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Boosting alumni participation requires a tailored design

perceiving it merely as a means to unrestricted funds, according to Lori Yersh, senior advisor to the vice president of advancement and external relations at Concordia University in Canada and an annual giving expert who has consulted at more than 120 educational and health care institutions in the U.S., Canada, and Europe.

However, Yersh says that recently a growing number of institutions are recognizing how valuable the annual fund is to the organization's long-term health.

"They're starting to understand that it's about building the pipeline," Yersh says. "The data shows that those who make annual gifts can emerge to become major gift donors if they have the capacity."

To gain footing in annual giving, she says, institutions need to assess their programs and constituents, as well as consider trends in the field. For one, many donors have come to expect choice, Yersh advises. In a highly competitive philanthropic market, allowing donors to decide where their money goes could make a significant difference in participation.

In addition, using the myriad outreach channels available today will pay dividends, says Adrian Salmon, vice president of Grenzebach Glier and Associates Europe. For example, according to Grenzebach Glier data, when some institutions couple direct mail and email, they've improved the performance of each by 25 to 30 percent. For optimal renewal rates, institutions need to make five to seven solicitation touches per year through a combination of mail, email, and phone appeals. And the outreach channels don't end there. The only bad channel is one used alone, Salmon says.

Focusing on broad participation, encouraging restricted giving, and using multiple communication channels are key tactics to consider. Here's how four institutions revamped annual giving and achieved results.



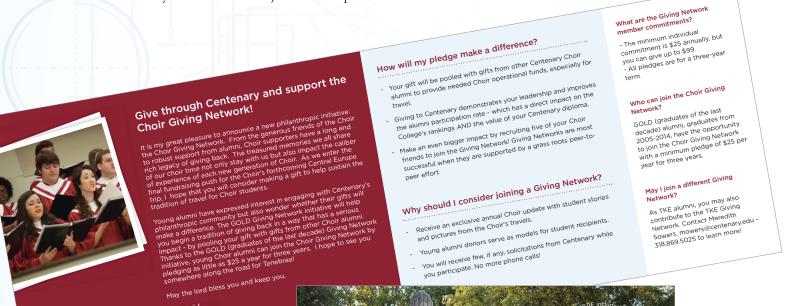
CENTENARY COLLEGE OF LOUISIANA AFFINITIES TO THE RESCUE

Feeling the effects of the recession in 2008, Centenary College of Louisiana had to undergo some dramatic cost-cutting measures. The 590-student college started down a road of switching from Division I to Division III athletics and reducing its number of academic majors from 44 to 22. The changes left many alumni feeling disconnected from the small Methodist liberal arts college in Shreveport.

The institution boasted an alumni participation rate of 21 percent in 2008, says Jena McKinzie, associate director for major gifts. By 2009, participation dropped to 18.3 percent and continued to decline each year until it reached just above 12 percent in 2014.

In addition to improving participation, the development team hoped to increase the donor retention rate and create a culture of giving among young alumni.

Previous attempts to launch senior class giving had failed, McKinzie says, and a class giving program cost the staff too much time and money to justify the meager results. According to Meredith Armuth, assistant director for annual giving, reunion giving programs weren't resonating with alumni, who reported a stronger bond with affinity groups than with their class.



John, Centenary College Choir needs your leadership!





THE SOCIAL NETWORK:

To boost annual giving, Centenary College of Louisiana created a giving strategy built around existing affinity groups and peerto-peer fundraising. Alumni could designate gifts to student groups or academic areas and invite former classmates to fund scholarships through those specific networks. Personalized appeals were sent to alumni based on their past involvement, from choir (bottom, far left) to fraternity membership (left).

STRATEGY: In late 2013, Centenary switched its primary annual giving strategy to giving networks built around existing affinity groups, which encouraged peer-to-peer fundraising. One segment had been the overwhelming culprit for lost donors: fraternities and sororities. Ironically, members remained highly involved in their chapters, so the Greek system became the first target.

The minimum gift to Centenary's giving networks is a three-year pledge of \$100. The annual threshold to maintain a network is \$1,000. Networks most often support a scholarship for a member of that group, although some support operational budgets.

Seeing ways to reconnect, alumni flocked to the networks and clamored for additional ones. By April 2016, Centenary established 17 networks, including groups tied to the campus Christian Leadership Center, choir, and academic areas such as geology.

"Even though it's a pretty low threshold, only a handful of our giving networks are at the minimum," Armuth says. "One has grown so large that they award two or three scholarships."

BARRIER-FREE GIVING: In response to alumni feedback, staff added an entry point for alumni during their first 10 years after graduation: a \$25 annual commitment for three years.

"We've found that if they aren't giving soon after graduation, they become incredibly disengaged," McKinzie says. "This has been a great way to lock them in." **PERSONALIZATION:** McKinzie and Armuth say appealing to alumni affinities requires a personal touch. Direct mailings announce giving networks related to a graduate's academic affiliations, student groups, and other interests. For the roughly 25 percent of alumni with more than one affinity, these mailings include bullet points promoting each giving network that could appeal to them, as well as related photos.

"We've gotten some great feedback that this was the most personalized mailing they had ever gotten," McKinzie says.

ROI: With a three-year cycle under its belt, Centenary is seeing donor retention rates increase. From 2014 to 2015 alone, the rate went from about 62 to 73 percent. In 2015, 32 percent of giving network donors were new or had returned after a significant lapse. Thanks to the segmented appeal, alumni participation rose to 13.2 percent in 2015, McKinzie says.

ADVICE: There's a temptation to start networks for every group that requests one, but Armuth suggests strongly encouraging groups to raise a \$1,000 initial gift before the advancement team heavily promotes the group.

"So if they come to us, 'Great, we love it,'" Armuth says. "But at the same time we tell them, 'We've found the most success if we can [raise] the minimum before doing broader outreach."

DENA LEVITZ is a Dublin-based journalist whose work has appeared in *The Washington Post, CityLab, and Narratively*.

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