

STUDENT AFFAIRS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL



Custom Research Brief

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I. Research Methodology

Project Challenge *Leadership at a member institution approached the Council with the following questions:*

- What is the mission of student alumni associations? What kinds of programming do they offer, and which are most successful at engaging students?
- How many students participate in associations? What are the requirements for student membership, and what level of commitment must members maintain?
- What role do students play in the success and growth of associations?
- In what ways do alumni engage in and support programming?
- How has association programming changed over time?
- What funding, staff, space, and other resources do associations require for programming?
- Which offices oversee associations (e.g., alumni relations, student life, career services)? What responsibilities do advisors have?
- How do advisors promote growth in association programming and membership?
- How do administrators measure the impact of associations?
- What metrics correlate with a high degree of student engagement (e.g., alumni donation rate, student retention rate), and what effect have associations had on these metrics?

Project Sources

- Education Advisory Board's internal and online (www.educationadvisoryboard.com) research libraries
- National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (<http://nces.ed.gov>)
- Institutional websites



Research Parameters

The Council interviewed staff who oversee student programming within alumni associations at large public universities.

A Guide to the Institutions Profiled in this Brief

| Institution | Location | Sector | Approximate Enrollment Total (Undergraduate) | Carnegie Classification |
|--------------|--------------|--------|--|---|
| University A | Midwest | Public | 42,700 (32,500) | Research Universities (very high research activity) |
| University B | South | Public | 51,100 (38,400) | Research Universities (very high research activity) |
| University C | South | Public | 32,000 (24,100) | Research Universities (very high research activity) |
| University D | Pacific West | Public | 39,100 (27,200) | Research Universities (very high research activity) |
| University E | Midwest | Public | 22,600 (17,800) | Research Universities (high research activity) |
| University F | South | Public | 34,800 (26,400) | Research Universities (very high research activity) |
| University G | South | Public | 34,700 (25,400) | Research Universities (very high research activity) |



II. Executive Overview

Key Observations All student alumni associations offer professional development (e.g., networking events, job shadowing), and many also host spirit events (e.g., pep rallies, talent shows). Programming primarily aims to build engagement among current students so that they will donate and/or participate in events as alumni. Several associations are shifting resources away from cost-intensive spirit events because professional development engages more alumni. Associations at three contact institutions exclusively provide professional development.

At most contact institutions, student alumni associations have 1,400-2,000 general members, including up to 70 student leaders. General members are rarely subject to minimum time commitments, and contacts estimate that less than 25% participate regularly in programming. **University D** provides an alternate model: its student alumni association includes only the 100 student leaders who plan events, and all members commit five to ten hours per week to their roles.

Contact associations generate annual budgets of \$10,000-250,000 through membership sales and allocations from alumni associations, external affairs divisions, and student affairs divisions. At four contact institutions, annual dues of \$15-25 per member cover expenses associated with most programming. Associations with larger budgets dedicate significant funding to large-scale spirit events, some of which generate revenue for universities.

Most student associations have one full-time advisor and up to two part-time student staff who typically report to alumni offices. Student association advisors may also oversee alumni programs for related groups, such as incoming first-year students or young alumni. At two contact institutions, students enrolled in master's programs in student affairs assist advisors. Other part-time positions include administrative support staff and graphic designers.

Student leaders recruit most new members during first-year orientations; they also staff recruitment tables at events they host and co-host throughout the academic year. Recruiters offer benefits such as school merchandise (e.g., t-shirts, tote bags) and local vendor discounts to incentivize membership. To facilitate registration, administrators at **University A** allow students at recruitment tables to bill membership fees to the bursar's office.

Potential metrics to measure impact include the rate at which student members become alumni association members and the rate at which they donate to the university as alumni. Administrators may struggle to measure these metrics because of self-selection biases (i.e. those who are likely to purchase student memberships are likely to donate as alumni regardless of membership) and economic fluctuations that impact alumni giving.



III. Overview of Programming and Membership

Mission and Programming *Associations Build Engagement through Professional and Spirit-based Events*

Mission Statement: University D

"To facilitate interaction between students and alumni, and to enhance the student experience by providing opportunities that strengthen their lifelong loyalty to [the University]."

Student alumni associations primarily seek to engage current students so that they will donate to universities after graduation. Most associations offer professional development opportunities and spirit events. To promote alumni engagement, administrators often prioritize programming in which alumni can participate (e.g., job shadowing).

