

The Use and Function of Community College Alumni Associations

Michael T Miller

University of Memphis, USA

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Abstract

Community colleges evolved in the United States to provide introductory college-level work to students as well as important job training skills. This evolution often focused on serving non-traditional students. Through this evolution, these colleges have been slow to engage in fundraising and other activities that their four-year counterparts have undertaken, including alumni engagement. Alumni engagement through associations has proven to be an effective tool for four-year institutions to steward and solicit alumni. The purpose for conducting the current study was to describe the use and function of contemporary community college alumni associations. Using a national sample of community colleges, approximately half identified through their online presence the existence of an alumni association.

Keywords: community college, alumni, alumni associations, fundraising, development, university advancement, associations

1. Introduction

Community colleges work in a wide variety of activities to engage their external stakeholders. The use of program specific advisory councils is common, providing those with technical expertise an opportunity to have input on curriculum and program design. Other councils are used to direct facility use, promote community engagement, and among other activities, forecast future planning needs. As these colleges increasingly work on resource development activities, also called fundraising, they have worked to create teams of potential benefactors to both begin the stewardship process and to work toward benefactor giving (Shen & Sha, 2020). One key strategy that has been used in higher education is that of alumni societies (Newman & Petrossko, 2011; Owens, 2016).

Alumni societies or associations are typically formalized groups of some defined criteria of former students. These might be individuals who graduated from an institution with a formal degree, or they might include anyone who has completed any sort of credit bearing activity, including those who enroll for a course during the summer to transfer to a 4-year institution or someone who completed a technical certificate. The institution typically sponsors the society or association, providing staff support to lend direction, oversight, and purpose to the body. And, the goal or mission of the society might be uniquely defined by an institution.

Generally, though, alumni societies are designed to be the ‘friend-raising’ arm of an institution that might have a secondary goal of fundraising or potential benefactor cultivation. Community colleges have been slow to develop alumni societies for multiple reasons, including the large commuting student population, the enrollment of non-traditional and adult students, the part-time nature of student enrollment, and the short amount of time that students are typically enrolled at community college. Alumni societies were first established by traditional, residential 4-year colleges and worked to bring students back to campus and rekindle their affiliation with the institution. For students in community colleges, even though the experience is often transformational, carries a different perspective (Westenburg, 2022).

The purpose for conducting the current study was to describe the use and function of contemporary community college alumni associations. The importance of this description is at least two-fold. First, as community colleges increasingly engage in development related activities, they must find ways to engage new pools of potential donors, and those are often the individuals who have directly benefited from the community college experience. Second, determining how community colleges can engage their former students can create a powerful advocacy group that can impact everything from local millage elections to managing relations in the capitol or state house. By identifying how alumni associations are designed and used is a critical first step in helping community colleges establish a strong financial foundation moving into the future.

2. Background of the Study

As Jackson (2023) noted, there has been a considerable amount of research conducted on college alumni, particularly in relation to the fundraising potential of engaging this group of stakeholders. As Smith, et al. (2019) found, however, a relatively small amount of scholarship has been undertaken to study alumni from community colleges specifically. The current examination not only focuses on alumni, but more specifically the role of alumni associations and what they are expected to accomplish within the community college sector of higher education.

The first alumni society was established at Yale in 1792 to specifically keep track of alumni records (Miller, 1993), and Shaw et al. (1917) wrote that the society was charged with the task to “hold the members of the classes together and enabling them to keep track of one another, and possibly keeping them in touch with the affairs of the university” (p.10).

A major difference between the legacy institutions in North America and the community college institutions that developed so quickly in the late-20th century is that the residential and developmental nature of four-year institutions provided a very different experience for the students they served. These institutions focused on providing safe spaces for young adults to develop and come into adulthood, along with learning to think critically about select disciplines (Chan, 2016; Strange, 1999). The process of development became linked with many milestones typically associated with the process (Shim & Ryan, 2012), such as self-discovery, independent thinking and living, marriage, and the formation of individual identity. Community colleges, as a form of short-cycle higher education, provide programs and experiences that tend to traditionally be more transactional. The community college experience can also be developmental in nature, but the historic extension of the secondary

school experience provides a different overall practice for the student, including enrollment and retention (Schneider, 2022). The result, then, is that the four-year college experience, due to the length of time and immersive nature, has typically provided a different kind of institutional connection between the alumnus and the alma mater than at a community college.

