Alumni Associations:
How the Career School and College Sector is
Transforming Them into Alumni Communities and
Creating Unique Branding and Customer Service
Opportunities and Solutions to Current Issues

By Dr. Susan F. Schultz
Susan F. Schulz & Associates, Inc. and
Schools for Sale International, Inc.

What do you think of when you hear Alumni Association? Probably fundraising? Homecoming? A football game? And definitely expect a request for a check!

Something new is happening to Alumni Associations in the career school sector. They are transforming into Alumni Communities. Alumni Communities are developing to show grads that their school, regardless of size, will never leave them. Alumni Communities are one of the innovative trends occurring in our sector.

At the 2011 APSCCU conference in Grapevine, TX Dr. Susan F. Schulz presented a workshop on The Endorsement of Alumni. Dr. Schulz assembled a panel of experts who provided first-hand examples of success at their institutions. The panel included June Gudeman, Pima Medical Institute (PIMA) with 62,000 grads; Allen Langer of New England Institute of Technology (NEIT) with 27,000 grads; Chad Major of Rasmussen College (RC) with 20,000 grads and Robert Starks of Collins College (CC), a CEC school with 515,000 grads throughout all campuses. The panelists offered extensive expertise and ideas. They focused on how Alumni Communities offer ongoing benefits and services to meet the needs of career school grads as they enter the next phase of their lives. The panel talked about how Alumni Communities benefit career schools and specifically the impact on key school measurement areas: enrollment, retention, graduation, placement, and now gainful employment.

How do you start an Alumni Community at a private career school or college? Getting started is always a challenge. The key is to find the driving force to make it happen. This is often the president or the owner since the very important people are close to budget and funding decisions, which is vital for success. At PIMA the driving force was the CEO who understood the benefits and unique opportunities of an Alumni Association and decided to simply make it happen. At NEIT the president saw a need when a new campus was built and hired an outside director with experience in alumni development. (It should be noted that fundraising is not a focus of career school Alumni Communities, but some career schools do fundraising. Therefore the NEIT alumni director was asked to share his experiences.) Some alumni organizations emerge from the career services department. This is because people in career services and placement clearly see the benefits of formally staying in touch with grads in order to locate hiring decision makers.

There are many barriers when setting up an Alumni Community. According to Robert Starks (CC), this can all be “managed.” This includes
establishing the time, funding, and priority on the list of other institution needs and challenges.

What’s the next task when setting up an Alumni Association? Our experts agree that creating a strong foundation is important to success. This means an advisory board, Web site, and buy-in from other departments. And of course a budget.

Advisory Board members need to be chosen carefully. These people have to be representative of the greater school community and community at large. Plus they need to be influencers.

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A dedicated Alumni Web site is a must. What PIMA discovered is that the Web site has to be easy to read, list services and events, focus on graduate success stories, and provide a way to drive traffic to the site. As a result PIMA directs grads to request transcripts via the Web site. The process requires grads to update their contact information. This helps the school stay in contact with the grad—especially important when tracking graduate employment and salary information. An alumni Web site must have an easy way for viewers to contact alumni directors by phone and email. With an Alumni Community and this system in place you should never have to hear your staff say, “After graduation we can’t locate them, or we have no current contact information to find out if they are gainfully employed or meet the income to debt ratio.”

Social media is of course essential when locating, tracking, and communicating with alumni. The decision about whether to create a dedicated social media alumni “package” (Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, etc.) or hook the school alumni profile to the institution profile was discussed. PIMA decided to drive alumni to the school profile. They noted that alumni often respond to questions from potential students. These responses from grads provide the best endorsements for the school. Potential students are not likely to check out the alumni Facebook page for information. Hence only one school profile was set up on Facebook. On the other hand, a casual comment from a school director provided information about a “spontaneous” alumni Facebook profile that developed. In this example a career school was acquired and changed names. But the students who went to the school under its original name wanted an alumni association in that name. So an “informal” alumni association for the now nonexistent school currently exists with about 2000 participants! Graduates want to belong to an Alumni Community!

