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Venturing into Virtual: A Study of the Impact of Virtual Alumni Engagement on the Alumni-

Alma Mater Relationship in Higher Education

by

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Abstract

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States prompted an unanticipated change in the fundamental ways in which alumni relations offices at higher education institutions engage their alumni populations. It necessitated a transition into virtual programming and engagement efforts. The impact of this shift into operating almost exclusively online is relatively unknown, with little scholarly research currently existing on the topic. Following a comprehensive review of the existing literature, this study compared the five-year historical trends in alumni engagement at a small, private liberal arts institution to survey feedback provided by alumni volunteers. Seeking to understand the impact of introducing a virtual alumni engagement strategy on the alumni-alma mater relationship and individual alumni decisions to continue participating virtually, the study concludes that a hybridized version of in-person and virtual alumni engagement strategies may provide alumni and their alma mater with the best of both worlds.

Keywords: alumni relations, alumni engagement, alumni programming, virtual engagement, virtual programming, higher education institution (HEI)

Chapter 1: Introduction

Each May, at graduation ceremonies across the United States, students of higher education walk across stages as their names are read aloud. They are handed diplomas and given a new title along with their degree: alumni. Though their time on campus has come to an end, many alumni continue to play a prominent role within the communities of their respective alma maters. The primary goal of advancement divisions, and more specifically, alumni relations offices at higher education institutions (HEIs) has long been to maintain the alumni-alma mater relationship and to engage their alumni populations with each other and with the institution itself (Fleming, 2019). This engagement, which the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) defines as "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," traditionally has taken place in the format of in-person meetings and events (Alumni Engagement Metrics Task Force, 2018, p. 5). With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, however, "traditional" in-person alumni engagement efforts were paused indefinitely, and new virtual engagement approaches emerged.

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States forced a near-universal transition into an online model for almost every aspect of daily life. The work done by alumni relations offices at HEIs was no exception, leaving staff scrambling to design and implement a new way of connecting to their alumni constituents. Though the move from the traditional in-person engagement strategy, such as regional events, presidential receptions, reunion and homecoming weekends, etc., into a fully virtual model was an unanticipated change by alumni relations offices, it is a change that is likely to continue to some extent as a part of standard

alumni relations practices even after it is safe to resume in-person programming. To this end,

with both the current fully virtual model and the anticipation of a future hybrid model in mind,

this research study will explore and attempt to answer the following questions:

1. **Primary:** What motivates alumni to engage with their alma mater in a virtual space?

2. **Secondary:** How will alumni motivations to engage virtually be affected when in-person programming resumes?

3. **Secondary:** What is the best strategy for alumni relations offices to take to successfully virtually engage their constituencies?

At present, the venture into virtual alumni engagement is mostly uncharted territory, without any

industry standards to help guide alumni relations professionals at HEIs as they navigate this

change. By answering these research questions, this study can begin to develop those standards.

Alumni-Alma Mater Relationship

Before asking the above questions, it is necessary to understand why the relationship

between alumni and their alma mater is so important to both sides that it is often maintained for

life, rather than ended after the diplomas have changed hands. The question "why do alumni

engage with their alma mater?" is one that has framed much of the research around the alumni-

alma mater relationship in order to help HEIs better understand the motivations of their alumni

constituents and to identify the most effective engagement strategies. For many alumni, their

time spent as students is typically an experience that becomes a foundational piece of their self-

identity and can ultimately dictate the level of their post-graduation motivation to remain

connected to their alma mater (Fleming, 2019; Gaier, 2005; McDearmon, 2013). The varying

degrees to which an individual chooses to engage with their alma mater understandably varies

person to person, but it is based largely on how they perceive their alma mater as an institution,

the value they place on higher education more broadly, and, most importantly, their personal

experiences as a student (Fleming, 2019; Gaier, 2005; Gallo; 2013; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; McDearmon; 2013; Weerts & Ronca, 2007).

On the other side of the alumni-alma mater relationship, HEIs have their own reasons for wanting to maintain an active, engaged relationship with their alumni populations. With their potential capacity to support their alma mater in the forms of both time and donations, alumni are typically considered a high-value resource to be tapped. In recent years HEIs have invested millions into alumni relations and understanding what motivates alumni to connect with and give back to their alma mater (Weerts et al., 2010). Having found that much of alumni engagement motivation stems from personal student experiences, many HEIs have even focused on cultivating a culture of alumni engagement within a current student body, understanding that "happy students become happy alumni; dissatisfied students become lost alumni" (Pumerantz, 2005, p. 290). HEIs have become increasingly dependent on their alumni populations for support in their current operations and have recognized the "mutually beneficial" terms of their relationship as outlined by CASE earlier (Alumni Engagement Metrics Task Force, 2018). The primary burden is on the HEI to create an environment in which their alumni community feels encouraged to engage with their alma mater and is not a burden that HEIs could not afford to lose with the unexpected loss of in-person engagement efforts. The importance of maintaining the alumni-alma mater relationship serves to further highlight the timeliness of this research study of alumni motivations within a virtual alumni engagement space.

Research Plan

Study Design.

In order to answer the previously stated research questions, this project examined the virtual alumni engagement efforts of a small, private liberal arts institution on the East Coast,

which will be referred to as "the University" throughout the study. Each year the University has about 4,000 undergraduate students on campus and an alumni population of approximately 50,000 that is supported by a team of seven alumni relations staff members. After approximately one year of a virtual alumni engagement model being implemented by the alumni relations staff, trends in alumni engagement preferences are able to be tracked and compared to data trends from previous years. Among the engagement trends that were tracked, historical alumni participation rates along with the current preferences and feedback from a group of alumni volunteers were evaluated to understand the potential impact of introducing virtual alumni programming.

The data for this research study was collected from two separate sources: a quantitative database and a mixed-methods survey. The quantitative data on the engagement behaviors of the University's entire alumni community was collected from their alumni database, Raiser's Edge. In addition to standard alumni contact and demographic information, Raiser's Edge tracks all of the engagement areas being examined in this study. With over 50,000 alumni, the data collected from Raiser's Edge will be crucial in getting an objective picture of the ways in which University alumni have chosen to engage with their alma mater.

The second data set was collected from a survey sent to alumni currently serving as regional alumni volunteers with the alumni relations office at the University. As regional volunteers, these alumni were actively involved in past, "normal" years of engagement opportunities and were asked for input when the virtual alumni engagement model was being designed. The regional alumni volunteers group represents a wide variety of alumni at various levels of engagement and can provide an additional lens through which to interpret all of the collected data.

Significance and Potential Impact

At the conclusion of this research study, my findings point to a hybrid model of alumni engagement programs as having the most potential for success. Typically, in-person engagement opportunities are limited to events held on campus, or in regions with a substantial alumni population, and are not accessible to the full University alumni community without substantial travel. Virtual engagement opportunities negate any obstacles faced by those alumni who have been unable to attend in-person programs due to a geographic lack of access. However, the research findings also point to screen fatigue, a continued thirst for in-person connection and socialization, and the simple ability to do so safely all as factors that are likely to lessen the overall demand for virtual options.

Though my data are limited in scope to the alumni of a single private liberal arts institution, the findings will provide insight and have relevance more broadly. I expect my findings can be applied to other similar universities and will also be of interest to the alumni relations industry as a whole, potentially helping a variety of higher education institutions connect with their own respective constituencies online. Additionally, while alumni relations work is understandably linked to higher education specifically, the main theme of their work, creating meaningful relationships between an organization and its constituents that ultimately support the mission of the organization, is applicable to the nonprofit sector as a whole. This same applicability can be said about my research. While the finer details of my research will relate directly to one area of the nonprofit sector, higher education institutions are not the only organizations looking to go virtual.

Literature Review

Prior to attempting to answer the previously stated research questions, a thorough review of the current literature is needed. It is crucial to first have an understanding of prior research on

the relationship between HEIs and their alumni populations, before being able to investigate

alumni motivators specific to virtual engagement. By exploring how alumni perceive their status

within their university community and what factors influence their decisions to remain engaged

with their alma mater after graduation, HEIs can better predict how their alumni communities

will react to the opportunity to be engaged in a virtual space and plan accordingly.

Along with establishing a foundational knowledge of general motivators for alumni to

engage with their alma mater, it is important to understand the strategies already utilized to

engage virtual communities, beyond the context of alumni relations. Though this transition into a

virtual platform is new in the realm of HEIs, other organizations have already recognized the

benefits of online platforms and conducted studies to gain a deeper understanding of how they

impact organizational relationships.

Venturing into the world of online communities and virtual engagement is relatively

unexplored territory for many alumni relations offices, resulting in little research currently

existing on the topic. It is due to this gap in the research that a comprehensive review of the

existing literature on the characteristics of both general alumni engagement and online, digital

engagement is a critical first step in the design of this research study by highlighting where the

two areas of research might overlap or be adjusted to focus on virtual alumni engagement.

Following the literature review in Chapter 2, this study's research methods and findings

will be outlined and analyzed in greater detail in Chapter 3. The implications of this study on

alumni engagement efforts at the University, HEIs more generally, and the broader nonprofit

sector will be discussed at length in the final chapter.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Before examining the impact of virtual alumni engagement efforts that are looked at in this study, it is necessary to have an understanding of the characteristics of the alumni-alma mater relationship as it currently stands, and the strategies used by other industries to successfully build virtual connections between organizations and their constituents. Since virtual alumni engagement efforts are just beginning to emerge, understanding the individual pieces first enables alumni relations professionals to better predict the potential outcome of implementing a virtual engagement strategy at their higher education institutions (HEI).

