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The Northern Illinois University Foundation and Alumni Engagement: Who is “Golden,” and What Leads Alumni to Give to NIU After Graduation

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

The Northern Illinois University Foundation and Alumni Engagement: Who is
“Golden,” and What Leads Alumni to Give to NIU After Graduation

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By

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The Northern Illinois University Foundation and Alumni Engagement: Who is "Golden," and
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The Northern Illinois University Foundation and Alumni Engagement: Who is “Golden,” and
What Leads Alumni to Give to NIU After Graduation

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The Center for Nonprofit and NGO Studies, Northern Illinois University

NNGO 495H: Capstone Seminar in Nonprofit and NGO Studies

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Abstract

Alumni gifts are becoming an important aspect of higher education funding due to decreasing state support. These gifts accommodate about 28 percent, or about \$6.8 billion, of support to institutions of higher education (Marr et. al., 2005; Stephenson and Bell, 2014; Sung and Yang, 2009; Weerts et. al. 2010; Drezner and Pizmony-Levy, 2021; and McNamee III, 2021). There are many different aspects of the alumni and student experience that shapes the likelihood of giving behaviors and other forms of engagement including financial capacity, satisfying student experience, age, gender, race, participation in student organizations and Greek life, affirming campus climate, involvement in athletics, major, volunteerism post-graduation, event attendance, and organizational and personal identification (Fleming, 2019; Drezner and Pizmony-Levy, 2021; Garvey and Drezner, 2019; Garvey, 2016). This study uses quantitative data analysis methods to analyze archival data about NIU alumni giving behaviors, demographics, and touchpoints, which encompass how student and alumni experiences and characteristics lead to gifts within ten years of graduation. The data set includes 275,173 alumni records, and includes data about constituent type, age, double Huskie, ethnicity, gender, degree amount, number of gifts, fraternity and sorority participation, student athlete participation, employment status, events participation, volunteer activity, travel program participation, student organization participation, Founders Forum membership, and Leadership Society membership. In looking at the research question, “what experiences and characteristics do “gold” NIU alumni have that encourages university engagement and giving?”, this study found that volunteer counts, event counts, travel program participation, student organization participation, sorority / fraternity participation, gender, and ethnicity have significant relationships with gift counts. While these all have significant relationships, the NIU Foundation needs to collect more comprehensive data to better form affinity and interest groups for more targeted cultivation, solicitation, and stewardship efforts.

Introduction

Alumni gifts are becoming an important aspect of higher education funding due to decreasing state support. These gifts accommodate about 28 percent, or about \$6.8 billion, of support to institutions of higher education (Marr et. al., 2005; Stephenson and Bell, 2014; Sung and Yang, 2009; Weerts et. al. 2010; Drezner and Pizmony-Levy, 2021; and McNamee III, 2021). Thus, alumni engagement and giving has important implications for universities, which in turns leads them to ask how to establish giving behaviors within ten years of graduation.

Since alumni are playing a greater role in funding institutions of higher education, it is important for colleges and universities to understand why their alumni engage with them, what characteristics highly engaged alumni have, and conditions and behaviors that they can change to encourage greater engagement. Post-graduation engagement relies heavily on alumni being satisfied with their undergraduate experiences and believing that their degree program set them up for success (Frisby et. al., 2019; Koenig-Lewis et. al., 2016). Universities hope to build strong ties with their alumni base because of their pre-existing relationships with faculty and staff, the connections they have with other alumni, and their connection to outside networks and relationships.

This study evaluates NIU alumni giving behaviors, demographics, and touchpoints from Northern Illinois University Foundation (NIU Foundation) data, which encompasses how student and alumni experiences and characteristics lead to gifts within ten years of graduation, by exploring the question: what experiences and characteristics do “golden” NIU alumni have that encourages university engagement and giving?

Literature Review

Alumni engagement is defined as “continued interaction after graduation between an alumnus/na and their graduate alma mater through philanthropic donations, attending events, volunteerism, and/or reading alumni association publications” (Drezner and Pizmony-Levy, 2021, p. 755). Fleming (2019) furthers this definition by means of the Council for Advancement and Support Education’s (CASE) definition: “‘activities that are valued by alumni, build enduring and mutually beneficial relationships, inspire loyalty and financial support, strengthen the institutions reputation and involve alumni in meaningful activities to advance the institution’s mission’” (CASE, 2018, p. 5, as cited in Fleming, 2019, p. 105).

Alumni play three major roles in institutions of higher education: 1.) donors, 2.) volunteers, and 3.) political advocates. Within these three roles, advancement officers need to understand that alumni gauge their engagement through personal values, institutional integrity, a sense of connection, commitment, and a sense of fulfillment when they were students and currently (Fleming, 2019). Alumni are continuously re-evaluating and changing their engagement based on their experiences and institutional actions and values.