How to budget for an Alumni Community has to be determined. Each panelist had a different method. One suggested that money be requested on a project basis. Another was given a set budget regardless of plans and estimated costs. One used the budget from his existing department. There was no consensus on budgeting, which is certainly an issue.

Deciding on an alumni director is an important task. The choice was easy at PIMA and NEIT. The owners made the decision. The alumni director can be someone from outside the school or even outside the career school sector. The Career Services director can be asked to handle Alumni. That person is already working with grads. The new alumni director can bring alumni experience or community outreach and marketing and public relations skills needed for networking with individuals and businesses.

Placement on the institution organization chart can be a challenge. Decisions depend on the number of campuses serviced, whether this will be a corporate position, and who the director will report to. Often the Alumni department is best structured when reporting solely to the president or key financial decision-maker at the institution.

Getting involvement from the entire school is the next “first step.” This means that each department head has to understand the benefits of an Alumni Community specifically to their department. Mr. Langer (NEIT) focused on the importance of personally meeting with every department head to outline the win-win benefits. It has to be clear what is wanted from each department. Therefore another initial step is to engage the institution directors of education, student services, marketing, and admissions. Help Admissions understand that grads can provide qualified referral enrollments. Education
can benefit from an extra talent pool of grads that can function as curriculum and equipment reviewers, or assist with mentoring, presentations about the world of work, job shadowing, and other retention strategies. If programs are highly specialized Robert Starks (CC) pointed out that grads create a great source for hiring talented instructors. Placement staff benefits from grads who can point them to job hiring decision-makers, job openings, and new externship site opportunities. Chad Major (RC) emphasized the importance of the alumni director participating in and reporting at every management meeting.

Another key person to involve in the institution’s new Alumni Community is the Information Technology person. He or she will need to assist in setting up ways to manage alumni records through the school student information management system. When establishing an Alumni Community you’ll need strategies to locate grads since a large percentage will be missing in action. The goal of PIMA is to locate every student that attended the school during its thirty-year history. One method they use is to go door-to-door to medical centers (PIMA offers allied health programs) and simply ask if anyone is a PIMA grad! NEIT requires grads to register for Alumni Association membership when they order their caps and gowns.

Mr. Langer (NEIT) disclosed additional benefits when working with IT on database management. They were able to perform major cleanup of over seven different databases in use at the school. All panelists reported difficulty working with IT whether it was on campus or outsourced. When working with the institution IT departments it is important to put in systems to measure results. You’ll want these stats when asking for a budget and to demonstrate return on investment. At the beginning you will want to measure every trend and success no matter how small. The institution IT department should be able to help.

The new look in career school Alumni Communities focuses on benefits for the grad and not on fundraising. Membership benefits can include most anything of value such as discounts, networking, affinity groups, free audits of classes, specialty training, technology updates, events, use of any campus and library, scholarships, and more. Suppliers to career schools are finding wants to support career school Alumni Communities. Certain vendors now offer career school grads discounts on supplies needed for the workplace. Examples are companies that sell medical supplies and scrubs since grads need these on the job. When grads enjoy discounts the supplier gains another lead from the company where that grad works.

Robert Starks (CC) felt that alumni appreciated professional development programs, classes and mentoring. (If the classes are fee-based then they can be revenue source.) Grads want and need ongoing training and technology updating especially in allied health and IT fields. Chad Major (RC) focused on offering career services and development geared to the person already working in the field or who may be looking for the next level job. This requires that career services maintain a solid job bank with higher-level placements in addition to entry-level employment. Robert also talked about Alumni Award programs that reward and recognize grads. The outcome is not only recognition, but also branding and public relations opportunities. It was agreed by all participants that Alumni membership should be as automatic as possible and free.

If the focus is not on fundraising, what does the innovative career school Alumni Community want from its grads? The list is endless and includes: enrollment referrals, assistance in the classroom, introductions to hiring decision-makers where grads work, speakers, instructors, advisory board members, curriculum reviewers, job shadowing opportunities, and more.

Robert Stark (CC) focused on building and maintaining relationships with Alumni to invite them to join Advisory Boards and to review potential new programs. Grads can also be a resource for staff and faculty, especially for

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highly technical and specialized training programs. PIMA has set up PALS or Pima Alumni Leaders. These are individuals who assist with alumni functions on a periodic basis. Robert also successfully engages alumni to work on special alumni events on a project basis. It's easier than counting on alumni to take formal roles or tasks that require a long-term commitment.

