

## **Planned Giving Primer: Before, During, and After Reunions**

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Many of us remember our school years with great fondness, as memory, that great deceiver, evokes our Brilliant Youth and lets us recall all the optimism of those years. Some of us long to recapture those memories by going to reunions . . . and a good reunion does let us reminisce and reconnect with friends and connect with others we may have never noticed.

For those of us who have become fundraisers, a reunion appears to be an especially auspicious time to give back to a school. Loyal alumni/ae back together again, in the setting that gave them their start in life, and everyone is having a good time (perhaps even a far better time than they ever had during their school years). The professors are around, talking about the life of the mind, and alumni/ae, who had not been on campus for decades, are able to interact with current students. The development staff can present the institutional needs of the school to a large, receptive audience.

As we all know, many colleges, universities, and independent schools have exceptionally well-orchestrated reunions programs that, seemingly without effort, bring in millions of dollars. If you work at such a place, you can stop reading now; this essay is not for you. Instead, we drafted this essay for all the college/independent school fundraisers who say to us "help us rethink our reunion program . . . right now all the returning alumni/ae just want to party and find any mention of money inappropriate (at best) and insulting (at worst)."

It just so happens that one of us recently celebrated a significant college reunion and discovered first-hand how to overcome some of these problems. As a member of the "Contributing Team," (which included three professional fundraisers, as well as several people who had worked on philanthropic gifts as accountants and financial advisors) our (unnamed) reunion participant found the much larger reunion planning team both skeptical and intrigued by the possibilities and options that planned giving offered to the class. Over a period of three years and through the direct example of significant gift commitments from all six members of the Contributing Team, others began to pay close attention and to ask for conversations about how they too could structure their gifts to make commitments far larger than any had originally envisioned.

What worked for that fundraising committee, and then the class celebrating the reunion, were small group focus groups where we could explain the myriad ways of being able to give a large gift. By emphasizing planned gifts—especially gifts of retirement plan assets, trusts, and IRA rollovers—this class was able to triple the gifts of the previous year's class (absent an eight-

figure gift from one of the members of that class) and exceed their own already ambitious goal by 200%.

What follows are six “best practices,” for reunion giving, as we draw on both our own direct experience and research on educational institutions and on the research from others in the field. These practices represent, in our view, the best ways of greatly increasing planned giving in reunions and, in the process, of increasing the success and potential of reunion fundraising efforts.

1. Hold “official” reunions every five years, with special emphasis on the 25<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup>.  
We are all creatures of habit, and reunions at the places where we experienced significant educational growth are no exception. By beginning early and rekindling the spirit of reunions every five years, we create the foundation for building and sustaining long-term connections over a lifetime.
2. Make fundraising a key component of every reunion, with special emphasis on major reunions. Again, patterns of behavior established early can become normative habits over time. By starting a fundraising component at the fifth reunion (probably with annual fund dollars and participation goals), or, even better, continuing the senior gift commitments that many schools and colleges have begun, we condition our alumni/ae to the expectation of giving as a part of coming “home.” By the time alumni/ae reach their fiftieth reunion, they now expect giving to be a part of the event.
3. Create ownership with the class through a fundraising committee. We all know that engagement produces a higher level of commitment than passive interaction. And we also know that class members are more likely to respond to an appeal from a classmate than from the institution alone. Staffing reunion class committees is time-consuming, to be sure, and development staff will surely be tempted to “do it themselves” because it is more efficient. But efficiency does not equate to effectiveness and working with reunion fundraising committees has proven to be far more effective in raising both dollars and participation levels. A corollary to creating a class fundraising committee is to find a committed and knowledgeable and credible spokesperson within the class, someone who can manage the fundraising messages and someone who has already made a significant financial commitment him or herself.
4. Count multi-year giving in reunion totals. Even though we count gifts in each fiscal year in that year’s reported totals, for the purposes of building a vibrant reunion program, counting five year totals (i.e., all gift commitments made since the previous reunion) in the report of reunion giving both reinforces the impact of the gifts made in the intervening years and the importance of reunions as a time for celebrating the relationship of all classes to the institution.
5. Count everything. While some institutions count only annual fund gifts as part of reunion totals, the most effective programs go far beyond this. The key is to switch the focus from “making a gift” to “helping the school” with a multi-year gift that recognizes a lifetime relationship with the institution. Annual gifts are critical, to be sure. But

