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Connecting with Alumni as an Academic Library

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Abstract

Existing literature about alumni and academic libraries describes fundraising or projects with Special Collections. This paper explores two different institutions' collaborations with alumni-focused departments in "friendraising" and building affinity for the library. The authors share their approaches to collaboration with various alumni projects.

Keywords

Connecting with Alumni as an Academic Library

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Abstract

Existing literature about alumni and academic libraries is limited to describing fundraising or projects with special collections. In contrast, this paper expands conceptions of alumni connections to academic libraries by exploring two different institutions' collaborations with alumni-focused departments in "friendraising" and building affinity for the library. The authors share their approaches to collaboration with various alumni projects at their institutions.

Keywords: Academic Library, Alumni, Programming, Friendraising, Outreach, Collaboration, Reunion Weekend, Homecoming, Finals Week, Book Clubs

Introduction

Alumni are an untapped audience for academic library programming. Frequently, alumni stay connected to their alma maters through sports, homecoming or reunion events, or giving campaigns post-graduation. However, every alum has the potential to be connected to the library from their time at the university. Collaboration between academic libraries and alumni relations departments represents a good first step to foster that connection.

This article describes two different university libraries' alumni engagement intentions and strategies, from starting to sustaining programs. Some academic libraries may have distinct communication and public relations departments with the goal of fundraising or gifts. This article focuses specifically on "friendraising" and fostering connections between the library and alumni that can be accomplished with one person or a small team, in collaboration with other campus units.

Objectives of alumni programming often can include re-engaging alumni and their memories of the library, connecting alumni with current students and student life, and fostering a working relationship with alumni-focused campus departments. The authors describe how this type of collaboration is essential—collaborations between an academic library and departments that interface with alumni ultimately helps move an institution's mission forward. Developing programs together also supports lifelong learning and can encourage alumni to develop a sustained affinity for the library.

Literature Review

Alumni and Academic Libraries

The majority of the literature on academic libraries and alumni falls into three categories: differentiating between fundraising vs. friendraising, describing library special collections programming for alumni, and making library resources available to alumni. There is limited published work specifically on academic libraries and friendraising of alumni, and this article hopes to fill that gap.

Fundraising vs. Friendraising

Money talks and as more budget cuts occur and loom ahead for higher education, academic libraries must continue to look to alumni to supplement or support their missions.[1] For example, Samuel T. Huang discussed the implementation of the University of Arizona's library development and fundraising committee and the library-wide mission to identify, cultivate, and steward donors.[2] Tomalee Doan and Sammie L. Morris highlighted, through two case studies,

the impact of the decrease in state appropriations on academic library budgets, which has required middle managers and librarians to refine their development skills to seek large gift donors.[3] Both case studies revealed that making the connection between alumni and the library was the result of knowing an alum's personal story or passion. Similiar circumstances at George Mason University led Adriana Ercolano to take a different approach than targeting large donors, but rather to work with their giving office to focus on alumni who would give to the library through the Annual Drive.[4]

Friendraising has been defined by Brain W. Keith, Joseph A. Salem, Jr., and Kurt Cumiskey as "efforts intended to generate committed and supportive relationships with outside parties and entities,"[5] and it is an appropriate approach which has been used by academic libraries with alumni, typically by hosting events, outreach programs, or tours. This strategy fosters a better sense of understanding of the organization's mission, leads to more library advocates, and in certain circumstances, these connections may develop into future gifts or volunteer support. However, friendraising is different from donor cultivation or stewardship because the focus is on building relationships and connections, without financial expectations. Both Huang and Ercolano showcase the importance of stewardship and not treating alumni as walking bank accounts.[6] As Andrew S. Griffith and Ceire Kealty state, "libraries can directly benefit from alumni who have a deeper relationship with the library that extends well beyond graduation" in the context of fundraising, but this is a poignant statement for friendraising as well.[7] Further, Elizabeth Konzak and Dwain P. Teague at the University of Central Florida worked to build alumni friends by attending alumni events with the intention of gaining collection donations to the archives and potentially in future financial gifts.[8] Joyce Garcynski's research study reviewed academic

libraries becoming friends with alumni on social media for fundraising purposes. Garcynski noted that at the time of the study the sample size was limited and not all of the libraries were using major social media platforms like Instagram.[9] As more and more universities and university libraries ask for monetary and material support from their alumni, alumni may become disenchanted and less engaged. Strategic outreach can invite alumni to be re-engaged or newly engaged with the library, helping to build authentic relationships.