What's the secret to communicating with Alumni? Electronic seems to work the best, reported all the Alumni directors. Email, e-zines, texting, and social media like Facebook are effective. It is important to monitor all emailing. This has to be done to check on engagement and opt outs. Events also get a lot of attention. But seasoned Alumni directors caution to wait to hold the first event until there is a strong foundation in place.

Is fundraising a part of the evolutionary new look in Career School Alumni Communities? Most would say no. But the leaders at NEIT have been successful in raising money for their building fund. They have an unusual situation where over 75 percent of their grads still live and work near the school, which has been part of the community for over 40 years. Many grads are now extremely successful corporate owners and want to support their local school. They welcome being offered naming rights to buildings and paying for corporate partnerships. Allan Langer (NETI) commented on the importance of announcing where the funds go. At NEIT the income goes to student scholarship funds.

Measuring success and return on investment is a challenge each alumni director admitted. Ideally the increase in referrals can be clearly established. For now there can be a lag between an alumni referral and actual enrollment. An example is when a grad refers a high school friend or relative. The student might have every intention of going to the career college, but it could be a year or more until the individual graduates high school! How is that measured? Retention is also a metric that takes time to measure. One area that is easier to measure from the start is in placement. It is possible to track the number of new hiring decision makers contacted or the job listings. Chad Major (RC) tracks corporate partnerships and relationships. Collins College focuses on measuring engagement, trends, and any change. Robert Starks (CC) suggests sharing all successes and creating videos and taking photos to be posted on social media like YouTube and Facebook. Eventually time and history will more definitively show the number of increased enrollments, retention, and job openings that result from alumni. But it doesn’t happen right away.

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When is the first alumni event held is the question most career school alumni directors want to know. Often they make the mistake of planning the alumni event as one of the first activities of the newly formalized Alumni Community. June Gudeman (PIMA) cautions about planning an alumni event too quickly. In fact, PIMA's first event was held six years after June was hired! This is because there is a lot to do to set up an Alumni Community with a strong infrastructure. If you build any major project on "quick sand" it will probably fail. Chad Majors (RC) suggests holding several small events at established campuses to start. RC plans to hold an event for their nursing program grads to test out if events should be program driven. PIMA would say yes. Their first event was held solely for medical assistant grads and all faculty and staff that ever taught medical assisting courses. The goal was to increase the number of job openings and hiring decision maker contacts.
because PIMA needed to boost its placement results in this area.

The secret to holding a successful event is of course plan, plan, plan. Also create an event that tells the grads that they are important. PIMA’s first event was held in a beautiful setting with wonderful food and décor. Grads were given great gifts (items with the PIMA name) and made to feel important. Faculty and staff were coached to make each encounter all about the grad. At a recent PIMA event the grad and entire family were invited. It was held at a family-friendly venue. As with each event it was organized for fun and networking and to gather student success stories. These stories are posted on the PIMA alumni Web site. (Success stories for each grad are also made into large posters and hung throughout every campus.) Invitations to events are sent in every way possible. PIMA staff even go door-to-door looking for grads. Graduates from other schools find out about the party and want to be invited too!

Harris N. Miller, APSCU former president and CEO wrote about innovation in career schools in the summer 2011 Link. “Forward thinking is absolutely critical,” and that’s what the transformation of Alumni Associations into Career School Alumni Communities is all about.

There is a quick and easy way for schools to determine the viability of setting up an Alumni Community at their campus. MaxKnowledge offers an online course—PL 105—Setting up an Effective Alumni Association. It is facilitated by June Gudeman of PIMA College, who has been head of the Alumni Community there for over eight years.

**About the author**

Dr. Susan F. Schulz, owner of Susan F. Schulz & Associates, Inc. and Schools for Sale International, Inc., has been researching the transformation of career school Alumni Associations and impact on the career school sector for the past year. She has given six presentations at various conferences and most recently for the second time at the 2011 APSCU conference. susan@susanfschulz.com.