Alumni and Their Alma Mater

The Alumni Identity

An in-depth exploration of the current literature written about the alumni population of HEIs reveals that a large proportion of the existing studies have narrowed their focus specifically onto the various factors impacting an alumnus/a's donor status with their respective alma mater. While an individual graduate's donor status is unquestionably a crucial area of study for HEIs, alumni engagement is not limited to financial contributions. Given the wide variety of components that comprise "alumni engagement," it is important to acquire a deeper understanding of how someone perceives their alumni status and its impact or influence on their personal sense of self before considering any of the individual elements.

Nearly three decades ago, a study was conducted by Mael and Ashforth (1992) on the relationship between one's alumni identity and their connection to their alma mater. This was one of the first scholarly building blocks working towards developing a foundational understanding of the significance of recognizing the alumni identity. Mael and Ashforth applied their concept of organizational identification, or "the perception of oneness with or

belongingness to an organization where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) in which he or she is a member", to social identity theory in order to understand how organizational identification might be "operationalized" to benefit the organization (1992, p. 104). Their theory was that an individual's social identification with an organization would result in a psychological connection between the individual and the organization in question and resulting in the individual experiencing the organization's successes and failures as if they were their own, and ultimately prompt the individual to act in support of their organization (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Citing a lack of scholarly knowledge about "the factors which affect alumni attachment and involvement," their theory was applied to the alumni-alma mater relationship and found that not only are alumni who identify with their alma mater more likely to offer their support to their HEI but, more importantly, that "identification can be encouraged" (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, pp. 106, 117). More and more, the support of their alumni population has become a critical resource for most HEIs, making Mael and Ashforth's findings that much more valuable. Though the study might be considered outdated, their findings both provide some guidance to HEI administrators and staff to sway opinions and identities in their favor and created a foundation for other scholars to build upon (Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

If Mael and Ashforth's study can be considered as a starting point from which to venture, in the decades since alternative approaches have found similar results, suggesting that the importance of understanding the deciding factors behind alumni affinity with their alma maters cannot be overstated. In their oft-cited 2007 study, Weerts and Ronca developed a character profile of "supportive" alumni who were likely to provide support to their alma mater in the forms of both time and money. Their profile suggests those generous alumni "expect to be involved in supporting the institution," but it also recognizes a gap in the research (Weerts &

Ronca, 2007, p. 30). They were unable to identify the "source responsible for developing [this expectation]," and questioned, "to what extent did the university (past or present) play a role in shaping these expectations among alumni?" (Weerts & Ronca, 2007, p. 30). Noting the gap, McDearmon (2013) sought an answer through his exploration of how an alumnus/a self-identifies with their alma mater after graduation as a means for the advancement divisions and staff of HEIs to better understand who they are soliciting on an individual level. The study showed that alumni with an increased sense of "role identity" as an alumnus/a, or, how "graduates use the role of alumnus or alumna in the formation of their own sense of self" are more likely to "act out the behaviors associated with that social designation" and institutional support (McDearmon, 2013, pp. 285, 299). In short, an alumnus/a's self-definition as such and their expectation to be engaged in supportive behavior towards their alma mater can be influenced by the social cues and perceived expectations designed and disseminated by the HEI itself (Weerts & Ronca, 2007; McDearmon, 2013).

Recognizing one's alumni status as a part of their individual identity is a crucial step for HEIs to take in their endeavor to build and maintain lasting relationships with their former students. Overall, alumni who base at least part of their self-identity on their connection to their alma mater expect to maintain that connection throughout their lifetime, and that knowledge is a powerful determining influence on the future actions of alumni relations professionals and HEI advancement divisions. It allows HEIs to proactively work towards fostering a community of support among their alumni, rather than retroactively reacting to their needs, and to show their alumni populations they are not forgotten after graduation but have, instead, forged a lifelong connection with their alma mater.

Alumni Non-Donor Support

Understanding how alumni status factors into an individual's identity and the role it plays in developing a continued relationship with their alma mater after graduation is only one part of the equation. The alumni identity can cultivate an environment in which the alumni-alma mater relationship can thrive, but it not solely responsible for determining how an alumnus/a might choose to engage. As previously mentioned, a significant portion of the literature surrounding this field of study centers its focus on those factors that motivate alumni to demonstrate their support for their alma mater in the form of a financial gift. However, monetary donations are not the only means of support an alumnus/a might offer, making it important to understand the determining factors behind non-monetary support as well.

Gallo's (2013) research suggests that the relationship between alumni and their alma mater is divided into four distinct stages of a relationship building life cycle – affiliation, affinity, engagement, and support – with the terms of the relationship looking drastically different at each stage within cycle. The cycle terms are broken down as follows:

- **affiliation:** pre-graduation (students) and recent graduates who are pro-actively involved with their alma mater and have an immediate affiliation with the institution.
- **affinity:** graduates who are inactive or reactive to communications prompted by the institution.
- **engagement:** graduates who are prompted by milestones (e.g. reunion year) to engage with alma mater or for their own benefit.
- **support:** graduates who are highly active and altruistic, looking to give back to alma mater, usually have a well-established relationship with the institution.
(Gallo, 2013)

The strength of one's connection to and level of interaction with their alma mater waxes and wanes as they move through the various stages, with the affiliation, engagement, and support stages all indicating a higher likelihood of involvement prompted by circumstances such as being a recent graduate, reaching a significant milestone like a 25th or 50th reunion, or simply an altruistic desire to give back (Gallo, 2013). This thought is further supported by Weerts and

Ronca (2007), whose study "illustrates the importance of life stage in predicting alumni giving and volunteer support" (p. 29). The precise definition of young alumni in the affiliation stage – typically defined as alumni who have graduated in the past five to ten years – is further supported by the fact that though young alumni are "less likely to give, [they are] more likely to participate than any other graduation group" (Gallo, 2013; Gaier, 2005, p. 287). Though only one sub-sector of an alumni population, it is important to understand what motivates young alumni to support their alma mater. Alumni who are engaged early, as non-donors and donors alike, are far more likely to remain engaged throughout their lifetime and ultimately become donors, fostering a long, fruitful relationship with their alma mater (Gaier, 2005; McDearmon & Shirley, 2009).

Alumni are not always in the position to be able to financially support their alma mater, but that does not prevent them from being able to engage and provide support by other means. While non-donor support from alumni, in the form of attending alumni events, volunteering with the institution, or working as an employee, for example, is valuable of its own accord, the act is also indicative of potential future behavior. Alumni who engage with their alma mater in a non-donor capacity are also more likely to also show their support in the form of a donation at some point than unengaged alumni, suggesting a HEI should capitalize on any and all opportunities to engage its alumni community (Borden et al., 2014).

Alumni Donor Support

In response to the increasing decline in state and federal funding available, HEIs have turned to their respective alumni populations as a critical source of revenue to make up the difference (Gaier, 2005; McDearmon & Shirley, 2009). It is this need that has led most scholars to keep one eye on donor-specific motivators, even while exploring the alumni identity and what prompts alumni to engage their alma mater in non-donor capacities. Those studies often highlight

alumni who are predisposed to become donors, but do not always define the specific reasons

behind their decision to make a financial commitment.

Among the most commonly identified motivators for an individual to make a gift of

monetary support are age, income level, post-graduation involvement with the institution

(Borden et al., 2014; McAlexander et al., 2014), and overall satisfaction with their undergraduate

student experience (Borden et al., 2014; Clotfelter, 2013; Gaier, 2005; Weerts & Ronca, 2007).

Additionally, Weerts and Ronca (2007) found that each year an alumnus/a is 1.09 times more

likely to donate to their alma mater than the previous year. Age and income level can be tied

together, in that as an individual alum progresses throughout their career, their capacity to give –

as well as their inclination to do so – can increase (Clotfelter, 2013; Weerts & Ronca, 2007).

However, wealth on its own is not always an accurate predictor of donor intentions, suggesting it

should be considered as *an* indicator of potential donations, but not *the* indicator (McAlexander

et al., 2014). Clotfelter (2013) and Gaier (2005) both found that reunion celebrations, which are

recognized on the graduation anniversaries in multiples of five years, also increase the likelihood

that an alumnus/a will make a monetary donation. Understanding those specific motivating

factors is crucial information for the advancement staff at HEIs to acquire, as it will ultimately

inform the tactics used when approaching alumni for financial support.

Virtual Communities and Engagement

The introduction of a new, virtual aspect to alumni engagement is relatively uncharted

territory for most HEIs, which have relied on an in-person approach to connecting their alumni

constituents back to their alma mater. Therefore, it is necessary to look outside of the realm of

higher education to understand the concept of building connections within a virtual community.

Building Community in a Virtual Space

Moving briefly away from the world of higher education institutions and alumni populations, the broader scholarly discussion about online communities and engagement offers insight to how virtual engagement has been successfully adopted by other industries and can inform the future efforts of HEIs. With the rise of the digital world and the ever-increasing influence of online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram on modern society, people have turned to the internet to form online, virtual communities. These online communities can be defined as "a group of people who come together on an online platform, in pursuit of common interests or goals that they wish to derive through the community," rather than the more traditional definition of those occupying the same general physical location ".

Depending on the size of the HEI, alumni populations can be comprised of anywhere from tens to hundreds of thousands of people dispersed across the globe, with their shared experiences and diplomas being the primary defining elements of their community. The growing prevalence of online communities overall and a growing demand for HEIs to offer an online component to the alumni experience provides HEIs with an opportunity to expand the ways in which they connect the members of their widespread alumni population to one another and back to their alma mater. They have the chance to take a timely look at how other organizations have successfully created their own thriving virtual communities and while also filling a gap in the research by exploring how adding an online component will affect organizations, including the alumni experience, overall (Kharouf et al., 2020).