Types of Professional Development Opportunities

- **Networking events:** Associations may host general networking fairs or industry-specific events, such as the entertainment industry reception at **University D**. Associations across the country offer "Dinner with Twelve Strangers" programs, in which distinguished alumni host meals for students interested in their field. Dinners occur monthly or semimonthly and may attract up to 2000 student applicants each year.
- **Job shadowing:** Some associations connect students with alumni mentors. **University E**, for example, offers an externship program during winter vacations that matches students with alumni in their hometowns for career exploration.
- **Career skills workshops:** Alumni association staff may host workshops on professional skills such as networking, interviewing, elevator speeches, and dinner etiquette. Alumni often perform mock interviews and attend practice receptions or dinners.
- **Awards and scholarships:** The alumni association at **University C** confers seven scholarships, two of which are reserved for student members. Each year, over 200 alumni attend award receptions for scholarship winners.

Types of Spirit Events

- **Athletics celebrations:** Many associations host pep rallies and/or bonfires before home games. Before rival games, students in several associations design and distribute t-shirts for audience members to wear. The association at **University A** plans all homecoming week programming.
- **Showcases and fundraisers:** Associations commonly host talent shows and other large-scale fundraising events. At **University A**, proceeds from races and dance marathons support local and national charities.
- **Tradition books:** Each year, students at **University F** draft and design a book that highlights nearly 50 campus traditions. Students who fulfill 20 or more traditions receive lapel pins to wear during graduation ceremonies.

Some Associations Prioritize Professional Services to Engage More Alumni

New Mission Statement: University B

"To foster professional relationships within the [University] family through alumni networking, career development, and student support."

Several contact institutions have recently prioritized professional development over spirit events. Last year, administrators at **University B** rewrote their association's mission statement to reflect a growing emphasis on professional programming.



Reasons to Prioritize Professional Development

- **Aligns with mission to engage alumni:** Spirit events primarily serve current students, while professional programs such as job shadowing engage both students and alumni. At **University C**, 55% of the alumni association's board of directors hosted dinners during the first year of its Dinner with Twelve Strangers program.
- **Generates fewer programming costs:** Campus-wide showcases and celebrations require substantial resources. At **University G**, a membership-funded student alumni association hosts professional development events while an externally-funded student ambassadors program manages all spirit events.
- **Addresses student needs for professional growth:** Administrators at **University B** realigned programming in response to student demand for professional support during the recession. During the 2012-2013 year, they plan to expand the association's two annual networking events and host at least eight alumni speakers.

Target Student Needs through Industry-Specific Events

Because students prefer to meet alumni within their fields of study, events focused on one industry (e.g., dinners with doctors) tend to attract more interest than general networking events. Last year, **University E** limited attendance at its annual networking fair to alumni from the schools of business, communication, and arts and sciences. Student attendance rose from previous years, when the fair had included alumni from a wider variety of fields.

Membership Requirements and Size

Up to 2,400 Dues-Paying Members Belong to Each Profiled Association

Most student alumni associations require members to pay dues of \$15-25 each year to participate in programming. Some associations also offer discounted four-year memberships to first-year students.

Student Alumni Association Memberships Across Institutions

| Institution | Cost of 1-year Membership | Cost of 4-Year Membership | Approximate Number of Members | Number of Student Leaders |
|--------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| University A | \$15 | \$50 | 2000 | 35 |
| University B | \$20 | \$70 | 1500 | 8 |
| University C | \$15 | n/a | 1400 | 70 |
| University E | \$10 | n/a | 400 | 9 |
| University F | \$20 | n/a | 2400 | 38 |
| University G | \$25 | \$75 | 1800 | 30 |



Most associations provide members with complimentary university merchandise (e.g., t-shirts, water bottles, tote bags) and discounts with local vendors. At **University C**, for example, members receive 10 percent discounts at approximately 20 local stores and restaurants, including the campus bookstore.

General members are not subject to minimum time commitments, and several contacts estimate that less than 25% of dues-paying members regularly participate in programming.

Some Associations Are Leadership-Based, Not Membership-Based

The student alumni association at **University D** does not follow an open membership model. Programming remains open to the entire campus, but only the 100 students who plan events are considered members. Program officers select new members from an applicant pool, and each new member pays a one-time fee of \$100 upon joining. This model requires all members to serve on planning committees and commit five to ten hours per week to meetings and events.

