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Achieving Student Success through Alumni Re-activation:
A Virtual Interpersonal Engagement Approach

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Abstract

The 2020-2021 academic year was far from ordinary and presented numerous challenges, including the ability to support student success in a virtual learning environment. We discovered remote learning enabled our ability to maximize a previously underutilized resource in attaining student success, our alumni. Utilizing a model developed by Travis York, that includes student engagement, satisfaction, and post college performance in addition to more traditional measures (academic achievement, learning objectives, and persistence) as attaining student success, we present three virtual contexts where alumni interacted with current students. These interpersonal engagements achieved positive impact from both students and alumni as evidenced by student quantitative and qualitative surveys, event attendance records, and alumni reflection. Highly applicable to any program with an alumni base, we conclude with considerations for future collaborations between alumni and students.

Introduction

In the preface to the fall 2020 *Journal of Access, Retention & Inclusion in Higher Education*, Denise Lujan, President of the National Organization for Student Success, wrote:

> Those of us in higher education use "student success" frequently, particularly when discussing retention and degree completion. However, I suspect that we have many different definitions of student success and what it looks like for institutions, faculty and staff, and students. The beauty of these differing definitions is that we can focus on our piece and define what student success means and looks like to us in a way that supports the overall mission and vision of our institution. Focusing on what we can impact allows for the innovation and creation of programs and policies that improve student academic and professional success (p. v).

Lujan's recognition of linking "student success" with institutional vision and mission affords a myriad of innovative approaches to enable students to experience fulfillment within the university context.

Higher education operations were hardly spared by extensive disruptors due to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and 2021. As we scrambled to discover strategies for providing meaningful educational experiences and maintain our commitments for student success, it became apparent that socio-emotional needs in our community of learners called for just as much attention as the pedagogical considerations needed for effective content delivery. Committed to student success, we asked ourselves three questions: 1) how can we create meaningful moments for interpersonal engagement?; 2) how can we provide experiences that will move learners beyond disengaged listening to a pre-recorded lecture?; and 3) what can be done to preserve student success given a completely virtual curricular, co-curricular, and service college experience?

To answer these questions and answer Lujan's call, we considered our available resources. Harvard economist Claudia Golden (2016) noted the power of human capital and how investments made in individuals beyond financial incentive – such as education, skill development, and experience – results in greater productivity. A treasure-trove of riches, beyond financial contributions, rests in human capital currency that members of a community and its stakeholders can contribute to enrich others and, in our circumstance, promote student success. We soon rediscovered a population of untapped stakeholders: our alumni. Previously not considered, largely due to geographic distance, we recognized in a state of remote learning our program's alumni could contribute gifts of social/network relationships, intellect, and life experiences in a virtual educational model to drive student success outcomes.

Utilizing a model of student success that includes student engagement, satisfaction, and post college performance as markers of student success, we collected correspondence with participating alumni and anonymous surveys completed by undergraduate students at the end of the academic year. The qualitative and quantitative feedback indicated appreciation for the interactions in three settings: honors courses, the co-curricular Honors Student Association (H.S.A.), and undergraduate recruitment. In short, the community experience for our current students grew and diversified through the time investment from our alumni. In this paper, we first review the insights and definitional perspectives offered by York and his colleagues, outline the methodology for collecting data that aligns with markers of student success, and then discuss how alumni contributed to student success even in a virtual context. As a programmatic benefit beyond immediate impact, alumni as stakeholders in the program influence student success and often inspire current students to follow suit through their own engagement when they transition to alumni status. We begin with a brief overview of our context.

