

4-2021

## Evaluating Alumni Perceptions of Reciprocity with Their Alma Mater

Courtney Geurink  
*Grand Valley State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gradprojects>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

---

### ScholarWorks Citation

Geurink, Courtney, "Evaluating Alumni Perceptions of Reciprocity with Their Alma Mater" (2021).  
*Culminating Experience Projects*. 45.  
<https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gradprojects/45>

This Project is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Research and Creative Practice at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Culminating Experience Projects by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

Evaluating Alumni Perceptions of Reciprocity with Their Alma Mater

Courtney Geurink

A Project Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Professional Master of Arts in Social Innovation

Integrative, Religious, and Intercultural Studies

April 2021

# Approval Page

## SI 693 Master's Project Approval Form

### Student Information

---

**Student Name**

Courtney Geurink

**Email**

clsonc@mail.gvsu.edu

**Project Title**

Evaluating Alumni Perceptions of Reciprocity with Their Alma Mater

**Date of Master's Project Presentation**

May 1, 2021

**Master's Project Advisor**

Burns-Ardolino, Wendy

### Proposal Documents

---

 Evaluating Alumni Perceptions of Reciprocity with Their Alma Mater (uploaded)

### Approval History

---

**Master's Project Advisor**

Wendy Burns-Ardolino  (mailto:burnsarw@gvsu.edu)

**Status**

Approved on 4/30/21 3:20 PM


**Graduate Program Director**

Wendy Burns-Ardolino  (mailto:burnsarw@gvsu.edu)

**Status**

Approved on 4/30/21 3:21 PM

**Department Chair**

Melanie Shell-Weiss  (mailto:shellm@gvsu.edu)

**Status**

Approved on 4/30/21 3:21 PM

## **Abstract**

A reciprocal relationship is based on a mutual exchange of goods, services, and support. Within the work of an alumni relations office, building and facilitating reciprocity between alumni and their alma mater summarizes the work. However, stereotypically, the relationship an alumnus/alumna has with their alma mater would not be described as reciprocal. Rather, it may be seen as single-sided, the university constantly asking alumni for their time, talent, and treasure. Thus, this qualitative, exploratory study utilized alumni interviews to determine the perception alumni have of their relationship with their alma mater. The study results suggest alumni do perceive their relationship with their alma mater as reciprocal and view the alumni relations office as the connector between the respective parties. Additionally, the findings allude to the interpretation of reciprocal offerings, the social impact alumni desire to provide, and the influence of brand communities on the relationship.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	3
Research Study and Goals .....	5
Data Collection and Analysis Methods.....	7
Analysis and Findings	
Theme 1 – Reciprocity and Alumni Relations.....	8
Theme 2 – Interpretation of Offerings .....	10
Theme 3 – Social Impact .....	12
Theme 4 – Influence of Brand Community .....	15
Recommendations.....	19
Research Limitations and Consideration for Future Studies .....	21
Concluding Remarks.....	23
Appendices	
Appendix A: Informed Consent.....	24
Appendix B: Interview Questions.....	26
Works Cited .....	27

## Research Study and Goals

Historically, it has been the role of the alumni relations office to facilitate relationships between alumni and their alma maters. In this way alumni relations cultivates and offers a type of brand community for alumni consumption. Within the works of *Building Relationships of Brand Community in Higher Education*, McAlexander et al. argue that brand communities define the relationship a consumer has with a brand through four conceptual frames – consumer/brand; consumer/consumer; consumer/product; and consumer/marketer, and that these frames can be implied to brands of higher education (2006). Thus, the impact is that alumni relations offices actually foster relationships between alumni/brand; alumni/alumni; alumni/product or the education received; and alumni/marketer or the representatives of the university described as current students, faculty and staff. Through my role as the Principal Investigator (PI) and based on this preliminary research into the brand community concept, I maintain that these relationships are intentionally designed to be reciprocal.

The definition of reciprocal is to be “shared, felt, or shown by both sides” (Merriam-Webster, 2020). There are benefits for reciprocity within relationships. According to Cherry, “...by reciprocating, we ensure that other people receive help when they need it and that we receive assistance when we need it” (2020). Furthermore, through reciprocal relationships, Cherry notes that things one may not be able to do on their own are accomplished, and with this mutual support, more can be achieved (2020). Therefore, a reciprocal relationship between alumni and their alma mater can positively impact both parties.

However, the relationship between alumni and their alma mater has been typecast as single-sided – what can the alumni do for the institution? The university’s primary outreach within the relationship has been seen as “askers” – asking alumni for their time, talent, and

treasure in order to support the university's mission (Vlahos, 2016). Yet, the greater impact of reciprocity could lend itself to a more valuable relationship between alumni and their alma mater. Not only can the alma mater obtain the assistance they are seeking, the university can also increase the social impact they have on the professions and communities of alumni. This provides an opportunity for give and take between each party, moving toward a common goal of shared growth respectively.