There are five central concepts of alumni engagement outlined in previous literature that account for alumni engagement and giving behaviors: 1.) personal values, 2.) perceived institutional integrity, 3.) connectedness, 4.) commitment, and 5.) sense of fulfillment (Fleming, 2019). In looking at these five concepts, Fleming (2019) defines personal values as “what an alumnus/a believes is important about their alma mater,” institutional integrity as “the characteristics their alma mater possess,” sense of connection as “the strength of affinity they feel towards the institution,” commitment as the “personal resources they are willing to invest towards the university,” and sense of fulfillment as “their assessment of the worth of their

investment” (p. 112). These five concepts interact with an alumni’s personal characteristics and preferences to indicate their predicted likelihood of giving to the university. The relationship that an alumnus has with the university is ever-changing, thus alumni relations offices, gift officers, and other institutional actors need to regularly monitor and evaluate their relationships with alumni to continue positive connections (Fleming, 2019).

Additionally, Fleming (2019) outlines four categories of alumni engagement that segment different aspects of engagement and giving behaviors: 1.) volunteer engagement, 2.) experiential engagement, 3.) philanthropic engagement, and 4.) communication engagement. McNamee III (2021) further discusses how alumni experiences have an impact on giving, particularly the more events that include engagement opportunities that alumni attend, “the more likely that they are to be consistent donors” (p. 42). Fleming (2019) then defines an individual’s level of engagement as stable, but capable of shifting between areas, thus indicating that engagement with newly graduated alumni needs to be prioritized.

Alumni Characteristics

There are many different aspects of the alumni experience that shapes the likelihood of giving behaviors and other forms of engagement. The ones that repeatedly appear in the literature are financial capacity, satisfying student experience, age, gender, race, participation in student organizations and Greek life, affirming campus climate, involvement in athletics, major, volunteerism post-graduation, event attendance, and organizational and personal identification (Fleming, 2019; Drezner and Pizmony-Levy, 2021; Garvey and Drezner, 2019; Garvey, 2016).

The type of student has a significant impact on the likelihood of alumni engagement and giving. Students who transferred are 24 percent less likely to donate to their university, which is attributed to brand identification and loyalty (Stephenson and Bell, 2014). Ultimately, most

alumni give to their alma mater because they feel connected to the institution: 68 percent of alumni in Stephenson and Bell's 2014 study selected that they donated because they are alumni.

A variety of personal identity characteristics also predict the type of engagement and giving that alumni are likely to commit to at their alma mater. Garvey and Drezner (2019) found that alumni with no spiritual or religious affiliations, lower incomes, transfer status, and honors program membership had negative relationships with lifetime financial giving. Oppositely, higher income, advanced degrees, research experience, culminating senior experiences, association or class committees, and positive personal ratings of the university increased an alumni's lifetime giving behaviors (Garvey and Drezner, 2019). Additionally, the specific major that an alumni graduated from may also predict giving behaviors. Marr et. al. (2005) found that alumni from economics, mathematics/engineering, and science have a greater likelihood of giving, but there are significant differences across all majors. These majors may be predictors of financial capacity, which is simultaneously a predictor of giving along with these other characteristics.

Contribution Patterns

Contribution also is influenced by an alumni's want to 'give back' to the university or a particular department because of feelings of preparedness and skills that they developed from the institution of higher education (Shen and Sha, 2020). Stephenson and Bell (2014) found that 47 percent of alumni donate as a means to give back to the university and its efforts to achieve institutional goals. Similarly, Stephenson and Bell (2014) found that 43 percent of alumni donate to help current students. Additionally, 94.9 percent of donors who have given before said that they would give to their alma mater again and 24.1 percent of graduates said that they were likely to give to their alma mater (Drezner, 2018, p. 274).

Koenig-Lewis et. al. (2016) point to the importance of an overall perception of their university experience, but that time plays an important role in alumni loyalty and the likelihood of giving and continued engagement. Time between graduation and giving is associated with success that graduates perceive as stemming from their higher education experiences, stronger identification with the university, and increased income (Koenig-Lewis et. al., 2016). Younger alumni are also more likely to state that they would include their university in their will or estate plan, but this may be associated with lacking estate planning education or distant planning obligations (McAlexander et. al., 2016). But, as Stephenson and Bell (2014) found, the most common reason that alumni do not donate to their university is financial capacity, with 43 percent of alumni saying that they could not afford a gift.

The amount of effort and resources that a university puts into events and engagement opportunities predicts the amount that alumni will give back to the school. McNamee III (2021) states that “the colleges’ average predicted increase of over \$50 per person for every event attended and ... they are well worth the time and energy to produce ... [also] the types of opportunities that were most beneficial in raising alumni OID were those that involved visiting campus and interacting with current or prospective students” (p. 47). McNamee III (2021) additionally explains that event attendance is the best predictor of alumni giving, particularly reunions and regional gatherings. Events that are open to the public, sporting events, concerts, and pre- or post-game receptions are not included in reunions and regional gatherings.

Beyond feelings of preparedness, pride, and effort, alumni make gifts to their alma mater depending on other aspects of their experiences as students and alumni. According to Drezner and Pizmony-Levy (2021), recent alumni are more likely to donate to their area of study or to scholarship support because those areas are where their current institutional loyalties lay.

