

10/26/05

REE Conference

Workshop C: Creative Ways to Engage Alumni

Facilitator – John Jaquette, Cornell University

Introductions

The facilitator of the workshop, John Jaquette of Cornell University opened the workshop up and introduced the two main questions for the session:

1. What are you as entrepreneurial program leaders at your respective institutions doing to engage alumni at this time?
2. What would you like to do differently in engaging alumni and why?

14 participants were in attendance at this workshop including the facilitator. Each of the participants then were asked to introduce themselves and their institution and then to give a brief synopsis of what they were doing to engage alumni.

- Ron Foster is from a background in microelectronics and photonics. He has just completed a large \$1B alumni campaign.
- Ted from the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill) is an assistant professor is looking to launch an alumni program.
- Jay from the Illinois Institute of Technology is involved in the architectural engineering and undergraduate business programs. He has recruited alumni to serve as coaches for student projects and as guest speakers in the past. He points out that engaging alumni in ways that makes them feel as though they are truly contributing is extremely important. Alumni liaisons need to learn how to give back to contributing alumni. There must be a mechanism in order to keep alumni engaged with the students to keep the alumni coming back.
- Chris Cline of the University of Washington commented that his alumni were very local (within 50 miles) of the school. However, his alumni are difficult to tap as they tend to mind their own business. Also his program is quite new and hence lacking in graduates
- Paul of the University of Colorado at Boulder commented on the importance of external outreach and networking. He has been having success with the more recent alumni, which remain loyal and highly energetic. His challenge is to attract more distant alumni and to who feel less attached to the school.
- Lee Cooper is a Professor Emeritus at UCLA. Recently, he has been promoting the transfer of technology from UCLA to the private sector and to get students involved in new venture initiation. He relies on his alumni to serve as industry experts (not as coaches), which gives the alumni authority. These alumni participate in client-side supervision and coaches of the business ventures.
- Peter is from Munich, Germany where he is working to start an alumni network. His alumni community currently is in its infancy of 3 years. One challenge for his organization is its lack of connection to an entrepreneurship center.
- Catalina is from South America where the entire structure for the alumni network is based around its national system involving 9 universities across 5 cities. One of her current techniques in connecting alumni to students is to make alumni videos that tell

success stories to students. She has many goals for the future including organizing conferences, promoting angel investing from alumni, creating internship networks, introducing an intrapreneur program (incubator). At this time, there is no connection between alumni and university.

- Michelle is with the University of Idaho. Her entrepreneurship department has no current alumni and she is trying to reach out to the general alumni instead. She intends to establish cross-disciplinary alumni networks with the college of business. Many of the colleges within the university do not have any formal relationship with its alumni. Her greatest challenge is the remoteness of the university since it has alienated many alumni who are too far to keep in touch.

Engaging Alumni

John observed that there was not one individual that was satisfied with the state of their alumni network. He then proposed the following questions: What would be your fantasy in reaching out to alumni? What are some creative ways to engage alumni?

Ted commented that his experience with an advisory panel was difficult since they wanted more control than they were given. He suggested that the role of the advisory panel must be firmly established while still giving them enough leverage. He ended up dismantling the group since they had separate agenda and began to pursue their own lobbying.

Jay replied that his advisory board has been useful and allowed him to be accountable to them. He suggested that the board should not only consist of alumni.

Ron agreed with Jay and mentioned that his industry advisory board only consists of 1/3 alumni. Paul concurs.

The Alumni Board

Tom Byers chimed in with a new question and thread: Does the size of advisory board matter?

Ted commented that a large board has a dual purpose. However if he was unable to serve all of the people and to keep each of them engaged, he would recommend no more than 12 members.

John introduced the bottom line authority in engaging alumni, Tip O'Neil. All alumni engagement programs are local. He suggested not telling people that they were on a board because that implied that they were in control. Instead, he named the group an advisory council such that he could dictate their role in the program. He reminded people to empower the alumni.

Ted said that more importantly than the alumni center itself, his organization wants to generate an alumni culture, one that is focused on returning to his institution as fellow entrepreneurs to connect with the next generation of entrepreneurs. One method he suggested was to have a business plan competition.

John added that alumni should be asked explicitly for advice, support, and resources. Notice, he said, that these alumni should be leveraged at this time because they would eventually become trustees and major benefactors of the university. He asked again: What do you want to use the advisory council for? His council is about 30 people. He also recognized that some alumni really just want to remain detached.

Next, Ted asked about how can you convert advisory groups to give?

Tom speaking on the example of the alumni from the London Business School and College of London, said that very little money comes from individual donors, most of the relationships are long time nurtured with corporate sponsors.

John explained that in the past, his organization would try to stay clear of its development office. Today he aspires to be its best friend and to serve as the ambassador to the alumni. At Cornell, they have established a Cornell Entrepreneur Network with the purpose of placing the needs of the alumni first. An MIT Enterprise Forum type organization may not be advisable as it is already is dominant in its space. Try other methods he suggested like a web based interface for speaker/topic forum signup. Allow attendees to have their own elevator pitch on the website. Choose speakers who will not lecture but will give an exciting 20 minute introduction to a universally engaging topic. Food should only be served at the conclusion and then alumni should be allowed to have an open mic session. John commented that his organization now has had 11,000 alumni participants in the last 5 years. In the end, the ultimate goal is to partner with the development office and to have it fund the program. At that point, they may then start adding strategic initiatives for example internships and other university wide programs. Slowly and subtly these initiatives can be introduced to the alumni CEN network so that the alumni can begin to take interest and provide the support and resources to advance the initiatives. Finally, he suggested that a questionnaire be circulated amongst alumni to gauge which ways they were ready to give back. However, the most important thing is to follow up with the alumni and mind the politics involved with the people you will be engaging,

Chris raised a question about the cut point for alumni participation.

John replied that alumni could make a pledge. To get connected one could start a partner program, initiate a newsletter, organize a meet and greet. Recognize the cost of being involved with the alumni and to maintain the relationships.

Chris followed up with the question of whether John sees any of the pledge capital.

John clarified that as standard procedure, he could not solicit money without being cleared. At the same time he felt that his organization was competing heavily against other campus organizations such as the library, technology services, scholarships, and athletics. The vision of the entrepreneurial alumni program must be crystal clear. In his case it is "finding and fostering the entrepreneurial spirit." Establish a solid history of successes so that you can have more leeway into what you do. At the same time, alumni like it when they see you being really entrepreneurial about getting the money and resources. In contrast, entrepreneurs hate

endowments because their money is not being used to its fullest potential. For example a \$1M endowment would probably just net \$40K per year.

Ted asked John what he would change if he could repeat this process starting ten years ago.

John replied that he would have started a network at that time. Due to the isolated location of Cornell, it hasn't been easy to create a nationwide network. However today his organization runs 45 faculty strong, with 4,000 student participants in entrepreneurial related classes this year. Keep in mind that cultivating the "spirit of entrepreneurs" at Cornell does not necessarily imply creating business from the experience.

In Closing (Wrap Up Remarks)

Several participants voiced their key takeaways for the session.

- Ted: Focus on your board. Reinforce the core of your organization and be outcome oriented. Focus on the five things that you want to accomplish and build up the resources to support them.
- Jay: Create a program that also helps alumni. That is the secret to getting them energized and eventually broadening the network.
- John: Keep the alumni in the focus and help them feel like they are really a part.