Contemporary alumni associations for four-year institutions have become active partners in the overall health of an institution, providing lobbying and advocacy services as well as financial and human capital support (Underwood, 2012). These associations at times raise money, but often are the bridge to building friendships and partnerships with former students that will eventually lead to financial support. Community colleges, in addition to having a shorter history of using alumni for advisory councils, sounding boards for curricular decisions, and hiring students completing programs, have only begun to use alumni along the lines of their 4-year counterparts (Gyllin, 2013).

As an important caveat in this conversation about the role and use of alumni societies, many community colleges have actively used alumni on advisory boards to assure the appropriateness of curriculum for job training. Advisory boards at times have taken on very active roles in examining curriculum and what students are learning and have directly linked programs to the workforce. These advisory committees have at times provided financial support for these programs. As Gyllin (2013) noted, and supported by Smith et. al (2019), this idea of private corporate giving to support job training programs has historically been an important role in evolution of community college fundraising.

Due to the differences in how 4-year and community colleges make use of alumni groups, comparisons are not always productive or helpful. The two higher education sectors have simply capitalized on their former students in different ways, with both receiving benefits from their engagement. The growing financial issues that community colleges are facing, however, would benefit from a greater reliance on alumni financial support to help offset fund shortages from other sources. In order to accomplish this, community colleges may need to use their alumni societies in a different way, one more consistent with their 4-year counterparts, that focuses on the long-term stewardship of alumni with the intention of financial support in the future.

As alumni societies evolve in community colleges, they face multiple evolutionary challenges. First and foremost among these challenges is the record keeping of former students. Many community colleges have not kept track of their former students or have done so in an ad hoc manner reliant on personal contacts and local relationships. As Gyllin (2013) found, most community colleges have lacked the technical data bases to keep track of and monitor their former students and where they reside.

Community colleges may also find themselves in competition with four-year colleges over the resources, time, and talents of alumni. Although the pipeline from associate's degree to bachelor's degree is not always a common route for a student to take, it is indeed a pathway many students choose to pursue. Holding two degrees, therefore, opens a conversation about which institution the student should support, and the historical activities of philanthropic pursuits by the four-year institution often give them a competitive advantage in the pursuit of alumni participation and giving.

One of the hallmarks of the contemporary community college has historically been the flexibility in degree offerings and supports for completion. Using a variety of curricular delivery options, including night and weekend class times, prior life credit offerings, and courses held on different business and industry physical settings, students may feel less attached to their institution. The student may greatly value the job training received or the associate's degree earned, but the individual might feel that the experience was much more transactional and less focused on a specific space. This is different from the historical approaches that 4-year colleges have relied upon, and the experiential difference may illustrate why alumni perceptions are different and ultimately, why some may choose to support their alma mater financially.

Despite enrolling nearly half of all college students, community colleges raise only 2% of all philanthropic gifts to higher education (EAB, 2021). This means, and the literature supports, that these institutions have not aggressively pursued traditional fundraising, and stewarding and engaging alumni and former students is an important part of that process (Miller, 2023). This means that if community colleges are to raise more funding through gifts, they will have to develop structured ways to engage alumni. Formal alumni societies have been historically the most common way to connect alumni to their alma maters. Community colleges have little experience or tradition in working with these societies, but there is little scholarship and formal understanding of what has been developed and used. The current descriptive study will help to create a profile of what is being undertaken with an intent that by creating a baseline of practices, further research can identify which practices are the most successful and effective.

