

What did Alumni Relations during the COVID-19 Lockdown look like?

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic thrust the world into lockdown in March 2020. People found themselves at home, with offices, schools and universities all closed as an attempt to contain the spread of the virus. As with many sectors, alumni relations within universities needed to reinvent itself. With relationship building at the core of its work, alumni relations had to reconsider new ways to engage and involve alumni.

This paper outlines a very small-scale, short term study that stemmed from curiosity into a gathering of social media data, to observe how alumni relations offices communicated to the alumni base during this pandemic. Gathering evidence from 75 universities across 16 countries, the social media posts (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram) relayed by alumni relations offices worldwide showed a broad base of activities, initiatives and information to alumni during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period in early 2020. Four key themes emerged from these social media posts: sharing, caring, daring and snaring, explained with examples in this article. The conclusion offers some comment on the state of alumni relations in universities, the ability for reinventing alumni engagement in a virtual way and the ability to offer a breadth of reliable information and opportunities for the benefit of alumni.

What did Alumni Relations during the COVID-19 Lockdown look like?

Dr Maria L. Gallo – Founder and Principal Researcher – KITE Keep in Touch Education

I am an avid follower of alumni relations social media accounts of universities worldwide. As a write, these accounts on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram are filled with alumni responses to the during COVID-19 pandemic. So many, in fact, it has been hard to keep track. So many, it has been hard to process what is really happening in the alumni relations space. In a sector that had relied on a tried and tested in-person event cycle of reunions, annual general meeting for alumni associations, networking seminars and career enhancing professional sessions, things had to change—and fast. In addition, there is the innovative nature of managing the newest alumni to the community: the class of 2020.

The result has shown the great resolve and creativity of those working in alumni relations and those university colleagues that work closely with alumni—such as career services or communications. University presidents, vice chancellors, rectors along with other senior administrators and academic faculty members are lending their leadership advice and subject expertise to alumni.

What I have found over the period of the pandemic lockdown in early 2020 is my mind has been inundated with these examples and I have not been able to genuinely understand and analyse what is truly happening, *even while it is still going on*. I decided to embark on a small-scale study, one that could offer some reflective value on the state of alumni relations during the COVID-19 crisis.

The research questions for this short-term study are as follows:

- What does alumni relations look like during the COVID-19 pandemic as portrayed on social media?
- What are the prevalent themes of alumni relations work at universities worldwide?
- What can the promotion of alumni relations activity tell us about the future of alumni relations in higher education?

The caveat is that this is not a comprehensive large-scale study to offer a thorough or robust view of what alumni relations truly looks like in higher education around the world. This is simply an opportunity to gather some data from 75 higher education institutions worldwide, representing a very percentage of total institutions with an alumni relations presence. The purpose of this sample is to get a wide view of alumni relations activity, and I am conscious of its limitations. By selecting the promotion of alumni activity through social media posts, may limit the private e-mails and invitations sent to alumni directly, not promoted in the public domain. One of my own alma maters initiated a book club during the pandemic exclusively for the alumni community and while I follow their social media feeds in my personal social media accounts, I didn't see a notice about it. Another limitation is that I would need to be aware and following their social media feeds in order to see the post about their alumni relations activity and outreach. I follow over 400 higher education institutions (and their affiliate alumni social media accounts) based on my awareness of the institutions, including those included in international university rankings. Naturally innovative and creative alumni relations activity could be happening and I may not be following it. In addition, I follow primarily accounts that offer social media posts in the English language and there could be excellent alumni relations innovation happening in other languages worldwide.

The nature of alumni relations activity is also somewhat subjective. In this paper, and I believe what will resonate widely is alumni activity that is promoted directly *to alumni expecting a call to action by alumni*. For example, there is an Instagram post about a webinar and alumni need to sign-up to attend. The focus is on alumni activity that seems to be primarily organised by the alumni relations function of the institution, though this can be difficult to determine entirely through a social media post.