Contributions are also impacted by the university's reputation, especially in terms of athletics. According to Wunnava and Okunade (2013), "donations tend to rise significantly in years that [their] alma mater won national basketball and/or football championship(s) ... both broaden and deepen the institution's national exposure, [which] significantly raised alumni giving" (p. 769). This increases the pride that an alumni has for their alma mater and strengthens the connections that they have with their university's community. Alumni may also increase their giving when their gift will be matched. Marr et. al. (2005) found that "alumni increase their portion of the gift when their employer matches gifts" at approximately eight percent increases (p. 141). Matches and challenges also help develop and strengthen the ties that an alumni has to their alma mater and the university's community because of the common goal in making the gift.

Segmentation

Segmentation is a marketing concept that strategically groups and targets people that have diverse wants and needs (McAlexander et. al., 2016, p. 84). Because of university associations that are based around program, major, and/or organization and club, giving can be associated with these different undergraduate experiences to create better engagement strategies and materials. Segmentation allows for alumni development officers to meet the distinctive needs of diverse groups.

According to McAlexander et. al. (2016) affinity programs create more productive advancement efforts because they are sensitive to age, generational difference, and issue. Meeting these 'niches' allows alumni to make deeper connections with their alma mater because they can make or strengthen connections with people who share their pride, concerns, and efforts within a specific area, issue, or program. According to Fleming (2019), institutions have the

ability to influence an alumni's sense of connection through creating these affinity groups that allow for the deeper, interpersonal relationships within the overall community.

Borden et. al. (2014) found that tenured faculty who are alumni are more likely to give than other alumni employees, including academic and nonacademic positions. They suggest that universities segment alumni faculty as their own group so that they do not receive fundraising appeals from multiple areas, like an alumni scholarship, their department, or campus amenities, and they are recognized as having dual roles in the university community (Borden et. al., 2014). McAlexander et. al. (2016) also explains the importance of advancement officers approaching alumni at different times that align with the appropriate stage of professional and life cycles.

LGBTQ+ affinity groups allow these alumni to feel reconnected to their alma mater because they increase or rebuild connections to the university: "I think groups like this got me reconnected or kept me in that university in a way – not because of any particular experience, but perhaps I would have drifted off" (p. 63S). Having this connection to the university and other LGBTQ+ alumni create a stronger sense of inclusion and reconnection, which increases the likelihood of giving, particularly directed to LGBTQ+ life on campus.

While segmentation is important for advancement officers to use to engage alumni and donors effectively, they must also be aware of the financial and social capital that their targets have. In thinking about this, advancement officers must "engage a donor's whole-self in their solicitations" (Drezner, 2018, p. 285). Using donor's social identities add greater depth, appropriateness, and inspiration for alumni to give to their alma mater and can also inspire retention.

Favorable College Experience

When alumni believe and remember positive academic and social experiences from their higher education institution, they have greater loyalty post-graduation. For most students, positive academic and social experiences include having an affirming college environment, a strong academic program, connections with faculty, involvement in Greek life or other student organizations, volunteerism and advocacy, and financial aid. Having pride in one's university allows for alumni identification that continues the relationship that alumni have with their fellow alumni and university staff.

Affirming College Environment

Drezner and Pizmony-Levy (2021) use a 'Sense of Belonging' framework that focuses on belonging being a basic social need that influences pro-social behaviors, positive academic achievements, retention, productivity, and persistence. In this framework, having organizational identification is crucial for building giving behaviors because it allows alumni to define themselves as being members of the university, thus increasing loyalty to the institution due to positive perceptions of their experiences at the university and the success they have achieved because of their experiences at the university.

While race typically does not play a significant role in determining the engagement patterns of alumni, alumni from marginalized communities are less likely to feel like they belong to an institution of higher education unless they are engaged in meaningful ways that show an institution's commitment to social justice or specify that their support will be designated to an interest or identity (Drezner and Pizmony-Levy, 2021).

Similar to race, Drezner and Garvey (2016) found that LGBTQ+ alumni who sensed that their alma mater was not "welcoming and affirming" would cease donating (p. 61S). LGBTQ+

alumni want to feel that they are supported by their alma mater and are being accepted for who they are. If they feel that their campus does not have an affirming climate, they will terminate their giving, reduce the amount and frequency of their gifts, or volunteer as a way to give back instead of monetary support (Drezner and Garvey, 2016). In a separate study, Garvey (2016) found that advancement staff should use campus climate measurements to attract LGBTQ+ alumni so as to create a more engaged and active LGBTQ+ community on the campus. Having this stronger sense of community will allow the advancement staff to “develop culturally sensitive and relevant engagement and solicitation practices that recognize and incorporate LGBTQ alumni identities and experiences” (p. 751). This ultimately ensures that LGBTQ+ alumni feel continually welcomed and supported on their alma mater’s campus and that they are an important member of the university’s community. Garvey and Drezner (2019) add to their research by stating that LGBTQ+ alumni need to be approached more strategically in cultivation and solicitation, but also in how they are engaged in stewardship, thus affirming their earlier findings that a one-size-fits-all approach does not effectively work on all alumni and donors, especially those with marginalized identities.

