

DEVELOPMENT STUDY: Why do Alumni Support Student Life?

Center for the Study of Student Life

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes the findings from a study of donors who gave financially to the Ohio State University's Office of Student Life. A total of 19 interviews were conducted in summer 2013. The findings are organized around five major themes.

Reasons for Giving to Student Life

Reasons for giving to Student Life included strong connections with Student Life and Student Life staff, that involvement in Student Life influenced their personal development, and to influence future students.

It's the organizations that made an impact on you and in your life. And you want that for future students. You know, giving back is all about giving to future students (Participant 10).

Reasons for Giving to Ohio State

Reasons for giving to the larger university included staying connected, gratitude, future influence, and a history of family giving.

I had this fantastic experience at Ohio State that was as a result of donors, I was actually a scholarship recipient myself. So it was really important for me to continue...that cycle (Participant 3).

Importance of Personalized Communication

Several donors spoke to the importance of personalized communication including initiating individualized and personalized contact with the donor, finding out how often and in what format the donor would like to be contacted, and keeping good records of this information.

And the person who actually worked with me to secure the first gift was a real pro and so I had a great experience working with her.... That having that personal connection in some way really influenced me to probably do something that I might have been a little bit more hesitant to do (Participant 7).

Reasons for Not Giving

Individuals indicated the reasons others may not give are not being involved during college, unpleasant giving experiences, financial reasons, and that they are not asked.

But I do think sometimes those personal connections, if they didn't happen outside of the classroom I think that's sometimes why people don't give. I don't think they feel that personal connection to Ohio State like those that were very involved (Participant 10).

Suggestions for the Development Office

Suggestions provided by participants included informing donors about aspects of the giving cycle, thinking of donors as customers, and asking donors to give specifically to Student Life.

...specific examples of how those funds have already helped is important, it encourages people to give again. So I think it's just reporting the progress is important, you always want to feel like no matter how much you've given you made a difference (Participant 10).

INTRODUCTION

This project examined motivations for why alumni may, or may not, give financially to student affairs offices, specifically to the Office of Student Life at The Ohio State University. During summer 2013, staff in the Center for the Study of Student Life interviewed 19 individuals who had donated to Student Life. Participants' donation histories varied from small to large, and from one-time to consistent. Eighteen of the participants were alumni who graduated between 1949 and 2010. One participant attended Ohio State but graduated from a different institution. The participants were identified and recruited through the Office of Student Life Development Office.

Each participant was asked the same seven questions related to reasons for and experiences with donating – or not donating – to the university in general and Student Life in particular. Interviews ranged from 10 to 45 minutes in length and were transcribed and analyzed for recurring themes. This report covers the five major themes that arose from the interviews.

Two of the themes for donating, whether to the university or to Student Life, include 1) feeling connected to Ohio State both as a student and as an alumnus and 2) being actively involved in Student Life activities. These themes are consistent with James Monks' (2003) findings that those "who reported that they are 'very satisfied' with their undergraduate experience gave 2.6 times as much to their alma mater as graduates who were 'ambivalent,' 'generally dissatisfied,' or 'very dissatisfied'" (p. 126).

REASONS FOR GIVING TO STUDENT LIFE

Many of the participants mentioned that they have given to Student Life because the activities in Student Life were as important as or more important than other aspects of attending the university. They reported that being asked directly from someone they knew at Ohio State influenced their giving, as were feelings of gratitude toward Student Life, wanting to "give back," and helping future students.

INVOLVEMENT WITH STUDENT LIFE

Some donors mentioned that engagement with Student Life was very important in their college careers and these strong associations influenced their desire to donate to Student Life.

...I gave to Student Life specifically because...looking back on both my undergraduate and my graduate careers at Ohio State, I had a stronger connection to the Office of Student Life than I did my academic programs. The relationships that I formed and the connections I made and the development that I had during that time in undergraduate and graduate school was a result of my ... on-campus employment, the connections that I had, the leadership development I had through student organizations, so I have a stronger tie to Student Life than I do maybe other opportunities around campus and my academic career (Participant 13).

But whenever I think back about a lot of the things that I otherwise did [outside of the classroom] it was really around Student Life and...those are the kinda memories that were the strongest to me (Participant 6).

...I went to class...but ...when I think back on my college experience, it was the out-of-the-classroom activities that I participated in by way of my interaction with a lot of organizations and Student Life that made college for me what it was. So it's...a no-brainer to me....I would never consider giving to my college the way that I have given and will continue to give to Student Life because that was...what made college for me (Participant 30).

