
Original Article

Why alumni don't give: A qualitative study of what motivates non-donors to higher education

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ABSTRACT This project explores why non-donors do not give to their alma mater by interviewing 12 non-donors for an in-depth examination of their decision-making processes. The Van Slyke and Brooks (2005) model of alumni giving provides the conceptual framework. This study concludes that where donors and non-donors differ is in the ways in which they socially construct their college experiences to create their own realities. The stories they tell themselves and others about their college experiences and the values they attach to those stories create a reality in which giving does not fit. They tell themselves that the college is too expensive for them or their children today, that other charities need their money more, and that the education they received was a product for which they already paid. This reality becomes the narrative lens through which non-donors interpret and evaluate requests for donations to the college. Variables such as their reasons for attending college, how they fit college into their life and whether they viewed college as a commodity emerged as important themes in these non-donors' narratives. Other process variables – who makes the giving decisions and how they prioritize giving – come into play for these non-donors as well. This study shows the need to include non-donors in research that explores factors that motivate alumni to give to their alma mater and confirms that examining the impact of demographic characteristics and experiences on alumni giving relies on oversimplified pictures of donors' and non-donors' decision-making processes.

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Alumni decisions not to give may prove detrimental for higher education as the need for alumni contributions to maintain fiscal health continues to grow (Baade and Sundburg, 1993; Bruggink and Siddiqui, 1995; Okunade, 1996; Utter *et al*, 1999; Cunningham and Cochi-Ficano, 2002; Cascione, 2003). In 2005, American educational organizations received \$38.6 billion from philanthropy, a 13.1 percent increase over 2004 (9.4 percent when adjusted for inflation; Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, 2006). Gifts from individuals accounted for 47.3 percent of this total, and alumni comprised the largest category of individual donors (Kaplan, 2007). Nationally, 11.9 percent of alumni contributed to their alma mater in 2006, down from 13.4 percent 4 years earlier (Kaplan, 2007), leaving nearly 90 percent of all alumni as non-donors in a given year. Nearly 75 percent of all alumni have never given (Parsons and Wethington, 1996).

PREVIOUS STUDIES OF ALUMNI GIVING

Previous research has focused on four interactive factors that make alumni more likely to contribute to their alma mater: demographics, experiences, motives and trigger events. One of the most robust demographic findings has remained a direct positive relationship between age and giving (Koole, 1981; Grant and Lindauer, 1986; Bristol Jr., 1990; Brittingham and Pezzullo, 1990; Willemain *et al*, 1994; Harrison *et al*, 1995; Clotfelter, 2001; Quigley *et al*, 2002; Conner, 2005) that peaks in the donor's early fifties before decreasing again (Bristol Jr., 1990; Okunade and

Wunnava, 1994) and rebounding a few years later (Bristol Jr., 1990). However, not all researchers found this pattern among the alumni in their studies (Ordway, 2000; Conner, 2005; O'Neill, 2005). A similarly robust positive relationship also exists between income and giving (Koole, 1981; Brittingham and Pezzullo, 1990; Lindahl and Winship, 1992; Martin Jr., 1993; Bruggink and Siddiqui, 1995; Clotfelter, 2001; Schmidt, 2001; Tsao and Coll, 2005), although an interaction effect likely exists between income, age, and giving, because people tend to accumulate wealth as they age. Other researchers (Schervish, 1997; Van Horn, 2002) have suggested that income does not predict giving status (donor or non-donor), but instead income impacts the size of the gift once the donor decides to give.

Experiential studies have investigated which student experiences best translate into future giving to the college. Involvement in extra-curricular activities (Hartman and Schmidt, 1995; Clotfelter, 2001; Goldberg, 2004; Sun, 2005) has been found to increase the chances of becoming a future donor, although the level of extracurricular involvement of donors in Shim's (2001) study did not relate to the frequency or magnitude of subsequent gifts. Tom and Elmer (1994) found that identification with the college – a factor they associated with giving – occurs in the classroom not in co-curricular activities, questioning the purported relationship between involvement and giving found in other studies.

Other experiential studies have examined the alumni's perceptions of their college experiences. Many of these studies have concluded that the relationship alumni retain with the

school after graduation influences subsequent giving (Koole, 1981; Shadoian, 1989; Martin Jr., 1993; Pearson, 1999; Shim, 2001; Tsao and Coll, 2005). However, Conner (2005) uncovered no difference between donors and non-donors in their level of alumni involvement in her study, and Shim (2001) found that only certain aspects of involvement – the number of recent campus visits and contact with a person from the college – correlate significantly with the magnitude of gifts among donors to the women’s college in her study. Other studies (Koole, 1981; Tom and Elmer, 1994; Hartman and Schmidt, 1995; Gaier, 2003; Conner, 2005; Sun, 2005; Tsao and Coll, 2005) have concluded that alumni who stay satisfied with their undergraduate experiences are more likely to donate than their non-satisfied peers. Van Horn (2002, p. v) concluded that although important, satisfaction with the student experience as a single variable ‘has insignificant predictive ability’ to accurately forecast donor behavior.

