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Community Partnerships? Ask our Alumni

By Jacob Dillabaugh

It was only a matter of time when I graduated from St. Joseph's University that my friends and I began receiving numerous calls from the university development office and a legion of well meaning undergraduates armed with telephones. These calls for donation give little consideration to the tuition spent, the debt accrued, or even the variety career paths chosen by graduates. The meager contributions that are given have little relative impact on the operation of the university and are one of the least effective ways of engaging young alumni in making greater the impact of universities. Instead, we should be utilizing the gifts our alumni possess in their new positions and networks to create and cultivate more dynamic partnerships with the cities, communities, and organizations around us, especially when so many of them end up right in our backyard.

The supposed aim of Jesuit Higher Education touted by admissions offices, print materials, and presidential addresses is always toward some form of educating "women and men to be with and for others." If we indeed do produce graduates that seek to be so oriented within our society, then why not utilize them? Regardless of their chosen major or career path, each graduate represents a possible connector to untapped opportunity of partnership for universities to actually have substantial impact on the surrounding community. Take, for example, those who pursue their career or vocation in the world of nonprofit service organizations. I admit that it is possible and desirable for all graduates, regardless of field, to act in ways that are oriented towards a state of being with and for others. However, those in the nonprofit sector represent an alumni cohort decidedly committed to that ideal.

Many alumni who find work in the nonprofit sector after graduation often times are continuing experiences that they had during undergrad in community service or service-learning programs. Through a service placement or an internship they find full-time employment at the same organization or within the same field. Because of their age and experience, these young alumni often fill roles that have some direct supervision over incoming volunteers or partnership management. Given their positions these recent

alumni are strategically placed to be directly involved in the establishment or further development of university community partnerships with the neighborhoods and communities around them.

Examples of this dynamic are borne out in a study, currently underway, of the partnerships between service-oriented programming at a Jesuit university in the Northeast and their community partner organizations. The preliminary findings of this research have shown that a significant number of the directors, volunteer coordinators, or even general staff at the community partner organizations are tied to the university, typically as alumni, with which they are partnered. Their status as both alumni and, now, professional staff allows them to act as bridges between their organization and the university. As an alumna/us they understand the institutional capacities of the university, and as nonprofit professionals they understand the abilities and needs of their organization. This dual-sided understanding allows for the better construction and development of partnerships.

A positive experience of an alumna/us with the university-based programs leads them to re-engage with the university and offer a meaningful way of expanding the impact that our universities have on neighborhood and community partnerships. If viewed as in-kind gifts, these partnerships offer far more to the expansion of a Jesuit university's mission than small sums of money ever could. If we instead turn back to our mission and recognize that we have, indeed, educated women and men for others we can actually propel that mission by engaging alumni well beyond the scope of a phone call and a credit card transaction. If I were to, instead, receive a phone call asking about how I might facilitate a university-community partnership, I would absolutely be more invested and give more of myself.

Jacob Dillabaugh is a candidate for master's degree in sociology at Boston College, '18. He is conducting research on the relationships between service-based campus organizations, such as BC's PULSE Program for Service Learning, and the community partners where students are sent to serve during the year.