While an affirming institutional environment is important during undergraduate and graduate studies (Marr et. al., 2005), institutions need to continue to provide opportunities for alumni after graduation that make them feel like they are a member of the community. Shen and Sha (2020) found that alumni want more opportunities to network and “connect with their former classmates through events” and more engagement opportunities through social media, email, and face-to-face events (p. 5). Connection to the university is vital for alumni-university relationships because one’s sense of belonging is manifested through physical markers of being a member of a

university community, like the logo, branding, mascot, and buildings (Stephenson and Bell, 2014).

Academics

As part of the overall perception of one's higher education experience, alumni's academic success plays a role in how connected they stay post-graduation. Shen and Sha (2020) found that alumni wanted communication from the department that they graduated from. Alumni from Shen and Sha's (2020) study mentioned their emotional bond with their department and the pride that they feel as a member of that academic unit keeps them interested in receiving updates about the current students, faculty, and the academic unit.

Student Organizations

Weerts and Cabrera (2017) found that alumni who were engaged in many organizations and activities while they were students are the most likely to be "Super Engaged Alumni" who participate in volunteering, religious activities, and political advocating. As students, these alumni were engaged in "all aspects of political, volunteer, social, cultural, and professional programs in college" which leads them to multimodal engagement later in life (p. 7). Current students who are engaged, and typically take on leadership positions, are those who advancement and alumni officers need to focus on engaging early because they have a proclivity to remain engaged with their university.

Affiliations with different student organizations and Greek life organizations increases the likelihood that alumni will remain engaged with their university and give donations. Greek life membership increases alumni's likelihood of giving by 5.6 percent (Wunnava and Okunade, 2013). Because of engagement with sorority or fraternity activities, these alumni feel a stronger sense of community and attachment to the university (Marr et. al., 2005). Greek life membership

is also a predictor of the financial capacity of alumni because of the high dues, housing requirements, and time-consuming nature of the organizations that would subtract from education and work schedules.

Volunteerism and Advocacy

Institutions of higher education need to engage their alumni in multiple ways beyond monetary solicitations. Alumni who have strong organizational identification want to engage with their alma mater, particularly their departments, through helping current students, having departmental updates, attending events, and volunteering, thus volunteering and advocacy opportunities increase the likelihood that alumni will become highly engaged or ‘super-engaged’ (Drezner and Pizmony-Levy, 2021). Weerts and Ronca (2008) argue that institutions who have high quality academic programs ‘grow their own volunteers’ because they are exposed to “high quality academic experiences” (p. 289).

Weerts and Ronca (2008) found that alumni volunteer with their university because of the “personal or professional benefits [they] received from being exposed to a high-quality academic program” (p. 287). This ties to the idea that alumni are more likely to be engaged with their alma mater if they feel that they had a satisfying experience at their university and that they left prepared for their careers. These alumni want to give back to the “institution or specific academic program that provided them a strong education and professional/life benefits” (Weerts and Ronca, 2008, p. 287). But different types of volunteering also increased the likelihood of alumni making gifts. According to McNamee III (2021), alumni who volunteer with admissions and reunions have significantly higher predictions of gifts. Additionally, Weerts et. al. (2010) discusses that student recruitment, mentoring, and other less structured student activities receive

the least attention and are the least formalized but have potential in understanding alumni's engagement with the university.

Through different forms of post-graduation activities, alumni remain engaged in more meaningful ways that increase their likelihood of giving by 20.5 percent (Wunnava and Okunade, 2013). Alumni volunteering is largely predicted by an alumni's distance from campus, and those who live closer are more likely to engage in more opportunities. Weerts and Ronca (2008) suggest that for better engagement with out of state alumni, universities should plan more global volunteering opportunities for their alumni.

Financial Support

Alumni who received financial aid as a student are more likely to give more frequently and empathetically (McNamee III, 2021). This also predicts where alumni may give their gifts in the future. Alumni want to support the departments and/or organizations that supported them while they were in school so as to financially support students similar to them (McNamee III, 2021).

Across all groups, solicitations that describe marginalized students (i.e., first-generation students, LGBTQ+ students) were more important and successful in fundraising for scholarships (Drezner, 2018). Drezner (2018) additionally questions how this need-based solicitation success challenges traditional meritocratic views within universities instead of relying on merit-based solicitations. Alumni with marginalized identities assign more importance to scholarships and support to others with similar identities, thus supporting Marr et. al.'s (2005) concept that the type of financial aid that an alumni received is more important than the quantity. Being targeted for need-based scholarships increases an alumni's chances of giving by five to 13 percent (Marr et. al., 2005, p. 139).

Methodology

To conduct this study, I use quantitative methods to analyze archival data. This allows for a better understanding of the conditions that encourage alumni to engage with their university and promote giving behaviors. This study uses data about NIU alumni giving behaviors, demographics, and touchpoints, which encompass how student and alumni experiences and characteristics lead to gifts within ten years of graduation. This study looks at the question: What experiences and characteristics do “golden” NIU alumni have that encourages university engagement and giving?