Studies of donor motivation seek to understand why people give to charity. Some studies (Simon, 1987; Kelly, 1997; Schervish, 1997; Harbaugh, 1998; Dayton, 2000; Ritzenhein, 2000; Panas, 2005; Schervish, 2005) have sought to determine what feelings – often joy and satisfaction – the donor receives as a result of his or her philanthropy. Closely related are the studies that view fund-raising as a social exchange – individuals give when the benefits they receive from their donation exceed the costs of making those gifts (Blau, 1964).

In addition to the demographic and motivational factors that underlie a

gift decision, something prompts each gift. Van Slyke and Brooks (2005) called these the ‘triggers’ that they define as the external activities by the organization that translate the motivation of the donor into the desired behavior, typically a gift or a willingness to volunteer. Van Slyke and Brooks (2005) identified three different triggers: being asked, the availability of tax benefits, and a sense of duty.

IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING THE NON-DONOR

Previous studies of alumni giving have focused on only half of the giving equation – the affirmative decision of why people make a donation. Research to understand the decision-making process that leads other individuals to not give to their alma mater has been limited and has only included non-donors as a comparison group to the donors of interest (for example, Korvas, 1984; Martin Jr., 1993; Tom and Elmer, 1994; Mount, 1996; Taylor and Martin Jr., 1995; Hunter *et al*, 1999; Caboni and Eiseman, 2003; Conner, 2005; Thomas, 2005). Reichheld and Teal (1996, p. 192) urged companies to review customer defections as ‘one of the most illuminating units of failure in business,’ because it sheds light on where the organizational systems broke down or operated at less-than-peak efficiency. Applying this philosophy to higher education fund-raising, Pearson (1999, p. 7) argues that

The decision to give is like a purchase decision: just as a consumer makes an active decision to buy a product for specific reasons, so too does the



consumer make an active decision not to buy a different product for specific reasons.

This study sought to understand what decision-making process leads non-donors to continuously decide *not* to make a donation. Only when we understand the decision-making process of non-donors can we begin to find more effective ways to encourage giving.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this study comes from the Van Slyke and Brooks (2005) model on the giving process. Research on the motives for giving has concluded that no one factor likely convinces a donor to make a gift (for example, Parsons and Wethington, 1996; Peltier *et al*, 2002; Cascione, 2003; Schervish, 2005; Van Slyke and Brooks, 2005). Instead, charitable giving comes after a long and complicated process both intrapersonally and between the individual and the charity (Parsons and Wethington, 1996; Peltier *et al*, 2002; Schervish, 2005). Van Slyke and Brooks (2005) reduced these processes into a concrete model that identifies background factors (demographics and motives) and triggers that lead to the desired behavior (the gift).

RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHODS

Studies that have included non-donors primarily use quantitative methods that measure relatively easy-to-access factors such as demographics and student experiences. This study expands on those exploratory quantitative inquiries to understand the non-donors' perspective by specifically asking a

carefully selected group why they do not contribute to their alma mater.

Participant selection

Subjects for this study were non-donor alumni of Midwestern University, the pseudonym for a medium-sized, religiously affiliated regional university. Invited subjects came from those who graduated from Midwestern University between 1975 and 1980, for whom current contact information existed, were not married to another Midwestern graduate, and resided within driving distance to allow for face-to-face interviews. The sampling procedure assigned a random number to each qualified non-donor to determine the order in which subjects were invited to participate. Recruitment continued until 12 non-donors agreed to participate. Table 1 provides a profile of the study participants.

Study methods

Because statistical models cannot uncover the underlying motivations for not giving, this study used a collective case study approach (Merriam, 1998), with personal interviews that followed a protocol of nine prepared questions, but deviated quickly from the planned script to follow up on interviewee-initiated topics. Use of interviews allowed for a more refined analysis of donor motivation by concentrating on why they do not support their college rather than focusing on giving to charity in general, a nuance not possible with quantitative analyses.