It is difficult through a post too to understand the *success* of these alumni relations activities. For instance, one university may offer an innovative career event online, but unless the results of the attendance (or the feedback from alumni) are promoted publicly it is difficult to see if the idea merited the efforts involved. To try to offer as robust an idea as possible of the alumni relations activity, the social media post becomes the gatekeeper to learn more about the event, though all of my information, whether from subsequent social media posts, a Web site or online news article will come only from publicly available sources. This study focuses on an analysis of secondary research insofar that no interviews, focus groups or follow-up surveys to the institutions will take place. The selection of the alumni relations activity is limited to one activity per institution and are chosen simply by planned happenstance, as outlined by John Krumboltz,¹ a serendipity of me accessing my social media accounts and noting the posts as they are promoted online.

The alumni relations activity outlined in this study were promoted on social media between the 16th of March 2020 and the 29th of May 2020. This 75 day, 12-week period represents a short period of time where most of the world experienced a lockdown, and the campuses of higher education institutions were closed as a public health precaution (see Figure 1). In some parts of the world, including in Europe and North America, this period was the nearing the end of the academic year and is also a time that usually sees a high volume of graduation ceremonies and alumni reunion events on campus.

Figure 1 – Listing of Data gathered from University Worldwide on Alumni Relations activity (n=75)

Country	Number of university alumni relations posts cited
Australia	4
Belgium	1
Canada	14
Egypt	1
Hungary	1
Ireland	3
Netherlands	4
New Zealand	1
Portugal	2
Saudi Arabia	1
Singapore	1
South Africa	1
Spain	1
UK	15
USA	25
Total	75

While all 75 alumni relations activities were collated on a spreadsheet, to give this paper more dimension the article presents some dynamic examples in the form of mini case studies as a heuristic device to illustrate the themes and analysis.

Themes for analysis

The data collected enabled broad themes to emerge from the incidences of alumni relations activity across the globe. These broad themes were distilled in two iterations from a multitude of themes down to a few easily-remembered themes that best encapsulate the work in alumni relations during these unprecedented times. The four main themes that emerged include:

¹ Krumboltz, J.D. (1998) 'Serendipity is not Serendipitous' *Journal of Counselling Psychology*. 45:4, 390-392.

Sharing – these initiatives concentrate on offering alumni opportunities that may be of value to alumni during the crisis, primarily information sharing from the wider institution but also bespoke alumni relations-led online events to share information whereby alumni are the passive participants in receiving information. Sharing comprised of a third of all posts targeting alumni (n=25)

Caring- there was a demonstrated concentration of events to support alumni during lockdown and the ongoing pandemic. The support was primarily well-being related—emotional, psychological and physical well-being—but also career and employment related support. 28% of the posts collected related to the broad caring theme (n=21).

Daring- these posts related to challenging alumni to do something, become active or participate in a specific activity, usually linked to sharing through social media channels. This also involved traditional alumni events brought to the online space that invited alumni to participate in an interactive way. Almost a third (n=24) of the social media posts collected related to the daring theme.

Snaring- far from a trap, these posts made the compelling case for support to ask alumni to give to their alma mater, primarily for COVID-19 related fundraising appeals. This was the smallest percentage of posts (n=5) but the posts did come from four different countries.

Some of these alumni relations activities promoted could indeed span across more than one theme, however, I focused on what seemed to be the main kernel or purpose for the activity.

The following sections provide additional details and some examples in each of the four themes collected.

Sharing

Under this broad theme, and especially posts collected early in the lockdown related to sharing information from university experts to the wider university community, including alumni. Cambridge University offered a Webinar on artificial intelligence drawing on their own academic staff to alumni and the wider community² while Indiana University shared the post with the headline: “IU researchers are well on their way to producing a mask that kills coronaviruses on contact.”³ The expertise shared tended to focus primarily on topics that impacted the community during the lockdown, including COVID-19 health-related information or information about career or business predictions for the future. For instance, Porto Business School hosted a Webinar called ‘The Moment for Digital Acceleration’ in April promising to share “ideas on how to take advantage of this strange new world and use it to our benefit”⁴ while the University of British Columbia posted a Webcast to the alumni community on ‘Rebuilding society to be greener, cleaner, and more resilient in the wake of COVID-19.’⁵

Another subsection of these posts brought in alumni as the experts. These alumni shared with their fellow alumni about their experience in some timely topics of discussion, including ones related to coping with COVID-19 pandemic. When these posts were primarily information sharing, they fit in the sharing theme, and the next theme section will show that some of the alumni contributions also