Case Description

This research focuses on a case study of the Northern Illinois University Foundation and their alumni engagement. This organization was chosen because the NIU Foundation has recently been making efforts to better their alumni engagement and giving as they enter a campaign. The NIU Foundation “works to promote philanthropy from all the university’s constituents to support access to higher education, retention and completion of college degrees and professional certifications, and the contributions of the University to economic development of our service region and the state” (Guidestar 2022). This philanthropy furthers the excellent educational and experiential opportunities at NIU by providing “critical support and funding to further student experience” to serve “economically disadvantaged people, Indigenous peoples, People of Latin American descent, People of African descent, and young adults” (Guidestar 2022).

History and Governance

The NIU Foundation was founded in 1955 and is a private, independent foundation that serves adults in their university education (Guidestar 2022). Recently, the NIU Foundation

merged with the Northern Illinois University Alumni Association (NIUAA) to work as one entity. The current President and CEO of the NIU Foundation is Catherine Squires and the NIU Alumni Association executive director is Reggie Bustinza. The NIU Foundation Board of Directors is led by board chair Chris Cole, and there are 22 other voting members. The NIUAA Board of Director's president is Joseph Sener, who is accompanied by 27 other board members.

Size

There are approximately 55 other staff members who make up the NIU Foundation and the NIUAA, connecting with a "proud alumni base of over 250,000 Huskies" (Guidestar 2022). In fiscal year 2021 (FY21), the NIU Foundation awarded \$8,293,813 to programs, professorships, and faculty awards (Guidestar 2022). The population of students who received support from program funds already rely on some form of financial aid (86%) and a portion of them are first generation (>50%) and from underrepresented groups (25%) (Guidestar 2022). Additionally, the NIU Foundation awarded 2,356 scholarship awards in FY21. In FY21, endowment returns provided for scholarships and program funds were \$3.1 million, and thus far in the FY22, there has been \$2.7 million (NIU Foundation 2022).

Programs

The mission of the NIU Foundation is "To energize and connect the private sector with the NIU community to secure and steward resources that support the future and growth of NIU" (NIU Foundation 2022). Their vision is "To develop, support and encourage a culture of giving throughout the NIU community that will allow it to flourish and accomplish NIU's goal of becoming the most student-centered public research university in the Midwest" (NIU Foundation 2022). The mission and vision of the NIUAA align with the NIU Foundation in that their mission is to "build lifelong relationships with NIU alumni and friends by communicating the message of

excellence and creating opportunities to connect and interact with the university community” (NIU Alumni Association 2022). NIUAA supports their mission by “offering programs and services that foster pride in the university, support its goals, and meet alumni needs; developing a pool of committed volunteer volunteers ...; developing alumni clubs and other constituency groups that further alumni affiliation with the university; representing alumni interests on university policy-making committees; sponsoring programs for students designed to develop university loyalty; and developing and sponsoring programs that foster financial support for the university” (NIU Alumni Association 2022) to their 262,000 alumni worldwide.

Data and Sample

This study uses secondary data – archival records of alumni information from the NIU Foundation database Millennium. The data includes 275,173 NIU alumni. Categories in the data set include constituent type, age, double Huskie, ethnicity, gender, degree amount, number of gifts, fraternity and sorority participation, student athlete participation, employment status, events participation, volunteer activity, travel program participation, student organization participation, Founders Forum membership, and Leadership Society membership. I use the secondary data to draw conclusions about the experiences and demographics that promote alumni engagement and giving behaviors within ten years of graduation.

Methods

This project utilizes a combination of univariate, bivariate, and multivariate analysis to analyze the characteristics and experiences of NIU alumni. For univariate analysis, I ran frequency distributions for constituent type, age, gender, ethnicity, double Huskie, student organization participation count, gift count, fraternities / sororities count, event participated, volunteer activity count, and travel program participation count. For bivariate analysis, I ran

crosstabulations of gender and gift count, ethnicity and gift count, double Huskie and gift count, fraternity / sorority and gift count, volunteer count and gift count, travel program count and gift count, student organization participation and gift count, and event participation and gift count. I also ran multiple regression with gift count as the dependent variable and volunteer count, travel program count, and event count as the independent variables.

Results

The NIU Foundation has a large number of alumni from various backgrounds and with a wide range of identities. Of the 275,173 records, 53.6 percent, or 147,590, of the alumni are female and 46.3 percent, or 127,359, of the alumni are male. 0.1 percent, or 225, alumni did not fall into the male or female categories. Alumni are largely white/non-Hispanic (69.7 percent or 191,793 alumni) followed by small percentages of marginalized races and ethnicities with Black or African American/non-Hispanic at 4.9 percent, or 13,404 alumni, Asian at 5.7 percent, or 15,635 alumni, American Indian/Native Alaskan at 0.4 percent, or 1,015 alumni, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander at 0.1 percent, or 166 alumni, Puerto Rican/Hispanic/Mexican American at 3.9 percent, or 10,711 alumni, and other/not indicated at 15.3 percent, or 42,235 alumni. About half of the NIU Foundation's alumni fall between the ages of 21 and 55. Approximately 10.7 percent, or 29,327, of alumni are double Huskies.