4. Research Methods

One of the difficulties of studying community college alumni associations is the lack of common nomenclature and inventory of programs. Programs are often unique to individual colleges and staffed in ways that are appropriate to the time and evolution of the office on that campus (Smith, et al, 2019). As a result, there is no clear listing of community college alumni associations to be studied. The approach, then, utilized in this descriptive study was to select institutions that have a demonstrated interest in creating an advancement program and understanding how they are making use of alumni associations.

There are several professional associations that focus on fundraising, philanthropy, and advancing higher education institutions. The most prominent for higher education is the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), which describes itself as “the global nonprofit association dedicated to educational advancement – alumni relations, communications, development, marketing, and advancement services – and championing education to transform lives and society” (CASE, nd, para. 1).

CASE is a voluntary association supported by their primarily educational activities as well as annual membership fees for each institution that participates. The organization arranged its membership along geographic districts and similarly reports and supports members by institutional type. As shown in Table 1, there are 401 institutions that self-report as community or 2-year colleges and they are distributed across eight geographic districts.

As an exploratory study, a stratified random sample of $n=150$ community colleges was

selected from the population of the $N=401$ community and 2-year college members of CASE. The sample size was determined based on previous research that indicates a cost-benefit return on sample sizes over $n=100$ was moderate (Settle & Alreck, 1995), and as the intent of the study was to develop an initial, baseline description of activities and was not meant to be comparative or inferential, the size was determined to be appropriate. The sample was stratified across the different CASE Districts (see Table 1) to reflect the geographic distribution of the colleges.

Table 1. Sample Distribution by District

CASE District	# Members	% of All	# in Sample
District 1	15	3.7	6
District 2	63	15.8	24
District 3	81	20.1	30
District 4	53	13.2	20
District 5	67	16.7	25
District 6	45	11.2	17
District 7	41	10.2	15
District 8	36	9.0	13
Total	401	99.9	150

Table 2. Colleges with Formal Alumni Societies

CASE District	n	# with AS	%
District 1	6	4	66%
District 2	24	9	37.5
District 3	30	21	70
District 4	20	8	40
District 5	25	13	52
District 6	17	2	12
District 7	15	7	46
District 8	13	7	54
Total	150	71	47%

Descriptive research of this nature is important for several reasons. First, it begins to create a foundational understanding of some phenomena, in this case, community college alumni associations. This type of research also provides for the identification and analysis of comprehensive information that can increase the understanding of a phenomenon while also providing a starting point for future research (Aggarwal & Ranganathan, 2019).

An important note on the geographic distribution of the community colleges in the study is

that many states evolved in their college construction in different ways and at different times. Some were tightly aligned with school districts, such as in California, and some were regional in orientation and based on county-level service areas, such as in Illinois. The result is that the organizational oversight and activities have evolved in different ways and at different times, and the geographic differences are important to consider.

5. Findings

Throughout the data collection, an important limitation of the study was identified. Many of the community colleges in the study offered alumni programming, events and services, such as providing transcripts, alumni hall of fame inductions, golf tournaments, career networking, and receptions before athletic contests, but these were not organized into any formal ‘association.’ As a result, some of the work of an association may be realized at some of these colleges but is not offered around a formal association or body to organize and conduct their activities. Similarly, the location to identify an ‘alumni association’ varied greatly among institutional websites. Some institutions had a link on their main webpage for ‘alumni’ or ‘alumni association,’ while others had no tab or link denoting the existence of an association. Some of the activities were linked to a ‘donation’ tab or link, and others were included in a ‘foundation’ link, and yet others were linked under a ‘community relations’ tab. For each institution, if there was no clearly identifiable link to an alumni or alumni association page, the search function was used in an attempt to identify such bodies.

An additional limitation of the study was that institutions were identified using the CASE member directory and some of the links proved inactive at the time of data collection. Overall, 11 institutions were identified for inclusion in the study but had to be replaced due to inactive links.