Unique Projects

Special collections departments collaborating with alumni and alumni offices has gained more momentum in the last decade. Special collections and archives have a unique tie to alumni as the opportunity to peruse old yearbooks or photographs is an easy way for them to reminisce about their student experience or to consider what memorabilia that might donate to show their legacy at a university. An example of this is described at Grinnell College, where the library worked with the alumni office to collect, transcribe, and host alumni interviews in the institutional repository.[10] Another example of special collections working on a single project with alumni is described in a case study at the University of Florida George A. Smathers Libraries. The library with the assistance of the alumni association reached out to alumni to gain the permission of doctoral graduates to scan and deposit their dissertations in their institutional repository.[11] Finally, Amy Wainwright and Chris Davidson spotlight Jacksonville State University where the library partnered with alumni relations and marketing to organize and preserve images and yearbooks.[12] These examples have demonstrated how a single project between alumni and special collections can strengthen bonds. Institutional repositories have provided an easy way for special collections to connect and extend relationships with alumni beyond just asking for donations.

Beyond special collections' projects with alumni, there are a few examples of other academic

library departments inviting alumni participation. Kylie Chan discussed how alumni have

occasionally participated in the library's Book Culture Club as attendees, authors, and book

editors at Hong Kong Baptist University. The Book Culture Club has created space for the

library to collaborate with other departments at the institution as well as in the community.[13]

Another example is the University of Hong Kong Libraries' book sales where alumni and library

friends have visited the Libraries and purchased books.[14] These examples highlight programs

where alumni are invited, but are not the only intended audience.

Alumni Access to Library Resources

University students are used to having resources for research and more at their disposal.

However, once they graduate, there are no guarantees that they will continue to have remote

access to the same resources. Some university libraries are looking for ways to extend alumni

access to resources, such as books and databases, as a way to show that the library still has value

beyond graduation.[15] As Catherine Wells has pointed out there are challenges to providing

database access to alums from remote access restrictions, authentication complications with

vendors, funding issues related to increasing the number of patrons who have access, and campus

systems that do not seamlessly connect.[16] For example, Chris Flegg investigated the barrier of

vendors denying remote access to alumni due to the potential of lost revenue.[17] Linda Hacker has

emphasized that vendors are now beginning to explore and pilot database access to alumni,

which would allow alumni in professional occupations, such as social workers, to stay current in

their field post-graduation.[18] Jo-Anne Hogan and Corey Seeman also have discussed the

perceptions about vendor database access in terms of the collaboration between ProQuest and the

University of Michigan's Kresege Library for the Stephen M. Ross School of Business. These perceptions included librarians' assumptions about the cost for alumni access, the assumed time to work with vendors to organize alumni access, and how alumni access would vary from their previous experiences as a student.[19] In fact, as seen in Adwoa Boateng's exploratory study, alumni usage of provided electronic resources varies in part because they may not have had a full understanding of resources access even as students.[20] Additionally, Columbia University provides electronic access to alumni, but there are still frustrations with the usability of database interfaces and this ongoing confusion with products directly impacts donor relations. Susan E. Marcin and Colleen M. Major have pointed out that improving usability demonstrates the library's continued importance to alumni and increases their willingness to give to the library.[21] There are challenges in providing access to library resources to alumni, especially remote access, and if access can be provided, it does not mean that there will not be other hurdles to using those resources.