The formation of these virtual communities has captured the attention of marketing professionals across industries who are continually seeking innovative ways to connect with their consumers, and found online platforms to be a powerful, cost-effective tool in successfully engaging their constituents with their organization (Kharouf et al., 2020; Vohra & Bhardwaj,

2019). Looking at how an individual's direct interaction with an organization online influences

their engagement with a virtual community, Vohra & Bhardwaj (2019) determined that an

organization building trust and commitment with their consumers is critical, stating:

> As users begin to develop a sense of trustworthiness and attachment towards the
>
> community, they become more engaged to the community…As users begin to feel an
>
> emotional connect with the community, they tend to get more involved in community
>
> activities. Community interactions, must, thus, be managed in a manner such that they
>
> lead to formation of emotional bonds, feeling of gratitude and a sense of attachment,
>
> generating of trust and commitment towards the community (Vohra & Bhardwaj, 2019,
>
> p. 107-108).

Though the study does not focus on the relationship HEIs have with their alumni populations, the

lessons drawn from Vohra & Bhardwaj's findings can be used as a framework for virtual alumni

engagement strategies. There is a clear parallel between example described above and the

emotional connection an alumnus/a has for their alma mater and how it impacts their behavior

towards the HEI. Additionally, Tsai & Bagozzi (2014) found that a main draw within online

communities is a desire for social interaction, a sentiment that is regularly echoed among alumni

communities as well.

E-Learning and Distance Degree Programs

Within the field of higher education, the move into a virtual space has not been limited to

the activities of alumni relations offices and advancement divisions. Online, distance learning

programs have long been available to students as an alternative to the traditional on-campus

experience and can offer insight into the potential successes and challenges of introducing a

similar virtual component within the alumni relations arena (Firat, 2017; Kendall & Pogue,

2006). In their studies, which focused on the reflections and opinions of both on-campus and

distance learning degree programs, both Firat (2017) and Kendall & Pogue (2006) found that the

views and opinions of virtual learning programs were largely positive and that "distance

education is underestimated" (Firat, 2017, p. 184). The increasing awareness of and demand for

virtual learning options in higher education can be viewed as a potential precursor to the

potential impact of virtual alumni engagement efforts on an alumni population. If the factors

which Firat (2017) and Kendall & Pogue (2006) found that cOontribute to the positive

experiences of distance learners – flexibility, accessibility, and variety of choice – can be adapted

to meet the goals of an alumni relations office, a similar level of success might be acquired.

     Despite the successes of distance learning programs, there are also drawbacks that need

to be taken into consideration as part of the adaptation process. Virtual degree programs are still

a relatively new concept that has not been fully accepted by society at large and as such the value

of online degree programs can often be overlooked due to "misperceptions in society" about the

quality of the education being provided as lesser than their in-person counterparts (Firat, 2017, p.

183). The obstacles caused by these misperceptions of online learning and degree programs are

as important to understand as what makes the programs themselves successful as they help

prepare alumni relations office for similar potential challenges. Though the content being

delivered is significantly different, the delivery systems and consumers of virtual education and

alumni engagement programming are similar enough that what works for one may serve as an

accurate representation of what will work for the other.

Early Efforts Towards Virtual Engagement

     While the concept of implementing virtual alumni engagement on a scale that rivals

current in-person activities has yet to be well-researched, some early efforts to go online can be

found in the literature. These efforts by HEIs include using email communications to engage

alumni donors, using popular social media platforms to keep alumni and community members

consistently connected to the institution, and creating a social networking website for an alumni

population (Kumar & Nanda, 2019; Moore & McLaughlin, 2007; Peterson, 2007). Each of these

endeavors can be considered small components of the larger engagement process, and as such

can be considered key indicators as to where virtual alumni engagement might be most

successful.

In their study of permission-based email campaigns, Moore & McLaughlin (2007) found

that though email is an extremely cost-effective form of communication, it is not always the

audience's preferred method due to the wide diversity of recipients. Instead, email campaigns

designated for alumni populations are better treated as a "tool in the communication toolbox that

needs to be tailored to provide a specific type of information (p. 7). Social media platforms such

as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn are a popular alternative for online

communication and connection between a HEI and their alumni, with a 2014 CASE study

finding that approximately 84% of the social media usage by HEIs is for the direct purpose of

engaging their alumni audience (Mack & Stoner, 2014). This emphasis on alumni social media

engagement is further reflected in Kumar & Nanda's (2019) proposed framework for continuous

social media engagement in higher education, in which they suggest HEIs target engagement

towards student populations so as to remain connected "throughout their lifetime" (p. 118). Their

assertion that "social media is perhaps the most important and effective tool in keeping a

continuous engagement with…alumni and keeping track of their activities" lends direct support

to the high value of social media in any future virtual engagement efforts (p. 114). Approaching

social media from a different perspective, Peterson outlined the steps taken to create a social

networking website designated solely for alumni of the World Learning program, which houses

email, alumni directory, listserv, blog, and content management (e.g. photo sharing) components

all in one virtual space (2007). The numerous options and abilities of the OurWorld platform

allowed for easy tracking of which virtual components were widely used, and which were less

popular, ultimately providing a guide to more successful virtual engagement of their constituents

(Peterson, 2007).

When looking at how all of these efforts to take pieces of alumni engagement onto a

virtual platform can inform a more substantial transition, Ledoux (2005) offers a helpful lens

from which to view the changes. Ledoux looks at the challenge facing HEIs to develop a "unique

market niche to attract students and keep alumni affiliated" by creating an institutional culture

and how they can authentically translate that culture to an online forum (2005, p. 191). The

biggest challenges facing HEIs, according to Ledoux (2005) are how to provide their

constituents, in this case primarily students and alumni, with comparable socialization

opportunities online that they would have had access to in a "traditional" format, as well as

combatting the "threat that…online culture may become generic" with so many HEIs looking

towards an online forum.

Conclusion

The literature surrounding the alumni identity and the alumni-alma mater relationship

shows a clear correlation between an individual's self-perception as an alumnus/a and their

likelihood to engage with their former university in both non-donor and donor capacities. Their

conclusions on what factors drive alumni behavior have become well-established. They do not,

however, consider how alumni behaviors might be altered when long-practiced, in-person alumni

engagement methods are replaced by a virtual version. By applying marketing and behavioral

theories for online community engagement to the alumni relations sphere, a gap in the research can be filled and new world of alumni engagement opportunities be opened for exploration. Though the transition from in-person to virtual alumni engagement was prompted out of necessity, the inevitable return to in-person engagement does not mean virtual engagement will cease to exist. Instead, it is likely some version of virtual engagement will continue on to fill in where in-person engagement is no longer practical. To this end, new research into virtual alumni engagement practices and impact could not be timelier.

Chapter 3: Methods & Findings

Research Methods

For this study, an overview of the University's alumni programming and engagement

trends over the past five fiscal years for the full alumni populations was combined with the

insights of a small groups of alumni volunteers to understand the impact of introducing a virtual

alumni engagement strategy. The research samples, instruments, and procedures for each of the

two methods are described in detail in the following sections.

Raiser's Edge Database

Sample.

For the entire alumni population, five years of alumni engagement data were retrieved

from the University's Raiser's Edge database. The alumni engagement information gathered

from the database identified all alumni who participated in an alumni event during the years FY

2016 – FY 2020 and pulled their graduation class year, donor status, gender, ethnicity, and

geographic information. In addition to the information pulled for the five fiscal years, a separate

query with the same parameters was pulled for all alumni participants of virtual alumni events

held from March 2020 - March 2021. Despite the overlap with the complete FY 2020 data, the

virtual alumni events list was pulled separately because it is the inaugural year of the virtual

alumni events program at the University.

Instrument.

The University's alumni database is managed using Raiser's Edge (RE) software, a

cloud-based fundraising and customer relationship management tool. The alumni information

housed and tracked within RE includes demographic details (name, age, class year, degree,

contact information, etc.), donor history, event participation, and more for each individual

graduate of the University. The database itself is maintained by Advancement Data Systems office, with the majority of staff members in the University's advancement division, including the Alumni Relations office, being granted varying levels of access and ability to add or edit the information in the database.

Procedure.

For this study, RE's query tool was used to create search parameters within the database to identify all alumni who participated in alumni programming during the years FY 2016 – FY 2020. For all the alumni identified by the query, the following information was exported into spreadsheets: constituent ID number, donor status during the specified fiscal year, class year, gender, ethnicity, geographic location, and the specific type(s) of alumni programming they had participated in during the year. Alumni programming at the University is divided into five major groups – regional initiatives, reunion weekend, homecoming weekend, alumni association, and the newly added virtual events. It is worth noting that the numbers for the Alumni Association group are significantly smaller than the other groups. This is due to the fact that programs held within that category were intended only for alumni serving on the University's Alumni Association Board of Directors. In addition to the five fiscal years for which data was queried and exported, the same parameters were used to export alumni participation information for the time period March 2020 – March 2021 to retrieve a full year's worth of virtual alumni programming data.

To identify alumni participation trends prior to the introduction of virtual programming, the data pulled for each of the five fiscal years was analyzed to see what percentage of the total number of alumni participants fell into each of the five identified programing groups. The individual years were then totaled together to examine the overall five-year trends. In addition to

looking at the programming trends, the total number of alumni participants for each of the fiscal years and the March 2020 – March 2021 virtual year were found to compare and identify trends in the overall alumni participation, regardless of programming types.

Regional Volunteer Survey

Sample.