² Cambridge University Facebook page post <https://www.facebook.com/cambridgealumni> 17th May 2020 [accessed on 20/05/20]

³ Indiana University Alumni Twitter post <https://twitter.com/IUAA/status/1266779664929996800/photo/1> 30/05/2020 [accessed on 31/05/2020]

⁴ Porto Business School Alumni Facebook page post <https://www.facebook.com/PortoBusinessSchoolAlumni/photos/a.446428735419894/3103577459704995> 14th April 2020 [accessed on 30th April 2020]

⁵ University of British Columbia Alumni Twitter post <https://twitter.com/alumniubc/status/1265770769952489473/photo/1> 27th May 2020 [accessed on 29/05/2020]

offered caring-related support to alumni. Some of the content of these posts was drawn from other alumni communication sources, such as the alumni magazine to create additional online content, with quirky headlines to get online attention. “An Olympian, a Magician and a Photographer Walk into a Zoom: Alums who create, perform and broadcast are stuck at home. So they talked to us”⁶ was the Stanford University response, promoting a story available in their online alumni magazine.

Moreover, posts in this section also took the alumni expertise sharing even further. Instead of only curating their own online events or opportunities to speak to alumni, alumni relations posts also shared external links where alumni offered the wider world their perspective on the current pandemic or on shift in professional working environment due to the lockdown and beyond. At Dartmouth College, the alumni relations team shared a *New York Times* opinion piece written by an alum with the title: “How can “tragic optimism” help us as we struggle with a global pandemic?”⁷ University of Alberta featured The Line podcast from bat biologist and alum ‘about the origins of COVID-19, and the scientific community’s challenge in delivering up-to-date information on a rapidly evolving crisis’ in May.⁸

This also shows the increasing value of encouraging alumni to share their content with their alma mater as it can reach an even broader audience by promoting the alumni publications or expertise through university social media channels. The university is also adding a level of creditability to their alumni, even gravitas when suggesting to fellow alumni to view this external alumni-curated content. Ever wondered what choral singers could sound like when they individual log onto Zoom to sing? On Facebook, the NUI Galway Alumni Office shared the video produced by the NUI Galway Alumni Ensemble singing the Gnarl Barkley hit ‘Crazy’ in May.⁹ This post, originally on the NUI Galway Alumni Ensemble Facebook page, received a broadened reach of alumni who would not otherwise follow the choral group’s page.

Still other universities shared initiatives or online events outside of the university sphere that might be of interest to the alumni community. For example, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona shared on its alumni Facebook page ‘calling on entrepreneurs’ to consider applying for a national talent and innovation awards programme.¹⁰

Finally, the sharing section also concentrated on celebrating alumni in a different way. Universities like Texas A&M University San Antonio showcased their graduation creativity with a curb side graduation attended by 250 of the newest alumni in cap and gowns in a car parade at the front of campus.¹¹ Many other universities such MIT¹² and Acadia University¹³ showed glimpses of virtual or

⁶ Stanford University Alumni Twitter post <https://twitter.com/StanfordAlumni/status/1261381965170671617> 15th May 2020 [accessed on the 21st May 2020]

⁷ Dartmouth College Alumni Twitter post <https://twitter.com/dartmouthalumni/status/1248298575047639041> 14th April 2020 [accessed on 16/04/2020]

⁸ University of Alberta Alumni Twitter post <https://twitter.com/UAlbertaAlumni/status/126069327755338752> 13th May 2020 [accessed 14th May 2020]

⁹ NUI Galway Alumni Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/NUIGalwayAlumni> Post on 15th May 2020 [accessed on the 15th May 2020]

¹⁰ AUBarcelona Alumni Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/xarxaAlumniUAB/photos/a.174270392730712/1551122851712119/> Post on 28th May 2020 [accessed on 02/06/2020]

¹¹ Texas A&M San Antonio University Twitter post <https://twitter.com/TAMUSanAntonio/status/1261684233459949569> 16th May 2020 [accessed 20/05/2020]

¹² MIT Twitter post <https://twitter.com/MIT/status/1266491728632127493> 29th May 2020 [accessed 30/05/2020]

¹³ Acadia University Twitter post https://twitter.com/acadia_alumni/status/1249756550434033664 13th April 2020 [accessed on 14th April 2020]

online graduations during the lockdown period on social media for the broader alumni audience to see.