In the presentation of data, quotes are taken from various institution’s websites. In an effort to be respectful of their work and present the material in an objective manner, institutional names and identifying information have been removed. In the place of a college’s name, the moniker “The College” has been inserted.

Analysis of the alumni associations first included a description of the number of colleges that associations followed a description of their purposes, membership, programs and benefits, and leadership.

6. Prevalence of Associations

Research Question 1: To what extent are formal alumni associations used in community colleges?

As shown in Table 2, 71 of the 150 (47%) community colleges identified had a formal alumni association. These associations made use of several different names with the most common being “Alumni Association,” but other titles included “Alumni Circle,” “Alumni Network,” “Alumni Society,” and “Alumni Group.” The critical, defining element of each association was the required action on the part of the alumnus to actually join, in some way, a formalized group. As alluded to earlier, the absence of a formalized alumni association did not mean that

an institution did not organize work to engage alumni; many institutions had alumni related activities, particularly related to transcripts, hiring fairs, and employment related activities, although they were not part of a formal association.

7. Membership Eligibility

Research Question 2: Who is eligible to join a community college alumni association?

The idea of an alumni association was originally focused around students who had enrolled and completed their course of study and were awarded a degree (Miller, 1993). In these early associations, former students returned to campus and were engaged in welcoming those who finished their degrees and helped with the celebration and intellectual life of the institution. Community colleges are different from these early institutions in many ways, including that they offer more than just formal degree programs. These institutions offer short certificates, formal associate degree programs (and in some instances four-year degree programs) as well as serving as transfer institutions where the focus is on completing coursework that will be applied at another institution and these students may or may not choose to formally complete an associates degree.

The colleges examined in the current study reflected a range of criteria for admission into an alumni association. Some institutions required completion of a formal degree or certificate program while others required the completion of only one course. One association had the criterion of: “All students that have completed 25 credits at *The College* are eligible to join the Alumni Association.” Other criteria statements for joining associations include:

You may join the *The College Association*, the former students association, if you have taken a credit or non-credit class at *The College* or if you want to lend your support to the college. This is a great opportunity for you to connect with other former students and friends of the college.

Have you taken a class or earned your certificate, diploma, or degree from *The College*? That's great! You are an alumnus of *The College* and are eligible to join the *Association*. Just as it was when you were enrolled here, we are still your resource for personal development, career services, continuing education, and special alumni events.

Whether you took one class or earned your degree from *The College*, we consider you an alum and part of the *The College* family. We want to continue to be a resource for your personal development and encourage you to take advantage of our career services, advanced course work, continuing education or cultural events on campus.

Did you graduate from *The College* with a certificate, diploma or associate degree? Whether you were with us last year or more than ten years ago, it's time for us to come together and celebrate *The College*! It's FREE and easy to join. Just complete the online Alumni Association Membership Form, and a membership card will be emailed to you.

To join the associations, the majority required some form of registration. Several reported

open registration regardless of time of year and included language such as “Free but have to register.” The majority of associations required a nominal membership fee with an average cost of \$23 ($n=48$; 67% required a payment for membership). The median cost was \$25 per year, although there were many membership costs near that price point, such as \$19.64 to celebrate the college’s founding in 1964. Several colleges also reported different categories of paid membership, such as a ‘friends/non-alumni’ rate that was typically higher than the regular alumni rate and also married/family rate that was also typically higher than an individual rate. Four institutions also had a ‘student rate,’ meaning that currently enrolled students could pay a small fee to join the association and make use of their benefits, namely career and job placement related services.