Thus, the goals of this study are to gain a better understanding as to whether alumni perceive reciprocity within their relationship with their alma mater, where the alumni relations office could make improvements in supporting the relationship, why alumni desire to give back, and if brand communities are impactful on the relationship. Upon reflection, in spite of the limitations of this study, such as the small sample size of strictly alumni who were or are currently volunteering, alumni responses confirm that they do indeed perceive their relationship with their alma mater as reciprocal and see the alumni relations office as the facilitators of the relationship. Additional themes emerged around the perception and articulation of the offerings provided by the alumni relations office, that undergraduate experiences significantly impact the desire to give back, and the frames of the brand community have a varying impact on the relationship. These findings are vital in analyzing the work and purpose of the alumni relations office, as it provides a lens through which to evaluate current and future strategic actions, programs, focus-areas, and offerings. This initial exploratory study should be used to inform the ongoing work of alumni relations offices and also provide a springboard for future opportunities of larger and more in-depth studies utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data.

## **Data Collection and Analysis Methods**

The data for this research project was collected through eight Zoom interviews conducted by the PI with selected alumni of Grand Valley State University. The interviewed alumni all currently live in the United States, have previously or are currently volunteering with the university, and graduated with their undergraduate degrees between the years 2000 and 2017. After agreeing to the informed consent (see Appendix A), the participants were asked a set of 14 predetermined, open-ended questions (see Appendix B). The interviews were recorded using the Zoom platform and then transcribed by the PI. For privacy measures, the individual identities of the alumni interviewees were replaced with arbitrary codes (A-AB, A-CD, A-EF, A-GH, A-IJ, A-KL, A-MN, and A-OP).

Once the interviews were transcribed, data was analyzed through a systematic review of common themes and answers. The advantages to content analysis, according to Luo, are its potential to be unobtrusive, transparent and replicable by later researchers, as well as flexible (2020). However, this type of analysis can be reductive, subjective, and time sensitive (Luo, 2020); all of which are considered and acknowledged in this final report. The themes discovered through the qualitative content analysis, were reviewed using the research conducted on alumni relations, reciprocal relationships, social impact, and brand communities. As this is a qualitative exploratory study, statistical analysis will not be part of this final report.



## Analysis and Findings

### *Theme 1 – Reciprocity and Alumni Relations*

The explanations and definitions of alumni relations within literature are broad and numerous. The office and its work has been described as “...focus[ing] efforts on bringing graduates together in largely social settings on the vague notion that when alumni are happy, good things result” or “activities that are valued by alumni, build enduring and mutually beneficial relationships, inspire loyalty and financial support, strengthen the institution’s reputation and involve alumni in meaningful activities to advance the institution’s mission,” (Vlahos, 2016; *Alumni Engagement Metrics*, 2018, p. 5). Even these definitions can lend themselves to a seemingly, single-sided relationship focused on advancing and benefiting the university. Whereas, “reciprocity is a mutual exchange of actions, goods, energy, time, emotion, etc....there’s a rhythm or a flow of a back and forth exchange,” according to The Center for Growth (*The Importance of Reciprocal Relationships*, 2020). Cropanzano & Mitchell state that reciprocity, or a social exchange, cannot take place within the framework of dependent or independent relationships such as the stereotype relationship of alumni and alma mater, because these relationships are solely dependent upon only one of the parties (2005). While the study is exploratory, the overall theme that evolved indicated that alumni do not view their relationship as single-sided; rather it can be described as reciprocal, although that exact term was used in only two verbal answers. One instance was shared by A-MN, “I would describe [my relationship with my alma mater] as good. It’s pretty reciprocal, would be the right word. There’s a back and forth,” (Q1). *The Importance of Reciprocal Relationships* further elaborates that when an individual experiences reciprocity for their efforts or inputs into a relationship, they can feel validated, energized, valued, and appreciated (2020). In general, interviewed alumni felt they had

received something of value and worth from their alma mater which created a desire to pay-it-forward and give back to the institution. This was reflected in A-CD's answer, "...the ideal relationship is I'm also contributing. I don't feel like I'm really part of something unless I'm involved or engaged in some way...so definitely a two-way relationship..." (Q2).

When asked to define alumni relations and its role in their relationship with their alma mater (Q12), interviewed alumni continued to expressed a more succinct and reciprocal definition of alumni relations than may have been anticipated. They described the office as the connector, or bridging-the-gap between alumni and university. A-IJ shared, "[Alumni relations] are the ones responsible for keeping alumni connected and making sure they feel supported and still part of the Grand Valley community." Both A-GH and A-EF also expressed the connection aspect of the office. "I would say the point of alumni relations is to keep you connected after you've graduated with events, news from campus...that [they] ask for money," shared A-GH. While, A-EF commented, "I feel that [alumni relations] is just allowing people a platform to really connect and hear from Grand Valley and realize the importance of giving back to Grand Valley. Just reminding you [that you] had a great experience at Grand Valley." Other general responses of who and what the alumni relations offices does, included: connecting alumni with each other, communicating with them, asking for money, reminding alumni of their experience on campus, offering opportunities to give back, and being the friendly face of the university. As A-MN described, "So, alumni relations is what it is in its name. I think it's an office that helps connect alumni to the university and helps connect them with other alumni, [as well as] with opportunities for growth personally and professionally. I think that alumni relations, they're the intermediate thing, the middle man between me and the university." Thus, alumni view the office

as the connector between themselves and the university, or as facilitating reciprocity within this relationship.