STUDENT LIFE INVOLVEMENT INFLUENCED PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Many participants reported that involvement in co-curricular activities within Student Life was essential for their personal development.

...I feel like those are a lot of the skills and mentality that shaped what I'm doing now (Participant 6).

...the place that we give our money is something that really developed my wife and I a little bit more into the people we are today.... it was something that we truly had passion for and once we came out of it, it changed our world view about what people are working with and how blessed my wife and I are and we wanted to make sure we could expose or help other students be exposed to that (Participant 9).

I feel really strongly about Student Life; it had a huge impact on my collegiate career, and also professional and volunteer careers.... The skills that I gained outside of the classroom from a leadership standpoint, communication, teambuilding, collaboration...are things that I use each and every day in my business, with my family members and in my volunteer work (Participant 10).

I was a very involved student, in terms of student organizations and activities as an undergraduate.... I felt that that was as instrumental to my success professionally and my growth as an individual and was as vital a part of my educational experience as my classes were. And, in fact, long-term, I certainly believe that my involvement in Student Life and student organizations was more beneficial than my...degree (Participant 22).

INFLUENCE ON FUTURE STUDENTS

Several donors emphasized that they want to support Student Life because their gifts may help future students experience the positive opportunities and outcomes that the donors experienced.

I think the biggest reason for me is to continue to provide opportunities to students, opportunities that I had when I was a student, that I learned from, I developed skills from, skills such as leadership skills, and also to provide them with new opportunities (Participant 24).

It's the organizations that made an impact on you and in your life. And you want that for future students. You know, giving back is all about giving to future students (Participant 10).

And now being a part of kind of paying that forward...and helping students myself.... the reason why I choose to do that is because I see those benefits and I have lived them myself (Participant 13).

Some donors mentioned that Student Life's diversity of opportunities and ability to reach all students on campus influenced their decision to give.

...Student Life...sponsors hundreds of student activities and groups and I really like the entrepreneurial spirit that gave support, which is...if a group of students or even one student wants to start a student organization ...they're able to do so on campus through Student Life....I really like that and I think that's probably one of the biggest reasons [that I give to Student Life] (Participant 24).

...the thing I like about Student Life versus giving to an academic program or to say athletics, is I like that Student Life covers the entire range of student experience on

campus. And that's very important to me is to try to, to be involved in something that speaks to every, potentially every student that comes on campus (Participant 7).

CONNECTIONS TO STUDENT LIFE STAFF

Many donors cited the close personal connections they developed with Student Life staff as an impetus for giving, especially when asked to give by that staff member.

I have a personal relationship with ...the coordinator of the program, so it's kinda twofold, the impact and also ...I really respect [the coordinator] ...we've stayed connected throughout ...the last ten years (Participant 32).

...the first gift I made was specifically to name a room in the new union for someone who was very influential in my college experience and so it was, it was a very personal thing for me to be part of a, a group that wanted to honor her by naming a room for her (Participant 7).

Participant 30 was invited to attend an event by a Student Life employee who mentored her. That experience changed her view of giving.

...it was actually a 60-year reunion where they were asking people to basically name spaces in the new union. And I had money left over in my college account because...I had scholarships. And so I...thought to myself, ...there was so much that I got from my experience, and...it's kind of a once-in-a-lifetime thing to be able to name a space like that...it was just kind of like right place at the right time.... if there had been somebody other [than her mentor] doing the event, I don't know that I would've even thought about it (Participant 30).

REASONS FOR GIVING TO THE UNIVERSITY

Participants were asked why they gave to Ohio State in general. Many of their answers included reasons they gave to the specific academic college (e.g., Arts and Sciences, Fisher College of Business) from which they graduated. Some reasons for giving to the university mirrored why donors gave to Student Life, including gratitude toward the university, wanting to "give back," and to influence future students. Additionally, donors gave to the university in order to stay connected and for family reasons.

TO STAY CONNECTED

Some participants wanted to remain active in influential programs offered by the university or a campus organization.

I would say a bigger piece of it is just being able to connect regularly and in order to do that, there is that kind of incentive by paying to be part of the alumni association or the alumni societies (Participant 13).

I wanted to continue to stay connected, uh, in I think a stronger, deeper way than just, you know, going to football games and, you know, serving as an advisor (Participant 30).

I felt that—well, for me, I had a very strong tie to the university both as a student, and when I left, I knew that I wanted to continue to stay connected and support the initiative that the university was putting together (Participant 31).