Beyond personal identity, alumni are tracked in a variety of ways that are important to understanding their engagement with NIU. Of the 275,173 records, 98.6 percent, or 271,374, of alumni have not volunteered. This is followed by a gap with 1.0 percent, or 2,619, of alumni who have engaged in one volunteering opportunity, 0.2 percent, or 539, of alumni who have engaged in two volunteering opportunities, 0.1 percent, or 296, of alumni who have engaged in three volunteering opportunities, 0.1 percent, or 157, of alumni who have engaged in four volunteering

opportunities, and 0.1 percent, or 188, of alumni who have engaged in five or more volunteering opportunities.

Another engagement activity that the NIU Foundation tracks is travel program participation. Of the 275,173 records, 99.6 percent, or 274,108, of alumni have not participated in the travel programs. This is then followed by a gap with 0.3 percent, or 769, of alumni having participated in a travel opportunity once. Only 0.1 percent, or 296, of alumni participating in two or more (2 to 69) travel opportunities.

Similar to other alumni engagement opportunities, NIU Foundation events are largely not attended by a majority of alumni. Of the 275,173 records, 94.9 percent, or 261,191, of alumni have not attended any events. This is followed by a gap with 3.3 percent, or 9,075, of alumni having attended one event, 0.7 percent, or 2059, of alumni having attended 2 events, and 1.8 percent, or 4,907 having attended three or more (3 to 134) events.

Outside of strictly alumni opportunities, it is important to understand the student characteristics of alumni who have given gifts. Of the alumni in this study, 85.6 percent, or 235,665, of alumni did not participate in any student organizations. This is followed by 6.3 percent, or 17,336, of alumni who were members of one student organization, 2.9 percent, or 8,091, of alumni who were members of two student organizations, 1.7 percent, or 4,774, of alumni who were members of three student organizations, 1.4 percent, or 3,743, of alumni who were members of four organizations, and 1.2 percent, or 5,564, of alumni who were in five or more (5 to 20) student organizations.

Also important to understanding alumni giving patterns is sorority or fraternity membership. Of the 275,173 records, 93.2 percent, or 256,377, of alumni were not members of a fraternity or sorority. This was followed by 4.9 percent, or 13,548, of alumni being involved in

one Greek life organization, 1.5 percent, or 4,223, of alumni being involved in two Greek life organizations, and 0.4 percent, or 1,025, of alumni being involved in three or more (3 to 9) Greek life organizations.

To understand how these factors all influence alumni giving patterns, it is important to look at the gift counts of alumni from the past ten years. Of the 275,173 records, 70.4 percent, or 193,604, of alumni have not given to NIU. This is followed by 9.9 percent, or 27,313, of alumni who have given one gift, 4.3 percent, or 11,780, of alumni who have given two gifts, 2.6 percent, or 7,099, of alumni who have given three gifts, 1.8 percent, or 5,037, of alumni who have given four gifts, 1.4 percent, or 3,743, of alumni who have given five gifts, 1.0 percent, or 2,857, of alumni who have given six gifts, and 8.6 percent, or 23,740, of alumni who have given seven gifts or more (7 to 733).

Crosstabulations of gender and gift count, ethnicity and gift count, double Huskie and gift count, fraternity / sorority and gift count, volunteer count and gift count, travel program count and gift count, student organization participation and gift count, and event participation and gift count showed that all these categories were significant indicators of alumni giving behaviors. Gender and gift count is significant at 70.4 percent (Figure 1.1), ethnicity and gift count is significant at 82.4 percent (Figure 1.2), double Huskie and gift count is significant at 58.6 percent (Figure 1.3), fraternity / sorority count and gift count is significant at 90.2 percent (Figure 1.4), volunteer count and gift count is significant at 94.8 percent (Figure 1.5), travel program count and gift count is significant at 97.0 percent (Figure 1.6), student organization participation and gift count is significant at 92.5 percent (Figure 1.7), and event count and gift count is significant at 98.2 percent (Figure 1.8).

In running a regression of gift count, volunteer count, travel program participation, and event count, we see that all three categories are significant in predicting alumni giving behaviors. From the ANOVA table (Figure 2.2), we see that the independent variables volunteer count, travel program participation, and event count have a significant relationship with the dependent variable, gift count with a p-value of 0.00. In the coefficients table (Figure 2.3), event count is statistically significant at .000, volunteer count is statistically significant at <.001, and travel program participation is statistically significant at .000.

Implications and Recommendations

By analyzing the behaviors and characteristics of NIU alumni, this study has come to help the NIU Foundation better understand their alumni population, with consideration of affinity groups, and the preferred methods of engagement that will produce greater likelihoods of civic engagement and giving. Because previous research has shown the importance of alumni engagement to university giving and civic engagement, it is important that the NIU Foundation builds and maintains a large pool of NIU alumni who are engaged in the university.

Because of the significance that gender and ethnicity have on gift count, the NIU Foundation needs to do more in-depth analysis of these groups and other characteristics that lead to giving within those groups of alumni and donors. To continue building and maintaining relationships with these specific groups of donors, the NIU Foundation should consider implementing affinity groups based on gender and/or ethnicity. Because volunteer participation, event participation, travel program participation, and student organization are all statistically significant, these can be used as controls in future research, but also in establishing affinity groups.

