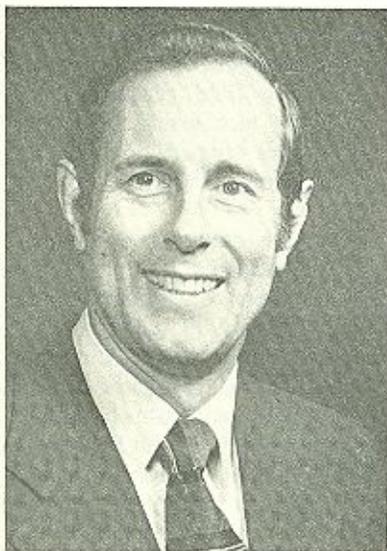


The response at a large university to a recent fund request to 10,000 Education alumni was answered by only 150, and one person sent a cryptic message by pledging 12 cents. What's the real meaning behind that message?

the college of education and its students— until death do us part

by Edgar L. Sagan



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The relationship between alumni and their alma mater has been cultivated for many decades in American higher education. This relationship was conceptualized as having two distinct phases. One was the college attendance phase where the future alumnus was exposed to the milieu of ideas, faculty, athletics, bull-sessions, and often a future marriage partner. The second phase was the alumni role, wherein the former student has been seen as perpetually expressing his gratitude in the form of cash for all the meaningful experiences provided by the alma mater during the attendance phase. In this model there has been very little overlap between phases: that is, the student has been seen as a recipient, and once an alumnus, the flow moves in the opposite direction to one of giver.

The One-Way Model

There have been some basic problems with this model. For example, not every student has had a pleasant or profitable experience in college. National statistics indicate that over half of all entering college students eventually drop out permanently or at least do not graduate on schedule. The likelihood of dissatisfaction and bitterness with the college experience seems quite high—hardly the type of experience to foster fond memories and cash contributions!

Another problem has been the lack of any ongoing benefits flowing from the institutions to the alumni. Mail and phone contacts from alma mater have been mainly requests for money, and the alumnus who felt he already overpaid for what he got asked, "What's in it for me?"

In addition to these general problems, Colleges of Education have been at an even greater disadvantage. They have had so little contact with their students during 'phase one' that the alumnus has been much less inclined to contribute specifically to them during 'phase two.' Most teacher education programs have been heavily grounded in the arts and sciences, and often less than a quarter of the total program has been taken in education. Even that portion contained a high percentage of student teaching, during which a college-based coordinator may have visited only once or twice. After graduation, the new first year teacher has found that much of what was learned is not applicable in the real teaching situation. The net result from this traditional model has been one of mutual disinterest at best and outright antagonism at worst. That is why the response at a large university to a recent fund request to 10,000 Education alumni was answered by only 150, and one person sent a cryptic message by pledging 12 cents!

A Model Based on Interaction

As funds from state legislatures and federal sources become more limited and as inflation diminishes the impact of those amounts that are forthcoming, monies from other sources take on crucial importance. In fact, in-kind contributions of expertise, time, and data can be of equal value. In order to tap these resources from alumni, institutions of higher education will have to abandon the traditional model and move to one which features an ongoing two-way interaction between alma mater and alumni. In such a model, benefits and resources flow in both directions, and the line between student and alumnus status becomes vague indeed.

Service to Graduates

Since a new model of alumni relations must feature continuous service by the institution to its graduates, it might be well to discuss this aspect first.

Any program of ongoing service to graduates should have its introduction and orientation among the students. The students should be informed of those services they can expect to receive, and they should also be appraised of ways in which they can help their alma mater after graduation. A logical beginning is the job placement function. It is during the senior year that students should initiate their placement credentials and learn how to update them periodically. A continuing placement service to alumni is a vital link and should be cultivated. It gives purpose to early contacts during the student years, and it demonstrates a continuing concern on the part of the college. A positive side effect is that appropriate job placements result in job satisfaction, persistence in the profession, higher salaries, and therefore greater likelihood of substantial alumni support for the institution.

A second program of help to the alumni is one of professional support during the first year of teaching. This is a frightening time for many new teachers, and those who are placed in unfamiliar surroundings often need help in simply surviving. This program would have college of education faculty members work on an in-service basis with first-year teachers within a reasonable geographic range. Graduates of other institutions might also be included. It is easiest to implement in those schools where undergraduate field placements already exist. Visitations of undergraduates can then be expanded to the first year teacher group. Such a program does require extra time and resources, but it is in line with a national emphasis on continuing and in-service education. If some graduate course credit can be associated with this activity, it can serve as a dual benefit to the teacher and can also generate student credit hour production for institutions whose budgets are predicated on such figures.