An anonymous, online survey was distributed to alumni who serve as regional volunteers for the 51 regions managed by the University's alumni relations staff. As regional volunteers, these alumni provide guidance to the Alumni Relations staff, represent the University at alumni events in their area, and are a local point of contact for fellow alumni in their region. Out of the 106 alumni volunteers who received the survey invitation, 33 completed surveys were received, resulting in a 31.1% response rate. The complete survey can be viewed in the Appendix.

Respondents within the regional alumni volunteer group were recruited to complete the survey online through an email message sent in collaboration with the University's Alumni Relations office. The regional volunteer group was selected to receive the survey for multiple reasons. As regional volunteers, this group of alumni had a demonstrated level of historically consistent engagement with the University prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and the unexpected transition into virtual alumni engagement. Following the transition, the levels of virtual alumni engagement and personal perspectives from regional alumni volunteers can offer targeted insight into an individual graduate's personal motivations to engage with their alma mater virtually. Additionally, the regional volunteer group represents a broad range of graduation class years and alumni in varying stages of life, allowing for a potentially diverse mix of survey respondents from within the full alumni population.

Instrument.

The survey sent to regional alumni volunteers was built using the Qualtrics XM online survey software and distributed via email. Despite being sent to a small, specific group of alumni, the survey itself was anonymous to protect the privacy of the survey respondents and to encourage open, honest feedback. The ten survey questions were a mix of yes/no ("Have you attended a virtual alumni program (ex. via Zoom meeting/webinar) with the University of Richmond since they began in March/April 2020?"), multiple choice ("How many virtual alumni programs are you interested in attending each week?"), ranking ("In the future, if both virtual and in-person alumni programming are available, what type(s) of programming do you anticipate you will want to participate in? Please rank the following categories from most likely to least likely to attend [1 = least likely, 7 = most likely]"), Likert-style scale, and open-ended, qualitative questions ("What elements of the virtual alumni programing currently being offered do you most enjoy?"). The combination of quantitative and qualitative questions allowed for the specific focus of the research study to be investigated and for additional input the survey respondents wanted to share to be collected.

Procedure.

The initial emails inviting all 106 regional alumni volunteers to participate in the anonymous online survey were sent on March 10, 2021. Since this research study is in collaboration with the University's Alumni Relations staff, the regional volunteers email lists were divided into three separate groups based upon their individual Alumni Relations staff contact, who was also copied on the email messages. A set of follow-up emails were sent one week later, on March 17, 2021, and the final survey data was collected at the end of a two-week period on March 25, 2021. The ten-question survey was intentionally kept brief, in the hopes that

a survey only requesting 5 to 10 minutes of a potential participant's time would encourage a higher response rate.

The Qualtrics XM software has extensive data analysis and reporting tools, allowing for a customized breakdown of the individual question results to be generated. For each question, excepting the three open-ended questions, the survey response data was analyzed to find the response percentages and create a data visualization. Qualitative data coding was applied to the three open-ended questions to identify any major themes within the given answers.

Research Limitations

There are a few limitations to this research study which need to be factored into the data analysis and findings. The biggest limitation to this study is unique circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Though the pandemic created an environment in which virtual alumni programming at the University could be introduced and implemented, thus far there is only one year of data available. Additionally, the only year for which virtual alumni programming and participation data exists is a year during which virtual alumni programming was the only opportunity offered to the University's alumni population. Without being given the chance to make a choice between virtual and in-person programming, there is a possibility that the virtual programming data collected from Raiser's Edge and the feedback collected in the regional volunteer survey will change significantly in future studies.

The Raiser's Edge database also faced some limitations in this study. Though access to the database is comparatively limited, most University staff members with access to Raiser's Edge are also granted varying levels of data entry and editing access. With so many individuals able to adjust the alumni participation and programming information housed in the database, a margin for human error should be considered as a part of the data analysis. Additionally, the

database is continuously updated, making some historical information challenging to verify. For

example, the current total number of alumni in the University's alumni population is easily

determined, but that number fluctuates with every graduation and death. For the five fiscal years

being examined in this research study, FY 2016 – FY 2020, the total number of alumni had to be

estimated by subtracting the number of alumni in one or more graduating classes that would have

been current or future students during that time period along with alumni who passed away after

that fiscal year (ex. alumni population total in FY 2019 ≈ current alumni population total – [class

of 2020 graduates & alumni who passed away after FY 2019])

     The regional volunteer survey is further limited by the sample size of the original survey

recipients. Though the regional alumni volunteer group does reflect a wide portion of the alumni

population, that portion does not include any undergraduate alumni who have graduated from the

University in the last ten years. The regional volunteers within this group of alumni, referred to

as "young alumni," are separated out to serve on Recent Grad Regional Councils and help advise

the Alumni Relations staff on offering additional programs targeted towards young alumni. By

expanding the sample size of the survey recipients to include young alumni, respondents from

this subgroup may have differing insights from the rest of the regional alumni volunteer

population.

     Though all of these challenges have limited the scope of this study, they also highlight

how future studies can expand upon the current one as the area of virtual alumni programming

continues to grow. It is with these limitations in mind that the findings of this study will be

presented, and the implications discussed.

Research Findings

Raiser's Edge Database

The data retrieved from the Raiser's Edge database was analyzed to understand how alumni programming has been operated in-person for the past five fiscal years and to identify historical trends in the programming that can provide additional insight into the impact of virtual alumni programming. From FY 2016 – FY 2020, approximately 87% of all alumni programming participants participated in either regional or reunion weekend programming. As depicted in Figure 1, the participation trends over the past five years emphasize the impact of regional initiatives and reunion weekend on alumni programming at the University, with those two categories accounting for over 90% of the alumni participants during FY 2016 – FY 2019. The impact of reunion programming on FY 2020 is significantly decreased due to the timing. Reunion weekend at the University is traditionally held during the first weekend of June, meaning the COVID-19 pandemic prevented a reunion weekend from being help in FY 2020. Though virtual programming did not completely compensate for the lack of a reunion weekend in FY 2020, it still made a significant impact with 31% of the participants for the year.

Figure 1

*Types of Historical Alumni Programming by Participation Percentage*
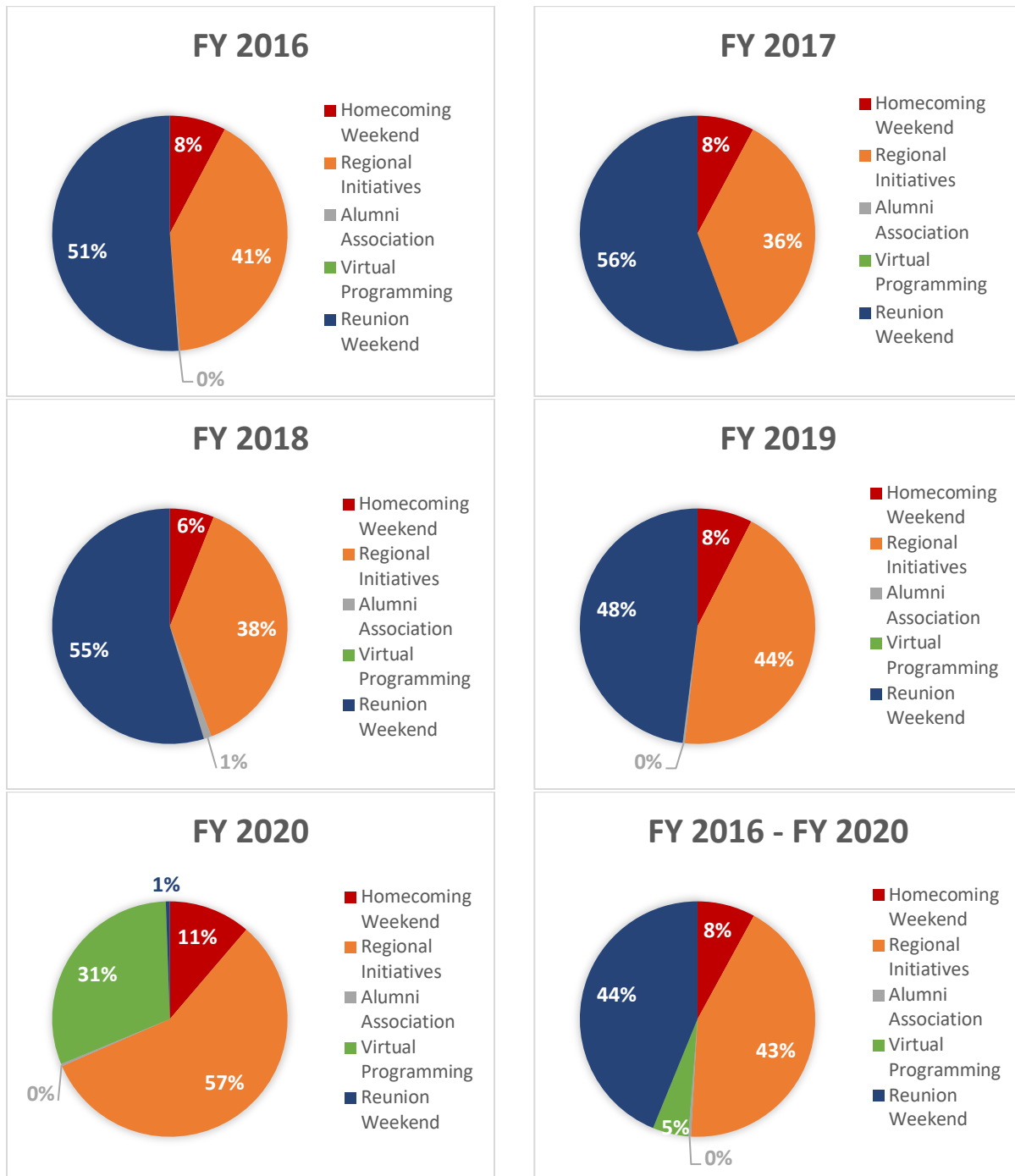
Note. The Alumni Association percentages in these following charts within the figure are not zero but are less than 1%: FY 2016 - 0.19%; FY 2019 - 0.28%; FY 2020 - 0.31%; FY 2016 – FY 2020 - 0.36%.

