



Nationwide Alumni Survey:

Opportunities to Refine Existing Strategies and Grow Alumni Engagement

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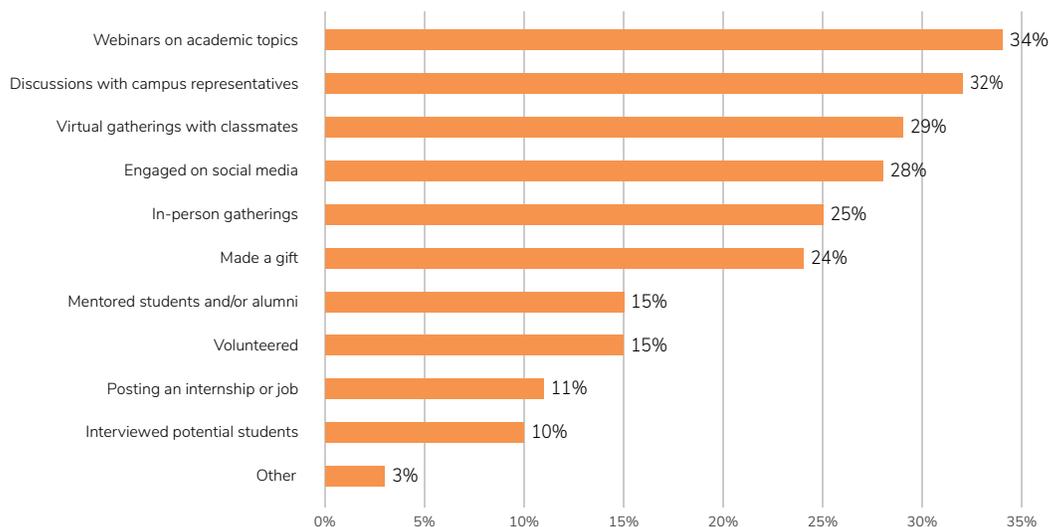
Goals of This Study

Building alumni and donor engagement continues to be a moving target with the effects of the pandemic as well as shifting expectations of graduates. To assist alumni engagement and fundraising professionals in developing and refining strategies, an alumni survey was released in June 2022. The survey was designed to identify changing communication preferences, including the type of content that is of most interest; to deepen the understanding of the types of programs that garner the highest interest, as well as to identify interest in and the potential for supporting the institution financially. Over 2,000 individuals who graduated from a two- or four-year higher education institution in the United States responded. The results highlight strong interest in engagement with their alma mater and opportunities for institutions to continue refining existing engagement strategies and to develop new approaches to broaden and deepen alumni engagement.

Engagement During the Pandemic

Overall, engagement improved during the pandemic based on survey results, as a higher percentage of respondents indicated that engagement with their alma mater grew during the pandemic (14%) than those for whom it decreased (10%). Nearly half of respondents (48%) indicated that they had engaged in an activity or action over the last year, with the majority participating in events and webinars (as indicated in the chart below), while 28% engaged on social media, 24% reported making a gift to the institution, and 15% mentored students or alumni or volunteered their time.

Participation in Activities in the Last 12 Months



Sample limited to those who participated in an activity. Sample size = 1,140

Only 18% of all respondents stated that they are not interested in connecting with their alma mater, although this was higher for older populations (31% of individuals who graduated in the 1970s). This is another indication that institutions should continue to leverage these types of opportunities to foster increased engagement.

