

Recent Alumni: Interest, Involvement and Opportunity

Survey Findings Provide Insights into
Post-Graduation Engagement

AUTHOR

Mirko Widenhorn, Ed.D.

Senior Director of Engagement Strategy



Recent alumni are a population that alumni engagement offices spend time cultivating to ensure they remain engaged and ideally become lifelong advocates and supporters of their alma mater. For the purposes of this study, recent alumni are defined as individuals who earned their first degree in 2012 or later.

Goals of This Survey

- **Provide** insights to help understand trends in recent alumni engagement to inform the work of alumni engagement and annual giving teams
- **Analyze** whether engaging at the institution while a student impacts their engagement post-graduation
- **Better** understand the type of content of interest in communications
- **Deepen** understanding of giving potential and opportunity among recent alumni

About the Respondents

2,064 respondents

1,567 graduated from public institutions (76%)

497 graduated from private institutions (24%)

Year received first degree

2012: 15%	2017: 9%
2013: 10%	2018: 9%
2014: 10%	2019: 10%
2015: 11%	2020: 8%
2016: 10%	2021: 9%

Gender

51% identified as female

43% identified as male

5% identified as queer or non-binary

3% identified as transgender

Highest degree received

Associate's degree: 22%

Bachelor's degree: 54%

Master's degree or equivalent: 8%

Doctoral degree or equivalent: 5%

SURVEY FINDING:

Student Engagement Leads to Alumni Engagement

Nearly 8 in 10 respondents indicated that they participated in a student club, athletics, or similar activity as a student, which is a high percentage. Interesting was that when asked about whether respondents felt involved, an even higher percentage than those who participated in student clubs indicated that they felt involved. This highlights that perception of involvement varies by individual. In looking at the types of organizations, over 4 in 10 respondents were involved in academic organizations, such as honor societies, with 1 in 3 indicating involvement in intramural or club sports, as well as over 1 in 4 who indicated that they were involved in e-sports at their institution with nearly the same percentage indicating involvement with cultural organizations. As would be expected, the types of organizations respondents were involved in vary greatly. As alumni offices seek to start or grow affinity programming, student organizations are one avenue to consider, and institutions are encouraged to review this type of data for their constituents.

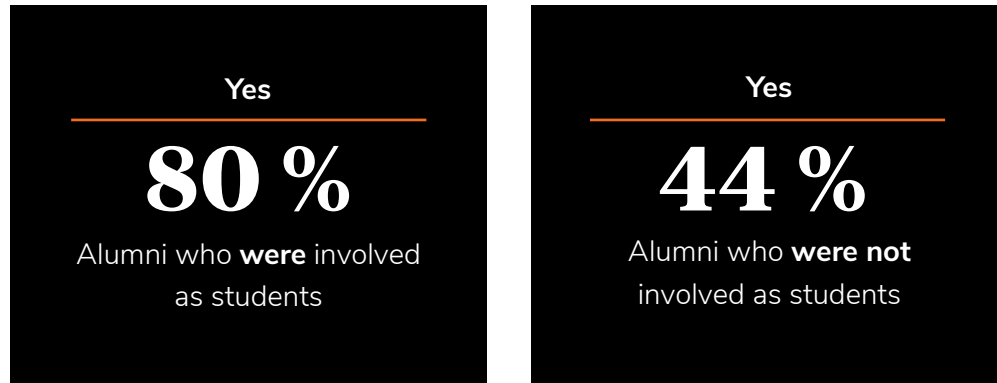
An underlying question was whether there is a difference in engagement among alumni who were involved as a student compared to the engagement of those who were not involved as a student. This information could help alumni offices focus energy on a recent alumni population that is more likely to remain involved after graduation.

In analyzing the results, it became apparent that there is a notable difference in engagement between these two groups. Nearly 8 in 10 respondents who indicated that they were involved as a student indicated that they participated in an alumni activity in the last 12 months. This compared to fewer than 5 in 10 of those who indicated that they were not involved as a student – a 35% gap.



Nearly 8 in 10 respondents who indicated that they were involved as a student indicated that they participated in an alumni activity in the last 12 months.

Percentage of alumni who participated in an activity over the last 12 months



The difference was even greater among those who indicated that they were a club officer. Only slightly over 1 in 10 had not participated in an alumni activity in the last 12 months, compared to nearly 4 in 10 who were not officers. Both scenarios provide a clear indication that engagement as alumni is higher among those who were involved in student organizations. This data highlights an opportunity for institutions to focus more on recent alumni who were involved as students.