GRATITUDE

A few participants mentioned being thankful for their academic college experiences as reasons they donated to the university.

...I guess the most influential parts about Ohio State for me were, one, the academic setting...so that was a huge part of my life at Ohio State. And I really cherish that (Participant 6).

I do give to the [college].... You know, they continue to do fabulous work and I'm impressed with ...the accomplishments of the students and of the programs within the [college]. So that is why I have continued to target those funds (Participant 10).

...I feel like it's something you should do as an alum is give back to your alma mater and I had a very fortunate and very positive experience (Participant 16)

Several expressed that they wanted to "pay it forward" because of their gratitude to the university.

...to support all the efforts there and pay it forward according to Woody [Hayes] (Participant 14).

One participant reflected on his and others' appreciation as the reason for giving:

I think they give out of their appreciation, as I do...how their days at Ohio State led them to success in their careers (Participant 21).

INFLUENCE ON THE FUTURE

Donors mentioned that they gave because they wanted to influence the future of the university—from scholarships for students to the general financial health and prosperity of the university.

I had this fantastic experience at Ohio State that was as a result of donors, I was actually a scholarship recipient myself. So it was really important for me to continue...that cycle (Participant 3).

I want to continue to support the school to allow other students to have the same positive experience with the difficult changing times in higher ed and funding changing (Participant 16).

...the university is such an important part of the community and I think it's very important that we support that financially, and with our time (Participant 12).

FAMILY HISTORY OF GIVING

Some participants reported that they grew up in a family that stressed the importance of philanthropy.

...my parents are very big into philanthropy, so I was raised with this idea that it's important to give back (Participant 3).

...the first part is why I give anything, but as well as why I want to donate money and that is definitely just because of my parents. I've just grown up in a culture of being connected to a community and wanting to give back to something (Participant 32).

One donor found an unexpected reason, related to his family, to donate to the university.

When my dad passed away six years ago...I knew he was involved with the university and he had a great love for the university, but we found this scrapbook

from his prime at the school.... he was involved in so many different aspects of the university while he was at school there.... we thought it would be appropriate to do a naming for him...(Participant 19).

IMPORTANCE OF PERSONALIZED COMMUNICATION

Personalized communication was a common theme among many donors. They reported the desire to be contacted individually by development staff members as well as the desire to have their personal preferences taken into account regarding when and how they are contacted.

Several participants mentioned that being contacted personally was a reason they began contributing to the university and to Student Life. As previously noted, Participant 30 donated because of a personal invitation from her mentor. Another person spoke of the first development staff member he worked with.

And the person who actually worked with me to secure the first gift was a real pro and so I had a great experience working with her....That having that personal connection in some way really influenced me to probably do something that I might have been a little bit more hesitant to do (Participant 7).

Participants also mentioned wanting their communication to be more personalized. Participant 9 reporting having five different contacts in five years with the experience being the “extremes of involvement and information versus none whatsoever. And definitely the greater preference is just that involvement and that connection.” Participant 9 gave the following advice about how to make the contact more meaningful.

...just reaching out and saying hey, I’m your new contacts, how do you prefer to be communicated to, how much information would you like to receive, all those basic things would really take it to the next level and make it a little more personalized.

One aspect of personalized communication is understanding individuals’ preferred modality for communications. When donors were asked how they preferred to receive information about the university, they primarily mentioned either email messages or print vehicles, especially the alumni magazine.

Those who liked email tended to mention that it was easier to read quickly or deal with at a convenient time.

Email is the best way for me to compartmentalize my time and my involvement and I appreciate just being able to look at it when I’m available as opposed to needing to sort of drop everything and take a phone call...(Participant 13).

Some donors like receiving both email and print, while others had strong preferences against email.

I like the combination of print and email. I think there are, there are times when I am off-location and having print material is helpful...sometimes electronic is not available and it’s nice to be able pick up the print copy to take with you sometimes and it’s also helpful to show other people...(Participant 10).

...I get 5, 6, 700 emails a day. I just can’t possibly do them so unless it’s quick, I either don’t see them or I’m on the road and never get back to them or I don’t have time to open them up so a lot of those go unanswered or unread (Participant 14).

I don’t like receiving things electronically, because I’m a non-tech person....I realize my generation...that’s atypical, but I really hate to get things electronically (Participant 22)

A few people emphasized that there were times when a personal phone call would be important.