*Theme 2 – Interpretation of Offerings*

When asked how alumni would describe their current relationship with their alma mater (Q1), respondents conveyed that they are involved, connecting with other alumni/staff, are an advocate for the university, give financially, and have an overall good or positive view of their relationship. Yet, when asked what was missing from their relationship (Q3), top responses included that alumni wanted to be better informed and were seeking more opportunities to be involved and engaged. They wanted opportunities to connect with alumni and students. The list of desires missing from their current relationship shared by some interviewees, reflects that shared by others as aspects they already view within their current relationship, as visualized in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1

Question	Question 1: How would you describe your current relationship with GVSU, your alma mater?	Question 3: What are you looking for beyond your current relationship with your alma mater?
Responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involved</li> <li>• Connect with other alumni/ university staff</li> <li>• Advocate for</li> <li>• Financially support</li> <li>• Good/positive relationship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunities to be engaged/involved</li> <li>• Opportunities to connect with alumni and students</li> <li>• To be better informed</li> </ul>

According to research, alumni relations offices offer the focal alumnus/alumna an identity, a sense of self, along with community belonging, prestige, skills, knowledge, memories, social and professional relations, and unique experiences, both academic and social (McAlexander et al., 2006; McDearmon, 2012; Palmer et al., 2016; Weerts & Ronca, 2007). Furthermore, the university continues to offer entertainment, upskilling, networking, volunteer

opportunities, information and updates, resources, discounts, and a new pool of talent for the future workforce. When interviewed alumni were asked what they receive from their alma mater (Q8), responses included a similar list to that found in the research and general work of the alumni relations office: connections/networks/relationships, events, education, volunteer opportunities, career support, and general ways to give back. A-OP shared that connections were the largest benefit they received, “I think the benefit is just the connections, knowing people at the university and other alumni, so the connection is probably the biggest benefit.” This statement supports the definition of alumni relations from McAlexander et al., as an entity to “...build interpersonal relationships among graduates,” (2006, p. 116). However, when asked what assistance, support, and/or benefits alumni would like to see offered (Q9), A-CD felt that connection was missing when they shared, “...to really reach out to alumni to kind of bring them back into the fold...it can feel like those who have left the state aren’t really a part of the alumni community sometimes.” Other responses to Q9, were again very similar to what others felt they were already receiving: career support, more events, education, connections, and community (see Table 1.2). Thus, a similarity arose between Q8 and Q9, as it did in Q1 and Q3 – while some alumni feel they are already receiving certain benefits from their relationship with their alma mater, another set would claim those same characteristics are missing from their relationship. Hence, the same set of programs, offerings, communication, and outreach can be offered by the alumni relations office, but is interpreted differently by a variety of alumni.

Table 1.2

Question	Question 8: What assistance, support, and/or benefits do you receive through your overall relationship with your alma mater?	Question 9: What assistance, support, and/or benefits would you like to see offered from your alma mater?
Responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connections</li> <li>• Events</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Career support</li> <li>• Networks</li> <li>• Relationships</li> <li>• Volunteer opportunities</li> <li>• General ways to give back</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connections</li> <li>• Events</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Career support</li> <li>• Community</li> </ul>

*Theme 3 – Social Impact*

Universities value alumni input into the relationship in the form of volunteering, internship offerings, philanthropic support, political and curriculum advocacy, prestige in positions, mentoring, recruitment, brand recognition, personal and professional connections, service on boards, speaking in classrooms, and attendance at special events and ceremonies (Palmer et al., 2016; McAlexander & Koenig, 2012; Weerts et al., 2009; Iskhakova et al., 2017; McAlexander & Koenig, 2001; Weerts & Ronca, 2007). When interviewed alumni were asked what they give back to their alma mater (Q10), responses matching those previously outlined were included: financial support, volunteer support, being a connector, and specific skill sets. These responses can each be grouped into one of the three elements the stereotypical alma mater is looking to receive from their relationship with alumni: time, talent, or treasure. However, a fourth “t” revealed itself within the responses of what alumni feel they reciprocate to their university, that being their testimony. Specific responses regarding promotion to potential students, friends, and colleagues were shared repeatedly throughout the interviews. “I am happy of my time at Grand Valley, so I do often promote to people who I’m talking to,” A-KL conveyed (Q10). While A-EF mentioned their desire to share their testimony/connection to their

alma mater in answers to two different questions: “I always tell people I’m a Laker for a Lifetime and I’m very proud that I did go to Grand Valley,” (Q1) and “...being able to use the fact that I graduated from Grand Valley to connect with people. I think that’s huge. And just being able to promote it in a way...” (Q10). Testimonies are extremely important to a university brand and thus should be considered part of the reciprocity between alumni and alma mater.