Impressively, in the span of one fiscal quarter (April – June 2020), virtual alumni programming made a strong enough impact to make up 5% of all the alumni programming participants to engage with their alma mater in the past from FY 2016 – FY 2020, as shown in Figure 1. It should also be noted that the alumni association percentages are less than one percent or missing from each chart in Figure 1 because those events are typically reserved for member of the Alumni Association Board of Directors, rather than being programming sponsored by the Alumni Association. In FY 2020, reunion weekend is reduced to 1% due to the COVID-19 pandemic requiring the weekend to be canceled.

The percentages of the total alumni population to participate in any type of alumni programming were also calculated and examined over time (see Figure 2). For that purpose, the virtual alumni program participation data for the timeframe March 2020 – March 2021 was also exported from Raiser's Edge. This timeframe was examined despite its three-month overlap with the 2020 data since there is only one year's worth of virtual alumni programming data currently available. During FY 2016 – FY 2020, the percentage of the total alumni population to participate in alumni programming ranges approximately 8 – 10% of the total population. Interestingly, at 9.5% of the total population, the level of alumni participation held steady during the March 2020 – March 2021 timeframe. Successfully maintaining this level of engagement in a fully virtual model suggests the University's alumni population wants to be engaged and remain connected even when in-person programming is not an option. It also highlights the potential impact virtual alumni engagement can have on alumni participation in future years.

Figure 2

Percentage of Total Alumni Population to Participate in Alumni Programming
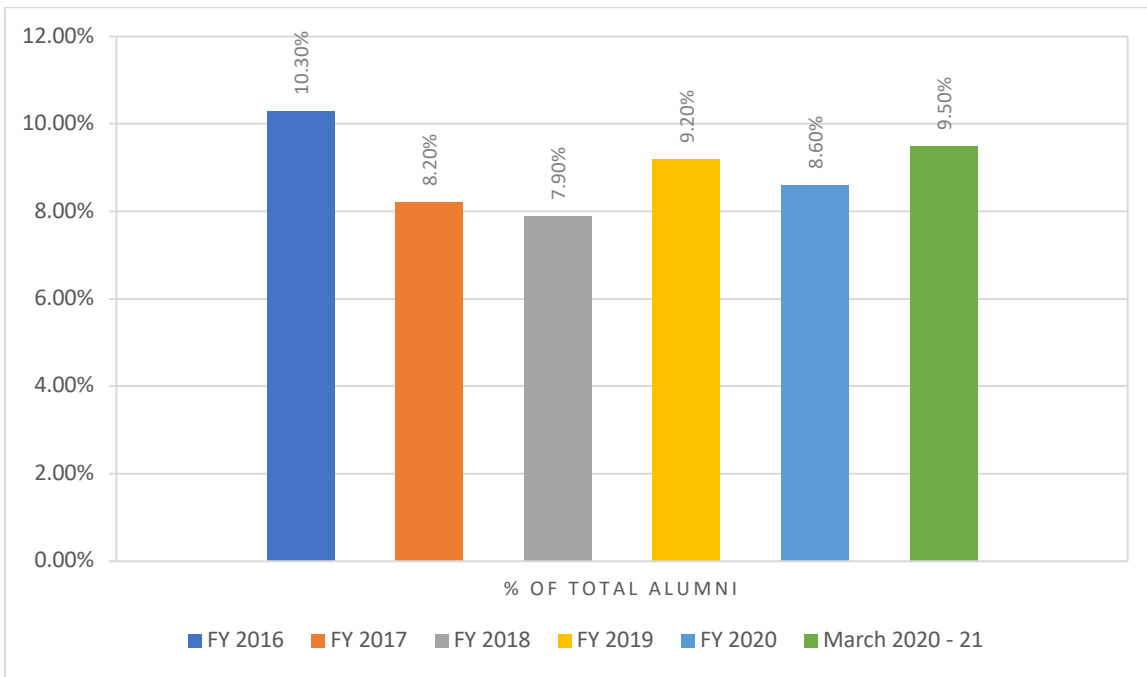
Note. The Raiser's Edge database does not track historical alumni population numbers. Population size during the individual fiscal years was estimated by subtracting the next year's graduating class and alumni who passed away after the end of that year from the current total number of alumni to approximate a population size. Example: alumni population total in FY 2019 ≈ current alumni population total – (class of 2020 graduates + alumni who passed away after FY 2019)

Regional Volunteer Survey

The ten questions on the regional volunteer survey were grouped into three broad themes under the umbrella of virtual alumni programming: alumni programming preferences, programming communication, and open-ended programing feedback. Accordingly, the survey findings have been group based on the same themes.

Virtual Programming Preferences.

Questions 1-5 of the regional volunteer survey focused on several aspects of the respondents' virtual programming preferences, including reasons for choosing to attend or not attend virtual programs, topic preferences, and expectations for future virtual alumni programming. Overall the preferences for virtual alumni programming were widespread among the survey respondents. However, as can be seen in Figure 3, just over 92% of respondents did indicate that they generally enjoy virtual programming and 65% of them agreed to some extent that they prefer virtual programs which are hosted in real time over pre-recorded options.

Figure 3
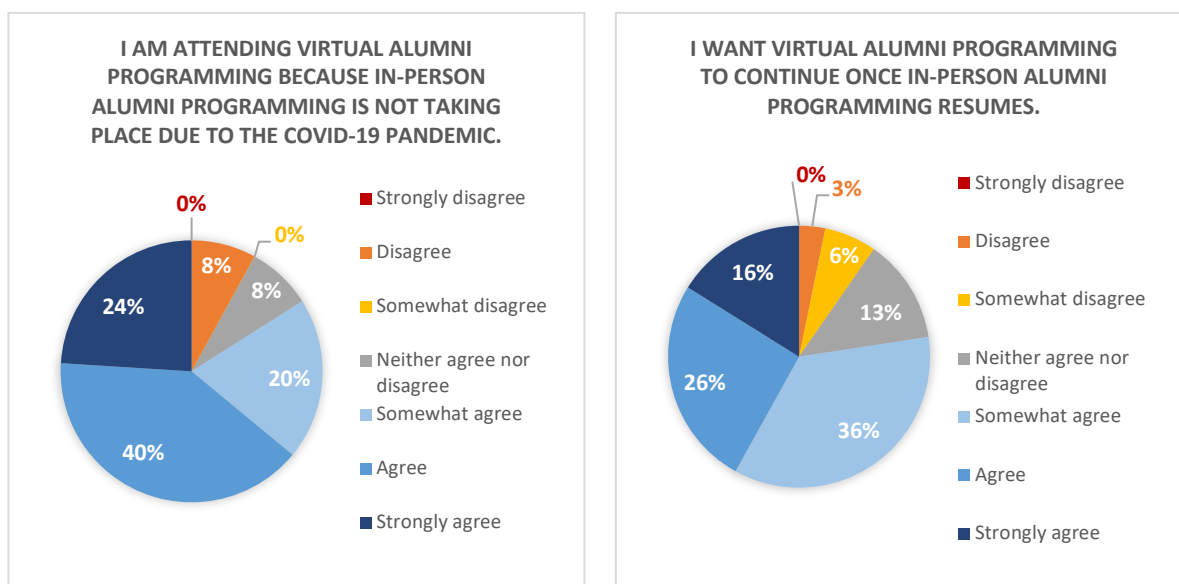
Virtual Alumni Programming General Preferences
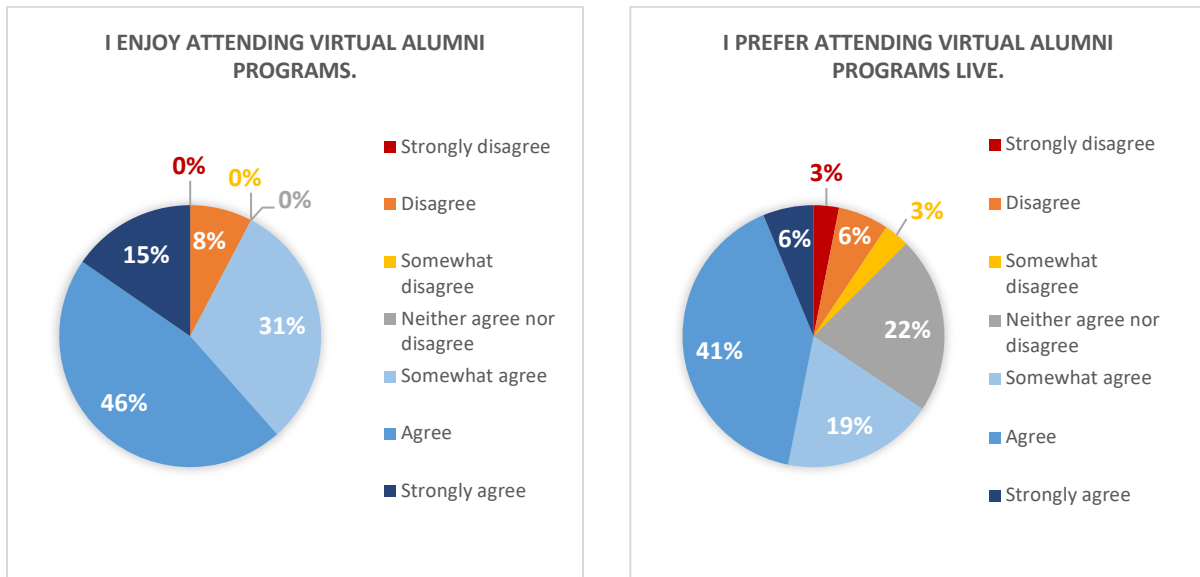
Note. Survey Question 2. Figure depicts respondent choices for two of the statements in the question. See Appendix for full question text.