Back to Campus Programming

Homecoming and class reunion events offer academic libraries a prime opportunity to host alumni in the library, showcase alumni-related collections or acknowledge alumni achievements. For example, librarians at Wittenberg University developed open-source software that creates "social-media-ready now-and-then" images using yearbook photos.[22] Ohio University Archives also hosts an annual homecoming display inside the library, including yearbooks, scrapbooks, photographs, sports programs, and other memorabilia.[23] Additionally, William & Mary Libraries hosts an annual alumni author breakfast as part of the university's homecoming schedule, in addition to alumni author and writer talks throughout the year.[24] Hosting alumni and honoring

alumni experiences and accomplishments are all ways libraries can build better relationships with alums.

Case Study: Getting Started

Pittsburg State University's Library Services

Pittsburg State University (PSU) is located in southeast Kansas with an FTE of 6,500 students. Founded in 1903 as a training school for teachers, PSU has a history and mission of providing transformational experiences for its students and the community. In the 1920s, students organized a pep club that led to the current mascot, Gus the Gorilla, which would be embraced by the university and community.[25] Library Services supports PSU undergraduate and graduate students in education, business, arts and sciences, and technology through collections, instruction, reference, and collaboration with other campus departments. Recently, Library Services has sought a more active and sustained relationship with PSU alumni through a collaboration with the Alumni and Constituent Relations, the campus department that fosters relationships between alumni and the university.

Being a Novice

In the past, Alumni and Constituent Relations and Library Services collaborated on one-time events, such as the Archivist presenting to alumni at their Half-Century Reunion, using the Leonard H. Axe Library as a venue for an alumni gathering, and facilitating a meet-up between a donor and special collections. Each of these events advanced the library's mission of being responsive to Pittsburg State University's community, however, there is not a dedicated library professional to coordinate this work.

First Steps to a Sustaining Project

Library Services began investigating ways to connect to alumni to showcase the Leonard H. Axe Library renovation project, slated to be completed in 2022, as well as library resources available to alumni. PSU Alumni and Constituent Relations reached out to the Library Services in November 2018 about hosting an alumni book club. This project appealed to Library Services because it could be a multiple-year collaboration and had the potential to expand into in-person gatherings at the library, as well as other possible collaborations. Additionally, this collaboration would meet the PSU and the Library Services' strategic plans of partnering with the regional community.

In the summer of 2019, Library Services and Alumni and Constituent Relations met to determine the goals, roles, and books for the Gorilla Alumni Book Club, which was to be hosted on Facebook. Alumni & Constituent Relations wanted an outlet that would engage alumni regardless of their geographic location. To customize the book club for Pitt State grads, collaborators decided that all books read and discussed would be written by PSU alumni, making it truly an alumni book club for and by alumni. It was decided that Alumni and Constituent Relations would promote and market the book club to PSU alumni, organize and administer the Facebook page, manage any prizes or giveaways, and work with connecting to alumni authors as needed. Library Services would select the books, lead the discussions, alert alumni authors of their book's selection for the club, and assist on any live author and book club events. The first book club meeting was held in January 2020. When possible, the Librarian and an Alumni and Constituent Relations representative looked for potential live events with authors to physically

bring alumni (particularly local alumni) back into the newly renovated library and on to campus. For one successful cross-campus collaboration, the Library and Alumni and Constituent Relations worked with the PSU Bicknell Family Center for the Arts and brought in Jennifer Knapp, a Grammy-nominated singer, for a concert to tie-in to the book club with her memoir *Facing the Music: My Story*. This asynchronous book club ensured individuals could participate on their schedule and meant that no major changes were needed when lockdown measures occurred in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Impact

As of 2021, the Gorilla Alumni Book Club is in its second year and has benefited alumni, Alumni and Constituent Relations, and Library Services.[26] The book club prompted Library Services to simultaneously examine how to better acknowledge alumni authors in a broader fashion. For example, before the book club, there was no single record or database of alumni authors, but now, there is an internal database that is regularly updated and publicly-viewable and searchable cataloging notes have been added on alumni books in the library. The community that has been built for the book club has allowed individuals from across the country to meet participants from Chicago to Topeka to New Jersey to Texas. During the pandemic, some authors have been videoconferencing with the book club, which has increased school pride—the feeling of "Gorilla Nation."[27] Book club participants, both readers and authors, are now advocates of Library Services as seen through their visits to the Leonard H. Axe Library building and social media accounts, as well as with increased book donations. Library Services has fostered more connection to alumni and their works, and the library hopes to see more alums in person after the pandemic when it is safe to do so.