Furthermore, the testimonies of alumni suggest the social impact alumni desire to make on their university communities. Social impact is the effect, either intentional or unintentional, on the well-being of a community or individual, “that happens as a result of an action or inaction, an activity, project, [program] or policy” (Build Abroad, 2017; Centre for Social Impact, n.d.; Parrett, 2019). Within the context of alumni and their alma mater, the social impact a university can bestow upon their alumni may include: benefits, networking, career support, upskilling or reskilling, further education and general support within their profession, family, and communities. Conversely, alumni can also socially impact the university through scholarships, student support, volunteering, and the general prestige they offer their alma mater.

Throughout the interviews, alumni alluded to the social impact they desired to specifically have on students, preparing them for life after college. A-OP shared in Q3, “I think one of the things I would say...are ways to give back directly to the students, especially in my field of work, because I feel like I’ve learned so much more as a professional now that I wish I knew in college and wish I could just kind of mentor and coach these students as an individual.” When asked what motivated them to give back (Q11), supporting students revealed itself in A-OP’s answer as well, “I think there is a real opportunity to expose students to more than just the classroom and my motivation in giving back...is to better prepare students.”

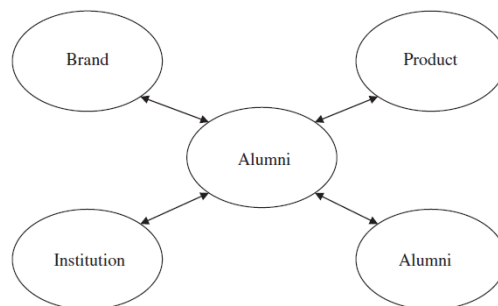
Alumni interviewed also shared how they had a desire to create social impact on other alumni, supporting them in their careers and learning from them about their industries as well. When asked if they sought to have relationships with other alumni (Q5), A-IJ shared, “Yes, I do enjoy having relationships with other alumni. One big piece of it is just networking from a professional standpoint...I feel I can learn more about other industries and they can learn from me about my industry.” A-IJ also brought up support for alumni and students in their answer to what assistance, support, and/or benefits they give their relationship with Grand Valley (Q10), stating, “I always take the time to try to get to know them (other alumni/current students) better and see if there’s any way I can help them out in their career or whatnot.”

In general, when alumni were asked what motivated them to give back (Q11), or what drove their desire for social impact, their responses were based on their past experiences, memories, feelings, and connections to the university, resulting in a pay-it-forward mentality. This pay-it-forward mentality is described as moral responsibility by Muniz and O’Guinn, “...a sense of duty to the community as a whole, and to individual members of the community” (2001, p. 424). A-EF shared, “I felt supported. So, I feel like that’s my motivation to want to keep giving back to Grand Valley and continue to support them and continue my education there now.” A-IJ specifically highlighted the education and support they received as being influential, “I would say it goes back to that feeling like I got a really good value out of my education and know that there were people who gave to Grand Valley to allow me to have that opportunity and experience, [so it] is just kind of like a pay-it-forward sort of thing for me.” A desire to pay-it-forward, or create social impact, was seen throughout the interviews in response to a variety of questions, highlighting that the experience received as undergraduate students significantly impacts the desire of an alumnus/alumna to give back.

#### *Theme 4 – Influence of Brand Community*

Brand community was first introduced by Muniz and O’Guinn and defined as “...a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand” (2001, p. 412). McAlexander et al. elaborated that brand communities are “...a web of relationships that connect customers to a brand and, under its umbrella, to its products and services, its associated institution, and its other customers” (2006, p. 108). Applying brand community literature to university alumni, McAlexander and Koenig additionally determined there were four frames of a relationship between a central alumnus/alumna and the overall university: the product or education, the institution or people of the university, the brand, and other alumni (2012) (see Figure 1). Thus, during the interview process, specific questions were asked regarding how each of these elements impacts the alumnus/alumna’s relationship with their alma mater. In general, the responses collected highlight that all the frames play a role in the relationship, but at varying levels.

*Figure 1 – Adapted from McAlexander and Koenig’s Brand Community (2012)*



When asked how the education they received impacts their relationship (Q6), the majority of responses pointed to education being a foundation of their current relationship. A-GH shared, “I would say [my education was] maybe the most positive part...it kind of really validated being there.” A-IJ further elaborated, “I think if I didn’t feel like I got a good education



that prepared me and I felt like my money wasn't worth what value I got out of it, I wouldn't really have any interest in being connected to Grand Valley alumni [relations]. I feel like the only reason I have interest in being connected is because I feel like I got a really good value and my professors really prepared me for the business world." Specifically, several alumni shared that because their education is directly connected to what they are doing now, they have a positive relationship with their alma mater. "I think it impacts it very well, because the education I received is directly related to what I do today. I know that there are people who do not have that and thus have a negative view [of their alma mater] ...but because I have a direct correlation, I think of it very positively," A-OP specified.