...when it's more than just a broad-based communication, something like the status update of something that I'm donating my time or my money towards ...either a specific email from that person or a phone call is preferred (Participant 9).

Another participant noted that a yearly phone call is unnecessary if the donor is already committed to donate every year.

They call me every year, and every year, I tell them I'm going to donate, and now, I don't wanna do it over the phone and they just need to put me on that list.... I'm already gonna donate (Participant 27).

The various answers regarding preferred communication modality indicate the importance of finding out how individual donors want to receive communications and then tailoring their communications in that way.

REASONS FOR NOT GIVING

Participants were asked to speculate on why other alumni might, or might not, give to Ohio State. Some reported reasons that others had told them, while other participants recounted their own unpleasant or unsatisfactory experiences with giving which they believe might affect giving patterns. Participants also mentioned various financial reasons for not giving.

LACK OF INVOLVEMENT IN UNIVERSITY OR STUDENT LIFE ACTIVITIES

Some speculated that people who do not donate may not have been involved in aspects of the university outside of their academic pursuits.

...people I know who give just had really positive experiences at Ohio State and tend to give back to the things they're connected to.... Another friend of mine has no interest in giving ...he doesn't think he learned anything at Ohio State and that Ohio State did nothing for him....But he also wasn't involved in anything really when he was an undergrad (Participant 3).

But I do think sometimes those personal connections, if they didn't happen outside of the classroom I think that's sometimes why people don't give. I don't think they feel that personal connection to Ohio State like those that were very involved (Participant 10).

UNPLEASANT GIVING EXPERIENCES

Although some participants continue to donate to the university and/or Student Life, they reported possible roadblocks for their giving. One participant pointed to poor communication.

It's been very rocky. We have a very strong passion for what we're doing and that's why no matter how rocky it's been we don't care...we have had at least five different contacts from Ohio State and the Union [in five years] and just extreme variances in push versus pull of information. It was sometimes going almost a year without hearing from anybody and having to make a phone call to try and know who and where I can send my check to (Participant 9).

Another participant explained she was treated poorly by development staff when trying to make an endowment.

I had a certain amount of money in the endowment, but it hadn't been fully funded. And I was working on [other funding campaigns], and I got an email asking me to

finish funding the endowment within 30 days....I mean, if someone's going to ask you for \$20,000, I think that should come over the phone or in person and not by email. And certainly not a demand for \$20,000 in 30 days by email. So I essentially didn't fund the endowment and walked away and transferred the money into my scholarship because I was less than happy with how that was handled (Participant 22).

One participant recounted a story of an individual who felt he was not treated with the respect he thought he deserved.

And it turned out, the fella' [was] very, very successful. So we're talking about giving and he said that he was invited to speak to [an academic college] but there were other people on the headline with him and he didn't want to do that because he felt that he deserved his own time, and he deserved his own headline. And the guy could give five million dollars without even missing it the next day.... And I think that the university needs to be attuned to people's wants and needs...(Participant 19).

FINANCIAL REASONS

When asked why they think their former classmates or other Ohio State alumni might not donate to the university, some participants mentioned various financial reasons.

I think a lot of people still don't give, because they...believe that the university has plenty of money, and...that they've already paid plenty of money to the university ...through tuition, and are...still payin' off those student loans (Participant 12).

[A previous donor] turned sour because of the compensation...and feeling that [the university president] was being overpaid (Participant 21).

One participant suggested that it is important to understand that younger donors may have to choose among the types of donations they make.

...young alumni are probably not likely to do both; to give...maybe smaller, consistent gifts to a number of different sort of departments or colleges, and one larger gift. It's probably gonna be an either/or (Participant 12).

One, in particular, spoke about challenges of the economic and job market for people who studied for a particular career.

I'm thinking about some of my...classmates ...we came out at a...difficult time...I'm sure a lot of them don't give...because they ended up not being able to get jobs [in their chosen career] and so, rather than having ...this great degree that opened doors for them, it ended up being more of an expense...(Participant 11).

Another common response was that others may think that their gift would be too small.

...they're not in a position to make what they would consider to be a significant gift...(Participant 7).

Another donor addressed competing financial priorities, such as family.

...A lot of people...[are] different than me. I don't have any family. I'm single and never had any kids and stuff like that.... I find an awful lot of 'em are – are very focused on wanting to give to their children at their death, and so the family has a higher priority (Participant 20).

NOT ASKED TO GIVE

While two participants specifically noted that they gave because they were asked, other participants conjectured that many more people would give if they were asked.

