



Building a culture of connection and loyalty

Infusing and nurturing loyalty and connectedness starts before students become alumni. It starts when they are first admitted as students – sometimes even before that. It continues for a lifetime.

The university's opportunity. Universities have a unique opportunity to create a bond with their students, because the experiences and adventures of one's youth are those that most people remember most intensely. Particularly poignant are the memories of "growing up", transitioning from child to adult, being "on one's own" for the first time. For many these start in the late teenage years and continue through undergraduate (or graduate) years at university.

The university's challenge. The challenge is to create an environment where those memories are both binding to and fond of the university rather than distancing or distasteful – even though a university's primary objective is research and teaching rather than entertainment or social engineering. Make students and alumni feel like part of one family.

The admissions process. A university education cannot seem like just a commodity, because people do not bond with the commodities they consume. Nor with that to which they feel entitled. The process starts when a potential student first visits a university or when he or she is first interviewed as part of an admissions process. The applicant needs to be treated with the respect and concern one would accord a potential family member – not just a customer.

A community of students. What binds alumni most strongly to each other and for a lifetime are the connections and friendships that they made as students. This is more than just sitting in a classroom together. The social glue comes from the extra-curricular life: studying together, working together on projects or campus jobs, competing together on athletic teams, eating together, playing together, singing together, living in close proximity, and socializing together.

Young people will have these interactions whether or not the university orchestrates or facilitates them. However, if the university sponsors those activities, and designs them with care, alumni will believe that the strongest friendships in their lives were due in part to the environment and good graces of the university. They will view the university fondly and as a true *alma mater*. In contrast, if they believe the best part of their youth occurred despite university discouragement, they are not likely to feel moved to give back to university.

Student activities. Student activities introduce students to future spouses, companions, and business partners. Student activities teach important leadership and workplace skills not taught in the classroom: how to manage one's time, how to work in a team, and how to manage others. At Yale University approximately 500 student activities serve its 5400 undergraduates: <http://yaledailynews.com/blog/2014/04/09/up-close-how-many-is-too-many/>. They include sports teams (varsity, club, and intramural), singing groups (large choruses and a cappella), debating societies, political forums across the spectrum, film groups (both watching and creating), print media (newspapers, literary magazines, and humor periodicals), service and social justice organizations, dance groups (ethnic and contemporary), performance groups (dramatic, comedic, and improvisational), identity groups (religious, ethnic, lifestyle, and sexual orientation), symphonies (plus chamber groups and a marching band), eating clubs, a literary society, fraternities, sororities, and much more. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Yale_University_student_organizations. The effectiveness of these activities in building loyalty is confirmed by all the alumni shared interest groups they have spawned. See handout.

Mentoring. For some students, similar connections extend to the faculty and coaches who taught them. This may be especially true for students who themselves become academics, or students whose research internships or team experiences became the basis for their post-university careers. But it also holds when students have gained insight from a strong mentoring relationship with a faculty member. Some alumni fondly remember university and professorial interactions as the one time in their life when a thirst for learning could be expressed without reservation. The university can encourage such student-professor interactions. Yale demonstrates that they are not incompatible with a research university.

A network of alumni. Intergenerational networking (and intra-generational networking) can be key elements in a successful career. University alumni organizations can be instrumental in building these networks. But they are also built when a student's professor (or former professor) helps make a contact or obtain an internship.

Architecture and Campus Design. Architecture can both enhance those memories and provide a setting which facilitates them. Not only is beautiful architecture memorable, but the design of university spaces can enable and assist the social interactions which bind people to each other in the context of a place. See handouts on the [Architecture of Return](#) and [the Campus as a Curated Gallery of Fine Architecture](#).