Additionally, interviewed alumni shared similar sentiments about their interaction with the institution or people of the university defined as faculty, staff, administration, and current students (Q7). Several alumni commented that because they never had a bad interaction with the people of the university as students, their experience was positive. "Thinking back to my time at Grand Valley, I had really great professors which helped influence my perception. People that work at the university, [I] never had a poor experience with them while I was there, so that just makes it positive," stated A-OP. Another common point was that interactions alumni had as students with the people of university not only impacted their experience during their undergraduate career, but some have turned into friends and mentors, post-graduation. "I think having those resources (relationships with the people of the university as a student), that have now turned into cheerleaders, that have now turned into friends, I think that influences and makes me think even more that [Grand Valley] was a home..." expressed A-AB. "I would say they were the ones who really were molding me, they were the ones challenging and supporting me to think differently and be a better version of myself," confirmed A-CD. A-GH also shared

that if they would have had a horrific experience with multiple bad professors or trouble making friends, it would have affected the overall view of their experience, but instead, because they had positive interactions, the people of the institution “set a good foundation” for their overall experience and relationship with their alma mater.

Furthermore, when asked to describe what alumni thought or felt when they heard the university slogan or brand tagline, “Laker for a Lifetime” (Q4), another of the brand community frames, the response was strongly positive. It also encapsulated their previous memories and experiences as a student. They shared how the brand tagline represents their feeling of being part of a community, a sense of nostalgia, pride, and overall connection with the university and with other university affiliates. This is reflected within ritual and tradition literature, stating that these social norms are woven into the foundation and fabric of each brand community, expressing the meaning, importance, culture, and value of each community (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Martin et al., 2015). “It ties us all together...” A-AB summarized. “Camaraderie among [Grand Valley] students, former and present, throughout one’s entire life,” shared A-KL. “...it makes it feel like, although you’ve left the university you’re still welcome back any time...” A-GH specified. While A-IJ expressed, “Pride. I really do feel like it is...once you are part of the Laker family, you always kind of get to carry that....” A-CD shared similar sentiments, “...it always gives me a warm, fuzzy feeling when I hear it. It reminds me, of a place that gave me great joy and energy, and two degrees.” The findings from Martin et al. reported “the greater the perception of alumni that a university has valued, well-established traditions and rituals, the greater their brand community relationships and intended behaviors associated with loyalty” (2015, p. 115). A-OP’s answer echoes this statement and even shared that it reminds them why they give back, “I think about just the pride in the university...kind of reminiscing on what the university gave for me

and what I give back,” showcasing the reciprocity and loyalty-built nature within the relationship.

The notion that members of a brand community “sort of know each other” and that as a collective are “different” or “special” from other brand communities of a similar nature, is seen heavily in consumption choices (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 418). The bond generated through a shared purchase experience, such as higher education, “strengthens interpersonal ties and enhances mutual appreciation for the product, the brand, and the facilitating marketers” (McAlexander et al., 2002, p. 44). Thus, when specifically asked if interviewed alumni seek relationships with other alumni and what value each party offers to the other in terms of relationships (Q5), six of the eight alumni surveyed responded, yes, they do seek relationships with other alumni. The main reason they used to support their response was the opportunity for both personal and professional networks. A-EF shared how they seek the personal network, “Yeah, absolutely, definitely seek to have connections with other Laker alumni. And I guess what I would value from the relationship would be just a sense of camaraderie.” A-IJ shared why the value of the professional networks with other alumni was important, “Yes, I do enjoy having relationships with other alumni. One big piece of it is just networking from a professional standpoint...I feel like I can learn more about other industries and they can learn from me about my industry.” Answers also alluded to the fact that while alumni seek out these reciprocal relationships with other alumni, these particular relationships do not necessarily have as large of an impact on their overall relationship with their alma mater as education, people, and the brand.

## **Recommendations**

Several recommendations have emerged from the findings of this exploratory research study. Most impactful, is that alumni indeed perceive their relationship with their alma mater as reciprocal. The study concludes that alumni are interested in supporting their alma mater, responding to the university's "ask" for their time, talent, treasure, and testimony. Conversely, alumni feel they receive something of worth and value from their relationship with their alma mater, underscoring the effects of reciprocity. An interesting addition to this finding, is that alumni view the alumni relations office as the facilitator of this reciprocal relationship. Therefore, it is recommended for the alumni relations office to understand and utilize this information in their strategy and programming. The office must make sure they are offering both opportunities for the alumni to give back to their alma mater, as well as offering something of worth from the university in return.