Under half ($n=17$) of the colleges offered a “life membership” rate. A sample of this ‘life membership’ rate included the following:

Lifetime membership for *The College* Alumni Association is a one-time payment of \$200. Benefits of this membership include:

- Email updates
- Invitations to alumni events
- Commemorative brick placed on either the *The College’s A, B, or C* Campus (your choice)
- Free admission to *The College’s* Museum of Art
- Free admission to *The College’s* student performances (Call the Box Office at for tickets and additional information.)
- 10 percent discount on room rental at CF Ocala Campus through Conference Services (Must present Lifetime Membership Card at time of reservation.)
- Access to the Learning Resources Center (Visit the circulation desk to register your card.)
- Access to the Talent Center, *The College’s* job portal for employers and job applicants
- Alumni Association Welcome Package including:
 - Lifetime membership card
 - Connection magazine
 - Alumni swag

Overall, institutions provided generally open criteria for joining their alumni associations, yet several did create mechanisms for greater selectivity, such as requiring paying a fee or

completion of a full degree for membership. There was little consistency across the sample of what was required, although there may have been a prevailing idea that registering for membership might be a way to maintain an accurate data base of former students. By registering individuals, the institution was able to capture names, mailing addresses, email addresses and related contact information; important data that might be used for other purposes at later times.

8. Purpose

RQ3: What were the self-described purposes of community college alumni associations?

There were multiple alumni associations that were identified in name only and did not include a mission or purpose statement. These associations seemed to imply their role in supporting their colleges but did not specify in what ways they did this. Many institutions had broad statements such as:

The purpose of the Alumni Association is to strengthen the relationships between alumni, the community, and *The College* as well as to maintain among its alumni a spirit of fellowship and service in an effort to support the mission and educational goals of *The College*. Our alumni are vital to the success and advancement of *The College*. We encourage all alumni to be informed, involved, and invested.

Another college included this as a description of the association:

The College Alumni Association promotes and supports the mission of the College by connecting alumni with the College community through engagement programs and development opportunities.

And yet another example includes:

The mission of *The College's* Alumni Organization is to honor *The College's* culture and build lifelong relationships between alumni, faculty, and staff. The Alumni Organization cultivates goodwill, meaningful involvement, and leadership opportunities to benefit the College and supports *The College* by sponsoring social, educational, philanthropic, and service-oriented programs.

These associations also offered a number of programs to fulfill their purpose including travel programs that allow alumni to go on guided tours together, job listings, career networking programs, social activities ranging from chili suppers and 5K races to pep rallies and sporting event parties. Nearly half ($n=34$; 47%) of the associations had career and job related programs or activities that they highlighted such as indices of local job listings, resume help, professional photography for 'headshots' to be used in social media platforms, networking events, job fairs, and career mentoring.

Benefits

RQ4: What were the self-identified benefits of joining a community college alumni association?

Each institution that sponsored an alumni body, regardless of nomenclature, identified certain benefits of belonging to the body. These ranged from services to alumni to altruistic ideas about providing support to the institution, and many ($n=29$) provided some token or gift for joining the association such as a membership card, coffee mug, decal, or sticker. Several institutions ($n=8$) provided no clear listing of benefits or advantages of joining the alumni association. Of those that did provide a detail of membership benefits, the following are representative examples:

Example 1.

The College is building a vibrant and active Alumni Association, which will benefit you, our *The College* students, and the County community. We invite you to participate and be an inspiration! Membership is free and includes the following benefits:

- Access to the *The College Career Services*.
- Access to the *The County Veterans Memorial Library*.
- Notifications about Cecil College bus trips to places like New York City and Washington, D.C.
- Discounts to pre-show receptions, special events, and more.
- Networking opportunities with other alumni.
- Leadership and community engagement opportunities include:
 - Mentoring
 - Tutoring
 - Participating on the *The College* Alumni Board of Directors
 - Fundraising

Example 2.

Active membership in the *The College* Alumni Association enables you to contribute to almost every part of the College while keeping alumni and friends connected to *The College*. In return, the Association provides you with a host of benefits, including

- Subscription to The Connection magazine
- Opportunities to have your class notes, births and weddings in The Connection
- *The College* Alumni Association auto decal

- Free admission to *The College* athletic events
- Discounts to *The College* Bookstores
- Discounted membership to the The College Fitness Center
- Use of the *The College* Libraries and their resources
- Making a difference at *The College* by supporting your alma mater

Example 3.