Verbatim transcripts of the audio-taped interviews were analyzed on the Atlas software program using the open-coding process (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to categorize emergent topics. Continually reviewing and

Table 1: Profile of study participants

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Profile</i>
Ann	Female, 1980 graduate, physical education major, community college transfer and commuter student, married during her senior year, parent of two alumni, currently lives adjacent to campus
Bob	Male, 1976 graduate, business major, community college transfer, military veteran and commuter student; married with children and worked full-time during college, lived near campus when he attended Midwestern
Cathy	Female, 1980 graduate, computer science and business major, commuter student, worked part-time during college
Dave	Male, 1980 graduate, accounting major, lived on campus, worked part-time on weekends back home, 30 miles away
Ellen	Female, 1979 graduate, communication and sociology major, community college transfer and commuter student, worked on campus during college, parent of an alumnus
Felicia	Female, 1977 graduate, elementary education major, residential student from a small town approximately 80 miles away, did not work during college; parent of a current student
Greg	Male, 1978 graduate, accounting major, commuted from a distance of 20 miles then boarded on campus, worked full-time during college, dropped out after his junior year and returned to graduate 2 years later
Henry	Male, 1980 graduate, physical education and education major, transfer student, worked on campus as a tennis coach during college, married and lived off campus
Jeff	Male, 1979 graduate, business and economics major, transfer student from another 4-year college, worked full-time and lived at home during college
Kyle	Male, 1979 graduate, accounting major, transfer from a state university, married, worked two part-time jobs during college.
Lewis	Male, 1978 graduate, law enforcement major, attended college on the G.I. Bill after the Vietnam War, married and worked a full-time and part-time job during college, two children were born while attending college, parent of a current student
Mark	Male, 1975 graduate, history major, began college after high school, left after 1½ years to join the military and returned 4 years later, lived at home or on his own and worked part-time during college

merging categories assured their mutual exclusivity.

FINDINGS

The non-donors in this study share many of the same characteristics and experiences that prior research has suggested make one more likely to be a donor. They had positive feelings toward their alma mater, had good college experiences and remained engaged with the college as alumni (Wastyn, 2008). Where these non-donors differ from donors comes

in the ways in which they socially construct those experiences (Berger and Luckman, 1966) into personal narratives (Polkinghorne, 1988) about their college experience. The personal narratives of the non-donors in this study included four major themes that lead them to not give to Midwestern: they consider college a commodity not a charity, they do not believe the college needs their money, they have misperceptions and uncertainties about giving and they do not make their giving decisions logically.



College is a commodity, not a charity

The consumer model of higher education (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004) posited that knowledge is a commodity that colleges sell and students purchase for an agreed upon price. Dave very clearly explained his views of higher education that was echoed by other subjects and fits squarely within the consumer model:

As far as whether or not to give to [Midwestern], it's like OK, I'm going, I guess that's too simplistic of an answer, but we'll use a Wal-Mart scenario. Ok, you go into Wal-Mart. You pay money to buy something; you get it in return. And it's like, I'm not going to pay Wal-Mart next year for something that I got this year. I guess I look at the college as, ya know, I went there, I wanted a service from them. Ya know, I paid them money for it, and now my obligation or transaction is complete, and I move on. I don't look at it as a charity, because it was a business. And it was operated as a business, which it should be. I paid them. They said, 'This is how much it's going to cost you.' We agreed upon a price. I paid it, and we are done. And we moved on. (Interview, 12 July 2007)

The transactional nature of the college experience for many of these alumni also contributed to their view that they had completed that phase of their life and had moved on. As Lewis described: 'By the time I started at [Midwestern], I was an adult with a family and a mortgage and all kinds of responsibilities. My tie was not to

the University. My tie was elsewhere' (Interview, 14 November 2007).

Higher education shares a distinctive position among charities in that individuals come to it first as a consumer and then as a donor. From a social exchange perspective (Blau, 1964), these non-donors first evaluated the value they received from their student days to determine whether that exchange resulted in added value. If not, then these non-donors would suggest that the likelihood of receiving future gifts diminishes.

The college is not needy

Earlier research identified the perception of need as a precursor for giving (House, 1987; Martin Jr., 1993; Pearson, 1999); the qualitative methodology of this study allows for a deeper examination of the non-donors' definition of 'neediness.' All of these non-donors give generously to various charities, but choose not to invest those dollars at Midwestern University. Ellen explained why she saw other charities as needier than Midwestern:

I guess that I just feel like if you can, if you are thinking of going to school out here, and if you can even comprehend the thought of affording it, then the money aspect of it could be used better for somebody else in the community that is, um, maybe not getting dinner tonight. (Interview, 17 July 2007)

Compounding this problem, many of these non-donors had either saved to send their children to college, often by 'skipping a lot of dinners out' (Interview with Henry, 21 September 2007), or they felt that they could not afford to send their children

to Midwestern. Greg captured the view of the rest of the subjects on this topic:

When I went to [Midwestern] from '72 to '78, I started out \$55 a semester hour. ...At \$500 a semester hour [today], a majority of the people are going to have to be pretty damn wealthy to be able to utilize that campus and the courses. I mean, if I was that farm boy today, I couldn't go to [Midwestern]. Back when, in '72, I could afford to go to [Midwestern] ... It's just, that's the biggest thing is that I couldn't have afforded to send my kids to [Midwestern]. (Interview, 20 September 2007)

Bringing these two factors together, these individuals saw college as a choice, not a charity that helps people with needs beyond their control. Lewis drew the distinction:

I look at it totally differently from, ya know, Juvenile Diabetes and breast cancer awareness, and ya know, the Shriners, and organizations like that, OK. ... Their focus is on a particular social problem or health problem, something that could affect anybody. [Midwestern], to me, is a place of higher education. And that if you, if you want to go there, that is your choice to go there knowing that you have to pay for it. (Interview, 14 November 2007)

Using Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1970), these non-donors draw distinctions between the first-level needs to feed, clothe and house people and the fifth-level need of

providing a college education to what they perceived as privileged students.

Misperceptions of giving and uncertainty about how the college uses donations

Two major misperceptions about giving to the college emerged from these interviews including that they could not make gifts in smaller amounts and that 'small' gifts would not make a meaningful difference at the university. Felicia exemplified the comments of the others in the group: 'I always thought that it was those rich people that were contributing ... I always thought people would give in the hundreds [of dollars]' (Interview, 17 September 2007). Cathy likewise explained her view of giving to Midwestern this way: 'I certainly don't want them to fail or anything, but I guess just feeling like 'well, what could they do with my small gifts,' and that's kind of the way I feel, I guess' (Interview, 11 July 2007). Such misperceptions may come from a fund-raising practice of asking for higher amounts, assuming that donors will make smaller gifts if such a contribution falls beyond their budget. Instead of giving less, these non-donors give nothing.

Non-donors also misperceived what their gifts would support or they were uncertain how the college would use their donation. Interestingly, they were divided between wanting to support building projects and non-building projects. Others were not sure where any gift would be spent and who it would benefit. Bob succinctly noted that 'I don't know what \$20 would do as far as good for anything' at Midwestern (Interview, 6 July 2007).



Giving decisions are not logical

The Van Slyke and Brooks (2005) model assumes that donors rationally weigh the pros and cons of their giving decisions. Evidence from these non-donors point to a more tacit decision-making process. Some abdicate giving decisions to their spouses. Felicia, Henry, Jeff and Kyle's spouses make their family's giving decisions. None of these subjects knew why their spouse made his or her decisions about giving; some did not even know where the family contributed. This suggests that married couples do not always mediate giving decisions (Andreoni *et al*, 2003), but frequently abdicated decision making to one spouse, pointing to a very informal decision-making process.

Other subjects exhibited inconsistent espoused theories of giving and theories in use (Argyris, 1993). For example, Henry gave to the United Way because he thought that the United Way could best help his students out of poverty, even though he knew intellectually that a good education could break their cycle of poverty. Likewise, in a desire to help his children and their peers, Kyle supported his children's private high school out of habit, even though they had long since graduated. Neither Henry nor Kyle prioritized their giving decisions among the myriad of other decisions they regularly make. Kyle commented that: 'I hadn't really thought about it. And kind of a selfish area that yea, we get wrapped up in the day-to-day, and we get selfish with our time' (Interview, 5 November 2007). Future models of the giving decision-making process need to consider people like Henry and Kyle who, with the best of intentions,

followed their hearts and not their heads when deciding where to give.

DISCUSSIONS

These interviews suggest that the differences between donors and non-donors do not lie in their characteristics or their motives, because in these respects, these non-donors look like donors. Men and women, wealthy and less wealthy, married and single, all failed to give to their alma mater. Using the Van Slyke and Brooks (2005) model, it appears that the key difference between non-donors and donors occurs during the internalization of their college experiences which impacts the intrapersonal decision-making process of whether or not to make a gift. As these non-donors debate the merits of the college's request for financial support and decide whether or not to make a gift, the filter throughout which the fund-raising messages are passed contain perceptions and narratives that bias them against making a gift. For example, instead of defining their student days as the beginning of a lifelong association with the college, the non-donors in this study defined it as a 'stop in their day' or as a service for which they paid an agreed-upon price.