As shown in Figure 4, nearly 84% of respondents indicated – within the scale of

"somewhat agree – agree – strongly agree" – that the COVID-19 pandemic was a catalyst for

their choosing to attend virtual alumni programs at the University, with 78% of respondents also

agreeing that they want virtual alumni programming to continue even after in-person alumni

programming has resumed.

Figure 4

*Virtual Alumni Programming Reasons for Participating*

Note. Survey Question 2. Figure depicts respondent choices for two of the statements in the

question. See Appendix for full question text.

Figure 5 shows that zero respondents, however, indicated that they would prefer to attend

only virtual programming moving forward, with approximately 61% opting for a mix of virtual

and in-person programming, and 36% planning to stick solely with in-person programming in the

future. Survey respondents were also asked how often they are interested in attending virtual

alumni programming, with almost 91% of survey respondents reporting that they were interested

in attending less than one event per week, emphasizing the importance of the content of virtual

alumni programming (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Virtual Alumni Programming Format Preferences
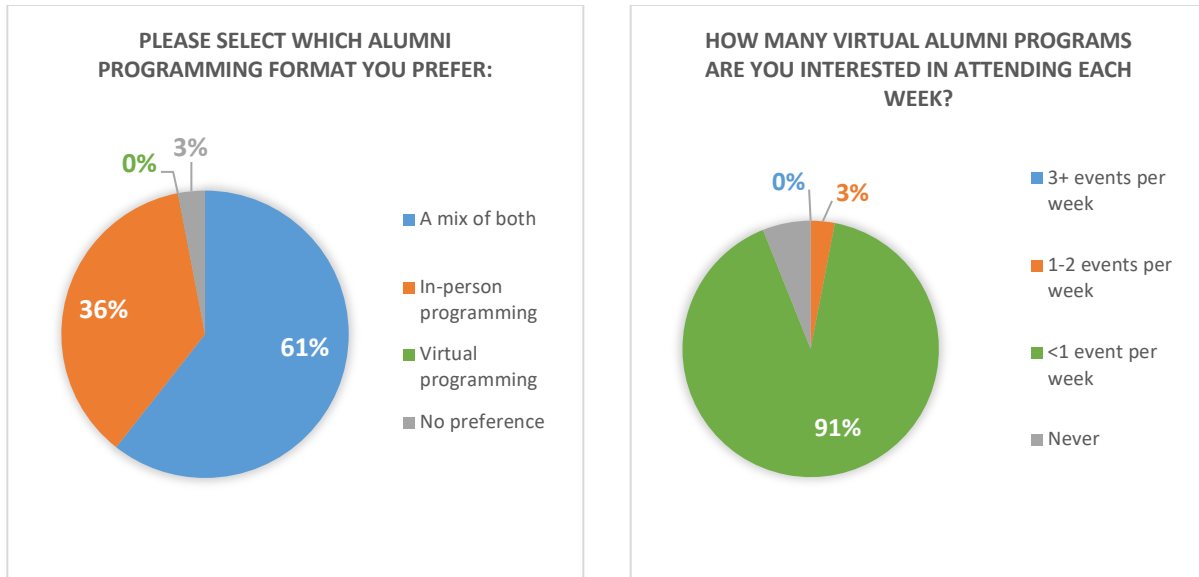
Note. Survey Questions 3 and 4 are reflected in the titles of the two charts in this figure.

Respondents were then asked to rank seven categories of virtual alumni programming

(Social, Academic, Administrator, Career Programming, Wellness/Fitness, Athletics, and Other)

currently being offered by the University's Alumni Relations staff in order of preference. As

shown in Figure 6, the most popular category among the respondents was Social programming,

with 36% selecting it as their first choice and 69% of respondents placing as one of their top

three choices. Since these programs are typically designed to bring alumni physically together to

connect with one another, this stated preference for Social programming among the survey

respondents is a likely limitation to virtual alumni programming that will be discussed in further

detail in the next chapter. The Wellness/Fitness and Athletics categories tied for sixth place, with

approximately 60% of survey respondents placing one of the two categories in that second to last

position. At 76% of respondents, the Other category was ranked most consistently at the bottom.

Though the Other option was fillable within the survey, only one respondent entered anything,

suggesting the majority of respondents placed Other in last position primarily because they were

required to give the option a rank within the survey question.

Figure 6

Virtual Alumni Programming Category Preferences
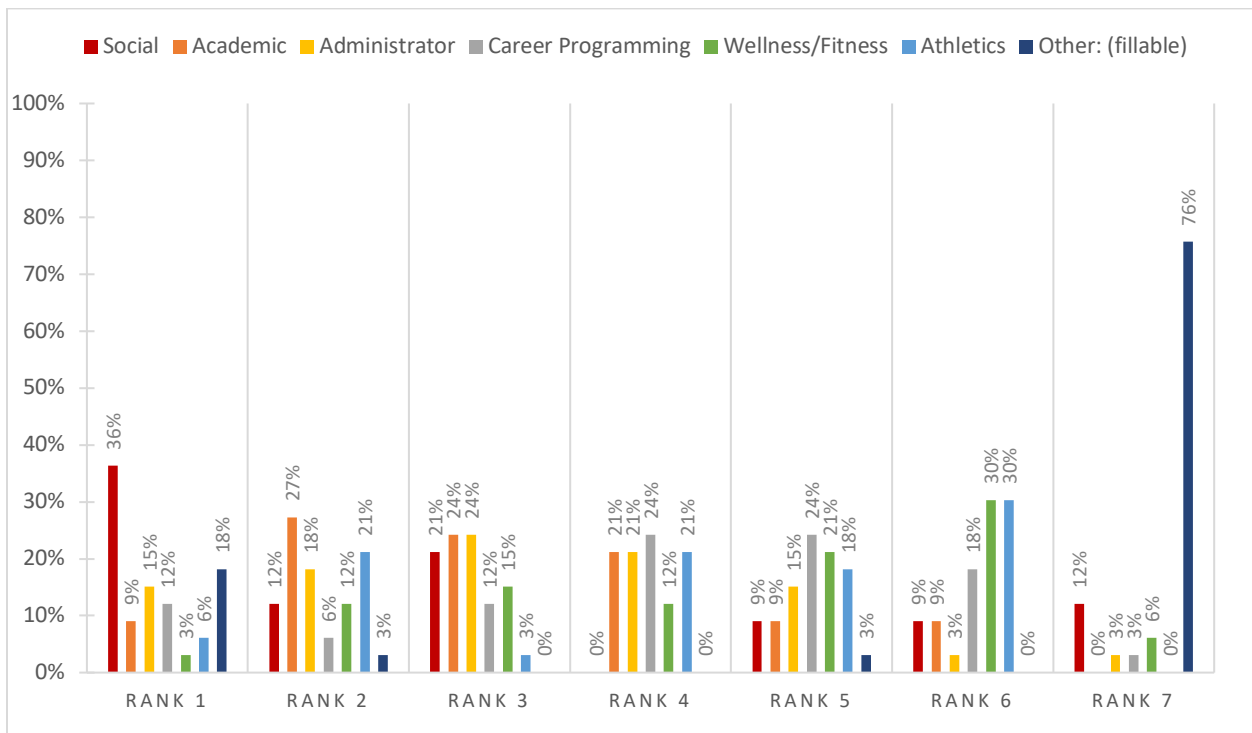
*Note*. Survey Question 5. See Appendix for full question text.

Virtual Program Communication.

Looking at the responses to questions 6 and 7 on the survey, which focused on what

forms of communication from the Alumni Relations office the survey respondents rely on, email

communications are the clear preference. Approximately 70% of the survey respondents stated

that they do receive the weekly alumni programming newsletter that is emailed out by the

University's Alumni Relations staff, and over 80% of them rely on email communications to

learn about upcoming opportunities, as can be seen in Figure 7. Balancing out the other end of

the spectrum, more than half of the survey respondents indicated that they do not rely on social

media to learn about alumni programming being offered. That number increases to almost 79%

for the University's alumni website.