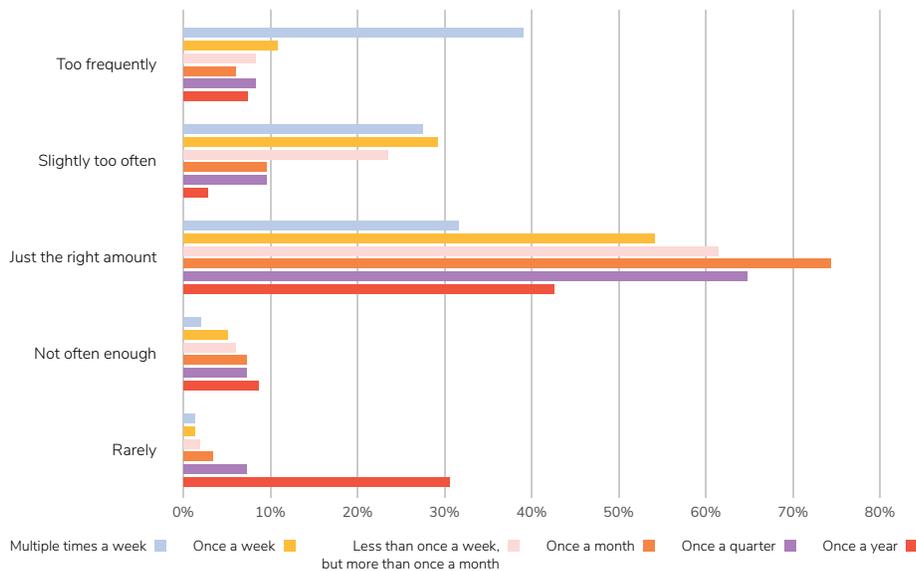
Communications: Content, Frequency, and More

Twenty-four percent of respondents do not recall receiving any information from their alma mater in the last twelve months, whether emails, postal mail, text messages, or other outreach. This continues to highlight the data gap that institutions experience and that they must continue to dedicate time and energy to maintaining updated contact information to effectively grow engagement. The focus should be on email acquisition for these efforts, given that email has become the primary method of communication.

Based on the survey, email is also the preferred way that alumni want to stay in touch with their alma mater, with 61% indicating a preference for email, followed by social media at 28%, and postal mail at only 22%. This low interest in postal mail may present opportunities to further reduce print communications. There are differences by class year, with 19% of recent alumni preferring postal mail, while 27% of those who graduated in the 1970s prefer postal mail (55% preferred email).

In considering email communications solely, 28% report not receiving any emails from their alma mater, which, even though not as high as expected, still indicates an opportunity for email address acquisition. However, when asked about the frequency of communications, 25% of respondents indicated that they receive emails once a quarter or less often from their alma mater. Respondents indicated a preference for more frequent communications. While this may be an indication that respondents do not see all of the communications, it also indicates an opportunity for institutions to increase communications. As in prior surveys, respondents continue to feel that receiving an email once a month, or more than once a month but less than once a week is the preferred amount of communications, with 74% in favor of monthly emails (although 10% feel it is not enough), and 61% feeling that less than once a week but more than once a month is the right frequency (only 7% feel it is not enough, while 23% feel it is slightly too often).

Frequency of Communications Compared to Preference



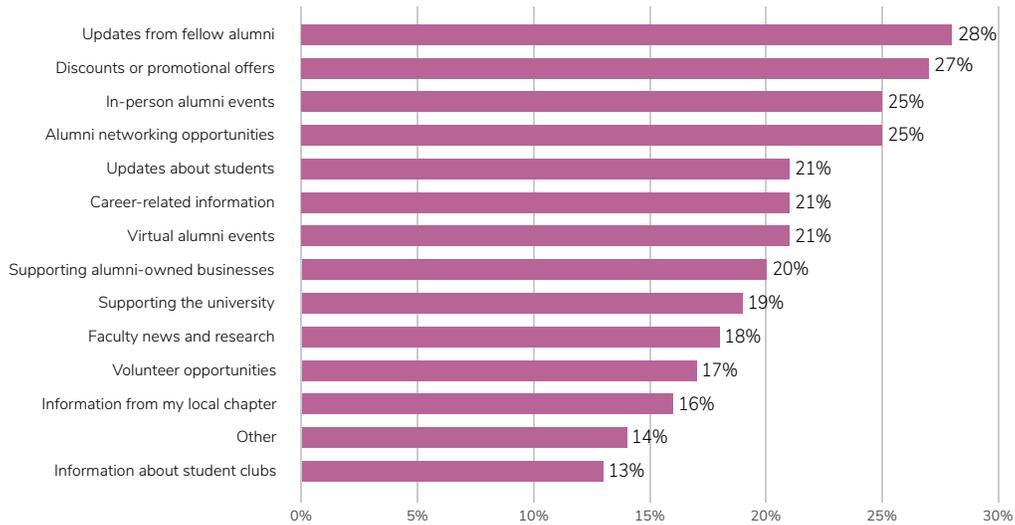
Sample limited to those who receive emails from their alma mater. Sample size = 1,745

