



Best Practices in Establishing and Maintaining Alumni Relationships

Many Schools of Education (SOEs) struggle to maintain contact with and to engage with students who have graduated from their institution. However, important and relatively easy steps can be taken both pre- and post-graduation to ensure that students remain connected to the university.

SOEs need to maintain relationships with their alumni in order to keep abreast of alumni's career paths upon graduation from the SOE. For assessment and accreditation purposes, SOEs often need to solicit feedback from alumni about their perceptions of the program from which they graduated, whether the program they completed resulted in a job in the related field, and if so, how well the program prepared the graduate for their job. Additionally, SOEs must solicit feedback from the employers of their graduates to understand how well alumni from the SOE are performing in their jobs, in order to provide evidence that the programs offered at the SOE are credible and relevant and to inform ongoing program improvement.

Reaching out to alumni and their employers can be a challenging task if contact information is scarce or alumni are unengaged with the institution from which they graduated. This paper outlines steps that SOEs can take that are easy and relatively cost effective to combat these challenges, and ways that SOEs can establish relationships with their students early on to ensure a more solid connection post-graduation.

Key Questions

How can institutions acquire and maintain accurate contact and employment information for alumni?

What are the ways in which institutions can engage alumni, both before and after graduation, to encourage them to provide feedback about their program experience and how well it prepared them for their profession?

What is the ideal timeframe for contacting alumni and establishing consistent communications with them?

Acquiring and Maintaining Contact Information for Alumni

Assess the Level of Existing Contact Information with Key Departments on Campus

Perhaps the first, and most important, step to collecting alumni e-mail addresses and mailing addresses is to establish a partnership with the Alumni Relations, Career Services, Annual Fund, and/or the Advancement Office. Oftentimes, these units will work together to share information about students and alumni and use that information in different ways. Within the Advancement Office in particular, dedicated staff are typically hired to collect and maintain databases of alumni contact information. The School of Education at any institution should be able access this database by speaking to the appropriate people within the Advancement Office.

Typically, Career Services, usually under the auspices of Alumni Relations, works closely with the Advancement Office to ensure that both groups have the most up-to-date contact information for all alumni. While the Advancement Office may collect information by speaking to an alumnus wishing to make a donation to the school, the Alumni Relations office may get contact information from a different alumnus requesting help in finding a job. In each case, this contact information is typically entered into a shared database so that both groups can use that contact information for their own purposes. Any School of Education should be able to access this database as well.

Develop a System to Fill Gaps in Alumni Contact Information

However, even with the resources available from alumni relations offices and/ or advancement offices, there are often still gaps that exist in terms of the accuracy and currency of alumni contact information. SOEs can take some simple steps to fill these gaps. As students prepare to graduate, there is an increased need to emphasize the importance to students of ensuring that the SOE has accurate and up-to-date contact information. While there are clear benefits to the SOE of maintaining accurate contact information, the benefits to the student should also be clearly articulated. SOEs should consider deploying a mandatory exit survey to students that requires them to provide a permanent email address, phone number, and mailing address. For those alumni that already have a job placement, ask for basic information about their employer and position.

This information can be stored in a relatively simple database tool ranging from Excel to Access to the institution's SIS system. Including the unique student identifier in the database along with the contact information is strongly recommended as this allows for subsequent matching of student files with alumni contact information. This information should be used to periodically communicate with alumni post-graduation (as described in greater detail in the subsequent timeline in this document). As email communications go out to alumni, it is important to continuously clean and update the database of contact information and to try to correct any emails that are bouncing back or not being opened. The SOE can have a student worker reach out to alumni whose email addresses are no longer valid by phone or mail – and this can be done very cost effectively.

Leverage State Information and Resources

Many states collect and house information about teachers, including where they were trained and where they are employed. First, check with your state to understand the level of information it keeps about teachers employed within the state, and the availability of that information to Schools of Education for the purposes of obtaining graduate contact and employment information. In some cases, SOEs may be able to work collaboratively with the state to deploy surveys directly to school administrators and/ or graduates.