Caring

Imagine a virtual tour of the most iconic serene spot on campus. The University of Victoria offered its alumni a tour of the Finnerty Garden as a ‘four-minute breather’ and escape.¹⁴ These are the small, caring gestures extended through social media by alumni relations offices around the world. Virtual well-being sessions such as meditation, promoted by University of Manitoba,¹⁵ were prominent. In April, the American University of Cairo used Instagram to offer a virtual event to show care for the alumni community: “We are all striving to stay healthy and protect ourselves against the dangers of the COVID-19 virus. Therefore, we brought you our brilliant nutritionist and alumna...to share with you some tips and recipes on how to boost your immunity during these difficult times!”¹⁶

Other universities took a learning for life direction with their caring related posts. Nanyang Technological University in Singapore promoted an Introduction to Data Science course via a special university app, as an exclusive offer to alumni¹⁷ while the University of Edinburgh opened the potential for alumni to learn Arabic through some of the university’s open source resources.¹⁸

Cultural activities linked to the university were also posted, from the Spotify playlist of the musical talent of alumni at Dublin City University¹⁹ to Lunchtime Lockdown music concerts at Bournemouth University²⁰ to the hashtagged #AtHomewithUCL suite of online events, including theatre productions.²¹ These creative activities show the extent to which alumni relations professionals are working collaboratively with other university colleagues to draw on existing university virtual community events along with offering the wider university community a glimpse into alumni-involving content.

With the uncertainty in the job market for new graduates and potential job losses or shift to the normal workday during lockdown, alumni relations responded with ongoing career support or specialist online events addressing professional themes, such as the extended careers services available to alumni at the University of New South Wales in Australia.²² Colby College in Maine extended these assurances further with the Pay It Northward campaign, whereby the President of the College made the commitment to source employment opportunities for all 2020 graduates, putting their advancement staff—including fundraisers—

¹⁴ University of Victoria Alumni Twitter post https://twitter.com/UVic_Alumni/status/1263611796948160523 22nd May 2020 [accessed on 23rd May 2020]

¹⁵ University of Manitoba Alumni Facebook page post <https://www.facebook.com/umanalumni> 19th May 2020 [accessed 21st May 2020]

¹⁶ American University of Cairo Instagram feed post https://www.instagram.com/p/B_AVgvZnYnX/?igshid=1h4q7k7c5iu3i 15th April 2020 [accessed on 22nd April 2020]

¹⁷ Nanyang Technological University Alumni Twitter post <https://twitter.com/alumniNTU/status/1262649776136306688> 19th May 2020 [accessed 22nd of May 2020]

¹⁸ University of Edinburgh Alumni Twitter post <https://twitter.com/EdinburghAlumni/status/1262381090481856520> 19th May 2020 [accessed on 19/05/2020]

¹⁹ Dublin City University Twitter post <https://twitter.com/DCUAlumni/status/1262435279953989648> 18th May 2020 [accessed 19th May 2020]

²⁰ Bournemouth University Alumni Twitter post <https://twitter.com/bournemouthuni/status/1263786777048948736> 22nd May 2020 [accessed on 22nd May 2020]

²¹ University College London Twitter post <https://twitter.com/UCLAlumni/status/1260533991314243584> 13th May 2020 [accessed on 14th May 2020]

²² University of New South Wales Facebook page post <https://www.facebook.com/unswalumni> 24th May 2020 [accessed 26th May 2020]

on this task as makeshift career counsellors as a priority.²³ Alongside career support, universities also made a commitment to support small businesses owned by alumni, such as the Directory of Michigan Alumni-Owned Small Businesses promoted via LinkedIn by the University of Michigan Alumni Association.²⁴

Finally, there was a tribute to the humanity of where alumni found themselves today during the pandemic, especially for alumni as parents struggling with working at home and taking care of children. There was a number of posts offering story time for children, read by famous alumni, such as posted by the University of Oklahoma²⁵ or Syracuse University's 'Help for the Homestretch' support for parents tackling home-schooling initiatives.²⁶ What is striking about so many of these activities is the rapid rate of response by alumni relations professionals and university administrators to offer swift, new online programming with alumni care at the centre.