other commitments—especially estate gifts—are equally important, especially because reunions are meant to celebrate the relationship of alums to the institution over a lifetime, not just in a specific year. So the programs that raise the most funding also count and report life income gifts like gift annuities and trusts, and estate gift commitments of all sorts. These reports count such commitments in different categories and are clear about how much is available now and how much will come in the future, but counting these long-term commitments at reunion time is a particularly effective way of spurring alumni/ae to take action.

6. Count total giving over a lifetime for fiftieth and post-fiftieth classes. Sometimes, schools and colleges have a hard time retaining the enthusiasm and momentum that a fiftieth reunion generates. But shifting from gifts over a five year period to gifts from class members over a lifetime can be a productive way of both reminding us of the lifetime connection to the institution and reinforcing the impact these gifts have on the total life of the organization.

Furthermore, counting total lifetime gifts means that the total announced at post-fiftieth reunions will always increase over the previous reunion announcement; the number will never diminish and classes will never have to suffer the embarrassment of falling off from previous totals. Often, we have found that post-fiftieth commitments, especially with estate gifts, are greater than those made at the fiftieth itself, coming as a result of the inspiration and connection engendered by the fiftieth. Some classes have even developed an internal goal of maximizing the number of classmates who have given totals greater than a specific amount (\$100,000, or even \$1,000,000).

### **Potential Barriers to an Effective reunion Giving Program and How to Overcome Them**

The best intentions and plans notwithstanding, instituting a new pattern of reunion giving often encounters potential barriers. Following are three the most pervasive of these barriers as well as strategies for overcoming them.

1. Alumni/ae (and sometimes alumni/ae association staff) know little about planned giving and thus are uncomfortable the techniques we all know so well; that discomfort can lead to uncertainty about how to incorporate planned gift ideas into fundraising for reunions. We all are most comfortable with information or processes with which we are familiar, and reunion fundraising is no exception. Key to overcoming this natural uncertainty and, therefore, the reticence that class members or staff may demonstrate is information: information that is not overly technical and that clarifies why planned gifts can benefit both the donors and the institution. Training for alumni/ae office staff can be just as critical as for major gift staff, and taking the time to work with class leaders can bring them often from skeptic to enthusiast.
2. Staff has trouble recruiting a reunion planning committee or class leaders do not come forward. Classes have personalities at all institutions. And, just like individuals, some

classes exude enthusiasm and others seem never to gain even a minimal level of reunion zeal. The former are wonderful groups with whom to work; the latter can produce a good deal of frustration.

Occasionally, institutions can overcome class lethargy through a single class leader, but that is hardly the ideal circumstance and puts a great deal of weight on the shoulders of the class spokesperson. In such circumstances, staff will have to step in to maintain momentum for the class. Sometimes, staff will even have to skip over, in effect, an especially unenthusiastic class in favor of an upcoming one with more internal vibrancy. But, as a reunion program takes hold over time, even unorganized classes will begin to get caught up in the momentum created by previous reunions and will pick up some of the flavor of more intrinsically zealous classes.

Sometimes, soliciting advice directly from class leaders about how best to communicate giving options to class members will engage them in a way that relying solely on spontaneous volunteers will not. Few people shy away from giving advice, and, the attendees will both learn more about how to give beyond writing a check and thus be more likely to help communicate these messages to classmates.

3. Organizations are concerned that annual giving will suffer if more comprehensive fundraising goals become part of the reunion program. The concern is natural but the data indicate that these worries are unfounded. In fact, encouraging and counting gifts beyond annual giving (and especially gift commitments from estates) are far more likely to increase annual giving, both in the reunion year and in the years following. Members of fiftieth reunion classes can benefit especially from seeing new, planned, ways of making their annual commitments. The relatively new IRA rollover opportunity is only the most visible and most widely used such annual (planned) gift.