...I think [Student Life's] problem is that nobody has asked... (Participant 30).

Another specifically suggested asking younger alumni.

I think Student Life has to be unafraid to make asks...so I think Student Life should be willing on an ongoing regular basis, to be willing to engage alumni, especially younger alumni who have just gone through the experiences. Because the person who gives you \$100 one year is the person who will end up giving you \$100,000 down the line (Participant 22).

SUGGESTIONS

Throughout the interviews, participants offered suggestions for development departments and development officers. The suggestions centered around better understanding the donors to better inform and communicate with them.

INFORM DONORS

Participants suggested that development departments may need to provide donors with more information – from the various opportunities for giving, to areas to which they can give and how their donations are used.

One suggestion was to reach out and ask people to give specifically to Student Life.

I'm not sure enough people know about, some of the Student Life funds and I think we could probably do a better job of promoting some of the various funds within Student Life (Participant 10).

Participant 24 mentioned that she thinks many alumni give to the Alumni Association "because they don't know that they can give in other ways."

Others more specifically mentioned that donors want to see the effects of donations.

One of the challenges we've had is understanding how the money gets used (Participant 3).

...specific examples of how those funds have already helped is important, it encourages people to give again. So I think it's just reporting the progress is important, you always want to feel like no matter how much you've given you made a difference (Participant 10).

Another form of informing donors is to give donors the tools to recruit others.

...I have a lot of co-workers who went to Ohio State and...I mention things every now and again about what's going on but if I had the right tools I probably could help you guys raise some money (Participant 9).

CONSIDER DONORS AS CUSTOMERS

One suggestion was to think of donors as customers and to treat them with an attitude of service.

I think from a development perspective ...the university would be helped if they thought of donors ...the way in the business world we think of customers. And

thinking about how the world works from the customer's perspective and not necessarily what the needs of the university or the university bureaucracy are (Participant 7).

...and then ...reaching out and finding out when we're gonna be on campus so they [development staff members] can connect with us and tell us a little more about what the program is doing now and where it's going. And are you gonna be available to do this, or would you like to be involved in that (Participant 9).

Another suggestion is that the institution should make it easy for the donor to give to specific units or funds.

I think that it's something that a university struggles with greatly because that's how most donors want to give, is very specifically, for a very specific reason.... They want the money that people want to give, but ...people don't want to just turn over money and say, "Go do whatever you need to do." They want to fund very specific things. And so I think the university has to recognize that directed giving is a reality that's not going to go away and is probably only going to continue to expand in terms of how donors approach giving (Participant 22).

As customer service representatives in the business world need to understand their business, one of the donors suggested that development staff members for Student Life must understand the complexities of Student Life.

I think that you need somebody who understands Student Life, and Student Life is, is difficult, right? Because it's so much.... It's so diverse. There's so many different aspects to it, and I would say that a lot of people who are interested in Student Life are, like, bam, huge ...into Student Life.... I would say that, your development officer's gotta be able to wear a lot of hats and understand the intricacies of student organizations that've been around for 125 or 150 years (Participant 30).

CONCLUSION

Participants reported that they donated specifically to Student Life because they were heavily involved in Student Life activities when they were in college. The connection to Student Life was often more important to donors than their connection to academic colleges. They reported that they believe their involvement with Student Life directly influenced their personal and professional development, and they want to help provide Student Life opportunities for future students.

The interviewees reported several reasons that they give to the university at large. Some want to stay connected to the university's influential programs because they consider Ohio State to be a strong institution. Many are grateful to the university and others want to influence the future of the university. Some attributed their interest in giving to the atmosphere of philanthropy in their families.

The importance of personalized communication was stressed repeatedly. This involves reaching out to people in a way that they find personal. It also involves finding out how and when people want to receive communications.

Donors speculated on why some people do not donate to the university or to Student Life. Some suggested that non-donors were not heavily involved in the university or with Student Life during college. Others have had or heard of unpleasant giving experiences. Others cite several types of financial reasons why people may not give. Another reason that was offered was that people may not be asked to donate.

The participants offered suggestions for reaching and working with donors. Some suggestions concerned treating donors as customers, with a customer service attitude. Another broad suggestion was to keep donors informed both of the many areas that may need funding as well as update donors about how the funds are being used.

REFERENCE

Monks, J. (2003). Patterns of giving to one's alma mater among young graduates from selective institutions. *Economics of Education Review* (22), 121-130.