Daring

Prior to the pandemic, there was peaked interest, but little transition of alumni relations events in an online setting. There was a general understanding that this would reduce the ability for alumni to be truly active participants in the events and have a genuine connection with their alma mater and fellow alumni: could you *really* participate in an online reunion at home? The COVID-19 pandemic quickly changed the minds of many alumni relations professionals who needed to pivot quickly into offering a suite of virtual, interactive events to engage its alumni community. The theme of this section is 'daring' because the nature of the university alumni posts was offering an invitation for participation by alumni, to create this interactivity, offering them some alternatives to a lonely lockdown at home. For instance, while the hashtag campaign to promote #DukeAlumniJobs posted a number of employment opportunities on Twitter offered by fellow alumni as a sharing activity with the alumni community²⁷, the post by the University of Waterloo asks alumni if they would consider hiring a co-op student in their company²⁸, positioning the information as an alumni request, thus *daring* a response so to speak.

The breadth of activities, even in 24 posts is enormous. What they have in common is the desire and challenge to elicit a response from alumni, to become more active in engaging with their alma mater. The pandemic came at a time of year common for graduation ceremonies so many of the challenges to alumni related to the newest alumni: the Class of 2020. The University of South Australia features a new graduate staging a virtual graduation at home, challenging other new graduates to complete—and post—their response to the 2020 graduation.²⁹ Many universities also requested words of wisdom or messages of support by alumni to this newest graduating class including at Simon Fraser University³⁰,

²³ Colby College Alumni Twitter post <https://twitter.com/ColbyCollege/status/1263218789988085760> 20th May 2020 [accessed on 21st May 2020]

²⁴ Alumni Association of the University of Michigan LinkedIn page post <https://www.linkedin.com/company/alumni-association-of-the-university-of-michigan/> 12/05/2020 [accessed on 31st May 2020]

²⁵ University of Oklahoma Alumni Twitter post https://twitter.com/OU_Alumni/status/1250428719367204865 6th May 2020 [accessed 8th May 2020]

²⁶ University of Syracuse Alumni Facebook page post <https://www.facebook.com/events/627066178022393/> 13th May 2020 [accessed 15th May 2020]

²⁷ Duke University Alumni Twitter post <https://twitter.com/DukeAlumni/status/1266354090021445633/photo/1> 29th May 2020 [accessed 01/06/2020]

²⁸ University of Waterloo Alumni Facebook page post <https://www.facebook.com/uwaterlootalumni> 15th May 2020 [accessed 16th May 2020]

²⁹ University of South Australia Facebook post <https://www.facebook.com/UniversitySA.Alumni> 17th April 2020 [accessed 20th April 2020]

³⁰ Simon Fraser University Alumni Twitter post <https://twitter.com/SFUalumni/status/1263533797712289794> 21st May 2020 [accessed 22nd May 2020]

Brown University³¹ and the University of Buffalo³² among others. The similarities of such activities around the same time also potentially shows the extent to which alumni relations professionals are learning from each other on good practice ideas and implementing them in their own university, though the evidence from this study does not point to or make such a conclusion.

Building on the alumni expertise under the ‘sharing’ theme, some of the posts were worded to explicitly ask for alumni engagement to impart their expertise, such as the Networking Nights at Oxford University.³³ As a creative response, as part of their ongoing posts related to the Central European University alumni reunion throughout May, the Alumni Office asked alumni via Twitter to consider the following request to impart their knowledge post-graduation: “Be a ‘book’ in the Living Library. Share your story of professional and personal growth with current students. Inspire your future fellow alumni.”³⁴

There were also traditional alumni benefits related to engagement that emerged in online posts during the early stages of the pandemic. Lehigh University offered a virtual book club³⁵, a common online alumni club growing in popularity during this pandemic. The University of Cape Town asked for alumni submission related to Africa Month in May³⁶, likely an activity that would have proceeded with or without the pandemic. The University of Greenwich’s popular Alumni Showcase event was reinvented online, asking alumni to participate in a range of events featuring alumni speakers and alumni-led activities³⁷. Keele University held a Virtual Alumni Day³⁸, while the University of Delaware held a virtual alumni reunion event³⁹, promoting alumni engagement in these activities through the social media posts. Since this very small study only focused in on the alumni related opportunities (and only one per institution) there was little follow-up, except for personal interest purposes, to see how popular or well-attended the webinars and virtual events were by the alumni community.