Currently, the NIU Alumni Association only recognizes seven affinity groups: the Black Alumni Council, Computer Science Alumni Council, Greek Alumni Council, Latino Alumni Council, NIU Huskie Marching Band Alumni Council, Engineering and Technology Alumni Society, and the NIU Rockford Alumni Club. The university has over 100 undergraduate programs, 93 graduate programs, and many other options for certifications, thus these seven affinity groups leave many alumni unrepresented within specific groups after graduation. Because NIU has over 250,000 alumni, it is important that alumni still feel that they have a program, department, group, or center that they feel connected to and engaged by, especially if the university and NIU Foundation wants to ensure continued, and strengthened, relationships with a variety of alumni.

Alumni development officers should also focus on segmenting their alumni populations into clusters that allow for more targeted approaches of communication that are personalized to a program, identity characteristic, or issue. Koenig-Lewis et. al. (2016) points to “strong ties” in alumni engagement because it places emphasis on academic experiences and collaborates with schools and departments to provide more personalized information and experiences to those donors. McAlexander et. al. (2016) also points to the efficiency of segmented data: “segmentation-related data can be combined with existing data for application to coordinated marketing campaign that can further engage alumni and build enthusiasm for the institution” (p. 93). Using gender, ethnicity, volunteer participation, event participation, and travel program participation, the NIU Foundation should segment within different giving levels of their alumni and alumni donors so as to create more specific cultivation, solicitation, and stewardship materials that appeal to the issues and interests of the group. These segmentations, that may lead

to affinity groups, help recognize alumni's identity along with the type and frequency of their engagement with the university and foundation instead of strictly relying on giving capacity.

Additionally, The NIU Foundation needs to focus on building collaborative relationships with the different college and department representatives because of the connections that students have with faculty. Frisby et. al. (2019) states, "Engaging faculty in the alumni relations process more strategically should become a valued best practice," (p. 169) which allows alumni development officers to maximize pre-existing relationships that alumni have with the university. Continuing these pre-existing relationships is vital because of the cultivation that has already occurred as the alumni were students. Having these relationships will also allow the NIU Foundation to collect more intensive data from different departments, which will allow them to further better understand their alumni from an identity and interest perspective instead of outside research.

NIU needs to continue to provide opportunities for alumni beyond volunteering, events, and travel programs. Alumni needs to be included in the NIU community in a variety of ways that utilize their skills, interests, and experiences. Because alumni want to be mentors and speak with current students, the NIU Foundation and the NIU Alumni Association should create opportunities for alumni to engage with students through different academic programs in order to foster a better relationship with the department, but because it also meets the needs and wants of the alumni, in turn increasing their likelihood to make a gift to the Foundation in the future. In developing mentoring opportunities with students, the NIU Foundation and Alumni Association should also create opportunities for alumni to network and mentor each other, which allows alumni to better keep the relationships they had as students and continue those ties into their careers. Having these networks in place both meets the wants of alumni to stay more connected

with other alumni from their program, but it also helps the Foundation develop a group of people who want to be engaged in events or opportunities that are outside “normal” alumni engagement activities.

The NIU Foundation needs to do this segmentation work on a local, regional, and national scale. Having volunteering, events, mentoring, and networking regularly occurring in different areas that alumni are concentrated in would create a campus-like climate and sense of connection in different areas of the country. Affinity groups, like the NIU Rockford Alumni Club, would allow the NIU Foundation to make connections with alumni who live in the same area, thus making cultivation a more concentrated effort. These affinity groups would also allow the alumni to continue growing their relationships and Huskie pride outside of specific NIU events, which strengthens their ties to the university and increases their likelihood of giving.

Both segmentation and collaborative relationships will require the NIU Foundation to have active communication both internally with advancement officers and externally with alumni. Sung and Yang (2009) attribute successful communication with alumni to increased communication with students who are currently enrolled. Starting relationships with student leaders allows the NIU Foundation to engage with students who are active in their communities and the NIU community overall. I suggest that the NIU Foundation engages in mentoring opportunities with the Student Government Association and/or other student organizations to help teach them the importance of fundraising and engagement, but also to help them develop skills that these students need. I believe that establishing these relationships with students will encourage them to share information about these connections and services with their fellow students and educate each other about the NIU Foundation. Keeping these connections is vital for the NIU Foundation, and as previous research shows, they are more likely to keep

relationships because the students they are engaging with are in student organizations, holding leadership positions, and have pride in their university.

Conclusion

By analyzing the behaviors and characteristics of NIU alumni, this study helps the NIU Foundation to better understand their alumni population, with consideration of affinity groups, and the preferred methods of engagement that will produce greater likelihoods of civic engagement and giving. Because previous research has shown the importance of alumni engagement to university giving and civic engagement, it is important that the NIU Foundation builds and maintains a large pool of NIU alumni who are engaged in the university. This study will help NIU Foundation staff to understand how to effectively engage with alumni, with particular considerations to young alumni and recent graduates, to encourage university engagement (volunteering, advocating, mentoring) and giving and forge long-term giving behavior.