Additionally, in a reciprocal relationship, it is extremely important that what one party is "giving" to the other is in fact meeting that party's expectations. Even if the giver feels they are offering what the receiver needs, it must be interpreted and accepted by the receiver as such. Within the study, it was evident that the intended assistance, support, and benefits provided by the alumni relations office were not always interpreted by some of the alumni as meeting their needs. This was seen in the response comparisons between Q1 and Q3, as well as Q8 and Q9 (see Table 1.1 and 1.2). It was also seen when A-IJ shared, "...I feel like the events are sometimes marketed in a way that's like 'hey, come to this event because we want you to come to our event because we need to have a lot of people at our events,' instead of really explaining the value that the event is going to provide for the attendees and why you should come and why it's good for you" (Q14). A-IJ is not necessarily asking for different programming, but was

rather expressing how they interpret the promotion as not meeting their needs. A-MN expressed something similar, “I think [alumni relations] could do a better job of *showing* what you can do as an [alumnus/alumna] to help the next generation of students at Grand Valley. *Showing* what alumni relations can do for you as a whole,” (Q14, emphasis added). Hence, it is important for the office to understand that all alumni are individuals who interpret the same offerings differently. It would therefore be recommended that in order to be reciprocal, the alumni relations office should be mindful of how they are articulating, presenting, and promoting their offerings in a way that expresses the impact as beneficial to alumni.

Another finding from this research, is that while brand communities articulate four different reciprocal relationships an alumnus/alumna has with their alma mater, some of these relationships are founded and defined even before alumni reach alumni-status. Specifically, the relationship an alumnus/alumna has with their education and the people of the institution. It should also be noted, that these relationships help to generate the desire for alumni to stay connected and involved with their alma mater, as well as to create social impact on alumni and students. Therefore, the alumni relations office can remind alumni of their positive experiences as students in order to help build a reciprocal relationship with them as alumni. Furthermore, because of the vitality of these previously set relationships, it would be recommended for the alumni relations office to support the undergraduate experience of students while they are on campus. Partnering with departments, supporting programs and initiatives, and connecting students with alumni for mentorship and engagement opportunities, are examples of how an alumni relations office can impact the relationship a current student will build with their alma mater. It also provides the office another opportunity to be reciprocal in the relationship, by supporting the journey from student to alumni, not only after graduation.

## **Research Limitations and Consideration for Future Studies**

A primary goal of this exploratory study was to collect information and data to determine whether alumni view reciprocity with their alma mater. In spite of the fact that the PI did not specifically ask if alumni viewed their relationship with the university as reciprocal, the 14 pre-determined, open-ended questions were designed to reveal how alumni felt about the give-and-take aspect of their relationship without leading them to a direct answer. The PI recommends that the inclusion of a direct question regarding reciprocity be included in future studies in order to better ascertain the precise relationship between alumni and their alma mater. While this may limit the scope of the initial study, it may lead to a better understanding of how alumni experience and discuss their relationship with their alma mater.

Other considerations include the wording of the questions themselves. Some questions were clearly understood by participants, while others had to be explained or were interpreted differently than the original intent. While the PI would recommend keeping the number of questions limited to fewer than 20, it may be helpful to include open ended questions such as: What elements do alumni feel impact their relationship? How do they view or define their relationship? Why do they seek to have a relationship? Answers and assumptions to these questions could be determined from this study, but specifically posing them may lead to more in-depth and illustrative examples. The order of the questions should also be considered as influencing and impacting the responses given.

Furthermore, including alumni who are not volunteers with the alumni relations office would provide a broader sense of engagement and relationships with the alma mater. By including only those alumni who were or are volunteers, this study limited its pool of interviewees to those who already understood the role of the alumni relations office. Hence, it

also inadvertently limited the responses to those who already have sought out engagement and connectivity with their alma mater and those who have a positive perception of their relationship with the university. In future studies, participants should include those who are involved and those who are not, to provide a potentially alternative perspective. Additionally, surveying a larger pool of alumni, as well as alumni from generations prior to 2000, could offer more detailed themes and findings. Due to the limited sample size of this study, which includes only eight alumni, these findings cannot be generalized to the broader alumni population.

This research offers an opportunity for further studies focused on the impact of reciprocal relationships between alumni and alma mater, the continued value and connection work of alumni relations both as a connector between alumni and alma mater, and in how to better articulate the programs and events offered as a benefit to alumni. Additionally, further studies could continue to examine the undergraduate experience on the involvement-level of alumni, as well as whether brand communities are influenced by the work of the alumni relations office.

## **Concluding Remarks**

In conclusion, this study adds to the current knowledge and research on the impact of reciprocal relationships between alumni and their alma mater. While the relationship between alumni and their alma mater has typically been generalized as non-reciprocal, the eight interviewed alumni shared that they do in fact view the relationship with their alma mater as reciprocal. Furthermore, this study supports the validity of the alumni relations office as the connector between the university and their alumni, providing a bridge for reciprocal interactions. Therefore, as facilitators of relationships between alumni and the alma mater, the alumni relations office should continue to focus on ways to innovate and reevaluate reciprocity within the relationships formed.