Other requests were designed to respond to the new state of normal under the lockdown, like asking alumni to post the view of their window (drawing from a popular Facebook group with this name) as was asked of the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology alumni⁴⁰ or to choose a

³¹ Brown University Alumni Twitter post <https://twitter.com/BrownAlumAssoc/status/1264737702823505920> 27th May 2020 [accessed 29th May 2020]

³² University of Buffalo Alumni Twitter post <https://twitter.com/ubalumni/status/1262065347018002432/photo/1> 17th May 2020 [accessed 19th May 2020]

³³ Oxford University Alumni Twitter post <https://twitter.com/oxfordalumni/status/1262356031994241025> 18th May 2020 [accessed 19th May 2020]

³⁴ Central European University Alumni Twitter post <https://twitter.com/CEUalumni/status/1263149455752257536> 20th May 2020 [accessed 22nd May 2020]

³⁵ Lehigh University Facebook page post <https://www.facebook.com/lehighalumni> 23rd April 2020 [accessed 25th April 2020]

³⁶ University of Cape Town Alumni Twitter post https://twitter.com/UCT_news/status/1266407851754487809 29th May 2020 [accessed 30th May 2020]

³⁷ University of Greenwich Alumni LinkedIn page post <https://www.linkedin.com/school/university-of-greenwich/> 20th May 2020 [accessed 20th May 2020]

³⁸ Keele University Alumni Twitter post <https://twitter.com/ForeverKeele/status/1259030379056553984> 9th May 2020 [accessed 10th May 2020]

³⁹ University of Delaware Alumni Facebook page post <https://www.facebook.com/events/172144154212072/> 20th May 2020 [accessed 21st May 2020]

⁴⁰ KAUST Alumni Twitter post https://twitter.com/KAUST_Alumni/status/1242752140784865280 25th March 2020 [accessed 26th March 2020]

specially designed university background for their next Zoom call, such as the backgrounds of the sunny campus at the University of Florida.⁴¹

This theme demonstrates the breath of activities that were offered during challenging time to engage alumni from a colouring contest for children of alumni at the University of Ottawa⁴² to the Solent University Virtual Alumni Quiz nights⁴³ to the University of Glasgow promoting the Spot-a-Bee app developed by an academic staff member, asking alumni to track and photograph bees.⁴⁴ The aim is to enable alumni to feel they are part of a wider alumni community even if they are only sitting at their home computer.

Snaring

This theme is not as sinister as it sounds. During this pandemic, even as this small study shows, offers alumni incredible value in staying in touch with their alma mater, sharing information, showing their care about their well-being and asking them to get involved. This involvement was also extended to include involvement as potential donors. While most people experienced the lockdown components of the pandemic timeframe studied here at home, there were others who had a different experience and the university wanted to offer alumni an opportunity to support those most vulnerable related to the university, both domestic and international students. Even in short social media posts, universities were able to make a compelling case for supporting students, such as the words in the Twitter post from the University of Aberdeen:

We are proud that our students have been changing the world for the better for 525 years. However, many are now facing severe financial hardship as a result of the devastating COVID-19 pandemic. Today we ask for your help as we launch the COVID-19 525 Bursary Fund to support our students in urgent need.⁴⁵

There was anecdotal evidence, scrolling through social media university content, that these COVID-19 funds were quickly established and promoted to gain support from alumni. The Hague University of Applied Sciences positioned its COVID-19 fund within its existing foundation activity, though still made a persuasive case of alumni donations:

The crisis is causing isolation, mental stress, concerns and sadness about loved ones. But it also has major financial consequences. Students of THUAS are among those affected financially. Students who have lost their (part-time) job. Students who parents aren't always able to assist financially. Students who aren't eligible for (additional) support... To support students who find themselves in serious difficulties due to circumstances beyond their control, THUAS Emergency Fund Foundation was founded in 1991 on the initiative of students.⁴⁶

