



Keeping Alumni Engaged in Giving over a Lifetime

When alumni experience financial success, they may be asked to give more. Often a fundraiser (professional or volunteer) will learn of career, family, or financial achievement during a cultivation conversation. That's one reason that such conversations should be open and wide-ranging. Many donors will be motivated to increase their giving through these thoughtful discussions.

When life makes alumni question their giving, fundraisers must work to keep them engaged. Like a marriage, a lifetime of giving requires maintaining the relationship in good times and bad. Otherwise, a donor may develop a habit of not giving, or of giving less. Discovering a prospect's concerns or changing circumstances is a reason why personal communication is so important. It can reveal a problem in time to fix it – or ameliorate its impact. An important part of a fundraiser's job (*especially a volunteer fundraiser*) is strengthening the donor's relationship with a giving community, because this can affect the interconnected feeling among those in the community as well as giving by others.

Hard times. Individuals who have come on hard times can be moved by the idea that their participation at any level sends a powerful message especially in support of a community with which they identify.

Less remunerative work. Some occupations and professions just earn less than others. For example, this may be the case with people working for government or non-profits. All donors and their gifts matter and their contributions are a message that every student is significant, every field of study and professional field is valued, and every gift is important and a vote in support of the school.

Retirement. Retirement occasions many changes in lifestyle and spending. Still, it is an opportunity to affirm that the donor is an important member of this community, and will continue to give at a level which is comfortable. It is also an opportunity to discuss testamentary and "life income plan" options available that could benefit both the donor and the school.

Disappointment with university actions. These are often felt as a personal rejection of the donor – and the donor's most heart-felt beliefs. Some may feel that a university is too political or not political enough. Some may be concerned that the politics, policies, research, or faculty actions are too liberal or conservative, too far left or too far right. Some alumni will feel that the university is not effectively supporting an athletic team or other student activity that was dear to them. *Most personal is when the university does not admit a graduate's child.*

The fundraiser should first acknowledge the hurt. Then, possibly offer examples of multiple views from the donors' own classmates. Help donors acknowledge (a) how much they have valued being a part of this extended university family, (b) how this "family" has made them what they are, (c) that whatever the disappointment, in the context of the wide range of university opinions and actions, this is not a personal rejection, and (d) that their gift is still a vote that matters to the health of this "family".

When university success offers an excuse not to give. The donor can be reminded not only that the education, research, and services offered all cost more than the tuition received – but also that in economic downturns or difficult financial times for the university, it cannot rely upon increases in tuition, research grants, or government funding. Instead, it must often look to its own husbanded resources.

University wealth. Some donors may feel that the university is already rich enough – and doesn't need more. Explain how the majority of existing endowment is committed to specific efforts. Explain that new gifts support new efforts, new initiatives, or more scholarships. But remember, that's why universities ask, not why people give.

Skeptical graduates of means who are approached by a close, respected friend can be persuaded to make important gifts. This is especially true when the prospect is reminded of individual reasons for support that include, "For me, access to our school's premier experience depended on financial aid and the generosity of alumni who came before me." A small gift can be quite meaningful.

Needs of other charitable endeavors. While the value and importance of helping other worthwhile organizations should be acknowledged, the fundraiser can ask the donor to include the university among their charitable priorities. A fundraiser can also point out how much the university helps to address those same causes, from university research, teaching or outreach programs, to the work of classmates and other members in the alumni community. Examples of fellow graduates making a true difference in public office, leading at non-profits and in companies, and serving around the world can serve as a reminder of the importance of outstanding education to enable alumni to address social concerns.

"Many institutions promise to change the world for the better, but for my money, our school delivers more often on that promise." *This quote and others adapted from a Yale Law School Fund Volunteer Guide.*