Institutions sending emails once a week should consider that 39% of respondents indicated that this was slightly too often or too frequent. Most respondents indicated that receiving emails multiple times a week is too frequent (39%) or slightly too often (27%), with only 31% indicating that it was the right amount. In these cases, opportunities to reduce communications should be identified to better align with constituent expectations.

Content of Interest

Providing relevant and interesting content leads to alumni being more likely to continue to engage with email communications, therefore deepening their relationship with the institution. Thirty-eight percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the type of content they are currently receiving is interesting and relevant, while only 19% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This is a positive indication of content being communicated while indicating room for improvement.

Type of Content of Interest



Sample size = 2,365

The type of content that most resonates with alumni is updates from fellow alumni, followed by information on discounts or promotional offers, in-person alumni events, and then alumni networking opportunities. Based on this, institutions could incorporate more alumni profiles and other news about alumni into regular communications. Additionally, if there are discounts available to alumni across the institution, this should be highlighted, based on the strong interest. Given how much time has been spent in the virtual world, it is also likely gratifying to see interest in in-person alumni events (25%) — and higher interest than in virtual alumni events (21%), which are topics that should also be included. Finally, for any program that includes a networking element, this should be highlighted to a greater degree to take advantage of the interest in this type of information. Overall, institutions should continue to include a variety of content in the e-newsletter, including some content that is of comparatively lower interest, but this content should not be the priority. Making some small changes to how information is communicated and what content is being shared can lead to stronger overall engagement.

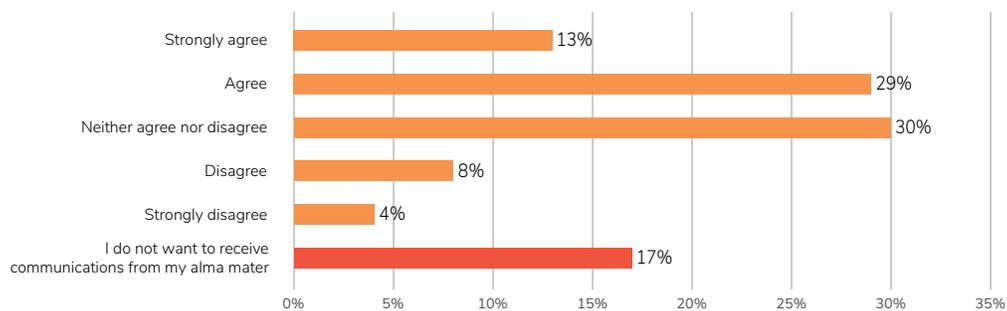
Recent alumni (those who graduated between 2013 and 2022) interests differ somewhat from the overall population, with in-person alumni events (30%) and discounts or promotional offers (30%) seeing the highest interest, followed by alumni networking opportunities (29%), career-related information (28%), virtual alumni events (25%), and volunteer opportunities (25%). Other than discounts or promotional offers, recent alumni are much more interested in the other content types, with differences of between 4% and 7%. Additionally, recent alumni are not as interested in updates about fellow alumni, providing another way to tailor communications to this group. This is helpful for institutions to consider in refining recent alumni communications and engagement strategies.