Opportunities:

- Develop partnership with student affairs department to foster increased engagement during and after their undergraduate experience
- Identify new graduates who were engaged as students early to encourage continued alumni engagement

SURVEY FINDING:

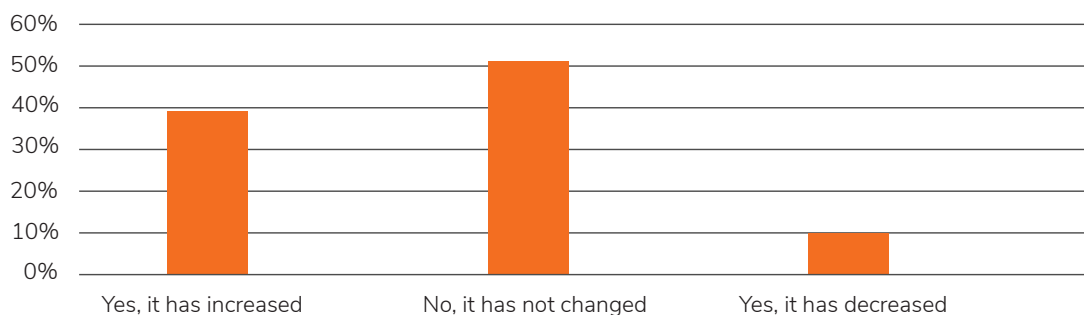
COVID-19 Resulted in Increased Engagement

The COVID-19 pandemic created challenges and yet has led to new ways to engage alumni, whether through increased digital engagement, virtual events, or other activities. Given that institutions have moved away from in-person events as a necessity, respondents were asked whether they felt that their engagement with their alma mater has changed. While engagement had not changed for one-half of respondents, the other 50% reported that engagement had changed. The good news is that, of those, 8 in 10 feel that engagement with their alma mater has increased during the pandemic. This is an indication that the additional offerings have broadened and deepened relationships with graduates.



8 in 10 feel that engagement with their alma mater has increased during the pandemic.

Change in engagement with alma mater during pandemic



This speaks to the work being done in alumni engagement at institutions around the country and highlights progress in continuing to grow engagement, even in a difficult environment.

The activities that drew the most participation among those who participated were gatherings with other graduates, followed by discussions with campus representatives (4 in 10), and over 1 in 3 indicating participation in webinars on academic-related topics.

Opportunities:

- Continue to offer a breadth of communications and programming in the “new” normal to ensure that engagement of these newly engaged or more deeply engaged individuals continues

SURVEY FINDING:

Interest in Career Programming and Networking Opportunities

There were some clear preferences among respondents related to the type of program in which they would be most interested in participating. For recent alumni, career-related programs and those providing networking opportunities were of highest interest – with 50% of respondents indicating interest in one or both of these. Slightly more than 1 in 3 respondents indicated interest in large-scale programs such as reunions and homecoming events. While there was general consistency among recent alumni, the most recent graduates (classes of 2019-2021) had the strongest interest in career-related programming with over 50% expressing interest. “Older” recent alumni expressed a slight preference for programs with networking opportunities, with career-related programming remaining second in importance. Overall, this data highlights a difference between recent alumni and other graduates, as older graduates tend to have less interest in career-related information, as seen in our previous surveys. Institutions should highlight networking components that are part of any alumni program in communications with recent alumni, given the expressed interest.



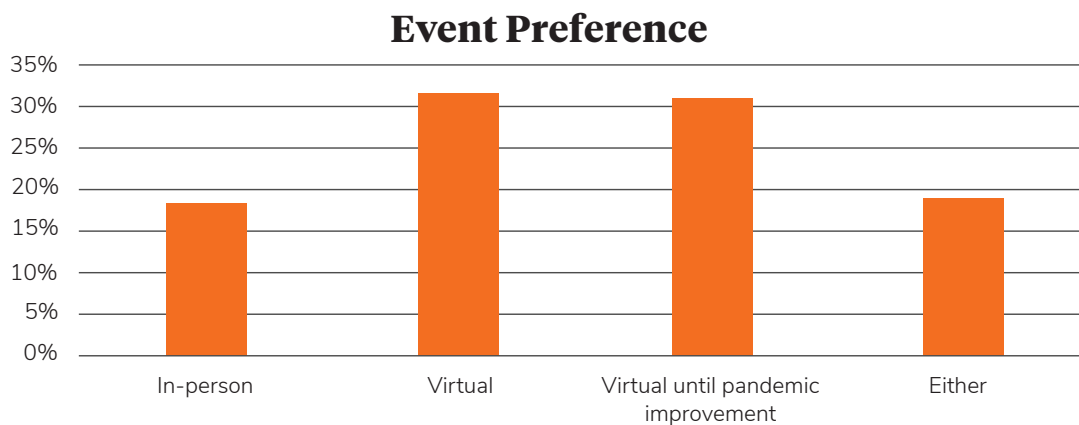
Opportunities:

- Increase emphasis on career-related information and programming
- Take advantage of existing content and activity, rather than starting completely new programming
- Identify whether there are career-oriented programs already in place at the institution that could also be marketed to recent alumni
- Identify offices to partner with when developing career programming

SURVEY FINDING:

Continuation of Virtual Events / Programs

At the time of data collection (June 2021), respondents indicated a preference for continued virtual programming, with 1 in 3 preferring virtual programming regardless of the pandemic and an additional 1 in 3 preferring virtual programming until there is improvement in the pandemic. Note that improvement was self-determined; however, the situation in June had already improved from earlier in the year. Overall, this indicates continued hesitancy for in-person events, and institutions should continue to offer virtual options and develop an understanding of preference of their constituencies. Only 2 in 10 respondents indicated a preference for in-person programming at the time of data collection, while 2 in 10 respondents indicated no preference between virtual and in-person events.



However, once individuals feel that the pandemic situation has improved sufficiently, a higher percentage is interested in returning to in-person events.

Opportunities:

- Continue to offer virtual programs given that 1 in 3 individuals prefer this type of programming even in the “new” normal
- For the time being, evaluate the level of interest among your constituents to return to in-person programming

SURVEY FINDING:

Interest in Supporting Current Students

Recent alumni have a strong interest in supporting current students, as 8 in 10 respondents indicated that they would be interested in helping current students. This presents another opportunity to engage recent alumni who were most interested in:

54%

Being a mentor to a current student

51%

Speaking with students about career-related information

42%

Sending students words of encouragement (this may be before graduation, at the beginning of the academic year, or in other circumstances)

Opportunities:

- Connect recent alumni with students as an additional way to foster lifelong connections with their alma mater

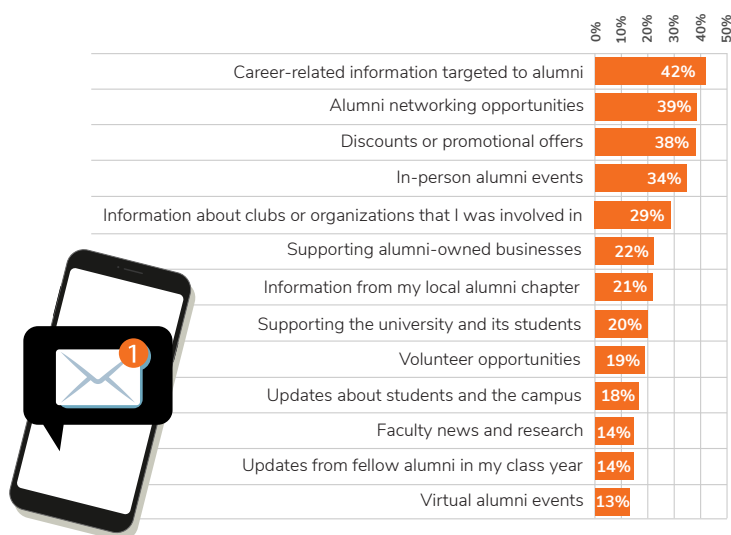
SURVEY FINDING:

Opportunity to Further Tailor Communications

Email continues to be the most prevalent way to communicate with alumni and is a key element of any engagement and fundraising strategy. One-half of respondents reported receiving at least one email a week, with 29% indicating that they receive more than one email a week from their alma mater. Recent alumni believe this is too much communication, as more than half of this group indicated that it is too frequent. When looking only at those receiving more than one email per week, three out of four indicated that this is too frequent. For institutions that are sending a higher number of emails, it may be challenging to reduce communications to recent alumni. However, half of those who receive emails less than once a week, but more than once a month, feel it is the right amount (11% feel it is not often enough). While there is no frequency that meets everyone's needs, institutions should seek to adjust communications to less than once a week, but more than once a month based on this data.

The good news is that nearly 3 in 4 respondents strongly agree or agree that they are satisfied with the communications received, indicating that communications are resonating with recent alumni. When asked about the type of content of highest interest, more than 4 in 10 identified career-related information targeted to recent graduates as of interest, with nearly as many interested in information about alumni networking opportunities, followed by discounts or promotional offers.

What type of information would you like your alma mater to share with you?



This is similar to the interest in the types of programming. Recent alumni had comparatively low interest in information about fellow alumni in their class, which is generally an area of high interest in overall alumni surveys. Institutions can use this information to tailor content to recent alumni more specifically. An easy adjustment would also be to highlight networking in communications about planned programs, as that is an area of interest among this population.

Among those interested in career-related information, three types of information were of the highest interest.