Student Leadership *Student Leaders Plan Events, Lead Meetings, and Recruit New Members*

Duties of Student Leaders

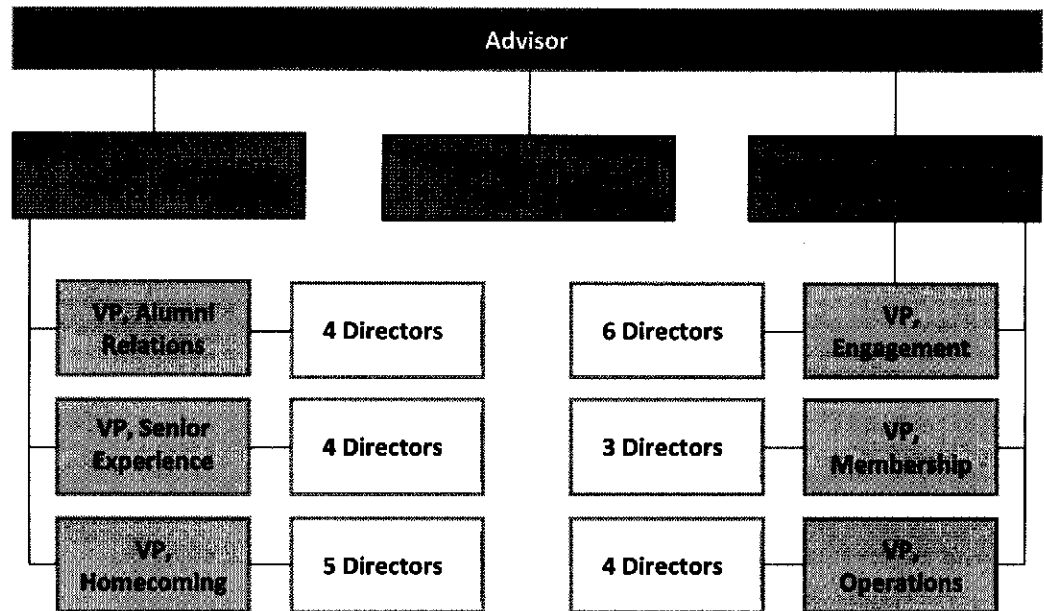
- Plan student programming
- Lead membership meetings and team building activities
- Direct marketing efforts and staff recruitment tables
- Attend alumni association board meetings

At contact institutions, one to five percent of general members hold leadership roles. Many associations require leaders to maintain minimum commitments. Each of the 70 leaders at **University C** must earn 15 activity points per semester, and each of the 38 leaders at **University F** must earn 40 points. At both institutions, points equal approximately one hour of commitment in meetings, events, or volunteer opportunities.

Most advisors require student leaders to perform the majority of the association's event planning. This model encourages students to develop leadership and management skills, and it allows advisors to focus their limited time on program support and guidance.



The Structure of Student Leadership at University A



35 student leaders at **University A** form a committee that plans all association programming. Within this committee, six vice presidents, two senior vice presidents, and the president form the executive team. The committee and the team each meet once per week. Additionally, the president and two senior vice presidents meet one to two times per week with the association’s staff advisor.



IV. Resources and Program Support

Budgets and Funding Sources *Membership Sales and External Funding Provide Budgets of up to \$250,000*

Most student alumni associations generate revenue through membership sales, but the alumni association and other university divisions may also allocate funding. Generally, event-related costs account for the majority of association expenses. Other areas of expenditure include publicity and recruitment, complimentary member gifts, and part-time support staff.

Funding Models for Student Alumni Associations

- **Membership-funded:** Associations at **University A, University C, University G, and University E** generate at least half of their annual funding from membership sales. Their budgets depend on the number of members they recruit and retain, and on any additional fundraisers they oversee (e.g., corporate sponsorships, class ring sales).
- **Alumni association-funded:** Student associations at **University B and University D** receive most of their funding from alumni association allocations. Both alumni associations primarily generate revenue through membership sales and donations. Student membership sales contribute to alumni association funds.
- **University-funded:** The external affairs division at **University F** funds alumni association operations, and it allocates programming funds to the student association annually. Student membership sales contribute to the University foundation's unrestricted fund.