A third benefit a college can provide its graduates is closely linked to efforts with first year teachers, and it actually picks up where the other program stops. It involves an ongoing, periodic contact with all graduates in the form of a fact sheet or newsletter which would report on the latest major research findings in education, new techniques, new materials, and suggestions on quality articles and books. Along with this there can be programs on tape or delivered in person concerning new techniques and theories pertaining to various jobs in education. These are the very things a faculty knows best and can do best. It is based on the philosophy that the alumni never stop being students with their alma mater.

Benefits to the Institution

The more familiar side of the coin is what the alumni can do for the institution. It should already be clear from the discussion so far that energies flow in both directions between college and alumni once a continuous interaction has been initiated. One needs to reinforce the other. Both must feel they are receiving some benefits. If they do not, the interaction will end.

The most common benefit to the institution is financial—the alumni fund. Appeals are made, and responses are expected. But as pointed out above, alumni interest in giving cannot be sustained indefinitely without some benefits provided in return. Therefore, the importance of institution-to-alumni contacts and commitment cannot be overemphasized.

Alumni can be of help to their college by participating in data-gathering, follow-up studies. In order for colleges to appropriately update and revise their programs, they need to have facts and perceptions from alumni concerning their ability to function on the job and how this relates to their program of preparation. Such studies often yield very low rates of questionnaire return. Teachers should feel an obligation to assist their alma mater in the vital effort of revising its programs through monitoring its products.

A third way in which alumni can help their college is to participate in field placement programs. If geographically possible, they should volunteer to work with student teachers and other students requiring field experiences. Not only does this broaden the base for quality field placement opportunities of the institution, but it also expresses a commitment on the part of the alumnus to participate in the important process of preparing new candidates for the profession.

A fourth area of alumni activity could be in student recruitment. In an era of tight job markets it is not necessary or advisable to attract large numbers of students to the teaching profession. However, there will always be a separate need for quality people. In this regard alumni can be alert to the identification of promising candidates for educational roles and encourage these candidates to explore program options at the institution where they did their work.

There is some movement lately in the direction of broader involvement in the governance of teacher education. Teachers, parents, and others are being given a voice in how programs will be administered and structured. This is happening in colleges of education, in individual schools, and in special units created for the purpose of preparing teachers. Alumni should be encouraged to participate on these governing groups. They can do so with the depth of understanding of having been through the program—a quality no other group can bring to the process.

A sixth area of alumni support is in the political arena. This is a time when institutions of higher education are not faring well in public esteem. This feeling is reflected by legislatures which vote to cut budgets and eliminate programs. While it is true that many colleges need to improve their cost/benefit ratios and operate more efficiently, it is generally difficult to innovate and develop quality programs in a climate of shrinking resources. Every alumnus should do whatever possible to influence the public, state department officials, and legislators to support higher education adequately. Excellent programs need to be kept that way, and mediocre

programs need to be given the incentive and the resources to improve. Several thousand alumni speaking as one voice can have surprising influence on both those who control the resources and those who use them.

The final area to be discussed here is probably the most difficult to deal with. It is difficult because it concerns the professional integrity of the individual. Every institution has a reputation, and it is created by a variety of factors such as research output, field service activities, and the "quality" of the graduates. Quality is an elusive term because it is perceived differently by different people, who in turn have their own sets of criteria. So the practical result is that different behaviors are valued differentially according to location and personnel. In some schools change and innovation are encouraged, while in other schools these may be perceived as radical and unsettling. So an alumnus with certain qualities may be perceived as successful in one setting and un-

successful in another. However, assuming the match between place and person has been a good one, it should be the personal responsibility of every educator to perform with integrity and with a high standard of excellence. Beyond the benefits such performance has for pupils and for society, there is a residual benefit to the status of the individual's alma mater. Perhaps it is out of date to do a job well for the sake of some greater cause—personal fulfillment has become paramount. However, there can be benefits to several sources resulting from quality performance—personal, societal, and institutional. The successful alumnus does provide a benefit to his college, and this has to do with status, reputation, and good feelings. Thus, as these factors improve for the institution, each individual's association with the institution is enhanced. The pursuit of excellence then becomes the well-trodden pathway, and the choices at the forks in the road become much clearer.

a definition of education

Education is a lifetime process
Whereby young and old are encouraged,
 challenged,
 and
 rewarded
to question,
 search,
 discover,
 and
 incorporate
 wisdom,
 experience,
 and
 skills
leading toward a
deeper understanding and appreciation
of various dimensions of the universe
including all forms of matter,
 life,
 relationship,
 and
 mystery.

Duane Parker
Graduate Student in Education
Kansas State University
Philosophy of Education Class,
February 11, 1975