Chapter 12
Alumni Giving and Social Exchange: A Study of Alumni Giving Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Fundraising efforts at institutions of higher education continue to be a top priority, especially as funding from state governments decline. Public institutions have been looking to private institutions, as they are believed to have been leading the way in cultivating alumni donations since their inception. Higher education institutions must understand what determines the greatest alumni giving if the field is to improve their fundraising efforts, and student and alumni engagement is a key indicator of philanthropic gifts. A survey was administered to gather important insight into the giving behavior of alumni of an engineering department at a large research university located in the Midwestern area of the United States. The purpose of this survey is to understand the correlation between alumni giving and engagement while a student and as alumni.

INTRODUCTION

Fundraising efforts at institutions of higher education continue to be a top priority, especially as funding from state governments decline. Public institutions have been looking to private institutions, as they are believed to have been leading the way in cultivating alumni donations since their inception. Higher education institutions...
must understand what determines the greatest alumni giving if the field is to improve their fundraising efforts; student and alumni engagement is a key indicator of philanthropic gifts.

The purpose of this survey is to understand the correlation between alumni giving and engagement while a student and as alumni. The results of this survey will guide future efforts to cultivate alumni and students, and may further contribute to the body of literature on alumni giving and university advancement.

The results of this study will not be generalizable to all departments within higher education institutions or to all alumni of departments in higher education, but these results will provide an important insight into the giving behavior of alumni of an engineering department at a large research university located in the Midwestern area of the United States, and may be used to inform future fundraising policy and initiatives. The results of this study may also provide information to other small, sciences-based, undergraduate and graduate degree granting departments and institutions of higher education regarding alumni attitudes about giving and philanthropic behavior, and may encourage these other comparable departments to implement a similar study. Information on alumni philanthropic behavior is important for institutions of higher education to continue to implement successful fundraising policy and initiatives, and for professionals working in the field to better engage with prospective donors.

BACKGROUND

Historical Overview

The history of philanthropy in the United States follows a winding and varied path to the current structure. There are diverging and converging routes, multiple organizations and individuals involved, and a plethora of purposes and interests at stake. The following overview illustrates many of the key players, paths, and interests that shaped the American system of education through philanthropic means and brings us to the present.

Early American philanthropy began in the colonies and was characterized by the wishes to teach religion, the arts, and useful sciences, and to instruct youth in the colonies so that they would be fit for employment with the church and government. Gifts were generally unrestricted, but the ones that were restricted were focused on the needs of the school: buildings, staffing, scholarships, and libraries. Early institutions were thought of as being essential to the process of bringing civilization and Christianity to the wilderness and also a means to train leaders. The goal was to create the same type of higher education as existed in England. Having a college was key; questions of how or what were not a main concern to early philanthropists.
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