

Alumni Relations Building Blocks to a Successful Strategy

By Sandra Rincón, Co-Author of *Engaging International Alumni as Strategic Partners*

Introduction to the Nanocourse

ICARe-Alumni 2021 delivered a nanocourse to substitute its annual conference. With the planning committee and trainers, we developed the course to guide participants in developing an engagement strategy in support of their institutional missions. The course comprised of three separate interactive workshops: (1) Building Blocks for a Strategy, (2) Defining Purpose, (3) Developing a Road Map. Each workshop was delivered every two weeks with a separate feedback session which participants could use to ask questions and share their journey. The workshops were delivered on a Tuesday while the feedback sessions on a Friday. The main learning objectives for the workshops were to:

1. Recognize why developing a strategy is important for successful alumni relations and career development programs.
2. Identify and apply the essential building blocks for a strategy to your own organization.
3. Create a roadmap with clear purpose, key performance indicators that align with the needs of the alumni and the institution.

The workshops addressed the needs of professionals in advancement, alumni relations, fundraising, career development and community building. Each workshop included different trainers who developed their own content and learning outcomes guided by a coordinator for the whole course. The coordinator maintained an overview of the program and assured cohesion for all content and feedback sessions. The first session was divided into two parts. Part 1a referred to the building blocks for a strategy and Part 1b discussed Customer Personas, Consumer and Customer Journeys - what, why, how?.

Session 1a: Building Blocks for a Strategy

Given that I was the trainer for part 1a, the following text summarizes my presentation that included 4 main topics:

1. *What are the challenges and demands on higher education?*

As we embark in the fourth industrial revolution, many universities continue to face common challenges such as less governmental funding causing lower institutional budgets to work with. The global competition for talent has also forced universities to invest in marketing and recruitment as well as international services to attract not only their national students and academics but also those from abroad. This has been coupled with internationalization of higher education which demands that universities invest in creating international classrooms and curricula for their programs. Consequently, there is a greater demand for both international students to populate the intercultural classrooms and academic staff who can teach in other languages and help develop international curricula for their programs. Therefore brand and build institutional reputation abroad has also become important in the competition

for talent causing a growing pressure to participate in world rankings. As governmental funding decreases, public higher education institutions are forced to increasing tuition fees to pay for the extra costs of marketing initiatives and attracting and retaining international talent. This has also brought about an escalating student debt. On top of all these challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the education process of delivering in-person lectures and participating in on campus activities. In addition, the pandemic, recent environmental catastrophes and worldwide demonstrations for social justice have brought home the environmental crisis and the escalating need for economic and social inclusion of marginalized societies. These social and environmental challenges have accentuated the university's role in education and research but also in showing its societal impact.

2. *Why do we need alumni as strategic partners?*

Alumni can serve their alma mater in many roles to support education, research and service missions. In education, alumni can be ambassadors in helping brand and promote their alma mater back home and within their networks. They can help recruit other students. Alumni can be advisors to academics and staff developing curricula for their study programs. They can be guest lecturers or mentors for students when starting their careers but also for any alumni navigating the labor market. They can return for new education programs as part of their life-long learning. In research, doctorate alumni can help establish and strengthen partnerships with other universities for exchange or research projects. They can help recruit new doctorate students, academic staff and can co-author internationally. For their service mission, institutions can engage alumni as employers and entrepreneurs to find internships, mentors and jobs for their students and recent graduates. Alumni can open doors to the public and private sectors depending on their position in civil society. They can also function as fundraisers or investors in projects and donors for scholarships or other initiatives that may be appealing to them. Alumni who live abroad can be global citizens who can act as cultural liaisons.

3. *Where to start building an AR strategy?*

Building mutually beneficial relationships with alumni requires a long-term vision and commitment from both the institution and alumni. A strategy for an alumni relations program helps in clarifying *why* you want to engage alumni, *how* you want to engage them and *what* activities you may want to do to help to nurture the relationship over the years.

As a first step, you need to spend time collecting data from your university and your environment. Some of the basic information you will need to collect:

- Institutional: vision, mission, goals and pillar. What are the university's strengths, how does it define its identity and student identity?
- Facts & Figures: Number of current students, academics, alumni, programs, important stakeholders, budget available. number of international partners, target
- Context: type of institution, location, relation to city, country and globally. Does it have international partners? Does it focus in particular countries?

Second step is to conduct surveys and interviews with students, alumni, academic and administrative staff to find out how an alumni relations program could benefit them.

Third step is to analyze the data to find common purpose, goals and objectives. Then based on this analysis you are ready to start developing purpose, goals and objective for the program. These are thoroughly discussed in workshop 2 (Purpose) and workshop 3 (Roadmap).

4. *Benefits of Collaborating*

The process of surveying and interviewing internal stakeholders provides a strong base to determine who can be future partners in engaging alumni. Map those internal and external colleagues and professionals who can help in promoting the alumni relations program as well in building its activities. Depending on the purpose and goals of your program, you might consider working closely with the career development office to help find internships, mentors, jobs and to organize career fairs. Or you might want to team up with the international office in helping find partner universities, set up research collaborations, and an ambassadors program to help recruit international students. Involving students in any activity where they can volunteer is nurturing future alumni volunteers. Remember students are enrolled for a limited amount of time while alumni can be engaged life-long.

Conclusion

Building relationships with alumni requires investment, mutual benefits and keeping your stakeholders' perspectives in mind. An alumni relations program needs to invest in building common purpose and commitment with internal and external stakeholders. It demands financial investment in staff, database software, and activities. It should have a clear purpose, objectives, a plan and a way to measure its success and return on investment. Success also depends on engaging not only alumni but also students, academic and administrative staff and external stakeholders. Therefore, find the mutual benefits for them by listening to their needs and interests. Offer opportunities to continue learning and networking. When engaging alumni volunteers be aware that they have other commitments and that they need to have clearly defined responsibilities and tasks. Make alumni your loyal allies by engaging them in meaningful activities that also speak to their values and interests. Every alumni is a treasure chest full of creative opportunities and inspiration to us all.