Case Study: Advancing with Alumni

University of Dayton Libraries

The University of Dayton (UD) was founded in 1850 and is a private, Catholic, Marianist university located in southwest Ohio with about 11,600 enrolled students. Roesch Library opened in 1971 and is the main campus library. People at UD recognize its culture of community—alumni help continue that spirit after graduation. This campus cultural trait has influenced the library to actively build engagement with alumni over several years by working with campus partners. New ideas and calls for collaboration may originate from university advancement, alumni relations, or from the library, supported by a librarian (the coordinator of marketing and engagement), the library's marketing and outreach team, and/or the Dean. Sustained and timely programs show multiple depths of engagement with alumni of all ages. New opportunities that have arisen online during and post-pandemic have helped to market the library, its collections, and to improve current students' university experience. The library advances its mission of supporting student success and communicates that story with alumni through a variety of initiatives including a pizza break for students during finals week, a note-writing drive for alumni to share encouraging words to studying students, and engaging online workshops. Each of these initiatives are intended to foster that sense of UD community belonging among current students and alumni, with the library as a conduit.

Finals Week Pizza Break

Partnerships can start small, as is the case where the UD library serves as a location for an alumni-funded program to benefit current students. One long-standing program at UD is a free

pizza study break for students in the library the Sunday before each semester's finals week. The program is coordinated by alumni relations and was initiated by a recent graduate and a university staff member. The student alumni organization and alumni volunteers help staff the pizza line in the library. A popular local pizza company owner offers a discounted rate. The giving opportunity for alumni is promoted as "just $15 will fuel four students for a long night of studying." In the past, strong supporters of the program funded the program for an academic year. This has been a channel of engagement with recent graduates who have experienced the program and want to give back to it, and current students view it as a tradition. The library markets it as part of its finals week events lineup for students, which also includes therapy pet visits, free chair massages, free taxi rides home for students, and free coffee and tea. In this example, alumni relations and advancement coordinate the program and the library supports it through hosting it in its building and promoting the event.

Finals Friends

Another program that is timed with finals week, but only runs during the spring semester, is a library-developed friendraising initiative called Finals Friends. Finals Friends is a note-writing drive for alumni to send well wishes to current students and is coordinated by the library. This opportunity to send in notes to current students is cross-promoted by the alumni magazine, alumni association, and the library, beginning in March each year. Electronic submissions are accepted on the program website using an online form.[28] The form asks for the person's name, graduation year, email, message, and social media handle (if they'd like to be tagged). Previously, blank print cards were made available at alumni events such as at reunion weekend and at game-watching social events.

Whether heartfelt ("Wishing you the best of luck!") or humorous ("I remember finals week — and I'm glad it's over."), notes have been shared in various ways—passed out to students studying in the library, posted on library bulletin boards, and shared on social media. The library received 56 cards for our first year in 2013. In subsequent years, there has been an average of 30 messages. Participating alumni represent a wide range of ages including recent graduates as well as Golden Flyers, those that graduated 50 or more years ago. Messages are designed into cards (see Figure 1), printed and posted around the library, and shared digitally on social media. Participant information is shared with our partners in alumni relations and university advancement to track engagement. The library is the most interested in the number of participants and repeat note writers to identify strong alumni library advocates. The partnering units look for constituents who participate in this program to track their level of engagement with the university overall.