Figure 7

Virtual Alumni Program Communication Preferences
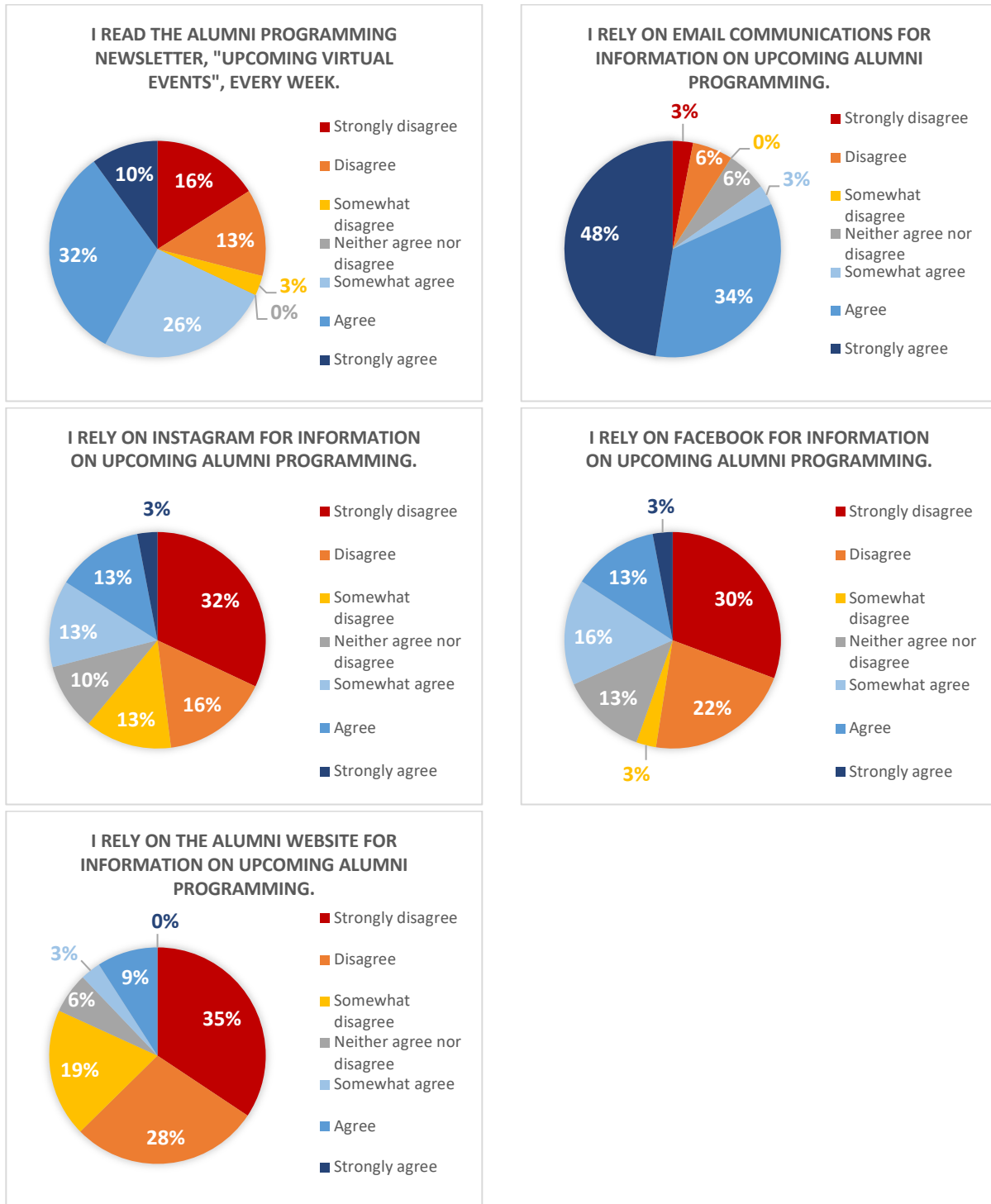
Note. Survey Question 7: "For each of the following statements, please choose one:" Figure

depicts respondent choices for each of the statements in the question.

Open-Ended Qualitative Feedback

To enable respondents to share any final details or opinions on the newly implemented

virtual alumni programming, the final three questions of the Regional Volunteer Survey were

open-ended, qualitative questions:

- What elements of the virtual alumni programing currently being offered do you most enjoy?
- What elements do you least enjoy? Please share any thoughts you have for improvement.
- Please share any additional thoughts or comments you have below:

The responses prompted by the open-ended questions yielded a few very prominent themes.

Among the most enjoyed elements of virtual alumni programming have been variety of

programming being offered virtually, as well as the sense of connection with fellow alumni

brought on by programming which showcases individual alumni. As an example illustrating

"sense of connection" through virtual programming, one respondent wrote:

"I have really enjoyed hearing from alumni across the country (and world?) about topics

they are passionate about or knowledgeable about! I have learned a lot from fellow alums

and am very impressed! I do not live in Richmond and currently reside in an area

with[out] a lot of UR alums, so these types of engagement would not be possible without

the virtual programming opportunities! It has also been great to connect with offices and

services on campus virtually - again, something I wouldn't have been able to do

otherwise."

Interestingly, that sense of connection reported in the survey was juxtaposed with a feeling of

being disconnected from fellow alumni; another major theme to come out of the open-ended

responses. In response to being asked what their least favorite parts of virtual programming are,

one respondent said, "not being able to move around and talk to different people," while another

answered that it is "challenging to connect with people" virtually. Rounding out the top

qualitative themes to come from the survey are "Zoom fatigue" and scheduling/time zone

conflicts. One survey respondent expressed their reluctance to participate in virtual

programming, stating, "I personally don't engage in virtual programs because my job has me on

Zoom several hours a day and I am too fatigued to engage socially in the evenings. I rarely do so

even with close friends because of how exhausting it is to be on screen all day long."

As insight provided directly from the alumni population, these common themes pulled

from the survey's open-ended questions, along with the rest of the survey data, will be critical in

considering the full implications of this study. By combining the insights collected from the

Regional Alumni Volunteer survey with the trends outlined by the Raiser's Edge data, the

implications of introducing virtual alumni programming can begin to be discussed.

Though this discussion will take place in depth in the upcoming chapter; a hybridized

alumni engagement conceptual model is depicted below (see Figure 8). Based on the alumni

participation trends pulled from Raiser's Edge and the feedback provided by the survey

respondents, a hybrid approach which includes both virtual and in-person programming

opportunities may open up the University's alumni engagement efforts to a much wider audience

within the alumni population. The potential implications of adopting this approach are

considered as a part of the upcoming discussion of the study's findings.

Figure 8

Hybrid Alumni Engagement Strategy Conceptual Model
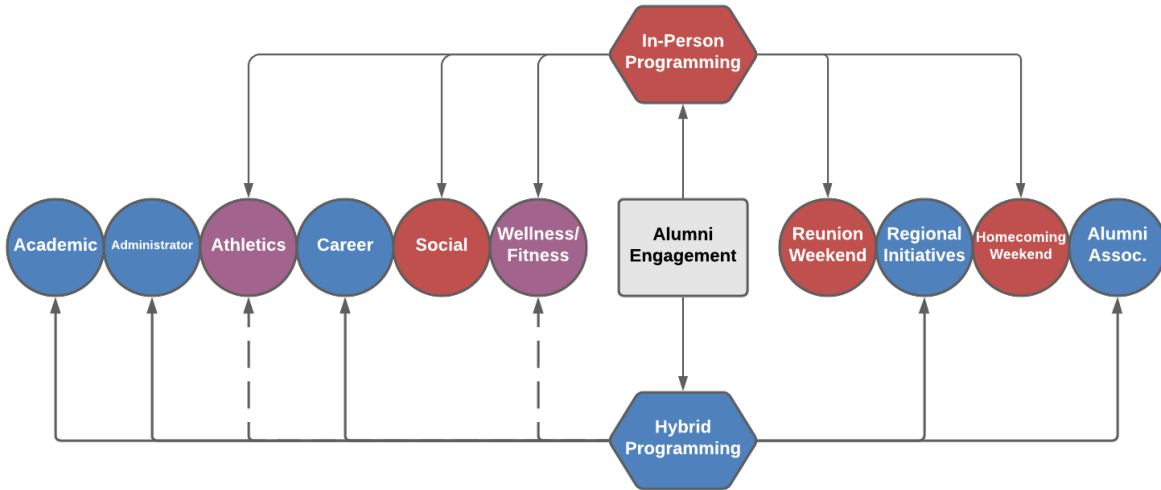
Note. Broken line arrows indicate program categories that could work situationally as a hybrid

program but are more suited for in-person programming.

Chapter 4: Discussion

The goals and priorities of alumni relations and advancement professionals at higher education institutions (HEIs) were abruptly challenged with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring of 20201. The unexpected transition from an in-person to a completely virtual alumni programming and engagement model required alumni relations departments to improvise and implement a new format for alumni programming with very little preparation time and no industry standards to refer to for guidance. Although the timing of this venture into the unknown was unanticipated, taking alumni programming virtual in the 21st century is a logical step. To this end, it is likely that the alumni relations industry will witness an increased focus on virtual alumni engagement effort even after in-person programming can safely resume. With a potential in-person/virtual hybrid alumni engagement model on the horizon, it becomes crucial to understand why a HEI's alumni constituents are currently motivated to engage with their alma mater and how they anticipate that motivation changing in future. Answering those questions will help alumni relations offices begin to develop strategies for successfully maintaining the alumni-alma mater relationship in a virtual venue.

By approaching this research study through the lens of a single small, private liberal arts institution on the east coast, a first small step has been taken into understanding the potential impact of introducing virtual alumni engagement into the industry by first exploring its impact on a single HEI. Combined, insights collected from the survey sent to the University's regional alumni volunteers and alumni participation data retrieved from the alumni database, Raiser's Edge, provided a thorough understanding of what alumni prioritize within their relationship with their alma mater and how virtual alumni programming has impacted the HEI thus far.

Implications

The study findings laid out in Chapter 3 reveal several areas of insight which impact key stakeholders in the alumni-alma mater relationship being explored. Overall, virtual alumni programming and engagement efforts at the University have been met with enthusiasm by their alumni audience, and there is likely to be a continued demand for virtual alumni opportunities in the future. This enthusiasm opens the door for the alumni relations industry to grow and diversify alumni engagement standards and for HEI alumni to have far more options for remaining connected with their fellow alumni and alma mater.