This study also provides insight into the way a reciprocal offering can be interpreted differently by alumni. Thus, the alumni relations office and university must clearly articulate how their beneficial offerings will meet the needs and desires their alumni are seeking. Additionally, this study adds to the brand community research within the higher education setting, specifically between alumni and their alma mater. Finally, this study provides insight into how student experiences lead to a desired relationship and pay-it-forward mentality as alumni. Hence, the support the alumni relations office should be providing to the undergraduate experience as a means to begin building reciprocity within the relationship between alumni and alma mater.



## Appendix A – Informed Consent



### Informed Consent Document

1. **TITLE:** Evaluating Alumni Perceptions of Reciprocal Relationships with Their Alma Mater
2. **RESEARCHER:**
  - Courtney Geurink, Principal Researcher, Graduate Student, Professional Master of Arts in Social Innovation Program, Grand Valley State University and Assistant Director for Alumni Relations, Grand Valley State University
3. **PURPOSE:** Using brand communities as the framework for the various relationships, the focus of this research study is to better understand if alumni perceive the relationship(s) they hold with their alma mater as mutually reciprocal? This is an exploratory study, which will examine the topic of interest for future research.
4. **PROCEDURES:** This study will be conducted through one-on-one interviews on Zoom. Participants must live in the United States at the time of the interview, graduated at least three years ago, and previous or are currently serve as a volunteer with the Alumni Relations office. Participants will be interviewed through a series of predetermined open-ended questions. The interview will take between 45 and 60 minutes. To permit for clarification, there is the potential for follow-up contact. The interview will be recorded via the Zoom platform directly to the principal investigator's work-issued computer, and transcribed by the interviewer using software.
5. **RISKS:** The known risks associated with this study are minimal. Risks can include feelings of discomfort answering questions. Electronic data will be collected and stored for this research project. As with any use of electronic means to store data, there exists a minimal risk that data could be lost or stolen.
6. **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO YOU:** There are no direct benefits for participants.
7. **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SOCIETY:** Indirect benefits may include the potential for developing long term reciprocal relationships between alumni, the institution, brand, and product, as well as providing a base for additional research.

8. **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:** Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate. You may quit at any time without any penalty to you.
9. **PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY:** Your name will not be given to anyone other than the principal investigator. All information collected from you or about you is for the sole purpose of this research study and will be kept confidential to the fullest extent allowed by law. In very rare circumstances specially authorized university or government officials may be given access to our research records for purposes of protecting your rights and welfare or to make sure the research was done properly.

All participants will be assigned an arbitrary code rather than using personal identifiable information once the interviews are transcribed. When the study is published, your name will not be included. The data, both paper and electronic documents, will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study. In the meantime, all information will be kept by Courtney Geurink, the principal investigator, downloaded to a secure, password protected location on her work-issued computer. Identifying information will be stored separately from the transcriptions. All emails will be deleted after follow-up is complete. The audio recordings will be destroyed once transcription and follow-up are complete. The completed study will be shared with Grand Valley State University Alumni Relations and may be published further.

10. **AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE:** By participating in the interview you are agreeing to the following:
  - The details of this research study have been explained to me, including what I am being asked to do and the anticipated risks and benefits;
  - I have had an opportunity to have my questions answered;
  - I am voluntarily agreeing to participate in the research as described on this form;
  - I may ask more questions or quit participating at any time without penalty.
  - I give my consent to participate in this research project.
11. **CONTACT INFORMATION:** If you have any questions about the study you may contact Courtney Geurink at 616-403-0129 or [geurinkc@gvsu.edu](mailto:geurinkc@gvsu.edu).

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the **Office of Research Compliance & Integrity** at Grand Valley State University, 1 Campus Drive, Allendale, MI. Phone: 616-331-3197. E-mail: [rci@gvsu.edu](mailto:rci@gvsu.edu).

This study has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at Grand Valley State University (Protocol # 21-137-H).”

## Appendix B – Interview Questions

1. How would you describe your current relationship with GVSU, your alma mater?
2. How would you describe your ideal relationship with your alma mater?
3. What are you looking for beyond your current relationship with your alma mater?
4. When you hear “Laker for a Lifetime,” what do you think and feel?
5. Do you seek to have relationships with other GVSU alumni? If so, what value do these relationships offer? What value do you offer other alumni?
6. How does the education you received (are receiving, if continuing) impact your relationship with your alma mater?
7. How is your relationship with your alma mater influenced/affected by the people of GVSU (i.e. professors, staff, administration, current students)?
8. What assistance/support/benefits do you receive through your overall relationship with your alma mater?
9. What assistance/support/benefits for alumni would you like to see offered from your alma mater?
10. What assistance/support/benefits do you give to your relationship with your alma mater?
11. What motivates you to give back (time, talent, and treasure) to your alma mater?
12. How would you describe alumni relations? What role does alumni relations have in your relationship with your alma mater?
13. When the alumni relations office or the university contacts you through email, social media, or website, what is their main message?
14. How could alumni relations better articulate the assistance/support/benefits of a relationship with your alma mater?

