni Relations and Annual Giving at Wilkes University. Now serving as the Senior Director of Engagement Strategy, he works closely with customers on engagement scoring and strategic planning projects. Mirko is a Drew University graduate and completed his Ed.D. in higher education administration at Wilkes University, focusing on whether giving differs based on participation in different types of alumni programming.