



CAREER SCHOOL ALUMNI COMMUNITIES

Measuring the return on investment of alumni efforts

By Dr. Susan F. Schulz, President, Susan F. Schulz &
Associates Inc.

The Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities' Most Innovative New Program Award was recently given to Anthem College in Maryland Heights, Mo., for its alumni group. This recognition demonstrates how the career college sector is crafting a new focus on alumni organizations. Alumni communities are being created to engage graduates with the expectation that alumni involvement can benefit everyone.

There are expenses when setting up an alumni community. The obvious concern is return on investment (ROI). In what ways will the school see a payoff and how long will that take? This is especially challenging when fundraising is not part of the alumni community concept.



So, what are the challenges of measuring ROI of alumni communities and how is it handled at various career schools?

Admissions and enrollment

There are many ways alumni impact enrollment. June Gudeman, Alumni Coordinator at Pima Medical Institute (PMI), focuses on success stories. They are printed on large posters and hung throughout the PMI campuses, placed on websites, and published in a book. Prospective students view these prior to their interviews and sell themselves on enrolling.

Alumni are viewed as highly credible resources by high school guidance counselors, parents and workforce staff, and alumni testimonials are powerful endorsements. Involved alumni refer friends and family and tell their employers about career school programs and courses that can benefit other employees. Increased enrollment can be directly and indirectly attributed to your school alumni and measured as part of your ROI.

Compliance

Regulatory agencies are concerned about results, among many other issues. Alumni success stories are powerful messages and show that students were satisfied, succeeded and got placed.

Staff and faculty development

Staff, especially faculty, have the most impact on student success. Gudeman said the success stories publication is a powerful tool to use during in-service training. It shows employees how they impact student satisfaction and results. The stories outline student struggles and the skills needed for faculty and staff to help students overcome barriers.

Some programs require a great deal of training and experience to teach, which is why PMI finds that many of their best instructors are PMI graduates. Utilizing graduates as instructors has many measurable financial benefits.

Retention and other student services provided by alumni volunteers

Susan Sullivan, Director for Alumni Relations at Oakland City University, focuses on the benefits of reduced salary costs when alumni are involved. Alumni provide extra time and talent, saving employee compensation costs. Students relate to graduates who faced the same struggles and succeeded. This impacts retention and student success, which translates into dollars.

Donald Ivanoff, a passionate career school alumni advocate, attests to alumni volunteers who save the school money because they are not paid. They help out in admissions, perform clerical work, handle initial resume reviews, conduct mock interviews and allow overworked staff to service more students.

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Gainful employment

Career college leaders still face the challenges of locating graduates since people move and rarely provide a change of address. PMI's alumni community website, PMI.edu/Alumni.asp, is the primary way graduates can request transcripts, and they must provide updated contact information to do so. This saves the cost of hiring people to phone, research and follow lost graduates.

Career development, internships and placement

Career colleges are measured by results – specifically retention and placement. This means career services and placement departments are constantly searching for job openings for entry-level graduates as well as externship sites. Imagine being connected to “insiders” – your alumni – at every company that could hire your grads or offer externships. Alumni can introduce you to hiring decision-makers. What is that worth?

Anne Sumangil, Director of the Rasmussen College Alumni Association, tells how her department supports the school mission that focuses on job assistance and ongoing training. Alumni are a source of jobs and continued enrollment. Enrollment in programs is clearly measurable. The number of additional jobs brought by alumni is also easy to count in ROI discussions.

Ivanoff reminds us that ROI data takes time to build. “We can’t cut off the opportunities because we need to prove ROI,” he said. There are many intangibles, as well as surprises, when alumni are engaged.

Marketing and public relations

Advertising and public relations are costly regardless of the size of your institution. Imagine being able to reduce these expenses as a result of your alumni community. Alumni can refer quality students to increase enrollment. Many work for companies that have public relations departments. Joint promotions and events generate press and provide publicity and expertise you may not have.

Brown College presented its 2012 Distinguished Alumni Award to former Rep. Steve Gunderson, R-Wisc., a graduate of the school’s broadcasting program. Gunderson is now President of the Association of Private Colleges and Universities (APSCU). The school and APSCU received a lot of press as a result of the award. Many career schools and colleges have famous alumni to honor, and there are hundreds of success stories like Gunderson.

Sullivan further explains that marketing is also about goodwill and holding events that have long-term results. One way she measures ROI is by event attendance. The larger the attendance, the more opportunity for ongoing relationships, alumni engagement and participation in the school.

Part of marketing is overcoming bad press. Sullivan talks about the success she has had with unhappy graduates. She is able to bring them back and address their needs. Perhaps if career schools maintained contact with their alumni, there would be less bad press. Active alumni are more likely to speak positively about career schools.

Website marketing

Traffic is driven to the dedicated PMI alumni community website because it is a way to obtain transcripts, according to Gudeman. The website also drives traffic to the main PMI website, which has a place for graduates to sign up to volunteer. Within a short period, PMI gained 719 responses from graduates who offered to give their time and resources.

Vendor relations

ROI can be measured when a career school develops relationships with vendors for the purpose of supporting alumni community activities. An example is a vendor that offers medical supplies to allied health schools. The school can arrange for the vendor to offer products and services to its graduates at a discount. This means the vendor has ongoing business and the potential of meeting the grads’ employers.

Summary

Alumni communities provide career schools and colleges a competitive opportunity. Given the choice between two similar institutions, a prospective student might be swayed by the endorsement of alumni testimonials. ROI is measurable in all areas that are important to career school owners: enrollments, retention, placement and operations. Some results can be measured in trends, goodwill and in the long-run. Career school image, reputation and success are important areas where alumni communities make a difference. ☺



Dr. Susan F. Schulz has been working in the career school sector for nearly 20 years. She is President of Susan F. Schulz & Associates Inc. and owner of Schools for Sale International Inc. Dr. Schulz has become passionate about the benefits of alumni communities and the impact on career schools as a result of three years of research. She gives frequent presentations on the power of alumni communities and how to initiate them at campuses of any size.