Given that a high percentage of recent alumni and one in five alumni overall are interested in career-related information, more detail was sought on the type of career-related information. Among those who expressed interest in career-related details, information on networking opportunities was of highest interest (59%), followed by job postings (52%), information about a job search or resume tips (43%), as well as insights into which career fields are hiring (42%). This presents an opportunity for institutions to more proactively share career-related information and highlight content that is potentially being created by other areas of campus, such as career services. This is also another way to further personalize communications and provide relevant content to graduates.

Interest in Personalized Communications

Segmentation has long been an area of focus for alumni engagement and development operations, as the more targeted a message, the more likely it will elicit engagement. However, there are sometimes questions about whether alumni will be negatively surprised by personalization based on major, activities, etc.

I would like my alma mater to send very personalized communications based on what I studied, student organizations, etc.



Sample size = 2,365

As indicated in the chart above, 42% of respondents are interested in receiving very personalized communications, with an additional 30% expressing no preference. Therefore, only a small percentage are not in favor of deep personalization, leading to an additional opportunity for institutions to increase engagement through more targeted, personalized communications.

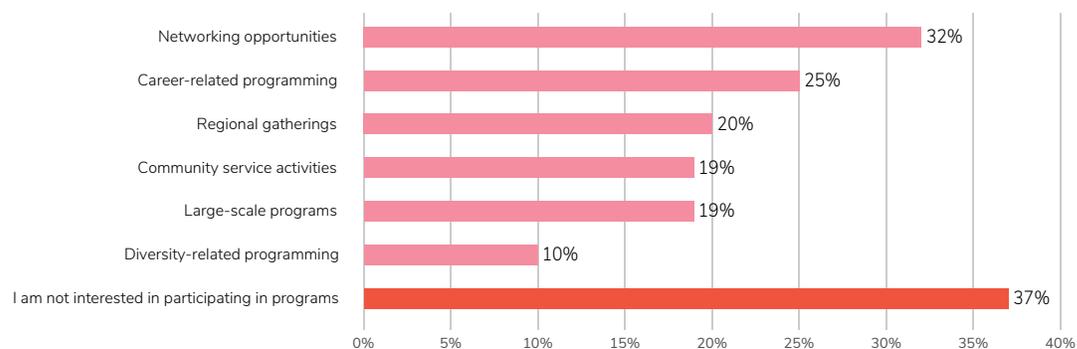
Opportunities

- Continue to identify better email addresses and review opportunities to further reduce print communications — especially to alumni who are engaging via email and more recent graduates
- Review frequency of communications and make adjustments based on constituency expectations and preferences
- Identify changes to content based on areas of highest interest, including alumni profiles, information on in-person events, and discounts or promotional offers, if applicable
- Develop targeted recent alumni communications, including networking opportunities and career-related information
- Partner with areas across the institution to provide career-related content to alumni, including networking information, job postings, and insights on how to change careers
- Continue to deepen personalization in communications to foster higher engagement

Interest in Programming to Drive Deeper Engagement

Alumni programming continues to be a key aspect of any engagement strategy, with the pandemic presenting an opportunity to offer different types of programs — not just virtual programs but also the types of activities being offered. As more in-person programming returns, institutions should review the types of programs offered and identify potential adjustments to draw both new and returning participants.

Types of Programs of Interest



Sample size = 2,347

Sixty-three percent of respondents expressed interest in at least one type of alumni program, which is a comparatively high percentage and an indication that they are looking to their alma mater for these types of options. Of highest interest were programs providing networking opportunities (32%), followed by career-related programming (25%), both of which were also relatively high on the preferred content list. Overall, 42% of all respondents indicated interest in one of these two types of programs. Moreover, 60% of all recent alumni respondents (graduates of the classes of 2013 through 2022) indicated interest in either or both of these. Therefore, these types of programs should be an area of focus for institutions as part of the overall programming strategy.

There was a similar level of interest in regional gatherings, community service activities, and large-scale programs (defined as homecoming, reunions, and similar events). However, this also differed somewhat for recent alumni as this group expressed higher interest in community service programs (28%) than in large-scale programs (24%) or in regional gatherings (23%).

Based on the survey, institutions should continue to offer virtual events while also reincorporating in-person events, as 33% of respondents interested in events indicated a preference for virtual events. While a slightly higher percentage (39%) preferred in-person events, it seems that a mix of programming is the best approach moving forward to meet expectations. In addition, 29% would attend either type of event, giving institutions large populations from which to draw.

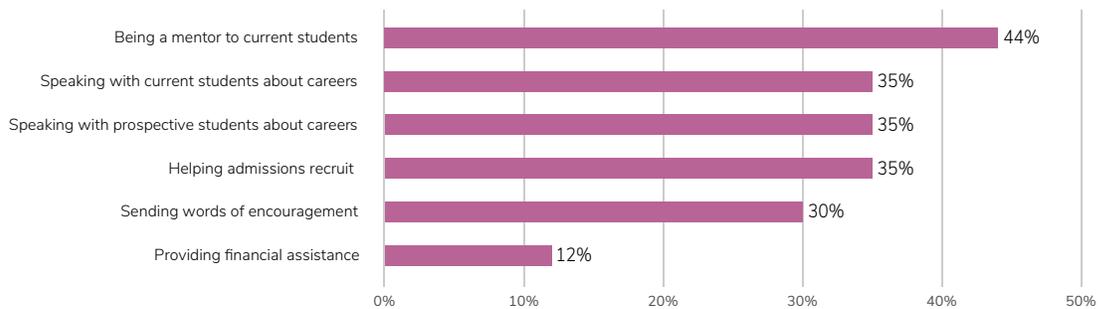
Opportunities

- Continue to offer a variety of programming, including both virtual and in-person options
- Identify occasions to offer networking opportunities and career-oriented programming for all alumni, and especially for more recent graduates
- Add community service options to offered programming as this is likely to especially resonate with younger graduates

Alumni Are Interested in Helping Current and Prospective Students

Over half of respondents (57%) expressed interest in helping current or prospective students, which is a higher percentage than those interested in participating in programming. Therefore, institutions have an opportunity to identify more ways to connect alumni with students — and prospective students. The highest percentage of those interested (44%) would help mentor current students, while around 35% each expressed interest in speaking with current or prospective students about their careers, and in helping admissions recruit students. Alumni engagement offices should proactively seek ways to involve alumni in the career support of current students, whether by encouraging faculty members to include alumni as guest speakers, partnering with career services on programming for alumni and students, or in other ways.

Interest in Helping Current or Prospective Students



Sample size = 1,315

A partnership with admissions should also be formed or expanded given the interest among alumni to speak with prospective students about careers and to help with recruitment of new students. In the current challenging recruitment environment, alumni are another option available to help raise awareness of the institution and also build connections with prospective students and their parents to encourage application and eventually yield.