Finals Friends is a positive way for the library to invite alumni to engage directly with current students in a fun and low-stakes way. A benefit of this program is having an annual "ask" of alumni that is not time-intensive and not attached to a monetary gift expectation. It invites alumni to recall their memories of being on campus "back in the day." They can make a connection to current students and also see the library's role in the academics and social life of students, an important aspect of friendraising in the academic library context. This program has worked well for many years because it has a reasonable annual timeline and a workflow that delegates specific responsibilities among the library, the alumni magazine, and the alumni association. The library updates the form, receives submissions, designs the cards, and shares the

messages with students. The alumni-affiliated units help promote the note-writing opportunity and the notes when they are posted. At the end of the campaign, the library updates a spreadsheet of Finals Friends note writers that is then shared with university advancement.

Figure 1: Example of Finals Friends message and card. Designed by Ann Zlotnik, University of Dayton Libraries.
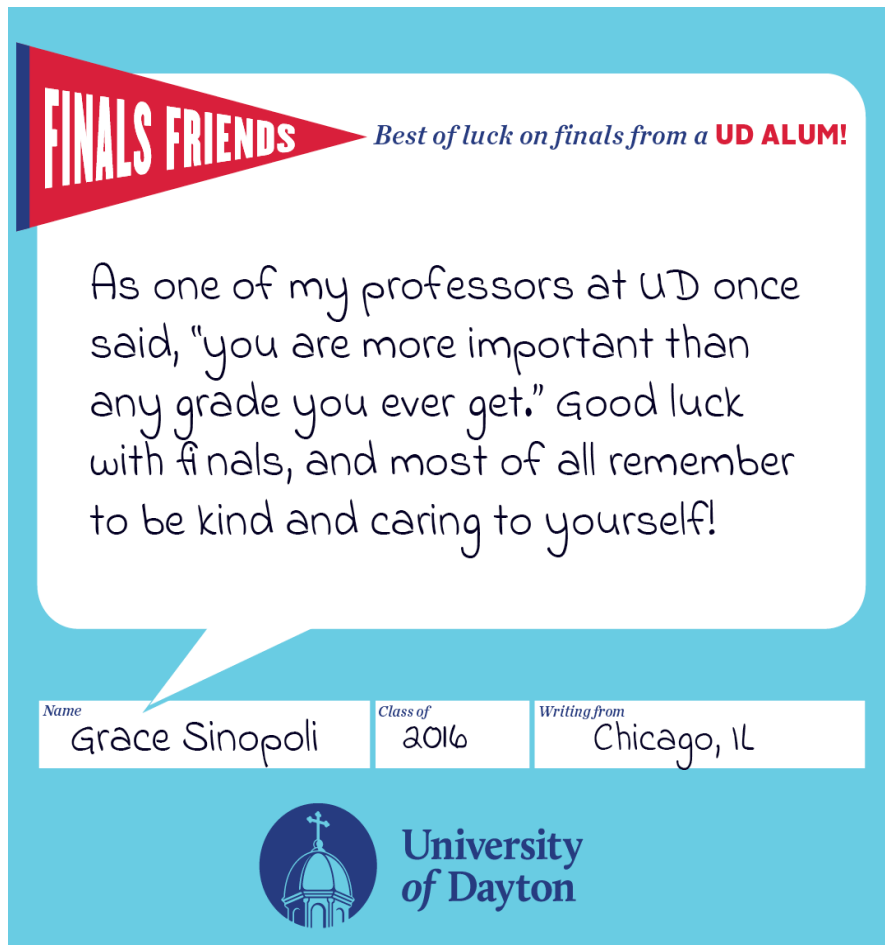
UDigital Webinars

A new opportunity which started in 2020 for the library to engage with alumni is via live webinars that are free of charge. The university advancement and alumni offices launched a

website called UDigital which is a one-stop-shop for resources, services, and programs for alumni. It has served as a positive way to connect with alumni during the pandemic and will continue for the foreseeable future. The coordinator of marketing and engagement set up an online form where library employees are invited to submit live webinar proposals to be featured on the platform. The library marketing team assists with description writing, graphic design, and liaising with the campus partners. University advancement provides technical support and coordinates webinar promotion with alumni offices.

