

# *How to Turn Alumni into Your School's Most Valuable Friends*

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As I walked across the stage at graduation, the last hand I shook was a representative who handed me a gift. He said, "Welcome to the Alumni Association." The gift was an attractive desk set for holding a pen and business cards. With that desk set, I proudly displayed the name of my alma mater in my workplace. Such attractive desk sets for an entire class of graduates could not have been cheap. Nevertheless, the school's development department understood that:

- Alumni can be your school's best recruiters of new students
- Alumni can be your most enthusiastic donors
- Alumni can be your most useful group of volunteers (e.g. for projects, committees, and fundraising)
- There are key times and methods for capturing a lifetime of continued support from alumni.

Not only is a school interested in cultivating relationships with alumni, alumni are often interested in a relationship with their school. Sometimes alumni want to stay connected to college friends, favorite professors and school-based ministries. Sometimes they want to re-experience their youth by attending a class reunion. They care about the progress their school makes because a school's reputation enhances their own resume. If their school achieves accreditation, they may be able to enter an accredited graduate school. Alumni are good potential donors to a school's accreditation effort because they have a vested interest in their school being accredited.

There are three keys to developing an ongoing stream of income through your alumni:

- a well-designed system of asking for donations
- the cultivation of mutually-beneficial relationships
- a staff member who works with the alumni leaders to insure the alumni association will be useful to the school.

If these keys are not in place, asking an alumnus for a donation is as awkward as a 16-year old nerd asking the prettiest girl in school for a date. This article focuses on cultivating relationships with alumni.

One of the most common methods of cultivating relationships with alumni is to invite them to attend an event. While a major donor may receive a personnel invitation to lunch with the president or attend a VIP reception with other major donors, an earlier step in cultivation is a less personal invitation. Many events can be specially planned for alumni (e.g. formal dinner, concert, celebration to honor a retiring professor or a special alumnus, a celebration for achieving accreditation). Other events are already planned, where alumni could also be invited (e.g. concerts, plays, inauguration of a new president, graduation, revival week, regular chapel

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services, 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary). The classic alumni events are class reunions, homecoming, local chapter meetings, and piggy-back events.

Offering alumni opportunities to travel can be another excellent way to build strong relationships. Many of your alumni already have a budget for leisure-time travel. Might a vacation taken with fellow graduates, not to mention fellow Christians, be an attractive travel option? It is exciting to re-live one's youth and re-connect by seeing old college friends and even one's former professors. Warm feelings awakened in your alumni translate into renewed emotional ties to your school. There are a variety of travel possibilities your school could arrange (e.g. vacations and cruises, educational tours, mission trips). It is wise to offer a variety of both inexpensive and more expensive options.

Offering a variety of services to alumni is another important method of building strong relationships with them. Some services to consider include continuing education programs, mentoring and networking societies, annual alumni awards, and career services.

Do you want more information on developing a useful alumni association? *How to Cultivate an Alumni Association that is Useful to Small Christian Colleges* can be found in our online store.



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