⁴¹ University of Florida Alumni Twitter post

<https://twitter.com/ufalumni/status/1263199595573710850> 20th May 2020 [accessed 21st May 2020]

⁴² University of Ottawa Alumni Twitter post

<https://twitter.com/uOttawaAlumni/status/1263495131640070144> 21st May 2020 [accessed 22nd May 2020]

⁴³ Solent University Alumni Twitter post <https://twitter.com/SolentUniAlumni/status/1264104021855481859> 23rd May 2020 [accessed 23rd May 2020]

⁴⁴ University of Glasgow Alumni Facebook page post <https://www.facebook.com/UofGlasgowAlumni> 15th May 2020 [Accessed 17th May 2020]

⁴⁵ University of Aberdeen Alumni Facebook Page post

<https://www.facebook.com/AberdeenUniversityAlumni/videos/2320955254864682> 1st May 2020 [accessed 4th May 2020]

⁴⁶ The Hague University of Applied Sciences Alumni Twitter post

https://twitter.com/dehaagse_alumni/status/1253411919970463746 23rd April 2020 [accessed 25th April 2020]

This brief context offers prospective alumni donors with the information to decide—and perhaps one attached to an emotional response of wanting to help—to give to students in need.

The other major COVID-19 fund that emerged as part of this study was one for research within the university that is related to expanding the research and knowledge base on COVID-19 itself. Another Dutch institution, Leiden University, focused its fundraising appeal directly on COVID-19 research because one of its academic staff is recognised internationally for his work on virology.

The University of Melbourne asked for both research and student support funding as part of its COVID-19 appeal. The Tweet invited further alumni donations: “463 alumni, donors and staff across the [university] community have already come together to support our students and researchers by contributing to our COVID19 Emergency Appeal. Learn more about how you can contribute.”⁴⁷ The positioning of alumni as engaged members of the community, as noted in this tweet, is common among the social media appeals for funding by alumni via social media posts.

What can this small-scale study tell us about the future of alumni relations in higher education?

What is most striking is the resilience that is shown in the alumni relations sector to reinvent alumni work in new ways building on a traditional base (and often annual cycle) of events. These posts during these unprecedented times shows a university’s yearning to want to engage alumni. There is an element of caring, and altruism from the perspective of the university, a willingness to want to genuinely help alumni during such a challenging time.

The social media communication also shows the breadth of working on developing the relationship with alumni as outlined in Gallo alumni relationship building cycle.⁴⁸ The sharing themed activities show an outwardly building of trust, linked to the affinity stage of the cycle, through communications of information from what alumni could view as a credible source. Next, the caring and daring activities focus on ways alumni can engage for their own benefit, aligned to the engagement stage of this alumni relationship building cycle. Finally, universities did also make a case for enlisting support from alumni towards causes that directly align with the current pandemic context.

This article offers a very small snapshot of the alumni relations activity happening around the world during these changing times. The ability for alumni relations professional to pivot, innovate and to change during these most unprecedented times is commendable. The partnership with other parts of the campus to offer alumni activity is admirable, hopefully demonstrating a higher recognition of the crucial nature of a lifelong relationship with alumni for the institution. The ultimate purpose of this paper is to enable alumni relations professionals to consider the extent to which their social media presence during these times leans towards one theme or another or offers a balance between all four areas identified in this small-scale study.

This is a chance for alumni relations professionals to continue to look to peers across the globe for ideas, inspiration and strategies that may also be employed in their own university context. This paper is not to replace a definite need for broader empirical research to better understand the outcomes or perceived alumni engagement during the COVID-19 and beyond. This research base would contribute greatly to enable alumni relations strategies to be designed from an informed base. Suffice to say that alumni relations professionals should rest assured that the alumni relations profession is valuable, valued and has a dynamic and exciting future ahead!

⁴⁷ University of Melbourne Alumni Twitter post

<https://twitter.com/uomalumni/status/1263028116710096898> 20th May 2020 [accessed 21st May 2020]

⁴⁸ Gallo, M.L. (2012). ‘Beyond Philanthropy: Recognising the Value of Alumni to Benefit High Education Institutions.’ *Tertiary Education and Management*. 18:1, 41-55.

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