Career-related information of the highest interest:

- Job search information
- Job postings
- Career fields information and which areas are hiring

Of note is that the classes of 2020 and 2021 considered information about job postings to be of the highest interest, while job search information was of more interest for the other class years. This may be an indication that segmented communication to the most recent graduates is beneficial and will help to further build their engagement, while providing differentiated content to older classes within the group of recent graduates. This data also presents an opportunity to partner with career services, especially as it relates to the most recent graduates.

Opportunities:

- Adjust frequency of communication and add additional content based on preferences
- Explore other ways to infuse career-related information into aspects of communications

SURVEY FINDING:

Student Engagement and Alumni Communications Influence Giving

Among respondents, 12% self-reported that they had made a gift to their alma mater in the current year, which is higher than the national average. This is an indication, as seen in other parts of the results, that respondents are somewhat more engaged than the overall population. **However, nearly 3 out of 4 respondents had not given in at least three years, with 1 in 3 reporting that they are non-donors.**

Alumni who were engaged as students were nearly four times more likely to have made a gift this year than those who were not engaged as students. This supports focusing more time and resources on soliciting alumni engaged as students – solicitations can be targeted to these individuals differently, or this group could be solicited at a higher frequency than those who were not engaged – saving budget dollars and staff time.

Another factor that seems to influence giving is that alumni who are satisfied with the content in communications are five times more likely to have given this year than those who stated they were not satisfied. While perhaps not surprising, there is an opportunity to continue to review communications and identify opportunities to deepen segmentation as highlighted above.

When asked which cause they would support, respondents expressed interest in:

- **50%** - fund that benefits students
- **42%** - the annual fund
- **34%** - specific academic department
- **28%** - athletics or specific athletic team
- **25%** - specific student organizations

The highest number of respondents would support a fund that benefits students, which is another indication of this group's interest in helping current students. This presents a continued opportunity for higher education to tailor messaging with that in mind. Somewhat surprising is that the annual fund was second in interest, which historically has not been a preference among recent graduates. This may be an indication that the perception of an annual fund is shifting slightly. However, institutions should primarily focus on the impact on students of financial support in messaging to recent graduates.

Opportunities:

- Focus efforts on soliciting alumni who were engaged as students, as they are more likely to contribute
- Review communications and identify ways to create alumni satisfaction to encourage giving
- Tailor messaging around funds that benefit students to appeal to alumni interested in helping current students

Final Thoughts

The results of the recent alumni survey highlight opportunities for institutions to refine engagement strategies for this key demographic. Below are key takeaways:

- Recent alumni **have different preferences and expectations** than older graduates – consider further tailoring messaging
- **Grow career-focused messaging and programming**, given high interest among recent alumni
- Identify ways to **connect alumni with current students**, given the high level of interest in helping current students
- **Review communications** to identify opportunities to focus on recent alumni and seek to maintain cadence of less than one email a week and more than one email a month
- Continue to offer **virtual events** while beginning to mix in in-person events
- Focus recent alumni giving initiatives on the **impact on students** and consider a deeper solicitation focus on individuals who were engaged as students

Every constituency has had a different student and alumni experience, but data from this national survey on recent alumni engagement can help to inform new strategies and support existing ones. The pandemic has changed how institutions engage their graduates and how donors and non-donors alike are solicited, creating an unprecedented opportunity to adjust strategies and continue to build engagement from this key group.

About the Author



Mirko Widenhorn, Ed.D. is senior director of engagement strategy at Anthology. Widenhorn joined the Anthology team in 2013, bringing over 11 years of higher education experience. Most recently, he was the director of alumni relations and annual giving at Wilkes University. In his role at Anthology, he works closely with customers on alumni engagement scoring projects, while also focused on thought leadership for higher education. Widenhorn is a Drew University graduate and completed his Ed.D. in higher education administration at Wilkes University, focusing on whether giving differs based on participation in different types of alumni programming.

About the Survey

Data was collected through a nationwide survey conducted in June 2021 using a national survey platform. To qualify for the survey, respondents had to indicate that they had completed a degree at a higher education institution in the United States and had completed their first degree in 2012 or later. 2,064 responses were considered valid and used in the analysis. For each data point, null values were excluded.

About Anthology

Anthology exists to help higher education advance and thrive using modern cloud technology and services that keep the learner at the forefront. Drawing on a fully connected data experience, Anthology solutions create operational efficiencies, provide intelligence for staff and administrators, and empower institutional leaders to support and guide students on a path to success.

The full suite covers admission and enrollment management; student success and retention; institutional and learning effectiveness; alumni and advancement; and enterprise applications and infrastructure, offering solutions to the challenges facing campuses today. Working with more than 2,000 colleges and institutions in over 30 countries, Anthology is constantly discovering new ways to revolutionize higher education. Learn more about our mission at www.anthology.com.