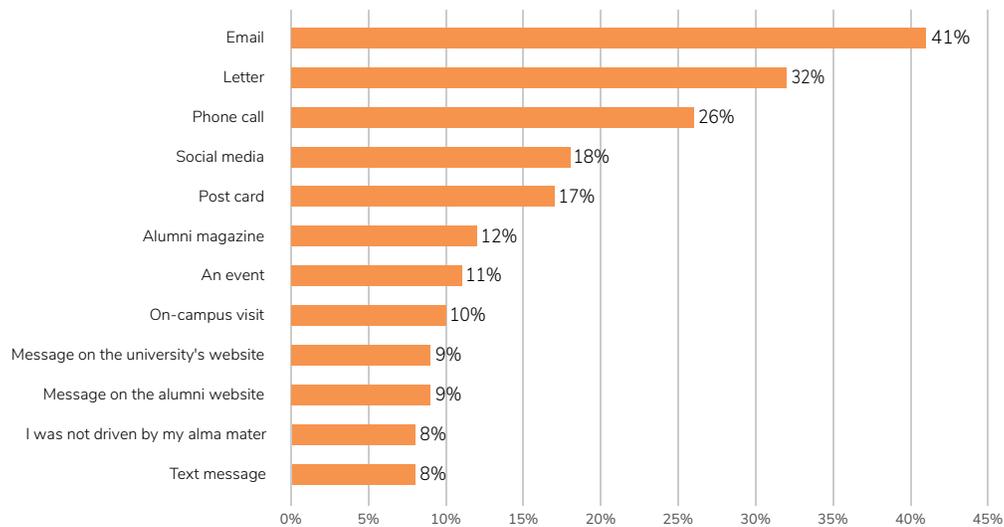
Opportunities

- Identify additional ways to connect alumni with students, including mentoring students, serving as guest speakers, or sharing their career journeys in other ways
- Develop partnerships with admissions to include alumni in recruitment efforts and other admissions activities

Strategies to Grow Financial Support

Nearly 50% of respondents reported being never givers — never having made a gift to their alma mater. However, 13% stated they had made a gift in the current year, while 16% indicated that they made a gift in the prior year. When asked what prompted their donation (asked of those who had previously given), the majority indicated that it was prompted by email communication (40%), while lower percentages indicated that it was due to a letter (31%) or phone call (26%). These cover the primary solicitation strategies, but notable is the high mention of email prompting donations. When reviewing this data by decade, there are some differences with older decades (1980s and prior being prompted primarily by letter), while donations from the 1990s and younger decades were primarily prompted through email communications. Institutions should therefore continue to place a greater focus on email solicitations while also continuing with print solicitations and phone calls — although perhaps to a slightly lesser degree or for subsets of the population.

My Donation Was Prompted by:



Sample size = 1,199

There were a number of other options that were mentioned by a comparatively small number of respondents as ways that donations are prompted. Notable is that text messaging was mentioned by the fewest number of respondents, which is likely indicative of a combination of lower overall use and an indication that text messaging is not the best approach for solicitations.

When considering the likelihood of support in the next twelve months, the majority (53%) of respondents were very unlikely or somewhat unlikely to make a gift. However, 15% indicated that they would be very likely to give, while 16% stated they are somewhat likely to give to their alma mater. This indicates openness to giving and offers an opportunity for institutions to continue to adjust solicitation strategies to foster support.

When crafting solicitations, there continues to be strong interest in supporting funds that help students directly, with over 50% of respondents indicating interest in this area, followed by the annual fund (26%) and by support of specific student organizations (19%). Institutions should therefore focus on the impact of donations on current students as the primary case for support and ensure that there are student-oriented options featured on online giving forms.

Opportunities

- Continue to refine solicitation strategies to focus on the impact of donations on students, including reflecting this option on online giving forms
- Continue to review solicitation vehicles, potentially increasing the focus on email solicitation compared to print solicitation for more recent graduates or other subsets of the population

Final Thoughts

Alumni are clearly interested in engaging with their alma mater and are looking to their institution as a provider of various types of information and opportunities. The more that institutions can meet alumni expectations, the deeper their engagement, and the more likely that alumni will also support the institution financially. So much has changed over the last several years given the pandemic, and institutions have an opportunity now to reset and combine aspects of what worked well prior to the pandemic with lessons learned during the pandemic to continue to grow engagement while also using this data to refine strategies and ensure that they are meeting expectations of their alumni.

Methodology

Data was collected through a nationwide survey conducted in June 2022 using a national survey platform. To qualify for the survey, respondents had to indicate that they had completed a degree at a higher education institution in the United States. A total of 2,365 responses were considered valid and used in the analysis.

About the Author

Mirko Widenhorn, Ed.D., is senior director of engagement strategy at Anthology. Widenhorn joined the Anthology team in 2013, bringing over 11 years of higher education experience. Most recently, he was the director of alumni relations and annual giving at Wilkes University. In his role at Anthology, he works closely with customers on alumni engagement scoring projects while also focusing on thought leadership for higher education. Widenhorn is a Drew University graduate and completed his Ed.D. in higher education administration at Wilkes University, focusing on whether giving differs based on participation in different types of alumni programming.

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