As alumni contributions continue to grow in importance, it is vital for NIU to understand what characteristics and experiences lead to more positive interactions that increase engagement and giving. By looking at the characteristics and experiences of NIU alumni, this study found the importance of identity-based, community-based, and belief-based connections that alumni have with their alma mater, especially in looking at gender, ethnicity, and university/community participation. The NIU Foundation has a strong base of alumni who are already engaged and have given gifts, but to continue growing their organization's capacity they need to build connections with a larger portion of their alumni through more affinity groups and non-traditional engagement opportunities that connect alumni with each other along with students, faculty, and foundation staff.

Limitations

Due to the nature of secondary data, this project relied on previously collected data about NIU alumni that is based on the needs and wants of the NIU Foundation and the NIU Alumni Association. As found in previous literature, knowing the different types of engagement that alumni participate in is vital to understanding the best ways to interact with different groups and individuals. Thus, one of the main limitations of this project was that the type of events attended and type of volunteering completed was not tracked. Additionally, not knowing the numerical amount that alumni gave, and the type of gift it was, limits the understanding of how and why alumni give.

For future research on NIU Foundation alumni engagement strategies, I would recommend a qualitative project that looks at individual alumni engagement motivations and strategies, including but not limited to, interviews with alumni across different age groups, different interest groups, and different financial capacities to understand how university involvement impacts volunteering and advocating, giving, and social engagement across different levels of commitment and capacity.

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Appendix 1: Crosstabulations

Figure 1.1: Gender and Gift Count

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1347.331 ^a	440	<.001
Likelihood Ratio	951.392	440	<.001
N of Valid Cases	275173		

a. 467 cells (70.4%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .00.

Figure 1.2: Gift Count and Ethnicity

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4986.474 ^a	1540	.000
Likelihood Ratio	5688.634	1540	.000
N of Valid Cases	275173		

a. 1457 cells (82.4%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .00.

Figure 1.3: Double Huskie and Gift Count

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	10624.120 ^a	220	.000
Likelihood Ratio	9060.952	220	.000
N of Valid Cases	275173		

a. 259 cells (58.6%) have expected count less than 5.
The minimum expected count is .11.

Figure 1.4: Fraternity or Sorority and Gift Count

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6174.629 ^a	1980	.000
Likelihood Ratio	1449.914	1980	1.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	378.894	1	<.001
N of Valid Cases	275173		

a. 1993 cells (90.2%) have expected count less than 5.
The minimum expected count is .00.

Figure 1.5: Gift Count and Volunteer Count

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	74560.977 ^a	3080	.000
Likelihood Ratio	4322.436	3080	<.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	5650.023	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	275173		

a. 3143 cells (94.8%) have expected count less than 5.
The minimum expected count is .00.

Figure 1.6: Gift Count and Travel Program Count

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	317172.292 ^a	4840	.000
Likelihood Ratio	3651.906	4840	1.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	2397.343	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	275173		

a. 4933 cells (97.0%) have expected count less than 5. The
minimum expected count is .00.

Figure 1.7: Gift Count and Student Organization Count

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7989.866 ^a	4180	<.001
Likelihood Ratio	4041.979	4180	.936
Linear-by-Linear Association	144.392	1	<.001
N of Valid Cases	275173		

a. 4089 cells (92.5%) have expected count less than 5.
The minimum expected count is .00.

Figure 1.8: Gift Count and Event Count

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2247590.90 ^a	12980	.000
Likelihood Ratio	16351.291	12980	<.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	21782.145	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	275173		

a. 13016 cells (98.2%) have expected count less than 5.
The minimum expected count is .00.

Appendix 2: Regression

Figure 2.1

Correlations

		GiftCount	EventsParticipatedAll	VolunteerActivityCount	TravelProgramParticipationCount
Pearson Correlation	GiftCount	1.000	.281	.143	.093
	EventsParticipatedAll	.281	1.000	.401	.080
	VolunteerActivityCount	.143	.401	1.000	.036
	TravelProgramParticipationCount	.093	.080	.036	1.000
Sig. (1-tailed)	GiftCount	.	.000	.000	.000
	EventsParticipatedAll	.000	.	.000	.000
	VolunteerActivityCount	.000	.000	.	.000
	TravelProgramParticipationCount	.000	.000	.000	.

Figure 2.2

ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	2121589.443	3	707196.481	8553.801	.000 ^b
	Residual	22749949.101	275169	82.676		
	Total	24871538.544	275172			

a. Dependent Variable: GiftCount

b. Predictors: (Constant), TravelProgramParticipationCount, VolunteerActivityCount, EventsParticipatedAll

Figure 2.3

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	2.019	.017		115.778	.000	1.985	2.053
	EventsParticipatedAll	1.639	.013	.261	130.924	.000	1.615	1.664
	VolunteerActivityCount	1.345	.074	.036	18.077	<.001	1.199	1.490
	TravelProgramParticipationCount	2.524	.065	.071	38.929	.000	2.397	2.651

a. Dependent Variable: GiftCount

Figure 2.4

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	Change Statistics			
						F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.292 ^a	.085	.085	9.093	.085	8553.801	3	275169	.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), TravelProgramParticipationCount, VolunteerActivityCount, EventsParticipatedAll