## Works Cited

- Alumni Engagement Metrics* (White paper). (2018). Washington, DC: CASE. Retrieved on October 31, 2020, from [https://www.case.org/system/files/media/file/CASEWhitePaper\\_AlumniMetrics%20AUG18.pdf](https://www.case.org/system/files/media/file/CASEWhitePaper_AlumniMetrics%20AUG18.pdf)
- Build Abroad. (2017, March 03). Social Impact: What Does it Really Mean? Retrieved November 25, 2020, from <https://buildabroad.org/2017/03/03/social-impact/>
- Centre for Social Impact. (n.d.). About Social Impact. Retrieved November 25, 2020, from <https://www.csi.edu.au/about-social/>
- Cherry, K. (2020, May 26). Why Do We Feel Compelled to Return Favors? Retrieved December 09, 2020, from <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-the-rule-of-reciprocity-2795891>
- Cropanzano, R., & Mitchell, M. (2005). Social Exchange Theory: An Interdisciplinary Review. *Journal of Management*, 31, 874-900. doi: 10.1177/0149206305279602
- Iskhakova, L., Hoffmann, S., & Hilbert, A. (2017). Alumni Loyalty: Systematic Literature Review. *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing*, 29(3), 274-316. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/10495142.2017.1326352>
- Luo, A. (2020, June 19). Content Analysis: A Step-by-Step Guide with Examples. Retrieved December 08, 2020, from <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/content-analysis/>
- Martin, M. C., Nichols, C., Moeder, J. D., Smith, R. M., & Moriuchi, E. (2015). The Importance of University Traditions and Rituals in Building Alumni Brand Communities and Loyalty. *International Academy of Marketing Studies Journal*, 19(3), 107-118.
- McAlexander, J. H., & Koenig, H. F. (2012). Building communities of philanthropy in higher education: Contextual influences. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, 17, 122-131. doi: 10.1002/nvsm.1415
- McAlexander, J. H., & Koenig, H. F. (2001). University Experiences, the Student-College Relationship, and Alumni Support. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 10(3), 21-43.
- McAlexander, J. H., Schouten, J. W., & Koenig, H. F. (2002). Building Brand Community. *Journal Of Marketing*, 66(1), 38-54. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3203368?seq=1>
- McAlexander, J. H., Koenig, H. F., & Schouten, J. W. (2006). Building Relationships of Brand Community in Higher Education: A Strategic Framework for University Advancement. *International Journal of Educational Advancement*, 6(2), 107-118. doi: 10.1057/palgrave.ijea.2150015

- McDearmon, J. (2012). Hail to Thee, Our Alma Mater: Alumni Role Identity and the Relationship to Institutional Support Behaviors. *Research in Higher Education, 54*, 283-302. doi: 10.1007/s11162-012-9271-6
- Muniz, A., & O'Guinn, T. (2001). Brand Community. *Journal of Consumer Research, 27*(4), 412-432. [https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/319618?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/319618?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)
- Palmer, A., Koenig-Lewis, N., & Assad, Y. (2016). Brand identification in higher education: A conditional process analysis. *Journal of Business Research, 69*, 3033-3040. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.01.018>
- Parrett, E. (2019, December 10). Social impact. What is it? How do I measure it? Retrieved November 25, 2020, from <https://www.goodfinance.org.uk/latest/post/blog/social-impact-what-it-how-do-i-measure-it>
- Reciprocal. (2020). In *Merriam-Webster*. Retrieved December 13, 2020, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reciprocal?src=search-dict-box>
- The Importance of Reciprocal Relationships*. (2020, September 07). The Center for Growth. Retrieved November 21, 2020, from <https://www.therapyinphiladelphia.com/tips/the-importance-of-reciprocal-relationships>
- Vlahos, C. (2016). *The Evolving Role of Alumni Relations* (Rep.). Lyndhurst, NJ: Marts & Lundy. Retrieved October 31, 2020, from [http://www.martsandlundy.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Alumni\\_Benchmarking\\_12\\_2016\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.martsandlundy.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Alumni_Benchmarking_12_2016_FINAL.pdf)
- Weerts, D. J., Cabrera, A. F., & Sanford, T. (2009). Beyond Giving: Political Advocacy and Volunteer Behaviors of Public University Alumni. *Research in Higher Education, 51*, 346-365. doi: 10.1007/s11162-009-9158-3
- Weerts, D. J., & Ronca, J. M. (2007). Profiles of Supportive Alumni: Donors, Volunteers, and Those Who "Do It All". *International Journal of Educational Advancement, 7*(1), 20-34. doi: 10.1057/palgrave.ijea.2150044