Budget Size and Funding Sources Across Institutions

| Institution | Total Budget | Amount from Membership Sales | Amount from Alumni Association Allocations | Amount from Other University Allocations |
|--------------|--------------|------------------------------|--|--|
| University A | \$120,000 | \$60,000 | | \$60,000 |
| University B | \$33,000 | | \$33,000 | |
| University C | \$10,000 | \$10,000 | | |
| University D | \$250,000 | | \$190,000 | \$60,000 |
| University E | Undisclosed | Most | | \$1,500 |
| University F | \$60,000 | | | \$60,000 |
| University G | Undisclosed | All | | |

University D and University F receive funds from external affairs. University E receives funds from student affairs.

Associations with smaller budgets are rarely responsible for campus-wide spirit events, while associations with larger budgets may host several each year. Although campus-wide events require significant funding, they may also generate revenue for the university. For example, the celebrity-judged talent show at University D costs \$100,000 to host, but it generates \$150,000 in ticket sales per year.



Staff and Space *Most Alumni Associations Employ One Advisor for Student Programs*

Needs At **University C**, **University E**, and **University F**, one full-time staff member within the alumni association oversees the student association. At three contact institutions, the student association shares a full-time advisor with other alumni association programs, including the young alumni council at **University A** and incoming first-year events at **University B**.

Because of the frequency and scale of its programming, three full-time staff members advise the student alumni association at **University D**. Each advisor oversees three to four event-specific planning committees of ten student volunteers.

Advisor Responsibilities

- Supervises student leaders in event planning
- Manages access to funding and other resources (e.g. meeting space, other alumni association staff)
- Remains available to student members

Advisors primarily provide support for student leaders while students plan programming. Many advisors meet weekly with student presidents, vice presidents, and/or directors to ensure that event planning and marketing remain timely and comprehensive. At most institutions, advisors also manage programming budgets, reserve space for meetings and retreats, and coordinate activities between student leaders and other alumni association staff (e.g., marketing and design teams).

Many advisors also host open office hours for general members, though student leaders typically remain their first line of support.

Emphasize Student Leadership to Reduce Staffing Needs

The student alumni association at **University A** previously employed two full-time advisors and one support staff member, all of whom assisted with event planning. Last year, administrators delegated event planning responsibilities to student volunteers to reduce staffing needs. A committee of six students now plans the association's largest event, Homecoming Week, under the supervision of only one advisor. Student leaders who previously served from August through May now serve from January through December to continue planning during the summers.

Student Affairs Staff Support Associations Registered as Student Groups

Because many student alumni associations are registered student organizations, student affairs staff sometimes provide additional support and oversight. At **University D**, one staff member coordinates the association's space reservations. He or she may also review event scripts to ensure that they represent the University appropriately.

Student affairs administrators also provide opportunities to collaborate with other student organizations. The dean of students at **University A** invites the student alumni association president to monthly lunches with other student leaders (e.g., student body president, student union president, Greek council president) to discuss opportunities to co-host and cross-publicize events.

At **University E**, the student alumni association qualifies for approximately \$1,500 in student activities funds each year. Student leaders request funds independently of alumni association activities, and their advisor has no formal involvement in the funding process.



Some Associations Employ up to Two Part-Time Student Staff

At three contact institutions, part-time student staff provide administrative support, advising, and leadership to student alumni associations.

Part-Time Staff Roles

- **Graduate student associates:** Two institutions hire master's candidates in student affairs to assist advisors. At **University F**, the graduate student associate plans leadership retreats, drafts weekly member newsletters, maintains the program calendar, and processes budget requests. Beginning in Fall 2012, a graduate student associate at **University A** will advise half the student leadership and develop a leadership curriculum for use with incoming members.
- **Undergraduate staff:** At **University C**, an undergraduate graphic designer commits 10 to 15 paid hours each week to event marketing. The association at **University F** employs an undergraduate clerical assistant.
- **Paid student leaders:** The association president at **University C** receives part-time pay because the position requires a significantly greater commitment than standard extracurricular leadership roles. A fellowship from the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) funds this position.

Alumni Associations and Student Affairs Divisions Provide Basic Office Space

All advisors and some student leaders have dedicated office and/or meeting space within alumni association buildings. At **University F**, cubicle walls divide one large room into three offices for the advisor, the graduate associate, and the clerical assistant. Student leaders at **University A** have 24-hour access to a classroom-sized office with six workstations, one per vice president. Each workstation includes a computer, chairs, and a bulletin board.

Additionally, some universities provide workspace to some or all registered student groups. **University E** and **University F** provide each of their associations with one dedicated office or cubicle, free of charge, within student union space. Association leaders at **University C** plan to rent an office within the student center.