At the recent national conference of Charitable Gift Planners, one of the speakers cited some statistics about the Return on Investment of planned gifts. Noting a Return on Investment, he reported the following:

- \$3.43 for every dollar spent on events
- \$19.11 for every dollar spent on annual giving programs
- \$33.33 for every dollar spent on major gift programs

But planned giving programs brought a return of \$56.93 for every dollar spent, far and away the most cost effective component of a development office.

We also cite a study from the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, which concluded that, in general, donors who had made an estate commitment to an

education institution gave, on average, annual gifts over twice as large as donors who did not. We have seen this dynamic play out in our own family lives as well.

### What Works

In preparing for a reunion, we suggest first offering a series of focus groups for members of the reunion committee. When class leaders understand new (and tax-efficient) ways of giving, they can help spread the word. In one recent 50<sup>th</sup> reunion with which we were involved, each member of the reunion planning committee sent, over the course of 18 months, a letter to all class members explaining what he or she was doing for the reunion. These specific stories both conveyed the message that each member of the committee had thought specifically about what he or she could do and, collectively, laid out the broad range of giving opportunities available to the entire class. Particularly important for a 50<sup>th</sup> reunion class is understanding the benefits of the IRA-Rollover (and how such a rollover counts as a RMD) and the benefits, especially to unmarried classmates, of making the school a beneficiary (or partial beneficiary) of retirement plan assets.

When one reframes reunion fundraising as an opportunity to join together to support the institution that was so much a part of the lives of the alumni/ae, instead of an obligation to drop some money into the pot, alumni/ae can see fundraising in a completely different light. The key to this transition is involving alumni/ae themselves in the fundraising process, selecting a dynamic fundraising chair or, even better, a fundraising sub-committee of the reunion planning team. If a school has no tradition of fundraising as part of reunions, institutions can begin incrementally, focusing on one especially well-organized class and on a set of enthusiastic leaders who might wish to establish a new standard for the institution. Fiftieth reunions are often the best place to look for such alumni/ae leaders and, once one class has developed a strong fundraising result, a new "tradition" is born.

As a function of these data about the impact of planned gifts, we encourage comprehensive reunion gift programs to ask for annual gifts, a major project gift, and deferred estate gifts. When they all "count," class members are far more likely to listen than if only the first option is available. Besides, counting all such gifts blends directly into the underlying principle of reunions: that the alumnus/a is a part of the institutional family for life and that the relationship is on-going.

Reunions also offer a chance to propose new ideas that might not have been part of the traditional fundraising effort. A few such ideas that have worked with organizations with which we have worked follow:

- a. "Endowing Your Annual Fund Gift": One potential strategy that some organizations have employed quite successfully is to emphasize that a gift to endowment (whether current or through an estate), or a gift that generates income to the donor (like a Charitable Gift Annuity) can be used to endow the annual fund. In other words, the donor can make a

current annual fund gift *and* provide a long-term annual gift through the endowed fund. The class gets credit for both gifts and the annual fund gets gifts now and in perpetuity.

- b. "Creating a 'Rainy Day' Annuity": A second strategy that has worked well at some schools has been to focus on life income gifts (especially CGAs) in the years leading up to and the year of a fiftieth reunion, with a complementary request to give back the income so long as the donor does not need it. Again, the class (and the donor) will receive "credit" for the life income gift *and* the annual gift that is generated from the contributed income.
- c. Marketing new ideas through stories: Successful programs let those coming to reunions know about these ways of giving through website stories, through newsletters and magazines, and through letters sent to classmates on "my planned gift" from members of a planning committee. The more the members of the class can lead the communication about planned gifts, the better. Nothing sells like a peer relating his or her own story about what a planned gift can do.

Reunions are opportunities for colleges, universities and schools. The joy of rekindled and newly discovered friendships is a key part of reunion success, but so is the opportunity to pass along that joy to next generations through the gift planning process. Adding the joy of giving to gathering together with old friends makes the experience, both for the participants and the institution doubly memorable.