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Successful community college alumni programs

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As state funding for community colleges continues not to keep pace with programming needs, more community colleges are taking the initiative to seek funding from private sources. Four-year colleges and universities have long used alumni programs as major outside sources of funding. Since a high percentage of today's students embark on their higher education experience at the community college, it is natural for more two-year institutions to begin alumni programs. Based on in-depth interviews with directors of successful community college alumni programs, this article suggests "best practices" for community colleges that are considering the development of an alumni program. It offers practical and relevant ideas for practitioners and institutional leaders, including changes being planned in existing programs to ensure continued success.

Introduction

It has always been a challenge and a conundrum for community college leaders that so many community college graduates who attain high-level positions often forget the community college when it is time to donate money. These successful people who often began their academic careers in the community college usually give their allegiance—and their money—to the four-year institution to which they transferred (Sullenger, 1976). Today, however, almost half of all college undergraduates in the United States attend community colleges; and these students represent future "success stories" which should become a strong source of expertise, networking, community

college advocacy, and fund-raising. Community colleges must do a better job of maintaining relationships with their alumni, not only for financial purposes, but also to help inform the community, the nation, and our political leaders how community colleges are making a difference in millions of people's lives (Herbin, Dittman, Herbert, & Ebben 2006).

There have, however, been few empirical studies investigating successful community college alumni programs. Studies specifically focusing on the factors that affect the success of a community college alumni program are almost non-existent. This study, therefore, examined successful alumni programs in the North Carolina community college system with the goal of finding "best practices" that could assist practitioners attempting to start or revitalize community college alumni programs elsewhere. The analysis investigates the factors that contribute to the success of community college alumni programs, including how successful programs were established, how they are currently operating, and any planned changes to ensure continued success in the future.

Background

In North Carolina, community college foundation directors iden-

tified alumni relations as a priority area for which they would like more assistance (Currier, 2006). Alumni programs within the community college system are a relatively new trend (Kerns & Witter, 1997). Forman (1989) presented an historical account of the first alumni organization in 1792 at Yale University. The administrators at Yale appointed class secretaries to gather information for publication in a series of newsletters to be mailed to alumni. These newsletters and activities quickly led to two outcomes: the solicitation of alumni for donations, and the creation of a local club and chapter. The next alumni program was formed during the 1821 graduation commencement of Williams College where a society of alumni organized to influence and encourage support from those the College had educated. Soon other universities followed the lead and began creating their own alumni programs. Kerns and Witter (1997) named Princeton as the first organization to set a goal of trying to raise \$100,000 in 1832. The first public university to form an alumni organization was the University of Michigan in 1897. The first reported date for an alumni program in a two-year college is 1935, but the potential of the alumni program was never fully understood until recently; sixty percent of two-year college alumni programs have been estab-

lished since 1980 (Kerns & Witter, 1997).

An article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* indicated community colleges are now beginning to acknowledge the need to compete by looking to alumni programs and other private fund raising as government funds cannot sustain their operations (Strout, 2006). Community colleges are realizing that private fund-raising from individuals is absolutely necessary. It has been predicted that the money raised by two-year colleges will double in the next 10 years, as it has in the last decade at four-year institutions (Strout, 2006). Many development officers are shifting some focus onto alumni for support as an important step in raising private awareness (Strout, 2006). Community colleges report fund-raising as one of the top priorities for establishing an alumni program (Kerns & Witter, 1997). Students give back to their college when they feel they are part of an association. Webb (1989) stated, "alumni constitute perhaps the greatest single resource on which an institution can depend" (p. 1), and alumni can be a great resource for advice, advocacy, student recruitment, and financial support.

Methodology

The current study was conducted using a multiple case study ap-

proach to examine factors related to the success of community college alumni programs. A qualitative approach was chosen in order to obtain in-depth, detailed data on success factors. Data on community college alumni programs is scarce, and it was determined that qualitative analysis of exemplary cases would produce more useful findings than quantitative depictions of the average community college alumni program. A qualitative study was advantageous because the nature of the method reduces constraints of predetermined categories, allows openness and detail, and generates large amounts of in-depth, practical information which could aid program directors.