IV. Growth and Assessment

Promoting and Tracking Student Participation

Recruit at First-Year Orientations to Promote Membership and Awareness

First-year orientations provide most student alumni associations with the majority of their recruits. Incoming students demonstrate strong enthusiasm to participate in campus activities, and recruiters find them easy to engage because they have few existing extracurricular commitments and typically want membership merchandise.

Common venues for orientation outreach include activities fairs and pep rallies. At **University E**, the alumni association hosts a three-hour outdoor social gathering with music and food after each activities fair. Program officers at **University C** deliver one-minute recruitment pitches during group lunches.

Additional Strategies for Membership Recruitment

Emphasize Recruitment Early In Each Term

Students have the most time and money to spend on memberships at the start of each term. Associations that begin a semester with large memberships tend to have well-attended first events, which generates momentum for participation in later events.

Facilitate Immediate Registration at Events

Program officers staff recruitment tables at all events that associations host or co-host. Students at **University A** only need to provide identification and signatures to register; from recruitment tables, they can bill membership dues to the bursar's office.

Present at Athletic and Academic Events

The association at **University C** co-hosts pep rallies with the athletics department to build name awareness. Several advisors also emphasize the importance of student engagement to deans and faculty members, who may allow recruiters to present briefly at departmental orientations and in classes.

Provide Members with Tangible Perks

Officers at **University G** often distribute reoccurring member giveaways during large events (e.g., new t-shirts for every home football game) to entice other attendees to register. All member discounts are item-based (e.g., free cheese dip for every restaurant visit) instead of percentage-based so that prospective members understand benefits in concrete terms.

Measure Participation through Event Attendance and Membership Renewals

Administrators track event participation and membership to assess student engagement and to anticipate future budgets.

Means to Assess Student Participation

- **Track attendance, ticket revenue, and membership sales to measure event success.** **University E's** association often hosts events in fenced-off areas to facilitate attendance counts. Staff may also track the presence of wearable merchandise at events (e.g., spirit shirts on designated game days, traditions pins at graduation ceremonies).



- **Consider membership renewals to evaluate engagement levels.** Renewals distinguish between members who register for one-time gifts and members who intend to continue participation in programming. Program officers at **University C** manage renewals in the spring term to establish membership bases before new student recruitment each fall.
- **Assess name recognition to target branding efforts.** Last year, the student public relations society at **University B** led student focus groups to assess the alumni association's brand. Findings revealed that students sought networking opportunities but primarily connected the association with alumni-only programs. This led administrators to emphasize professional development for students in the association's new mission statement.

Assessing Association Impact

Track Effects of Student Membership on Alumni Membership and Donation

Metrics to Assess Impact

- **Membership conversation rate:** Are former student members more likely to become alumni members?
- **Alumni donation rate:** Are former student members more likely to donate to the university as alumni?

Current assessment of association impact relies largely on anecdotal evidence (e.g., stories of students who find jobs through networking). However, administrators demonstrate growing interest in data-driven metrics, especially student-to-alumni membership conversion rates and donation rates. To track these rates, membership and donation forms often ask alumni to indicate whether they previously participated in student associations.

Existing data-driven assessment remains limited among contact institutions, and new associations may still lack data on the long-term effects of student programming.

Challenges to the Assessment of Student Programming

- **Self-selection of student alumni association members:** Those who are likely to join student alumni associations are often predisposed to donate as alumni regardless of student membership. Studies that evaluate the effect of student membership on alumni donation rates must account for this bias.
- **Impact of economic climate on alumni contributions:** Alumni membership and donation rates typically decline across institutions during economic recessions. In recent years, the impact of the economic downturn has largely overshadowed the effects of student programming on alumni giving.
- **Lack of longitudinal data:** Associations founded within the last four years cannot assess the impact of their programming on alumni contributions. Furthermore, because young alumni and older alumni contribute at different rates, administrators may need decades of data to undertake comprehensive studies of impact.

Build Continuity Between Student and Young Alumni Programming

Administrators seek structures that convert student participation into young alumni contributions. At **University A**, one advisor oversees both the student association and the young alumni council, which allows her to recruit students for young alumni activities as they graduate. When staff members solicit donations from former student association members, they frequently refer to large-scale programming (e.g., pep rallies) to remind alumni of positive student experiences.