Show you're *The College* pride by joining the Alumni Association! As an active member, you'll enjoy benefits like:

- Invitations to Special Events
Personal invitations to all special events organized by student clubs, community groups, *The College* and the Alumni office. Participating in these events will provide interaction with other alumni, faculty, administrators, staff, community members and friends.
- Exclusive Updates About the College
As an alumni member, you will receive emails with the latest happenings at the college along with the college newsletter. This communication will allow you to see what opportunities there are for you to get involved.

Example 4.

Benefits of Membership

1. Scholarship Opportunities
2. Discounts and Promotions at Local Businesses
3. News and Special Events
4. Networking Opportunities
5. Show your Wildcat Pride
6. Opportunities to Volunteer and Give Back

The benefits identified and presented by the different institutions reflect a variety of

Perceptions of the roles and functions of their associations. Some of these are social-oriented, focusing on special events and opportunities to connect with fellow alumni while others are based on connecting back to the institution in specific ways. These include special media access (magazines, websites, announcements) as well as free admission to museums and sporting events. Although some of the benefits identified did include opportunities to volunteer, there were no direct linkages between membership and fiscal contributions to the institution.

Leadership

RQ5: What were the leadership structures identified for community college alumni associations?

The majority of institutions ($n=46$; 65%) did not identify a specific person responsible for their alumni work on the pages associated with their alumni body. The remaining colleges, however, listed either an individual person or title of an individual who had professional responsibility for the oversight of the alumni body. There were a wide range of titles and there was no consistency in their use across institutions. Titles included Community and Alumni Relations Coordinator, Director of Annual Giving and Alumni Relations, Alumni Coordinator, Vice President of Advancement, Communications/Alumni Coordinator, Alumni Relations Officer, Foundation President, and Vice President of the Foundation. One institution listed the college's president as the individual to contact for more information or questions about the alumni society, and several ($n=4$) listed either an elected individual serving as an alumni society 'president' or a volunteer.

9. Discussion

The study provides an initial exploration of the community college alumni association and reveals several important practices that should be noted. The first is the establishment of the understanding that community colleges do have and make use of alumni in formal associations. Although only about half of the colleges had such associations, there were clearly identifiable associations, webpages, and sets of activities that demonstrate that these colleges do make use of and value their alumni work.

The second important recognition identified in the study was the sense that alumni associations required registration. This could be for any number of reasons, but most likely such an activity has to do with building a base of former students that might later be used for fundraising activities. The process of registering, and even paying a small fee to join, demonstrates to the institution that the individual has some sense of commitment and interest in supporting the college. This means that the college has an opportunity to construct a potential donor list by offering the service of the association. So whether the association is highly or moderately active can become somewhat of a secondary concern for the institution, as the process of applying and joining an association creates a self-selected body of individuals who have the interest in supporting the college.

Another key finding from the data collection and analysis was that the purposes and benefits of these associations are very similar to those in four-year institutions with one possible exception. Most of the associations provided networking and social opportunities for those with shared experiences, but these associations also seemed to highlight their occupational relevance. This means that they were more focused on job opportunities and networking than perhaps those associations operating in four-year institutions.

And lastly, the data did not show any clear or consistent staffing of community college alumni work. This may be a result of the evolving and growing nature of alumni work in this higher education sector or it could be a reflection of institutions placing value and importance on alumni work at different levels. Future research into community college alumni societies

would benefit from a clearer understanding of these professionals, how they use their time, and what they see as the future for their alumni work.

These findings all lead to the conclusion that community college alumni associations are an evolving aspect of the organizational structure of the colleges that they represent. The role, organization, leadership, and functionality of these alumni programs can serve multiple purposes and be of multiple benefits to these colleges, and further research on them has the potential to benefit not only alumni associations such as these, but ultimately, the political and fiscal standing of community colleges. Future research can identify best practices for these alumni associations as well as the metrics that might best be used to determine whether or not they are fulfilling their purpose and their potential.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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