Original Article

Communications and alumni relations: What is the correlation between an institution's communications vehicles and alumni annual giving?

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Wendy Levine

is Director of Development at First Graduate, a San Francisco nonprofit committed to helping young people finish high school and become the first in their family to graduate from college.

ABSTRACT This paper examines the relationship between colleges' communications pieces and their undergraduate alumni giving. In order to test the question, 250 surveys were mailed to annual giving and development directors at private US colleges that were members of the Council of Advancement and Support of Education. Fifty-eight surveys were returned. The analysis revealed that the overall number of communications pieces sent to alumni was not associated with higher alumni giving levels or participation. The frequency with which certain communication pieces were sent was positively associated with giving: alumni magazines and alumni electronic newsletters. For annual fund and campaign appeal letters, the results were mixed; there was some positive association with alumni giving and some negative association with alumni giving. *International Journal of Educational Advancement* (2009) 8, 176–197.
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INTRODUCTION

Since their inception, colleges and universities in the United States have relied on voluntary financial support of community members to support their missions and make up the gap between

institutional needs and available resources. As in the past, tuition today does not cover all of the costs associated with a university education. How can colleges and universities increase funding to finance adequately their institutional needs?

Over the past three centuries, voluntary support of colleges and universities has come in the way of

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Correspondence: Wendy Levine
First Graduate, Presidio of San Francisco, PO Box 29415,
San Francisco, CA 94129, USA
E-mail: wendylevine@gmail.com

gifts for the annual fund as well as major gifts for initiatives such as new buildings, endowments, equipment, establishing a course of study and more. Much of this financial support comes from alumni, an important source of support to institutions of higher education. Colleges and universities proactively try to 'cultivate and retain the loyalty and support of continuing assistance ... institutions of higher education need allies and supporters; and they rely on their own alumni to play this role' (Muller, 1986, p. 7). In order to attract this kind of support, colleges must cultivate relationships with their alumni. To that end, '[i]t follows that even small colleges must communicate with large and varied audiences that are geographically dispersed' (Muller, 1986, p. 7).

AREA OF STUDY

According to the US Department of Education, in fiscal year 2001, 18.4 per cent of a private nonprofit 4-year institution's revenue and investment returns were made up of private gifts, grants and contracts. This figure was up from the year before: 12.9 per cent in fiscal year 2000. These figures illustrate the importance of private gifts to an institution's budget. 'Historically, alumni and foundations are the biggest sources of voluntary support to higher education' (Council for Aid to Education press release, 16 February 2006, p. 2). The Council reports that in 2004–2005, voluntary contributions to colleges and universities in the United States reached \$25.6 billion, and that nearly half of this money came from individuals. According to the Council, of individual donations, 'Alumni giving

– the traditional base of higher education giving – grew by 6 per cent in 2005' (p. 2). In 2004–2005, alumni contributed just over 27 per cent of higher education support. In 2002–2003, the alumni figure was 28 per cent while in 2001–2002, it was 25 per cent. The 2002–2003 figure represents a 5-year change of 20 per cent. Another factor that supports the importance of alumni donations to a college is that colleges and universities are now being ranked, among other criteria, on this kind of support as evidenced by the *US News and World Report's* Guide to the Best Colleges. As a result, many colleges are propelled to increase alumni support lest lack of support detract from their institution's ranking.

Despite the importance of alumni support, there is much research that shows that alumni support is not as great as it should, or could, be. According to *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* (2005, p. 14), supporting one's school or university ranks sixth out of the nine types of organizations Americans chose to donate money to. Of all age groups surveyed, just 30 per cent support schools or universities. The organizations that ranked lower were, in order: a political campaign or party (not tax-deductible); a civic, arts or cultural organization; and an issue-advocacy group (may or may not be tax-deductible). Furthermore, those born after 1964 are less likely to support a school or university – 29 per cent stated that they would – than the older age group (those born between 1946 and 1964), where 34 per cent would. Older Americans, those born before 1946, who have potentially the greatest giving capacity in some regards, are the least likely to support

education with just 24 per cent responding that they would.

As institutions of higher education look to increase alumni support, they must allocate their resources effectively and strategically so that they serve the mission of the organization: educating students. The importance of communication in this endeavor cannot be underestimated. According to *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* (1 September 2005, p. 14), those born after 1964 cite that they stop giving to charities because 'The organization hasn't kept me sufficiently informed' – 18 per cent. Another reason they stop giving is that 'I'm not sure that my contribution makes a difference' – 33 per cent across the generations. From these two responses, we see that there is both the opportunity and the need for colleges and universities to better inform their constituents of the need for their support. There are so many communications vehicles available to advancement offices today – from printed magazines, web sites and electronic newsletters, to fundraising letters and campaign materials – that it would serve advancement offices well to understand which vehicles have a greater correlation to promoting donations than others.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Many in advancement see fundraising as an ongoing process, the result of relationship building and well-thought-out education about an institution's cause. 'Regular communication between an organization and its potential donors can have a far greater impact than the fundraising campaign in progress at the time' (Parsons and Wethington, 1996, p. 48). Colleges

and universities know this as evidenced by the comprehensive and thorough communications programs – glossy alumni magazines, newsletters, email briefs, campaign newsletters, appeal letters – that they establish. Although alumni may certainly enjoy hearing from their alma mater, there is no empirical evidence that shows what the correlation is between an institution's efforts and alumni donations back to the school.

At the same time, the need for alumni support is evident. An article in Brady *et al* (1999) states, 'It is clear that alumni contributions will be increasingly critical as universities face the challenge of enhancing educational quality while minimizing tuition increases. Although direct marketing efforts directed at alumni are important, we contend that university fund-raisers must take a longer-term perspective' (p. 5). Going back to Muller's (1986) contention that 'colleges must communicate with large and varied audiences' (p. 7), we must look at what effect a college's communications program has on the school. How can we examine the relationship between communications tools and alumni support for the school? Where should the colleges put their resources: print versus electronic communication? How does an established communications program fare over a younger communications department? What role does the annual fund appeal, or case for support, play in alumni giving?

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Although there is much written on both the how-to's of alumni giving and communications methods, there is little

research on the correlation between the two that shows whether more frequent, or more in-depth, communication has a greater association with alumni giving. It is important to interpret the effects that communication vehicles – by their frequency, their format, their content – have on alumni giving, as colleges and universities look to maintain and enhance the relationship with their most important potential constituency, their alumni.

VOLUNTARY SUPPORT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

On average, the four greatest revenue producers for private nonprofit colleges and universities are: student tuition and fees (27.90 per cent); investments (24.60 per cent); hospitals, independent operations and others (15.00 per cent); and private gifts and grants (12.40 per cent), respectively (O'Neill, 2002, p. 116).

Among the different types of colleges and universities, there is considerable difference in revenue: research universities versus master's universities versus baccalaureate institutions. Research institutions are those that have undergraduate, graduate and strong research programs, master's universities are 4-year colleges with many master's programs, whereas baccalaureate institutions are colleges that award bachelor degrees only. In 1996–1997, research institutions such as Stanford and Johns Hopkins received '77 per cent of their revenue from federal grants and contracts, private gifts and grants, investment return' whereas colleges that only awarded baccalaureate degrees received 50 per cent from these same sources (O'Neill,

2002, p. 116). Master's institutions (4-year college with many master's programs) received 32 per cent of their revenue from these sources (O'Neill, 2002, p. 116). This point illustrates the importance of alternative means of support aside from federal grants and contracts, private grants and investment returns for baccalaureate and master's institutions. These institutions increasingly turn to individuals for support. Furthermore, private liberal arts institutions rely much more on voluntary support than do other institutions (O'Neill and Council for Aid to Education press release, 16 February 2006). One of the greatest sources to whom the baccalaureate and master's institutions turn for donations is their alumni body (Council for Aid to Education press release, 16 February 2006).

FACTORS AFFECTING ALUMNI GIVING

Several factors will affect alumni desire to give to their alma mater. Some research shows that characteristics of alumni when they were students at the university – whether they participated in activities, what their grade point average was and their attendance – are not strong predictors of future giving. Other research shows that alumni who have business degrees and alumni members of student organizations contribute more than other alumni (Coll and Tsao, 2005). Male graduates may donate more money than female graduates, but in terms of participation, more alumni support their alma maters (Coll and Tsao, 2005). Research consistently supports the idea, however, that emotional attachment to the university is a strong predictor of alumni support (Parsons

and Wethington, 1996; Coll and Tsao, 2005). Alumni involvement with an institution after graduation is an important factor affecting alumni support of their alma mater and the amount of their donations (Coll and Tsao, 2005).

There are several institutional characteristics that play a role in alumni support, but which remain outside the influence that development, advancement or alumni offices may have on alumni giving. One such characteristic is whether the institution is public or private. According to *Fund Raising Management*, (Brady *et al*, 1999, p. 1) 'when comparing solicitation effectiveness ratios of universities (donors as a percentage of alumni asked to give), private universities show higher solicitation effectiveness ratios than public institutions and private liberal arts colleges report the highest numbers of all groups.'

On the other hand, institutional activities that can change and influence alumni giving are communication and alumni cultivation activities. Muller (1986, p. 7) explains, '[I]n the competitive climate of American society, institutions of higher education need allies and supporters; and they rely on their own alumni to play this role.' Therefore, there is a 'continuous effort to maintain and strengthen that uniquely American sense of community between a college or university and its graduates.' Regular contact with alumni results in larger donations than one-time campaigns do (Coll and Tsao, 2005).

Another institutional characteristic that can affect giving is alumni perception about the value of education received. A study in *Fund*

Raising Management magazine found that satisfaction while the alumni were students at the institution was a strong predictor of future giving (Brady *et al*, 1999, p. 1). The more satisfied alumni were as students, the more likely they were to be generous donors tomorrow. Brady *et al* (1999) found that students who perceived the quality of education to be higher were more likely to be generous donors as alumni. To that end, '[s]chool administrators can influence this perception through communications highlighting faculty successes and other teaching-related accolades' (p. 1). Also, long-standing campus rituals and traditions, successful athletic teams and academic prestige have all been noted as factors that influence the development of these feelings. Brady found that another aspect that alumni support was centered on was whether students were attending their first choice college or university. 'Students who listed the university as their first choice were more likely to donate than were those who had wanted to attend other universities. Of the students who listed the school as their third choice or lower, only 20 per cent intended to donate after graduation' (1999, p. 1). The above examples illustrate the areas in which the giving is determined and influenced by other factors than those that the development, advancement or alumni offices affect.

COMMUNICATION

Communication is critical for a university as it looks to 'inform consumers and others about its goals, activities, and offerings and motivate them to take an interest in the institution' (Kotler and Fox, 1985, p. 277). Communications programs,

which are part of alumni donor cultivation, include a publications program, advertising, public relations, special events and stewardship of current or potential donors. Written materials that colleges may use to stay in touch with their constituents include annual reports, catalogs, newsletters, alumni magazines, invitations, press releases and more. Of these, printed alumni magazines may be one of the most consistent and long-lasting ties that many alumni will have with the institution (Bliwise and Hay, 2001). Publications, then, must serve both alumni interests as well as the interest of the institution. The alumni magazine and additional communication pieces must address the clusters of 'intellectual, personal and sportive interests' that the alumni hold (Hancock, 1986, p. 596).

ALUMNI MAGAZINE

The alumni magazine has evolved over the years. According to an article in the *New York Times*, 'More than 90 per cent of the 445 alumni magazines listed [in 2004] by Oxbridge Communications, publisher of the *National Directory of Magazines*, are four-color or glossy magazines, but in 1996 about 70 per cent of the 423 magazines on the list were... .' (Daly, 10 November 2004). Colleges are also expanding their circulation base. 'While public universities traditionally sent their magazines only to paid-up members of alumni associations, many are moving toward the private college model of mailing to all graduates, as well as staff and faculty members and parents of students' (Daly, 10 November 2004). For most alumni, the alumni magazine 'is their primary – in many cases, their only –

connection to the institution' because the 'majority of graduates will never set foot on campus after their college days' nor will they 'hear directly from any campus representative' (Bliwise and Hay, 2001, p. 1). The alumni magazine strives to sustain, and ideally to build alumni connection to campus.

There are several challenges that editors of alumni magazines face. First, universities experience a push–pull with their alumni magazines as the communications department tries to balance its editorial integrity with the fundraising and development demands of the institution's presidents and advancement offices. Second, they often have a 'hard time quantifying their contributions to the institution' and have 'no way to measure the overall good the magazine might be having for the campus' (Bliwise and Hay, 2001).

An example of the editorial push–pull occurs when a magazine story is seen as being at odds with a university's projected image. Stories that cause disagreement may be about a university student, faculty or alumna/us. When these stories diverge from the institution's image, conflict emerges between the university and the communications office (Seward, 5 June 2006). Questions arise surrounding control. Who controls the publication – the communications team, the development office or the alumni association? Recognizing the tensions that sometimes exist between the editorial staff for alumni publications and administrators at the institutions, the board of trustees at the Council for Advancement in Support of Education (CASE) approved a statement drafted by a coalition of alumni magazine editors last year

‘defending their ‘respect for truth, fairness, free inquiry and the presentation of competing ideas,’ while also recognizing an obligation to ‘advance the mission and well-being of their institutions’” (Seward, 5 June 2006, p. B1). The statement was drafted in a move to defend their independence.

As a result of this tension, several institutions have more than one magazine. For example, since 2002, Baylor University graduates have received two magazines: *The Baylor Line*, published since 1946 by the independent alumni association, and *Baylor Magazine*, published since 2002 by the university.

Quantifying the contribution of an alumni publication is challenging. Different from admissions or development programs where there are measurable outcomes, it is difficult to measure the success of a magazine (Bliwise and Hay, 2001). Because magazines are mailed to alumni, the connection that they create with alumni and the cultivation that takes place occurs off campus, in the home of alumni, outside of the realm of the communications department. The results of a successful magazine are often intangible. Although communications offices conduct surveys, track subscription figures and read letters to the editors to determine alumni perception of the publication, these avenues may only garner feedback from a portion of the alumni body. ‘Other campus communications vehicles, such as development or class newsletters, obviously have narrower aims – raising money or promoting reunion attendance, for example’ (Bliwise and Hay, 2001, p. 2). A high-quality

publication may not immediately result in a donation to the university or increased attendance at a college event; however, it is the hope of the institution that the communication pieces will result – perhaps weeks, months or years later – in increased support for the college (Bliwise and Hay, 2001).

APPEAL LETTER

Another communications piece is the cause for support, often called an annual fund or campaign appeal letter, and is an important factor for alumni donations. Some research has shown that direct mail and postcards are the most effective media, followed by phone solicitations (Coll and Tsao, 2005). Other research shows that personal (either in person or via phone) solicitations are most effective (Nichols, 1986, p. 258). Despite the different research findings, because making a personalized solicitation to an entire alumni body is generally not as time- or cost-effective as a direct mail piece is, direct mail is used as a way to solicit the majority of alumni. The content of the direct mail and postcards is important; studies have shown that alumni were more inclined to donate when they were informed that the school budget was severely reduced and assured that their donations would be appropriately managed (Coll and Tsao, 2005).

ELECTRONIC NEWSLETTERS

Recently, new technology has enabled communications offices to be in touch with alumni more frequently and consistently. The result is an electronic newsletter sent to alumni via email. These monthly or quarterly pieces keep alumni up to date on campus news,

research and activities, and help to strengthen the connection that alumni have to their alma maters. The news items in these pieces are different than what is covered in printed magazines. Full of headlines, the newsletters are meant to be read in a few minutes rather than in the length of time that a printed piece takes. A 2000 survey conducted by Stanford regarding their electronic newsletter, @Stanford, showed the piece is favored by alumni and that alumni who receive it feel better informed about the university than alumni who do not (Pearson, 2001). The Stanford Alumni Association found that the newsletter is most often received by younger alumni. Distribution breaks out among alumni as follows:

- 46 per cent of younger alumni ages 39 and younger receive the newsletter,
- 23 per cent of alumni ages 40–59 receive the newsletter,
- 8 per cent of alumni ages 60 and older receive the newsletter.

Assessing whether alumni actually read the newsletter, 57 per cent of recipients usually read some of an issue and skim the rest. Ten per cent typically read the entire issue, whereas about 20 per cent say they skim all of it. The newsletter is one way to get in touch with alumni in a timely fashion because of those who do read @Stanford, approximately 50 per cent usually do so when they first receive it. 'About 25 per cent save it for a more convenient time, and another 25 per cent say it varies' (Pearson, 2001). Regarding the frequency of the newsletter, 80 per cent of those who responded think that once a month is

best. 'Only 9 per cent would prefer to receive it less frequently (every other month), and just 7 per cent would prefer to receive it twice a month' (Pearson, 2001). From the November 2000 survey, the Stanford Alumni Association found that recipients were more likely than non-recipients to:

- have read something in the past year that made them proud of their Stanford affiliation,
- feel Stanford does an excellent job at keeping them informed,
- be able to name Stanford's new president, and
- have read about four of the seven news items tested in the survey (Pearson, 2001).

Overall, recipients were more likely than non-recipients to have very positive feelings about Stanford as it exists today (72 versus 58 per cent). 'They also may be more likely to feel a great deal of pride in their Stanford degree, to feel an emotional connection to the alma mater and to feel they don't hear from Stanford only when it's asking for money' (Pearson, 2001).

ANNUAL REPORT

An annual report is a formal report on an organization's performance in the preceding year. As a way of showing accountability, nonprofit colleges and universities publish these reports for the people and institutions that support them. They demonstrate income and expenses including investments and donations. In a *Currents* magazine article about annual reports, it is suggested that 'no single vehicle demonstrates institutional accountability better than the annual report' (Gabrlick, 2006). 'For

advancement the annual report should be, primarily, a document focused on the relationship between accountability and securing resources for the future,' says John Ross, principal of RossWrites. Colleges and universities typically share these with alumni, because they present an important communications opportunity.

STEWARDSHIP

Another important piece of alumni communication is what comes after alumni support an institution. Follow-up communication from the institution, along with stewarding of the relationship between the donor and the institution, plays an important role for donors, yet it is often absent. In Brady *et al*'s (1999) study cited in *Fund Raising Management*, several Boston College students commented that one reason they were dissatisfied with their prior charitable contributions was the lack of follow-up from the charity or nonprofit. Students expressed a strong desire to receive communications with the results of a fundraising effort.

There is a lack of research on the relationship between communication from institutions of higher education and alumni giving. Although alumni giving is a priority for most universities, little has been done to determine the effectiveness of the communications materials sent out to constituents and what correlation they have to alumni giving. Although conventional wisdom holds that the quality of communication to alumni – particularly for alumni who live far from their alma mater – fosters a connection to the institution, little empirical evidence exists showing the effectiveness of communication pieces

and what relationship they hold to alumni giving.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study was designed to determine whether there is a correlation between a college's communications pieces and its alumni giving, including the annual fund and other campaigns. In order to test this idea, it was necessary to conduct a comprehensive survey. The cross-sectional, quantitative survey was sent to 250 private universities within the United States. The study tested four points: (1) whether the level of communication exhibits a positive relationship to alumni dollars raised; (2) whether the level of communication exhibits a positive relationship to alumni participation percentages; (3) whether the level of communication exhibits a positive relationship to the average alumni gift size; and (4) whether certain communications vehicles exhibit a greater positive relationship to alumni giving than others. The cross-sectional survey design enables the collection of data on multiple cases at one point in time to determine whether there is a pattern of association between communication and alumni giving.

The responses from the institutions were used to answer the research question: Is there a correlation between the various types and frequency of communication pieces that an institution sends to its alumni and alumni giving? Communications and alumni giving responses were measured by the responses given to the 22 questionnaire items. Questionnaire respondents were kept confidential as information was not reported by institution, but in an aggregate format.

Subjects

To be able to compare and contrast somewhat similar institutions and to be able to limit the number of institutions surveyed, the population for this study consisted of mid-sized private colleges and universities in the United States with student populations ranging from 1500 to 15 000.

A reason for selecting only private colleges is that different institutions have different fundraising sources: private colleges and universities receive the majority of their support from non-government sources, whereas public colleges and universities receive the majority of support from the government, foundations and corporations. Another reason for focusing the study on private institutions is that public institutions have different challenges and opportunities for communicating with their alumni than private institutions. This is especially true regarding topics such as governance, budgets and salaries. In all, focusing on private colleges best allows the researcher to limit variables in order to study the effects of the institution-generated communication pieces compared to alumni giving.

A reason for selecting this mid-sized population range is that institutions with fewer than 1500 students and more than 15 000 would have different departmental budgets, communications challenges, opportunities and alumni/university relationships that may be less related to communications activities than to the connection or relationships that the alumni had while they were students at these much smaller or much larger universities. These mid-sized schools were also

selected because they represent a significant number of universities in the United States, which can be contacted.

Forty-four per cent of the surveys were mailed to institutions in the East, 25 per cent were mailed to colleges in the Midwest, 18 per cent were mailed to colleges in the South and 13 per cent were mailed to institutions in the West.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INSTRUMENT

The survey asked about giving for fiscal year 2005–2006. The first section of the questionnaire (questions 1–3) asked about the institution's background and size: whether the institution educates undergraduate students only or undergraduate and graduates students, the undergraduate student populations and the percentage of the alumni body, that is male and female.

The second section of the questionnaire (questions 4–7) asked about the institution's giving landscape – whether the institution had an alumni annual fund, years of the alumni annual fund and whether the college was in a campaign that year – to provide a context to the alumni giving donation figures.

The third section of the questionnaire (questions 8–15) asked about undergraduate alumni giving. Within the subcategories of general giving and alumni annual fund, these questions asked about the total dollars raised, participation percentages, the average gift size and the percentage of the institution's giving that came from the 10 largest gifts. To determine the level of support, it was necessary to first determine the total dollars

donated by alumni to the university and then to break out the total dollars donated to the annual fund. Because the institutions vary in size where larger institutions may raise more money than smaller ones, it is necessary to determine what the alumni participation percentage is for alumni giving and for the annual fund. Questions 11 and 15 about the percentage of gifts coming from the top 10 largest alumni gifts were crafted to provide a perspective on the dollars-donated figures, to identify any universities that had a few extremely large gifts that would skew their results.

The fourth section of the questionnaire (questions 16–22) asked about the institutions' communications vehicles and practices. The types of publications and communications pieces and the frequency with which the advancement or communications department sends them is important in determining whether there is a correlation between these pieces and alumni giving. The survey asked whether the communications department was on its own or under another department, what the communications department's budget was, what pieces the advancement office sent (alumni magazine, annual fund appeal letter, annual report, campaign appeal letter, campaign newsletters, electronic newsletters and others), how many years the communications pieces were sent, how often the pieces were sent and the group or department responsible for the pieces.

Before distribution, the questionnaire was reviewed by three university annual-giving professionals from institutions not included in the study

but which met the criteria for inclusion.

PROCEDURES

The research was conducted through a mailed questionnaire, which was sent to 250 annual giving and development directors that meet certain criteria. The first criterion was that the institutions be members of the CASE. The names of universities and the annual giving directors' names and contact information were obtained from CASE's Research Department. The surveys were mailed to a portion of CASE's annual giving director members based on equal geographic distribution by regions: East, South, Midwest and West. The second criterion was that they work at private universities ranging in size from 1500 to 15 000 students.

To gather the data, a letter was mailed to the annual giving directors, introducing the researcher, the purpose of the study and outlining the procedures for completing and returning the questionnaire. A written questionnaire and a self-addressed reply envelope were included in the mailing. One week later, the researcher followed up with a combination thank-you and reminder postcard, thanking those who responded and asking the non-responders to do so. Three weeks after that, the researcher mailed a second letter and copy of the survey to the non-responders.

MEASURES

Institutions were grouped into four geographic regions: West, Midwest, South and East Coast. States were grouped into one of these four regions following the standards used by the *US News & World Report* in their annual

college and university rankings guide. The region called West includes Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas, Utah, Washington and Wyoming; the Midwest includes Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota and Ohio; the South includes Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia; the East Coast includes Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Vermont.

To code for gender at all-women's schools, female gender was coded 100 per cent and male gender was coded 0 per cent to minimize missing data. Further, undergraduate enrollment was recoded such that schools with populations of 5000 or more undergraduates were coded into the same category.

Schools were also asked in which departments they created their marketing materials. These findings were recoded into separate binary categories that were not mutually exclusive. For example, if a school produced marketing in both the Communications Department and the Development Department, it was coded yes for two binary variables: Communications Department and Development Department.

Giving figures (Annual Giving dollars and Annual Fund dollars) were not included from two responding institutions. In one case the figures provided were duplicates of one

another, and in the other case, the annual giving figure was larger than the annual fund dollars figure.

Because a few figures for dollar amounts were unusually high relative to the other scores and had the potential to skew the correlations, the annual giving and annual fund dollars figures were recoded such that the lowest third of dollar amounts were coded 1, the middle third 2, and the upper third 3. For general giving, the cut-off points were less than \$2 000 000, between \$2 000 000 and \$11 000 000, and \$12 000 000 or over. For annual fund giving, the cut-off points were less than \$750 000, between \$75 000 and \$26 000 000, and \$30 000 000 or over.

TREATMENT OF DATA

To analyze the collected data, several statistical methods were used. First, responses were analyzed on a straightforward statistical level: the frequency of specific responses to provide a sense of the institutions' alumni giving levels and communications methods. Examining the research question required more advanced statistical tests.

Questions 1–3, which are independent variables about the institution's background, were used for statistical controls. They were also used to create regression equations. If two variables are correlated, description can lead to prediction. In this case, the predictions would concern the relationship between the independent variables and giving. Questions yielding dependent variables (8–15) are interval/ratio variables, which were analyzed using frequencies. Frequencies were also run for independent variable questions relating

to communications (16–22). These questions are a combination of nominal, ordinal, interval/ratio and dichotomous.

To analyze the research question, the researcher related the independent variables about communications methods to the dependent variables about alumni giving and interval/ratio measurement. The researcher then related the independent variables about the institution's background to alumni giving.

To analyze the relationship between the institution's background and alumni giving, the researcher first used a correlation matrix. The matrix is useful for showing correlations among all possible pairings of variables whenever there are more than two variables. Regression was then used where the independent variables were communications methods and the dependent variables are alumni giving.

LIMITATIONS

The study's research design has some limitations. First, there may have been inconsistencies in reporting, particularly when schools follow different formulas for calculating alumni dollars donated and alumni participation percentages. Also, what qualified as annual fund support at one school may not qualify as such at another school. Second, institutions produce additional communications pieces outside of the advancement office and additional communication pieces beyond those that the survey probes. Examples of additional communications pieces that alumni may have received include departmental newsletters, alumni association materials and fraternity/

sorority materials, which affect the feeling and desire on the part of alumni to make a donation and support their alma mater. Third, there may have been spurious connections affecting alumni giving, such as the institution's reputation, how selective the institution's admissions process is and any recent news about the school, positive or negative. Fourth, because of the size of the sample, the results may not translate to institutions with different-sized student populations. Fifth, there may be a bias in the response rate. Individuals who perceive that their institutions can answer the survey questions favorably (that is, the institution has a high level of giving and alumni participation) may have been more inclined to respond to the survey than those who could not. Sixth, there was a bias because the survey was mailed only to institutions that were members of CASE and therefore place a particular priority on advancement. Seventh, it is possible that although the surveys were kept confidential and the results were aggregated, the respondents skewed their reporting in an effort to present their institutions in a better light.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

A description of the survey respondents and their institutions is followed by a discussion of the data to answer the study's research question: Is there a correlation between the various types and frequency of communication pieces that an institution sends to its alumni and alumni giving? The three questions posed in this study are:

- (1) Does the number, type and frequency of communication vehicles exhibit a positive

relationship to alumni dollars raised?

- (2) Does the number, type and frequency of communication vehicles exhibit a positive relationship to alumni participation percentages?
- (3) Do certain communications vehicles exhibit a greater positive relationship to alumni giving than others?

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESPONDENTS

Two hundred and fifty surveys were sent to annual giving and development directors at private universities with student populations between 1500 and 15 000 throughout the United States. Table 1 shows that almost half of the 58 responding institutions were on the East Coast. More than one quarter were located in the Midwest, and about 15 per cent each were located in the South or the West. To compare geographic regions, 44 per cent of the

surveys were originally mailed to institutions in the East, 25 per cent were mailed to colleges in the Midwest, 18 per cent were mailed to colleges in the South and 13 per cent were mailed to institutions in the West. Further, about three quarters of the responding institutions educated both graduate and undergraduate students, whereas the remainder educate undergraduate students only. More than half of the responding universities had undergraduate populations between 1500 and 2499. More than a third had populations between 2500 and 4999, and the remainder had a population greater than 5000.

The survey was mailed to both co-educational and single-sex universities. Of the responding institutions, 93 per cent answered the question about the gender of their alumni. Two schools were all female. For the sample as a whole, men made up almost half of the alumni ($M=47$ per cent, $SD=13.19$ per cent).

The survey asked institutions about alumni giving to the university on the whole and then about alumni giving to the alumni annual fund in particular. Virtually all (95 per cent) of the institutions had an alumni annual fund. Just under three-fourths (72 per cent) were either in the public phase or the quiet phase of a capital campaign whereas just over half (53 per cent) were either in the public or quiet phase of an endowment campaign. Table 2 shows that schools reported that over one quarter of alumni gave to the general fund and annual fund, respectively. As a point of comparison, according to the *US News and World Report*, the national average alumni donor participation rate for private institutions is 17.5 per cent (University

Table 1: Frequencies for sample population

<i>Demographic variables</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Region</i>		
East coast	26	45
Midwest	15	26
South	9	15
West	8	14
<i>Institution type</i>		
Undergraduate students only	18	31
Undergraduate and graduate students	40	69
<i>Undergraduate enrollment</i>		
1500–2499	31	53
2500–4999	20	35
5000–7499	5	9
7500–9999	2	3

Table 2: General fund and annual fund dollars and percentages

<i>School finance variables</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
General fund dollars	49	\$12 960 755	\$19 158 258
Annual fund dollars	49	\$3 698 200	\$5 797 986
General fund participation percentage	50	28%	15%
Annual fund participation percentage	44	28%	14%
General fund average alumni gift	36	\$2003	\$4214
Annual fund average alumni gift	40	\$643	\$1353
% General giving from 10 largest alumni gifts	26	52%	24%
% Annual fund from 10 largest alumni gifts	35	24%	22%

of Missouri press release, 20 July 2007). According to the survey results, alumni were said to have given an average of almost \$13 million overall in 2005–2006, and more than \$3.5 million to the annual fund specifically. The average alumni general giving donation was more than \$2000, whereas the average alumni annual fund gift was more than \$600. The average percentage of the institution's total alumni giving that came from the top 10 largest alumni gifts was just over half, whereas the same figure for the alumni annual fund was nearly one quarter.

COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENTS AND VEHICLES

Of the responding institutions, the majority of them (57 per cent) were organized such that the communications office was a separate department from the advancement (development) office. Just over 40 per cent of them (43 per cent) were organized such that the communications department came under the advancement office. Very few institutions ($n=10$) answered the question that asked for their communications office's budget, but

for those that did, the average departmental budget was \$300 057.

Table 3 shows that virtually all universities produced an alumni magazine and annual fund appeal letter. More than three quarters of the universities also produced an electronic alumni newsletter and an annual report. Less than half produced a campaign (capital or endowment) appeal letter and campaign newsletter, respectively. Table 4 also shows that the electronic alumni newsletters were sent out most frequently, followed by annual fund appeal letters, alumni magazines and campaign appeal letters. Overall, schools sent about four of the surveyed types of communications pieces in 2005–2006 ($M=4.07$, $SD=1.08$, range = 2–6).

Of the responding institutions, the development office was most frequently responsible for the annual fund letter (86 per cent of the time), whereas the communications office was most often responsible for the alumni magazine (83 per cent of the time), and the alumni office was most frequently responsible for the electronic alumni newsletter(s).

Additionally, Table 5 shows that the annual fund appeal letter, alumni magazines and the annual report had

Table 3: Communication vehicles and frequency of use

<i>Communication vehicles</i>	<i>Frequency (reading)</i>		<i>Range (reading)</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>
Alumni magazines	55	97	3.08 (1.40)	2–7
Annual fund appeal letter	55	97	3.85 (1.89)	2–10
Electronic alumni newsletter	46	84	6.44 (4.59)	2–12
Annual report	43	78	1.56 (0.84)	2
Campaign appeal letter	23	47	1.13 (1.40)	2–4
Campaign newsletters	20	41	0.79 (0.99)	2

Note: Brackets for frequency sent are 2=1–3 times a year; 4.5=4–5 times a year; 7=6–8 times a year; 10=9–11 times a year; 12=12+ times a year.

Table 4: Departments that handle communications vehicles

<i>Communication vehicles</i>	<i>Development</i>		<i>Communications</i>		<i>Alumni</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Alumni magazine	13	24	48	83	14	24
Annual fund letter	50	86	7	12	1	2
Annual report	34	59	31	53	1	2
Electronic alumni newsletter	16	28	24	41	27	47

Note: Figures will not add up to 100% as respondents could choose multiple departments when selecting responsibility.

Table 5: Number of years (in brackets) that communications pieces have been sent to alumni

<i>Communication vehicles</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>Mode</i>
Annual fund appeal letter	51	18.27 (5.36)	21
Alumni magazines	50	17.78 (5.43)	21
Annual report	39	14.59 (7.64)	21
Campaign appeal letter	30	9.07 (6.67)	3
Campaign newsletters	26	6.65 (5.46)	3
Electronic alumni newsletter	42	3.83 (1.89)	3

Note: Brackets for years sent are 3=1–5 years; 8=6–10 years; 13=11–15 years; 18=16–20 years; 21=21+ years.

been sent for the longest periods, on average. Campaign appeal letters, campaign newsletters and alumni electronic newsletters were initiated more recently.

The next analyses asked about the relationship between giving to the

school and characteristics of schools or communication vehicles.

Hypothesis 1: Predicted that the more communication pieces that institutions sent to their alumni, the greater the giving participation rates and

giving levels would be. Overall, the number of communications pieces sent to alumni was not positively correlated with alumni giving levels or participation (see Table 6).

Hypothesis 2: Predicted that the more frequently alumni magazines were sent the greater the alumni giving participation rates and giving levels would be. This hypothesis was confirmed. Table 6 shows that the frequency with which alumni magazines and electronic newsletters were sent was positively associated with higher giving participation rates both for general giving and for the annual fund. When alumni magazines were sent more frequently, alumni gave more to the general fund and to the annual fund. When the alumni electronic newsletters were sent more frequently, people gave more to the general fund, but not to the annual fund.

Hypothesis 3: Predicted that more frequently sent appeal letters would correlate with greater giving levels

and participation rates. The hypothesis was partially confirmed. Table 6 shows that there was a positive correlation between the frequency with which annual fund appeal letters were sent and dollars donated to the annual fund, although there was not a significant correlation with annual fund participation rates. There was a negative correlation between the frequency of campaign appeal letters and giving and participation for both general giving and the annual fund. Speculating as to why this might have been, it is possible that the larger financial goal of a campaign made alumni feel that they were being asked to make a gift larger than their usual annual fund gift, which, in turn, causes them not to make a gift to the campaign or the annual fund. Another speculation as to the lower participation rates is that publicity surrounding the large lead gifts to the campaign (organizations usually enter the public phase of a campaign once at least 50 per cent of the funds have been raised) make

Table 6: Correlations of giving dollars and percentages with school and communications variables

<i>Fund %</i>	<i>General giving \$</i>			<i>General %</i>		<i>Annual fund \$</i>		<i>Annual fund %</i>
	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i>
Number of communication pieces	49	-0.09	50	0.05	51	0.05	45	0.07
Alumni magazine frequency	49	0.40**	50	0.39**	50	0.39**	44	0.43**
Electronic alumni newsletter frequency	47	0.55**	48	0.38**	48	0.20	43	0.36**
Campaign appeal frequency	43	-0.43**	43	-0.45**	43	-0.38**	39	-0.48**
Annual fund appeal frequency	49	0.16	50	0.06	50	0.30*	44	-0.04
Undergraduate enrollment	49	0.11	50	-0.25*	51	0.02	45	-0.36**
Percent male alumni	46	0.42**	47	0.26	48	0.41**	42	0.26
Institution type	49	-0.16	50	-0.30*	51	-0.12	45	-0.24

Note: A recoded variable is used for general and annual fund dollar amounts.

* $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$.

alumni believe that their donations are not needed by the university.

Hypothesis 4: Predicted that smaller colleges and universities would have higher participation rates than larger colleges and universities. This hypothesis was confirmed (see Table 6).

Two additional findings came out of the study. First, as seen in Table 6, schools with a larger percentage of male alumni gave more money both in general giving and to the annual fund. The number of male alumni did not correlate with participation rates. Second, there was a negative correlation between the general giving participation rate (from undergraduates) and whether the universities had a graduate school in addition to an undergraduate school. Alumni from undergraduate institutions participated more often than undergraduate alumni from schools that also had graduate schools.

As a final analysis, a multiple regression was conducted to determine which of the independent variables best predicted an institution's alumni giving. A multiple regression equation contains more than one predictor and provides more accurate predictions than could be obtained from a simple regression equation. This analysis included independent variables that were found to have a significant correlation. To predict general fund and annual fund participation, a multiple linear regression was run to include any variable that was significantly correlated with general fund participation or annual fund participation. For both variables, the regression showed that a higher

undergraduate enrollment correlated with a lower participation rate for the general fund and annual fund. There was a similar positive association between the frequency with which alumni magazines were sent to alumni and participation rates for the general fund and annual fund. The frequency of campaign appeal letters was negatively associated with participation for both funds, but more negatively associated with participation for the annual fund than for the general fund. The frequency of electronic alumni newsletters had a positive association with the general giving participation rate. Lastly, the adjusted R^2 is an indicator of how well the model fits the data. In Table 7, R^2 showed that the variables were almost equally significant (0.39**** and 0.40****) for participation for both general giving and the annual fund.

To predict general and annual fund giving, a stepwise regression was used. Stepwise regression includes models in which the choice of predictive variables is carried out by an automatic procedure. This study's stepwise regression analysis included undergraduate participation rate and any variable that was significantly correlated with general giving or annual giving. In this study, for both variables, the regression showed that undergraduate enrollment and undergraduate participation rate both significantly and positively predicted giving. It was a slightly stronger predictor for general fund dollars donated than for annual fund dollars donated (Table 8).

FINDINGS

Some of the results of this study were expected, whereas other results

Table 7: Correlations of giving participation percentages with school and communications variables

	<i>General % (n=40)</i>		<i>Annual fund % (n=38)</i>	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Undergraduate enrollment	-6.74	2.87*	-7.62	2.84*
Alumni magazine frequency	4.42	1.62*	4.49	1.59**
Annual fund appeal frequency	—	—	—	—
Campaign appeal frequency	-2.87	1.68	-4.13	1.68*
Electronic alumni newsletter frequency	0.91	0.45*	—	—
Adjusted R^2	0.39****		0.40****	

Note: A recoded variable is used for general and annual fund dollar amounts.

* $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$, **** $P < 0.0001$.

Table 8: Correlations of giving dollars and percentages with school and communications variables, from stepwise regressions

	<i>General fund \$ (n=39)</i>		<i>Annual fund \$ (n=37)</i>	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Undergraduate enrollment	0.31	0.12*	0.43	0.13**
Undergraduate participation rate	0.04	0.01****	0.04	0.01****
Adjusted R^2	0.39****		0.55****	

Note: A recoded variable is used for general and annual fund dollar amounts.

* $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$, **** $P < 0.0001$.

brought to light new information. The hypotheses proposed that institutions sending more communications pieces to their alumni would have greater giving levels and participation rates than their peers who sent fewer communications pieces. There was no connection between the overall number of communications pieces sent to alumni and alumni giving – either in dollars donated or participation rates.

Specific communications pieces, however, were found to have an effect on giving levels and participation rates.

More-frequently sent alumni magazines were associated with higher alumni giving participation rates and giving levels both for general giving and for the annual fund. More-frequently sent alumni electronic newsletters were associated with higher giving levels to the general fund, but not to the annual fund.

The findings regarding appeal letters were mixed based on the campaign for which they were sent. For the annual fund, there was a positive association between the frequency with which

annual fund appeal letters were sent and dollars donated to the annual fund. Participation rates were not affected by how many appeal letters were sent. For campaigns, there was a negative association between the frequency of campaign appeal letters and both the giving level and participation rate. Although campaign appeal letters may not ask for annual fund support specifically, in this study, they are associated with a lower annual fund participation rate.

The size and type of school affected giving. Smaller colleges and universities had higher participation rates than larger colleges and universities did. Also, institutions that had undergraduate schools only (no graduate schools) had higher undergraduate alumni participation rates than did their peers with undergraduate and graduate schools.

The percentage of male alumni and whether the institution had a graduate school in addition to an undergraduate school affected giving levels and rates. Schools with more male alumni raised more money both in general giving and to the annual fund; however, the participation rates for both funds were not any higher than at schools with female alumni.

Implications For Future Research

This study corresponded with existing research that shows that smaller schools have a higher alumni giving participation rate. It also corresponded with the notion that men typically donate more to their alma maters than women do.

This study corresponded with some of the existing literature on alumni magazines: printed magazines may be one of the most consistent avenues

through which alumni hear from their colleges and are one of their strongest ties to the school. This study extended the existing literature on alumni magazines: because quantifying the contribution of an alumni publication can be challenging, it is difficult to measure the success of a magazine, and the results of a successful magazine are often intangible (Bliwise and Hay, 2001). This study illustrates that alumni magazines and the frequency with which school news is shared with alumni bears a positive association with higher donation levels.

Implications for practice

These findings have implications for fundraising and for colleges' alumni relations efforts. Overall, the implications were remarkably similar for general giving and for annual fund giving.

The research established that there were connections between the frequency of certain communications pieces and alumni giving as well as the characteristics of the schools (student enrollment, type of school, percentage of male alumni). Advancement professionals cannot do very much to change the school characteristics mentioned, but they can look at how frequently alumni receive communication from the school. The results show a strong positive association between receiving certain communication pieces frequently, and high alumni giving levels and participation rates.

This study does not purport to show that frequently received alumni magazines cause alumni giving, because it cannot be determined whether the donated funds enable the magazines to be published or whether

the magazines bring about the donations. Nevertheless, the importance of fostering the connection with alumni cannot be overlooked.

On the fundraising appeal side, universities need to carefully look at how they craft their fundraising case for support, because there is a negative association between frequent appeal letters and alumni giving. Including giving requests and campaign updates within other vehicles such as newsletters, and not just traditional appeal letters or fundraising updates, may help universities increase alumni giving.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Improvements to this study

If this study were to be conducted again, it is recommended to work more closely with CASE before the mailing of the survey in order to generate a higher response rate and a larger sample size. Because of the small sample size, some correlations that may exist may not have been apparent in the analysis. Survey question 22 should have offered 'Alumni Office' as a possible answer in addition to 'Alumni Association.' The survey should have asked for the year in which the institution was established to help identify whether older universities showed stronger or weaker alumni giving.

Recommendations for further research

Further research could entail tracking the responding institutions' NCAA athletic division and admissions selectivity rankings to see whether other factors such as sports and perceived desirability of the university correlated to alumni giving. This study

could be extended to include public universities to identify the impact that communications pieces have for those institutions.

Print alumni magazines are part of virtually all universities' communications programs. Further research could examine the format and content of these magazines to see what aspects of the magazine correlate to greater alumni giving.

Electronic communication is a growing part of universities' alumni communications as evidenced by how recently universities started sending electronic newsletters, and how frequently they send them. Future research could entail focusing on alumni giving and electronic communications, specifically alumni web portals, newsletters, email solicitations, blogs and social networking opportunities.

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