The first program took place May 2021 and showcased one of the library's special collections, the John Stokes and Mary's Gardens collection. A team of library employees presented a do-it-yourself terrarium garden using flowers and plants associated with the Blessed Virgin Mary to 40 attendees.[29] This online event provided a platform to connect alumni and donors to the library and its collections, which uniquely support student learning and research. It was a way to introduce alumni to the wide range of activities library faculty and staff are engaged in. Demonstrating use of a library's special collection for a general audience made a connection between the library and the university's mission and identity, in this case the Mary's Gardens collection recognizes UD's Catholic, Marianist heritage. The hope is that building awareness of what a 21st-century library is, including spaces, programs, and collections, will help us attract new advocates and supporters for the future.

Best Practices for Friendraising

Based on these case studies, the authors recommend the following best practices and considerations for working with an alumni audience, and these practices should be observed in

all programming endeavors. First, it is important to identify where your institution already connects to alumni, such as the university alumni association, alumni magazine, and advancement. These organizations and departments might already be interconnected at an institution. Frequently, alums receive communications from these groups and therefore, they have a good idea of alumni needs. By working with these groups, the library can identify mission-aligned areas to further meet alumni interests. Collaboration with these departments and alumni may vary depending on a library's relationship with each department.

Second, collaboration can look and feel different, depending on the scale of a project and available staff. At the low end, it might just be communication by email to share an alumni-related or university history blog post written by the library. Asking about sharing or cross-posting materials on social media is a good starting point for any novice to this type of collaboration. Additionally, look for ways that the library might be able to be a part of existing alumni events, such as reunion weekend. A small activity with alumni, such as making buttons, can lead to a longer-lasting impression of the library. For larger projects, a meeting with campus partners is often helpful to discuss initial ideas and what might work well, to see who needs to be aware of campus events, and to detail specific types of support needed (email, social media, event registration, budget, etc.). It's always important to then follow up with any progress made or to write a final report for assessment purposes. Ask program partners and university collaborators what went well from their perspective, what could be improved, and if the event should happen again. Reflect on these questions from the library's perspective as well. Write down feedback, share it in a document, and then set a meeting for next time if your event will occur regularly. For multi-year projects, such as the book club, it is important to have periodic

check-ins via email or in-person meetings to ensure that the project is still meeting the initial outcomes and expectations. As with any working relationship and collaboration, make sure to acknowledge the work of your partners to the campus community and other relevant stakeholders.

Third, librarians looking for ways to begin or expand their alumni outreach should learn more about university traditions and library lore. It's useful to know student's nicknames for campus features, favorite study spots, and the various departments that have had offices or a presence in the library building over the course of the university's history. Alumni that drop by the physical library or archives enjoy the ability to reminisce about their memories of the space. This knowledge can also be used for social media posts, but even more importantly for building a quick connection with individual alumni. It is important to remember that a library is used by all majors and classes, so librarians should build relationships with all campus departments and organizations. With knowledge of campus history, librarians and archivists can highlight milestones and anniversaries of various events and groups, especially when those anniversaries might bring alumni physically back to campus. Every action and project helps to establish affinity for the library and the institution and can help sustain connections between the library and alumni.

Conclusion

"Friendraising" of alumni cannot be done alone. Intentional relationships with alumni-focused departments ensure alumni are reached out to consistently and that the projects are sustainable, regardless of scope. The case studies described in this article involve library employees who

don't have fundraising as part of their normal job duties, but who do have a dedication to mission-centric outreach and programming. Positive results are achieved when combining outreach and marketing ideas for alumni from the library with other units' fundraising and communication expertise.

As these case studies demonstrate, collaborating with other departments creates a larger impact on the community and extends the library's reach beyond current faculty and students. Considering alumni as a key audience for library communication efforts or events is a good first step, and additional ideas and opportunities will arise naturally from there. The authors hope that these ideas and practical steps inspire other librarians to reach out to their campus departments, either to plug into their events or to collaborate on a new project to increase alumni engagement. Any alum can become connected to the library, but it is paramount for the library to continue to foster those relationships long after graduation.

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