Student Success: Our Context

By a more traditional definition of "student success", viewed through the lenses of recruitment, retention, degree achievement and academic completion, the primary cohort of students we serve fairs well. We annually recruit eighty incoming first year students. For over a decade we consistently meet enrollment targets, enjoy an over 95% retention rate, an over 80% four-year graduation rate, and 98% graduate with a minimum *cum laude* (3.25) grade point average. We hold particular pride in our diversity. The incoming class of fall 2021, represents

forty-one different academic majors, self-identifies as 70% women, 30% men and 24.4% underrepresented minority (URM). We attribute programmatic success to the emphasis we place on community building. This focus stems from our institution's strategic plan, which aims to "enhance meaningful and engaging experiences among and between students, faculty, staff, alumni, and local communities to promote lifelong learning" (WCUPA Strategic Plan, 2021). Such learning pathways that produce student success include community engagement, professional development, diversity and inclusion, and sustainability. The COVID pandemic put the goal of community engagement to a monumental test.

The National Conference on State Legislatures reported in spring 2020, more than 1,300 colleges and universities across all fifty states canceled in-person classes or shifted to online-only instruction (Smalley, 2021). According to data gathered by the College Crisis Initiative (2021), as quickly as fall 2020, 44% of institutions developed fully or primarily online instruction and 21% used a hybrid model. Our institution shifted to remote learning from mid-March 2020 through the summer of 2021; the move clearly thwarted community. Indeed, this sense of loss prompted educational theorist, Michael W. Ledoux, to cast a skeptical eye towards online education's ability to achieve learning outcomes and cautioned that learning, delivered in a remote context, "must acknowledge factors beyond the confines of a course to create a learning community" (196). In spring 2020, and throughout the pandemic, we faced a crisis moment of both student engagement and satisfaction. While never discarding student success as grounded in academic achievement, perseverance, and acquisition of educational outcomes, we needed to heighten our energy towards inspiring student motivation. An answer came to us through increased intentional utilization of alumni emphasizing interpersonal engagement.

At the forefront of negotiating the obstacles presented by COVID, we retained our deep dedication to preserving transformational experiences with a principle we call *interpersonal engagement*. From our previous work (Dean & Jendzurski, 2012 & 2013), we found that transformational learning occurs when students critically think and subsequently reflect upon personal connections, conversations, and other interactions shared with cultural others. In the interpersonal engagement process, students: 1) listen to the stories of others, 2) probe for additional insight through questions they pose in face-to-face dialogue, 3) devote time to a process of focused reflection following the exchange of information (Dean & Jendzurski, 2012 & 2013). Historically, the centrality of interpersonal engagement has remained a cornerstone of transformational leadership success among our students and graduated alumni. With an understanding of our context, we turn to supporting literature.

Literature Review

Existing research, particularly from scholars in education and business, champion the value alumni afford their institutions. Much attention is devoted to financial and philanthropic relationships (Stevick, 2010; Tanis, 2020; Tuma et al., 2020). The implied impact of financial support from generous alumni, as seen in areas such as endowing programs and funding scholarships, unquestionably heightens opportunities for student success, but there is scant research to show that financial contributions from alumni directly affect student success.

Beyond a financial focus, growing research exists on ways alumni engagement directly correlates with various aspects of student success. Research crediting alumni interaction as driving student success include increased: a) career opportunities, mentoring, and networking experiences (Ashline, 2017; Dollinger et al., 2019; Larsson et al., 2021; Skrzypek et al., 2019), b) engagement in the campus community both personally and academically (Dollinger et al., 2019), c) sense of connectedness and integration with university community (Ebert et al., 2015; Gamlath, 2021; Priest & Donley, 2014; Skrzypek et al., 2019), and d) interpersonal skills, self-esteem, and confidence with overcoming adversity (Gamlath, 2021; Larsson et al., 2021; Long, 2016; Priest & Donley, 2014; Skrzypek et al., 2019). Other research suggests that undergraduates who perceive benefits from alumni interactions will likely attend similar programs and participate in them as alumni (Dollinger et al., 2019; Ebert et al., 2015). These studies clearly illustrate student interpersonal engagement with alumni enhance student success.

Measuring Student Success: York et al.'s Theoretical Underpinning

In 2015, frustrated by the notion that student success "has been applied with increasing frequency as a catchall phrase encompassing numerous student outcomes" (1), researcher Travis York and colleagues conducted an extensive literature review that led to a model defining student success within the academic context of higher education. York et al. adapted an Inputs-Environments-Outcome (I-O-E) Model to view college outcomes as a function of three elements: 1) inputs, or the life experiences students bring with them to college; 2) environment, or the full range of contextual experiences during college; and 3) outcomes, or the characteristics, knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors students exhibit after the college experience concludes (53).

In defining student success, York et al. turned to research conducted by a team led by higher education scholar George D. Kuh, who identified contributing factors in defining student success: a) academic achievement, b) persistence, c) engagement in educationally purposeful activities, d) acquisition of desired educational outcomes of knowledge, skills and competencies, e) persistence, f) satisfaction, and g) post-college performance. Academic achievement was most regularly measured through grades or cumulative grade point average (GPA). Indeed, York et al. (2016) confirmed that GPA represents the most common metric for claiming student success across all the literature they reviewed (8).

In terms of the other factors of student success identified, two prime measurements exist to capture persistence: retention rates and time to degree completion. University institutional research (IR) directors often collect such data and make it available to departments and programs. Engagement is viewed as a "psychological desire or motivation to participate in learning" (5). Several scholars contended that student motivation stands as a primary factor to student academic success (Beghetto, 2004). More than simply showing up to an event, engagement suggests being an active participant, sharing the experience with others, and attending events without need for compensation. Accomplishment of gained knowledge, skills, and competencies, comes through measurements at the course, program and/or institutional level. Satisfaction is often gleaned through course evaluations and related student feedback

mechanisms. Finally, career success comes through extrinsic measures such as attainment rates to graduate/professional school or job acquisition as well as intrinsic measures as self-reports of "participants perception of the opportunity to develop potential, realize ambitions, enhance career options and increase self-satisfaction" (8). In their conclusions, York et al., recommend broadening voices involved in determining student success, giving increased attention to student voices and other stakeholders such as parents or employers. To that end, we proposed alumni as an additional population who could help drive student success.

Method

We designed and distributed a survey to honors students enrolled in fall 2021, based on York et al.'s conceptualization of student success including student satisfaction. Using Qualtrics, the questionnaire aimed to elicit students' perceived value of having alumni participation in the areas of academic, co-curricular, and service contexts. After collecting demographics, we adapted a customer satisfaction (CSAT) survey based on a five-point Likert Scale (1 = extremely dissatisfied, and 5 = extremely satisfied) to evaluate students' satisfaction levels with the alumni panels and alumni participation during recruitment interviews. Beyond asking the value students experienced in the moment, we also asked them their motivation (derived from virtual experiences with alumni) to attend a similar event, promote such events to peers, and willingness to engage as an alumni participant post-graduation. The survey concluded with an opportunity for students to share a meaningful experience from the fall 2020 or spring 2021 semesters related to some direct or indirect interaction with participating alumni. We performed a content analysis of student responses to determine common themes based on their interactions.

Results

We received 96 responses representing a 53.3% response rate. Within our responses, 94.5% indicated either satisfaction or extreme satisfaction with alumni panels; 82.4% indicated very and extreme likelihood to prioritize attending similar events; and 96.3% responded they would probably or definitely recommend alumni interactions for their peers. We asked students to indicate where they found particular value; see results in Table I. Our final Likert question yielded an 80.3% response rate of students expressing somewhat to extreme likelihood of participating in panels or interview sessions as future alumni.

Table I - Value Students Draw from Alumni Interaction

1	Awareness of networking opportunities	18%
2	Affirmation of your vocational path	12%
3	Affirmation of your membership in honors	18%
4	Affirmation of your career readiness	10%
5	Insight to the utility of the honors curriculum	15%
6	Insight to leadership skills	16%
7	Insight to community service	8%
8	None	1%
9	Other	2%

A content analysis of student free response showed student value clustered into three themes: vocational support, program affirmation, and observed leadership skills.

Discussion

Our data indicate students overwhelmingly viewed their interpersonal engagement with alumni as valuable in the moment, would prioritize their participation in future events, and would promote such experiences to others. By our definition, drawn from York et al's. model that includes engagement and motivation of student success, the virtual opportunities we championed made an impact. Indeed, with an average attendance of 87 at HSA weekly meetings, the three featuring alumni surpassed the average, each rising above 100.

The most frequent free responses centered on the value students gleaned with respect to their future selves, specifically from affirmation of their vocational direction, their choice in major and advice for graduate/professional schools. These free responses capture values 1, 2 and 4 (40.14%) from Table I. One student noted, "I was amazed by the dedication of the alumni speakers to their vocations---they all seemed to really enjoy what they do. It gave me real excitement for what I see as next steps for me." Another student, paired with an alumnus on the virtual recruitment event, commented, "I spoke with a current teacher and he shared with me his lesson plans for the coming week. We also learned we had nearly identical involvements as WCU students. I learned a practical, 'real-life' approach to lesson planning from an actual teacher, and I learned that my involvements will benefit my future job opportunities and career path." Not only did students offer feedback about their 'in the moment' experiences with alumni but several indicated how the initial meetings we helped facilitate led to further interaction. One student indicated, "I emailed some of the alumni about their career choices and how they knew what path was right for them." Another student told us that a subsequent conversation with an alum landed him an internship in Washington, D. C. Finally, with respect to vocation, a number of comments centered on graduate/professional school preparation and application. "One of the alumni on the panel," claimed a student, "was a resident and another was currently in medical school. I found their experiences and insight really helpful as I know no one currently in that state of their pursuit of a medical career. The insights they shared about the application process were really valuable." Another student gained an unexpected link between international travel and the graduate school application process. The student recounted, "I particularly enjoyed when alumni spoke about their trips to South Africa, explaining the relationships made, giving details about specific moments of the trip, describing what they saw and how it helped the community. One alumni told how he talked about his international travel to South Africa in his grad school application and how that arose as a major point of conversation in the interview. It made me realize how I could share some of my experiences as I put together my applications."

As a corollary to vocation, several students courageously shared their anxieties of not having certainty of their vocational directions and found assurance from interactions with alumni. "The alumni," one student disclosed, "provided comfort in explaining how many changed majors, made mistakes, and have turned out just fine." Another student shared, "She changed majors at least once and still was able to graduate within four years. Her insight showed

me even if I struggle, I can still graduate and end up well." One student even made the choice to change majors after interacting with alumni, writing, "I attended the panel as a psychology major; however, I was debating changing my major to education. Simply participating in a conversation with the teaching alumni confirmed my desire to change my major."

The second number of comments clustered around the theme of reinforced value of what the honors program offers current students, capturing values 3 and 5 (32.18%) in Table I. "I did recruitment interviews with Dan; it was nice to hear him talk about his involvement with honors almost ten years ago and how it carried over into his teaching job. You can tell how professional and successful he is and how honors helped with this." Another wrote, "I had several interactions with alumni who had this honors curriculum and are pursuing a career or have an established career in medicine. They helped me see how the education we get is a real benefit and leads to success." Following the medical vein, another student wrote, "I was not thrilled when I found out honors required a full course in public speaking in the very first year and that public speaking was woven into several other classes in our curriculum. I was shocked when the alumni, a working surgeon, shared that one of the best skills he got from honors was public speaking. He told how important it was in his job to communicate complex information in ways others could understand and how so many of his colleagues press him to be 'the one' who speaks to groups because they are all so uncomfortable in those situations because no one covers any of that in medical school. I guess I'm glad now that I will have that practice in public speaking."

Beyond affirmation for specific course work, students also saw how leadership was present through their interactions with alumni, (item 6, 16.26% in Table I). "I was with Matt in an interview team," wrote a student. "He was such a great leader during our interviews. He made the candidates feel so comfortable and he validated their points and encouraged them to share their experiences." Another student commented, "During the interviews, I met an honors alumnus that demonstrated leadership skills very blatantly. While allowing me and my peer underclassman to lead the interactions with the candidates, he gave specific direction in how he wanted the interviews to go. As a result, the interview with the recruits went extremely well." Finally, referring to an alumnus who gave a class presentation on anti-racism, a student reflected, "She was organized when she came to speak and had a powerful message to share. She wanted to inform us rather than shame or blame us; she knows how to earn respect and make an impact."

A final testament of alumni enhancement of student success exists with the 80.28% of students who expressed willingness to return to the honors community, once matriculated, to offer service to future students in our program. One student captured the sentiment of many by succinctly recounting, "I would be very excited to hopefully help out other students on a panel the same way this alumni panel helped me." Recognition that their presence matters, clearly supports the notion of satisfaction related to student success.

Future Research

Thus, as we transition back to 'post-COVID normal," revising former patterns of alumni-student interaction holds merit as virtual interactions could prove advantageous over interactions in shared physical space.

The unanticipated success of virtually involving alumni in the life of the current honors community, motivates consideration of additional outlets for collaboration. While countless opportunities present themselves, we focus on four areas of maximizing alumni integration for driving student success: 1) student capstone projects, 2) innovative methods that enhance direct student-alumni connectivity, 3) collaborative research outlets, and 4) facilitating network opportunities through an alumni database.

First, the culmination of our curriculum involves a senior level capstone project. Based on the insights from previous studies on the value alumni mentorship provides undergraduates (Tyran & Garcia, 2015), we are exploring ways we might virtually link students to alumni who share project interests. Second, because we emphasize interdisciplinary work, the ability to match students with alumni from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds could foster some innovative outcomes. One particularly intriguing suggestion comes from Chi, Jones, and Grandham who discuss the value of a platform for alumni to student connectivity, Smart Alumni System (SAS), which promotes access through mobile technologies such as cell phones via app development. Collaboration with colleagues in Computer Science could explore potential creation and dissemination of a program specific app, enhancing access ease for interpersonal engagement, a driver of student success.

Third, promotion of collaborative scholarship between a professor and student or a student and field practitioner, holds great value for a student's learning and vocational discernment. Leadership development scholars Sue Gordon and Jennifer Edwards note that most opportunities for students engaging in research exist on campuses but often that too is limited, resulting in a lack of student research experience which disadvantages them when it comes time for future graduate study (2012, 206). They recommend the creation of virtual research teams involved in "action research," characterized as a "participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes grounded in a participatory worldview" (208). This work also supports the research team led by Richard Heller who determined alumni who were surveyed about participation in an alumni group listed as one of their top motivations "collaborative research opportunities" (2015, 6). Based on the ideas Gordon and Edwards promote, merit exists in extending a collaborative call for research between students and alumni. The simple increase in scope of application through technological connectivity holds value.

Finally, institutions should dedicate resources and priority to maintaining an active honors alumni database, supporting active channels of communication between alumni and the honors college, and exploring the formation of a robust honors alumni association. Except for a survey extended to seventy-eight alumni who participated in our international research and service partnership between 2003-2011 with South Africa (Dean & Jendzurski, 2013) and a 2010

survey linked to a Middle States Accreditation review, we have conducted no formal assessment of our alumni particularly with requests for such a simple issue as their motivations for engaging in a sustained relationship with the university, faculty, students and/or one another.

Conclusion

While no one should ever celebrate catastrophic impact of 2020-2021, the experience challenged professionals in higher education to examine the pedagogical practices we historically utilized to champion student success and make adaptations due to the external mandates for remote learning. From this forced reflection, we discovered a previously underutilized resource in our approach to attaining student success, our alumni. The alumni of university programs and organizations offer vast value to students. Far too often sought after for hopeful financial contributions, alumni contribute to student success by illustrating and even providing career opportunities and networking, motivate greater engagement in campus communities and skill development in areas such as leadership and interpersonal sensitivities.

This past year Zoom technology enabled us to cross geographic divides and create meaningful and very affordable space for our alumni to become a visible part of our community and contributing partners in our shared quest for student success. Our survey data and student feedback demonstrate that alumni involvement can function as drivers of student success and make an impact in both the moment and in motivation for current students to sustain their programmatic engagement after matriculation.

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