Communicate the Benefits of Maintaining Contact to Alumni

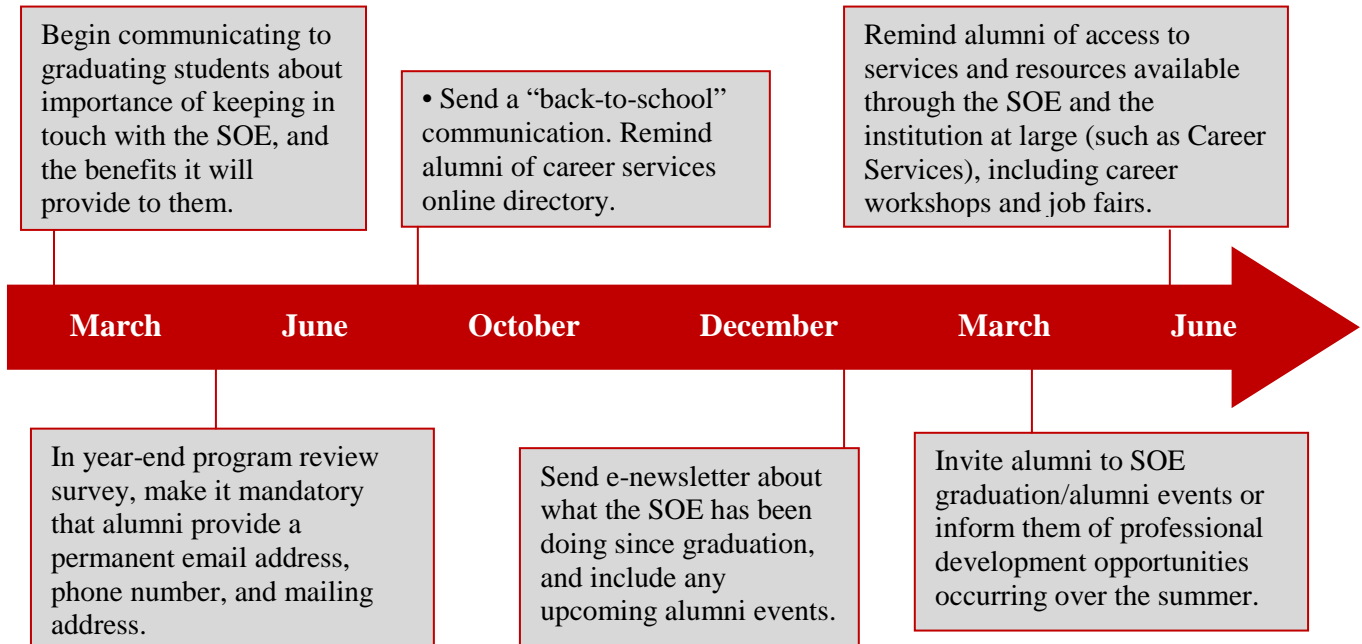
It is important to give alumni a reason to want to stay in touch with the SOE. This can be done fairly cost-effectively and easily through a periodic e-newsletter. These e-newsletters can be sent on a semester or quarterly basis, and can:

- Provide updates about the SOE, e.g. a professor won an acclaimed award, or a new program is in the development stage
- Update alumni on available resources, e.g. Career Services for job postings
- Include helpful hints or tips; e.g. tips for managing your own classroom, or a list of education-related Websites that might be helpful to remain knowledgeable in the education field
- Market professional development coursework, or upcoming seminars or workshops

In addition, creating an affinity group on LinkedIn, Facebook, or other social networking sites can be a great way to forge connections and stay in touch with alumni.

Suggested Timeline of Events for Engaging and Maintaining Contact with Alumni

The timeline below can be used as a guide for SOEs who wish to target graduating alumni, and can be altered to accommodate non-traditional academic calendars. Some of the suggested activities, such as sending e-newsletters that inform alumni of upcoming events or professional development opportunities, can be applied at any time of year that is most relevant.



Pre-Graduation (March-April)

- Begin communicating to graduating students about the importance of keeping in touch with the SOE. *Indicate to graduates the value of maintaining a relationship with the SOE and participating in periodic surveys or requests for information.*
 - Provide students with one-page handouts describing how information provided by alumni through surveys helps the SOE with program improvements
 - Ensure that faculty also emphasize the importance of staying in touch with the institution
 - If applicable, highlight an area of the SOE that has benefitted from the alumni survey that is tangible to graduates – i.e. development of a technology resource center
 - Explain to graduates the importance of their feedback as part of the SOE's accreditation process and therefore the reputation of their alma mater
- Ensure that graduates are informed about:
 - How to sign up with career services to search job database and receive any available advising support after graduation
 - The capability to forward email received at school email address to a personal email address to ensure that they receive any emails

Graduation (May-June)

- In year-end exit survey, ask students to provide permanent email addresses, phone numbers, and mailing addresses; if applicable, ask students to provide employment plans and the name and location of their employer
- Remind students to sign up with career services' online job directory
- Invite students to join the SOE's Linked In or Facebook page

Pre-Employment/Beginning of Employment (July-October)

- Send e-newsletters or postcards with a “back-to-school” theme to create a continued positive relationship with graduates
 - Ask alumni to provide updated employment information
 - Remind students to sign up for career services/ online job directories if they are still looking for employment
 - Provide students with helpful hints as they begin their career, and/or opportunities to sign up for relevant professional development offerings
 - Alert them of any planned outreach that will be asking them to provide feedback so they can keep an eye out for it and update their contact information accordingly

First Year of Employment (January-April)

- In early spring, send information that wishes alumni well as they start the new year. Information to send can include:
 - Upcoming alumni events, including alumni-related events held by the institution
 - Registration periods for professional development courses offered over the summer
 - New SOE program developments that may of interest
 - Notification about any upcoming surveys
- Later in the spring, invite alumni to participate in any survey, telephone interview, or focus groups and invite them to share their opinions on their preparation

One Year after Graduation (May-June)

- Remind alumni of access to services and resources available through the SOE and the institution at large (such as Career Services), including career workshops and job fairs

Summary

This timeframe should be used as part of an annual process to manage alumni relationships and stay connected. Many of the examples provided here can be coordinated with another institutional unit, such as Alumni Relations or Career Services. For example, if Alumni Relations plans to send a newsletter in the spring detailing an upcoming alumni event, perhaps the SOE can add a note within the newsletter about an alumni survey that is to be launched shortly. The key to making this successful is establishing those relationships with other units or departments on campus, and setting up periodic meetings in which the goals of both units are defined.

Additionally, setting expectations up front for future alumni can impact the degree to which students remain engaged with the institution after graduation. Indicating the value that the SOE can provide to the student, via e-newsletters and other forms of communication that inform alumni of resources and events available to them, and actively recruiting contact information can help the SOE maintain a hearty database of alumni contact information, and potentially increase the response rate to periodic surveys.