The multiple case study approach identified factors such as how successful programs were established, how they currently operate, and plans for ensuring future success. The Coordinator of Foundation Support and Alumni Affairs at the North Carolina Community College System identified six community colleges in North Carolina with highly successful alumni programs. For the purposes of the study "highly successful" was defined as any alumni program with 10% or more active alumni from the possible pool of alumni within the past 10 years.

The Director of the Alumni Program at each of the six in-

stitutions was, then contacted and a face-to-face interview was scheduled. The interviews were semi-structured with a set of consistent questions to initiate the interviews, and follow-up questions which allowed the respondents to interject perceptions or ideas they felt added to the success of their alumni program.

North Carolina was chosen because of a higher response rate from that state's foundation directors on a nationwide survey conducted for the Council for Resource Development (Herbin, Dittman, Herbert, & Ebben 2006). Intensity sampling was used to select cases that were information rich in data and would deepen the understanding of practitioners interested in starting or reinvigorating community college alumni

programs through reasonable and "do-able" examples and experiences (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996).

Eight people from six different colleges were asked to participate based upon the recommendation of the Coordinator of Foundation Support and Alumni Affairs at the North Carolina Community College System because of their work with a successful alumni program at their college. Seven people from five colleges were actually interviewed because one college declined to participate. Three of the five colleges were located in rural counties, and the majority of the colleges were founded in the late 1950s and 1960s. Four of the directors interviewed had the word "Alumni" in their title. Table 1 describes the participating colleges.

Table 1. Description of participants

College	Average number of students	Year founded	Rural/urban	Title responsible for alumni activities
A	13,000	1970	Urban	Coordinator, Institutional Advancement and Alumni Services
B	9,000	1963	Rural	Foundation and Coordinator of Alumni Relations
C	16,000	1958	Urban	Coordinator of Institutional Advancement
D	9,000	1965	Rural	Director of Institutional Advancement/Foundation and Alumni Relations
E	16,000	1958	Rural	Coordinator of Foundation and Alumni Activities

Data Collection

Once the community college alumni directors to be interviewed were selected, initial contact by telephone asked the directors to participate in the study. Each director was then mailed a packet of information including a cover letter, summary of the purpose of the study, a consent form, and a sample of the interview objectives.

Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with the director of the alumni program at the five identified community colleges in North Carolina generated the data. An interview guide was used to direct the interviewer, but each interviewee was encouraged to interject his or her perceptions or ideas. The guide was based on ideas found in the literature and various suggestions from a panel of interested community college leaders who served as reviewers. The interviewer had the flexibility to pursue unexpected topics, an important benefit since community college alumni programs is still an emerging topic in the professional literature.

The interviews were tape-recorded, and the average time for each interview was an hour. A contact summary sheet summarized what was learned from each interview, and a document summary form collected data from related documents which were

reviewed. The data was first analyzed individually, and then comparatively across the cases to make generalizations about themes relating to certain success factors. Themes emerged from a coding process, and pertinent documents were reviewed in order to provide triangulation or the use of multiple data collection procedures and sources as evidence of validity for the qualitative research findings (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). The data found in the documents, the few research articles available, and the comments from the interested individuals were compared to the data collected during the interviews.

Findings

Each college had varying degrees of success and some were definitely more successful than others. Some of the colleges had formal alumni associations; others had no formal association. Some were solely for “friend-raising”; whereas, others were only focused on “fund-raising”; most programs were attempting to generate both friends and funds. Regardless of the structure and initial objective, all successful programs had an advisory board made up of active college alumni, college faculty, soon-to-be alumni (i.e., current students) and at least one college administrator. The advisory board established the program mission and goals.

The main reasons given for initiating the alumni programs defined as successful include: fund-raising opportunities, building a volunteer base, involving alumni as a recruitment tool, building friendships, and developing alumni as advocates for the college. For four out of the five programs interviewed in the study, the community college president initiated the alumni program, usually in conjunction with the celebration of the anniversary of the founding of the college, the appointment of the president, or some other special anniversary.

The alumni programs named as successful are currently operating in a variety of structures. Three colleges have formal associations, but only one charges alumni dues. All the alumni programs exist in relation to either the college foundation or the development office. The expenditures and personnel requirements include a full-time staff person who has worked with special development projects. Some of the colleges use work-study students to conduct research for building a database of potential alumni. The most common efforts to reach potential alumni have been reunions, direct mailings, telephone calls, and recruiting at local community and campus-based events. The successful programs all declare that the two main benefits of an alumni

program are the ability to generate funds and produce volunteers for the college.

When asked about their plans for ensuring future success for the alumni programs, interviewees discussed improving websites, continuing to build more sophisticated databases (an accurate mailing list with names, addresses, and e-mail addresses is vital), targeting alumni events to academic disciplines rather than academic years, establishing an Alumni Hall of Fame, holding customized alumni events related to athletics or leisure activities (e.g., golf tournaments, presentation of the Distinguished Alumnus of the Year Award, etc.), and learning lessons from past success and failures. Additionally, every respondent spoke about the need to continue connecting fund-raising and friend-raising as standard operating procedure.

Discussion

The present qualitative study attempts to identify factors that contribute to the success of a community college alumni program in North Carolina, including how successful programs were established, how they currently operate, and plans for ensuring future success. One of the most common comments was that an alumni program is for both fund raising and friend building. That indi-

cates a personal side to the alumni program which allows people an opportunity to participate if they wish to do so. The question then occurs of how to define a community college alumnus. Does an alumnus need to be a graduate of the community college, or can she/he be someone who “found success” at the college and benefitted from attending? The broader view of an alumnus being someone who attended the college and benefitted from its services fits well with the community college mission. The “open access” mission of the community college inevitably means that many who benefit from the college do not necessarily graduate. Since the community college added value to these people’s lives—and it is conceivable that the community college was the most important institution of higher education they will ever attend—it is sensible to consider them community college alumni even if they did not graduate from a degree or certificate program.

Successful community college alumni programs must have the support and attention of the college president and a strong, consistent budgetary commitment if the program is to be sustainable (Van Houten, 1989). Presidents must understand the importance of alumni-related capital campaigns including efforts for funding both

capital and operations expenditures. Chief executives must also consider whether their college can sustain fund-raising techniques such as alumni donor clubs (e.g., a \$1,000 per year “President’s Circle”) in which the personal participation of institutional leadership is critical (Miller, 1994).

It will be informative to revisit the same college alumni programs interviewed for the study in five years to see if the same factors continue to be important. It is only after a community college foundation is well established that a successful alumni program can be developed, and Perkins (1990) and others indicate it takes at least ten years to determine if an alumni program will truly be successful. All of the programs participating in the study were less than five years old; in another five years other suggestions for success may emerge. Additionally, most of the community colleges in the study were located in rural areas, where resource development is most difficult and often most needed. Leaders of rural community colleges, who face unique and especially difficult financial challenges, must be particularly aware of the potential benefits of a well run alumni program (Williams, Pennington, Couch, & Dougherty, 2007)

One of the most important factors when establishing an alumni program is patience. The organi-

zation is a long-term effort, and college administrators must be willing to commit both personnel and financial resources to the program for the long term. Each participant stressed that results do not happen overnight. A new program takes time to cultivate, but it is a worthwhile effort. As Sullenger (1976) advised over 30 years ago, “Think positive, be positive, and relate positively” and your

alumni program will be successful (p. 178). Community college leaders have learned to be patient, and they recognize that alternative funding sources—those that go beyond taxpayers and tuition-payers—will be needed for success in the future. “College foundations will be pursued with increasing vigor” (Cohen & Brawer, 2008, p 464), and alumni programs must play a critical role.

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