Higher Education Institutions

With close to 80% of survey respondents indicating they would like to see some form of virtual programming continue on, the University alumni desire for continued virtual alumni engagement is clear. However, 61% of the respondents indicated that they prefer to have virtual programming opportunities combined with the in-person experiences that already exist, which may pose new challenges. Though there may be a growing demand for virtual programming and engagement opportunities, it is unlikely to be balanced out by decreased demand for in-person options. Instead, the University's alumni relations office will be required to produce a much higher amount of programming than they have been expected to in past years. Adding in a virtual component to move towards a hybrid alumni engagement model does not lessen the burden of in-person engagement, it instead creates additional responsibilities to be met. Consequently, by working to meet the growing demands for both virtual and in-person alumni engagement the individual workloads of the University's alumni relations staff members will grow correspondingly.

It is crucial to note that the positive impact introducing a virtual alumni engagement component may have would not negate the importance of continuing to offer in-person

programming. As clearly shown in Figure 2, there was a not insignificant drop in the number of alumni participants during the FY 2020 and March 2020 – 2021 years. Those two years are the only timeframes examined in which a reunion weekend was not held on campus for alumni. As a key part of the University's alumni engagement strategy, the 5% - 10% difference in participation between those two years and the other four was likely a result of an in-person reunion weekend not being held in June 2020. The importance of in-person programming is further supported by the survey respondents' preference for social programming (see Figure 6). Several respondents also indicated that the inability to easily interact with fellow alumni participants during virtual programming was a reason for preferring in-person programming, particularly for social offerings such as alumni happy hours or pre-game gatherings. These preferences stress the need for continued in-person alumni engagement, further highlighting a hybrid alumni engagement model as the best path forward.

The potential benefits of a hybridized engagement model, however, far outweigh the cost – in some cases literally. The cost of producing virtual programming can be significantly more budget friendly for a HEI to put together as it does not incur the same charges, such as venue rental fees, food and drink minimums, or event materials, that an in-person program may cost. This would enable a HEI to produce a higher volume of virtual programs and make the move to a hybrid engagement model fiscally achievable within alumni relations offices.

The main goal of most, if not all, alumni relations professionals and offices is to foster a continuous connection between alumni and their alma mater and introducing virtual alumni programming into an office's operational model has the potential to greatly enhance that effort. Budgetary and time restrictions can limit the scope of an HEI's reach within their alumni population, forcing them to focus on the largest geographic pockets of alumni to make the

biggest impact. Large campus events, such as Reunion and Homecoming weekends, then

become the primary avenue for bringing alumni from different areas back together, if only for

brief spans of time. Virtual alumni engagement is an opportunity for HEI's to strengthen that

full-population connection on a more permanent basis by creating an online community. Alumni

are able to connect with one another through a shared experience and are no longer required to

live within certain areas of the country in order to have the chance to participate and connect.

Subsequently, a HEI's potential audience is truly opened up to the complete alumni population.

A permanent move into a hybrid alumni engagement model would undoubtedly be

daunting for any alumni relations office within a HEI. Redesigning an operational model to

incorporate the additional work of creating and implementing virtual alumni engagement efforts

into an already heavy workload would be an adjustment, but with a large potential payoff.

Alumni Populations

The enthusiasm and demand for virtual programming expressed by the survey

respondents has an equally significant impact on the University's alumni population. For alumni,

virtual engagement can do more than simply offering a reimagined avenue for delivering

programming. For some it can be an entry, or re-entry, into the University community if

participating in in-person programming is not a viable option. Though there were respondents

who understandably cited extended screen time ("Zoom fatigue") as lessening their interest in

virtual programming, many respondents shared an appreciation for virtual programs which

highlighted their fellow alumni and created the opportunity to connect with one another. HEI's

provide the possibility to build virtual community through programming, but it is the zealous

participation of alumni that create it. Though there will always be some level of disconnect

between alumni within a virtual programming model from a physical standpoint, having access

to a variety of programming in different formats better enables a HEI's alumni constituents to select their preferred degree of connection with the community on an increasingly nuanced scale.

The potential for increased variety in programming that a hybrid alumni engagement model offers further empowers alumni to connect with their alma mater on their own terms, which has the potential to maintain the alumni-alma mater relationship long term. For the HEIs providing the programming, strategically planning which programs are best suited to be offered virtually versus in-person will be critical. For example, the survey showed social programming was the top format preferred by respondents and they later expressed that social connections were more challenging to make via a virtual platform, suggesting that socially focused programs are more successfully offered in person. Other program offerings, such as academic or administrator events, may attract a larger audience and thrive on a virtual platform. This concept is especially useful in helping alumni virtually "return to campus" for events that were historically only accessible to a HEI's on-campus community and local alumni. Alumni can be located anywhere on the globe without risking their connection to their alma mater.

Nonprofit Sector

While findings of this research study are focused specifically on the impact of virtual alumni engagement efforts at a single, private HEI, they may also be useful to the nonprofit sector more broadly. Fostering strong, long-term connections between an organization and their constituents is not a goal that is limited to the alumni relations industry. It is reasonable to expect that other industries within the nonprofit sector were also forced by the COVID-19 pandemic to consider virtual alternatives, and as such may find the structure of this study and the proposed hybrid model useful for determining the impact of virtual engagement within their own populations.

Limitations

The limited scope of this research study offers several areas for the research to be expanded upon. Most importantly, the unique pandemic circumstances surrounding the initiation of virtual alumni programming efforts have created an environment in which virtual alumni programming has had zero competition from other programs. At present, virtual programming has only been offered at the University at a time when virtual programming was the only option. Adding an additional layer of complexity could offer a more nuanced set of alumni motivators. As in-person programming resumes and alumni relations professionals transition their focus into developing a hybrid engagement model, the opinions and participation data collected from virtual programming within that context will likely provide a more complete picture of what motivates alumni to engage with their alma mater virtually.

Future Research

Expanding the survey recipient list in future studies beyond the regional volunteer group could also offer additional insights to consider. Though a diverse group on their own, the regional alumni volunteer group sampled for this study did not include young alumni who graduated from the University in the past 10 years and is still comparatively limited in their representation of a full alumni population. At 106 alumni volunteers, who are by nature of their volunteer role already actively engaged with their alma mater, they are a small group to represent a population of over 50,000 alumni. By expanding the survey invitation to include a HEI's full alumni population or by conducting the study at a different type of institution, such as a large, public research institution, a far more diverse group is likely being sampled.

Conclusion

Virtual alumni programming is still in the earliest stages of becoming a part of standard alumni engagement practices, but the value it has the potential to add is clear. Alumni can be provided with significantly increased programming variety and opportunity to be an active part of their alumni community, without being hindered by an inconvenient geographic location. Higher education institutions share in the benefits of virtual programming by having an effective means of reaching out and connecting with all the members of their alumni population, leaving no one behind. The COVID-19 pandemic may have catapulted virtual alumni engagement to the forefront of the alumni relations industry, but it is the flexibility and room for growth encouraged by virtual engagement that ensures the model will endure.

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Appendix

Regional Alumni Volunteer Survey Questions

1. Have you attended a virtual alumni program (ex. via Zoom meeting/webinar) with the University of Richmond since they began in March/April 2020?
   a. Yes
   b. No

2. For each of the following statements, please choose one:
   Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Somewhat Disagree – Neither Disagree nor Agree – Somewhat Agree – Agree – Strongly Agree – Not Applicable
   a. I enjoy attending virtual alumni programs.
   b. I plan to continue attending virtual alumni programs.
   c. I want virtual alumni programming to continue once in-person alumni programming resumes.
   d. I prefer watching virtual alumni program recordings on my own time.
   e. I prefer attending virtual alumni programs live.
   f. I do not have a preference between recordings and live virtual alumni programs.
   g. I am attending virtual alumni programming because in-person alumni programming is not taking place due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
   h. I attended virtual alumni programming when it first started in March/April 2020, but do not attend now.

3. Please select which alumni programming format you prefer:
   a. In-person programming
   b. Virtual programming
   c. A mix of both
   d. No preference

4. How many virtual alumni programs are you interested in attending each week?
   a. 3+ events per week
   b. 1-2 events per week
   c. <1 event per week
   d. I am never interested in the virtual alumni programs.

5. In the future, if both virtual and in-person alumni programming are available, what type(s) of programming do you anticipate you will want to participate in? Please rank the following categories from most likely to least likely to attend (1 = most likely, 7 = least likely):
   a. Social (i.e. happy hours, trivia)
   b. Academic (i.e. faculty presentation)
   c. Administrator (i.e. presidential receptions, alumni updates)
   d. Career Programming
   e. Wellness/Fitness (i.e. workout classes, guided meditation)
   f. Athletics (i.e. updates with coaches, pre-game gatherings)

      g. Other:

6. I receive the alumni programming email, "Upcoming Virtual Events", in my inbox every week.
      a. Yes
      b. No

7. For each of the following statements, please choose one:
Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Somewhat Disagree – Neither Disagree nor Agree – Somewhat Agree – Agree – Strongly Agree – Not Applicable
      a. I read the alumni programming newsletter, "Upcoming Virtual Events", every week.
      b. I rely on email communications for information on upcoming alumni programming.
      c. I rely on Instagram (@urichmondalumni) for information on upcoming alumni programming.
      d. I rely on Facebook (facebook.com/URAlumni) for information on upcoming alumni programming.
      e. I rely on the alumni website (alumni.richmond.edu) for information on upcoming alumni programming.

8. What elements of the virtual alumni programing currently being offered do you most enjoy?

9. What elements do you least enjoy? Please share any thoughts you have for improvement.

10. Please share any additional thoughts or comments you have below: