It seems like the perfect partnership: alumni relations and student affairs. Each has something the other wants. For the alumni office, student affairs offers a treasure trove of resources. They have databases with contact information, affinity-based records, and a history of effectively targeted programming. Even more important: They have the students. They know how to reach and engage the institution’s future alumni.

To student affairs, the alumni team presents a variety of opportunities, from mentors and event speakers to career counseling and job connections. At a time when budgets are tight or shrinking, the alumni office can even pitch in on programming costs. All the pieces fit together. It is a natural, mutually beneficial arrangement.

So why isn’t it happening more? Why isn’t there a history of alumni relations and student affairs offices working together? It’s a question that most alumni offices—not to mention student affairs offices—frequently find themselves asking. And it’s one that Jennilee Schlinsky, an engagement officer at Marquette University, wanted to finally answer. She had often thought that the two offices served the same clients; it would make sense for them to pool their resources. But for much of her eight years at the Wisconsin university, the two rarely collaborated. They barely even recognized that the other existed.

“It was a strained relationship,” Schlinsky recalls. “We were definitely operating in our little silos.”

A Beautiful Friendship

By JOHN DICONSIGLIO

Overcoming misinformation and silos, alumni relations and student affairs offices are collaborating

Each had its own separate student-focused programming. The alumni office sponsored limited student programming, mostly involving students at reunions or regional alumni gatherings like basketball-viewing parties. Meanwhile, student affairs handled programs like freshman orientation and student government. The two offices never held official meetings with each other. They weren’t in the same building or even on the same side of campus. “We had created in our minds a very bright line between student affairs and alumni relations,” says Jon Donley, Marquette’s senior associate dean of student development. “We didn’t talk much. It was even kind of puzzling to hear the advancement folks say they needed to engage the alumni. We used to think, ‘Don’t look at us. They were engaged when they were students!’”
THE MONEY LINE
You’ve probably heard this story before. The alumni office doesn’t connect with the student affairs divi-
sion. Alumni relations accuses student affairs of ignoring the big picture and having little idea of what advantage the University does in the first place.
Student affairs counters by claiming they know exactly what advancement is all about: asking for
money. And they don’t want students pestered for
gifts before they’ve even cracked a textbook.
Matthew Borowick, associate vice president for
alumni and government relations at New Jersey’s
Seton Hall University, knows this perception all too
well. “We talk about building communities and
relationships with students and the best way to
achieve that is through the alumni. But when it comes right down
to it, everyone thinks, ‘Uh oh, they are going to ask for
money.’ That’s the biggest hurdle we have to overcome.”

It’s not the only obstacle, either. Forming a collab-
orative arrangement means overcoming misconcep-
tions, territorial thinking, and even institutional red
tape. It means sharing resources and budgets and,
often, giving up programming control. Most likely, it
means thinking of your job—and your constituents—in an entirely new way.

“All our advancement programming has been done by
independent offices. These are all collaborative programs.”

“Student affairs thinks they only deal with the stu-
dents and alumni affairs thinks they just deal with
alumni,” says Jacqueline Carlson, associate director
for alumni and student affairs at Hofstra University in New
York. “That mindset has to change if you are going to
 collaborate.”

At Marquette, Schlinsky and Dooley’s collaboration
began with a simple conversation. The two offices
sat down to discuss ways for alumni to offer students
volunteer opportunities. It turned into a brainstorm-
ing session about how to engage students and alumni
in the life of the school. Schlinsky suggested invol-
vling alumni in traditional student programming like
freshman orientation. Dooley talked about teaming
up to improve National Marquette Day, which “has
always been an alumni-only activity,” he says. “You
don’t even know about it until you graduate. How
much more meaningful would it be if it meant some-
th ing to students as well?”

“That was two years ago. Today, Schlinsky and
Dooley have moved out of their silos and into a full-
fledged partnership. Their offices hold weekly planning
meetings. They’ve launched Marquette Nation, a joint
program that focuses on university traditions, class
unity, and raising money for student scholarships. The
alumni office now plays a role in freshman orientation,
teaching new students the school song, and promoting
baccalaureate programs—without asking for money.

For their part, student affairs occupies a seat on the
university’s alumni board of directors. The student
affairs board member “gives our board a student perspective and shares what we do with
the student board,” Schlinsky says. And National
Marquette Day isn’t just for alumni anymore. An
alumni-student affairs task force has recruited
students to help with everything from arranging
alumni association parties to pre-game activities like face-painting in the student section. “We
got input from the student perspective and shared that with the alumni,” says Dooley.

Perhaps most beneficial, student affairs has opened up its database
to the alumni office. Having access to the
campus’s alumni database has enabled the
university to do research that can help them
tailor their appeals. “That was a huge step,” Schlinsky says. “We had

“Student affairs thinks...”
relationship. Our students love it. Our alumni absolutely love it. Everyone comes out a winner.”

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Partnerships between alumni relations and student affairs start at the top, with senior leadership setting a collaboration mandate and directing the institution’s culture. “If your leadership isn’t on your side, then you might as well not even try,” says UNC’s Davis.

“That’s how important their participation is. Without it, this is a battle you are going to lose.”

However, most of the actual collaboration is done “in the trenches,” among the student affairs and alumni staff, says Seton Hall’s Borovick. The personal relationships between offices—essentially finding a cross-campus counterpart—can be the difference between a failed outreach and a thriving partnership.

Still, it can be a struggle to spot the right partner.

“It’s hard to identify who to talk to in [alumni relations],” says Marquette’s Dooley. “Advancement can be quite large and segmented. If you are not in that world, it can be difficult to access it.”

Good partnerships are often made over cups of coffee, Dooley says. He and Schlinsky initially met through a mutual friend at a campus church group. And embracing a partnership, says Matt Ebeling, executive director of alumni affairs at Pepperdine University in California, often means relinquishing some control. “You have to take the risk of dropping your guard and letting them inside those walls.”

We have these irrational fears that they are somehow going to steal our ideas. You’ve got to let that all go.”

Schlinsky stresses the importance of keeping in close communications with your partners from the planning stages, rather than merely sending an email when you need their help. “You don’t want to tell them, ‘Well, this program has already started, so you should do this.’ That’s not going to get their cooperation,” she says. Instead, meet with them during the early phases of potential collaborative events. “It will be a lot smoother if they feel vested in the process.”

Indeed, Illinois’s Chaney says she approaches her meetings with student affairs by asking what her office can do for them. “You have to bring something to the table if you want them to offer their help too.”

Even when each side agrees that working together benefits both offices, it can be difficult to find a suitable project that combines everyone’s talents and skills, not to mention their resources, budgets, and staffing.

“Empathy is a key factor,” says Seton Hall’s Borovick. “We need to be mindful of what they are dealing with. If we approach them to work with us, we have to be ready for them to say, ‘Sorry, but we don’t have enough time or we have budget constraints. Sometimes it’s OK for one of us to say no.”

Borovick also recommends initially holding off on ambitious projects. “Start small,” he says. “Pick a few easy projects that may not be huge in scope but can build a relationship.”

The right partnership programs—even small ones—can be hugely effective. “It’s amazing what can happen if you’re not concerned about who gets the credit,” says Lee Patouillet, president of Patouillet Consulting. “Partnerships can work even when you can pin turf issues aside and see the bigger picture, the common good for the whole university.”

Examples of alumni relations–student affairs partnerships include the following:

• At Pepperdine, the alumni and student offices agreed that their homecoming programs were “broken,” as Ebeling put it. The parents’ weekend events, basketball pep rallies, and Greek-themed programs run out of the student affairs office drew only modest support. Ebeling says both offices realized they were wasting resources by overlapping programming and appealing to essentially the same constituents. “Our idea was to take all of these smaller events that had kind of lackluster attendance and combine them into one huge weekend,” he says. The multidepartment partnership resulted in Pepperdine’s popular Waves Weekend celebration, featuring a Friday evening concert, a Saturday basketball party, and a Greek-sponsored race dubbed the Spirit Cup.

“We pooled our talent and resources and came up with much bigger, more impactful output than we ever could on our own,” Ebeling notes.

• At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the alumni association and student relations have brought their constituencies together to celebrate reunions of La Casa alumni, the Latino student association and student relations have brought their constituencies together to celebrate reunions of La Casa alumni, the Latino student organization, and the Black Alumni Network. “So many of our students have initial questions related to their courses and the student experience. A major survey in the U.K. gets answers 23 core questions related to their courses and the student experience. Universities can also ask their own questions. Results are publicly available at unratsdirect.gov.uk to help prospective students make informed choices about where and what to study.

U.K. STUDENT EXPERIENCE. A major survey in the U.K. gets answers 23 core questions related to their courses and the student experience. Universities can also ask their own questions. Results are publicly available at unratsdirect.gov.uk to help prospective students make informed choices about where and what to study.

Students don’t care if a program comes from the careers department or the alumni department.

U.S. STUDENT SKETCH. Maybe you feel like you have a good sense of the students on your campus, or you might feel like they are creatures from another planet. Either way, if you work at a U.S. institution, The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2011 by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program at the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, should be a fascinating read. The most recent iteration of the annual survey of 200,000 first-year students (bit.ly/2011_Freshmen) finds that they are more socially liberal and are spending more time studying than previous cohorts.

SILOS ARE FOR GRAIN. Do people outside your office understand what you do? If your answer is “no,” then you are working in a silo, says Mario Moussa, academic director of the Wharton School of Executive Education at the University of Pennsylvania. In a Q&A from the May 2010 HR Magazine, Moussa says, “Silos aren’t created by evil people. Sure, some organizations are filled with empire builders, backstabbers and ego buffers. But systemic, organization-wide silos are more likely the result of systems. And, systems can be changed.” The people featured in this article changed their systems, so keep hope alive!

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