Implications for higher education administration

Colleges need to create their own narratives that tell the story of the college's needs in a way that resonates with the personal narratives developed by these non-donors. The personal narratives that these non-traditional students developed to remember their college days may present a systemic issue of the ways in which colleges recruit students and then create and

deliver the educational experience. Even for traditional-aged students, college is becoming closer to the non-traditional student's experience where college fits among non-school obligations for jobs and families to become 'a stop in the day.'

To effectively engage this generation of students to support their alma mater, fund-raising must extend its reach throughout the university. Faculty, for example, need to reinforce the organization's narrative to help students frame their experiences from a non-consumer mentality. Colleges themselves help to create a consumer mentality by marketing their amenities to traditional undergraduate students and marketing their convenience to adult students. Colleges can also help to overcome this consumer mentality among their students once they arrive. Donaldson and Graham (1999, p. 31) argue that because adult students – and by extension most non-traditional and commuter students – spend less time on campus, the college needs to connect these students to each other and to the college during the hours they sit in the classroom.

The classroom is seen as the fulcrum of the collegiate experience for adults, mediating the psychosocial and value orientations, the life-world environment, the adult cognition, and the outcomes component involved in the collegiate experience. The classroom connects adults with their instructors and student peers and provides a context to socially construct, for themselves and others, what it means to be a college student.

Better engaged students in the classroom will help to change this consumer mentality. For all students, and especially for adult and non-traditional students, the faculty need to reinforce the organization's narrative to help the student frame the experiences that will ultimately become his or her personal narrative.

Implications for fund-raising practice

Today's fund-raisers cannot change the ways in which each alumnus defines his college experience. The most promising suggestions for converting a non-donor into a donor come from more education on giving in general and by using appeals that resonate with the personal narratives that non-donors have created to describe their college experiences. Four suggestions are presented here based on the results of this study.

First, to overcome the perception by non-donors that the college is not needy, fund-raisers need to more effectively and consistently communicate the giving process, the needs of the university and the social benefits of higher education. Non-donors need to understand where their gifts would go, who it would help and how. The trick becomes getting uninvolved and misinformed alumni to open fund-raising appeals to begin this education process. Henry confessed, 'I know you do need that money. But that's, it's probably to the point where we see it [a solicitation letter] coming through the mail, and it doesn't even get opened' (Interview, 21 September 2007). In all, 11 of the 12 non-donors read the alumni magazine and focused on the class notes to read about their classmates; perhaps sprinkling stories about giving throughout the class notes



section of the alumni magazine will begin to reach and educate these non-donors.

Second, colleges need to demonstrate the value of a gift to both the alumni and their spouses. Because giving decisions in married households may be abdicated to either the alumni spouse or non-alumni spouse as these findings suggest, the appeals need to speak to them both. 'Adopting' non-alumni spouses as members of the college family through invitations to college events and activities might be one way to engage them in the life of the college.

Third, the type of appeal becomes important for the non-donor who may already have skepticism about the need for the gift and whether or not they can make a difference. All of these non-donors said that they would likely respond to a legitimate college need that resonated with their college experience (such as supporting their major), asked them for a small amount to help meet that need and demonstrated how collectively they can help today's students.

Fourth, because giving decisions emanate from a decision-making process that is less than logical, the request needs to include emotional appeals. This requires a careful balance with the slick brochures and letters that alienated some of these non-donors.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Because non-donors differ from donors in the personal narratives they create, future researchers need to incorporate not only objective descriptions of student experiences as positive or negative, engaged or disengaged, but also the value statements the alumna

associates with that experience. Does she tell a personal narrative of triumph over incredible obstacles to receive a degree or one of just getting through? Only when we can separate the objective reality from the reality each alumnus socially constructs to describe his student experience can we begin to understand what factors make one more or less likely to become a future donor.

Finally, these findings point to the need for more research toward 'the development of a first-stage model that explains how people become givers in the first place' (Schervish, 1997, p. 133). This study confirms the need to focus on the non-donor to better understand how they have developed personal narratives that lead them to not contribute and how to help them recast that narrative to include giving to the college.

LIMITATIONS

By design, this study contains a few limitations. First, the study's focus on a single college limits its applicability to other colleges and universities, especially those with a different history and student demographic than Midwestern. However, this study's findings can provide the foundation upon which additional studies can rest.

Second, this study limited participants to graduates of the second half of the 1970s and individuals in their mid-fifties. Some of the findings may relate more to their experiences as members of the Baby Boom generation (Smith and Clurman, 1997) than to factors related specifically to their college experience or non-donors status.

Finally, a self-selection bias exists in the donor recruitment process. Only

10 percent of invited alumni agreed to participate. While the 12 interviewed alumni had different student experiences and perceptions of the school, other experiences and perceptions may have become lost with those subjects who declined to participate including those with extreme negative experiences.

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