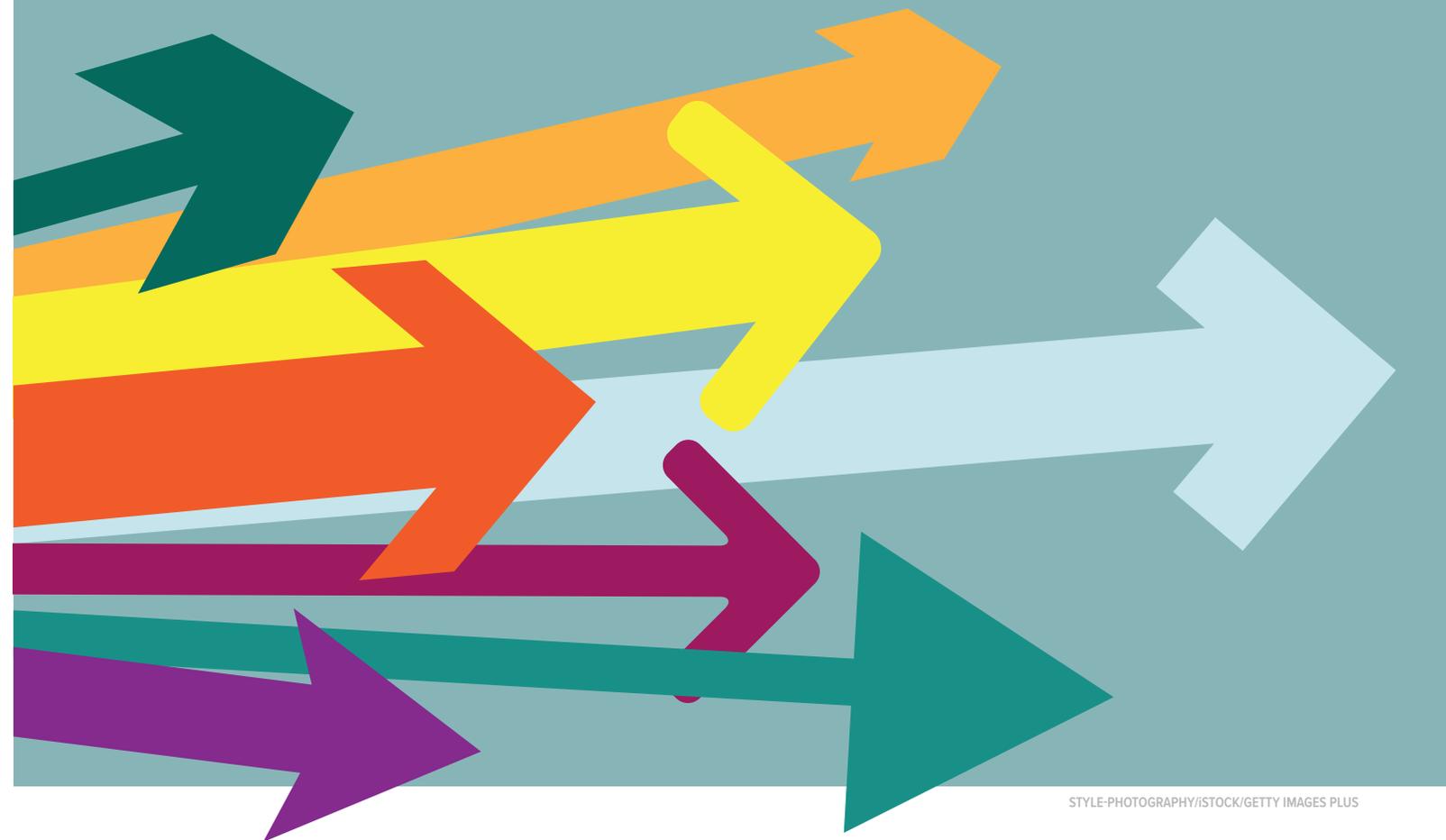




AMPLIFY ALUMNI VOICES

How institutions are rallying alumni
online, at the statehouse, and beyond

BY MEREDITH BARNETT



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AS A STUDENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON, Sarah Reyneveld saw firsthand the power of putting ideas into action. In the classroom, she explored public policy; outside the classroom, she lobbied the university's administration to keep tuition affordable.

Fast-forward 11 years (and a master's and law degree later) to today: Reyneveld is still speaking up on behalf of students—now as an alumna and chair of UW Impact, the UW Alumni Association's legislative advocacy program. She's testified twice at the Washington State Senate for higher education funding, including during the April 2019 legislative session, as lawmakers considered a proposal that would be a game-changer for Washington students. The proposed legislation would raise US\$1 billion over four years through tax revenue to effectively provide free or reduced tuition for all lower-income students attending community colleges and public institutions.

So Reyneveld took action.

"As a result of state disinvestment, the burden for paying for higher education too often falls on students and their families. We must change this," she tweeted the day she and fellow UW alumni and students met with Washington's governor and legislators to discuss the bill.

With support from education, business, and community leaders, the Workforce Education Investment Act passed in April. Reyneveld called it a great day for education: "I'm so proud to advocate for this important bill for UW, students, and our economy."

Experts say with this legislation, Washington has gone further than any U.S. state to address college affordability. And it happened, in part, because alumni were empowered to advocate for and share the value of higher education.

Alumni advocacy—or informing, empowering, and mobilizing alumni to support legislative, regulatory, or social issues—has picked up speed in the United States in the last two decades as states

have cut education funding amid rising costs. Around the globe, social upheavals and disruptions on campuses have cast an even brighter spotlight on higher education. Universities need alumni advocates more than ever to speak up on key issues and reiterate to lawmakers and the public the importance of higher education.

Here's how institutions are mobilizing alumni online, at the statehouse, and beyond, to be impact storytellers.

Alumni Advocacy's Momentum

Since the earliest days of alumni associations, graduates have served their alma maters as advocates in student recruitment and fundraising, and now they're moving into advocacy as well. Institutions' work to engage alumni as legislative advocates picked up steam in the 2000s in the United States during the recession.

Since then, the stakes have only gotten higher. Across the country, states have sliced funding for higher education by more than 24% since 2008, according to the State



TAKING A STAND: UW Impact members (left) visit the Washington State Capitol in Olympia for advocacy day in 2019. At the 2018 advocacy day (right), Suzanne Dale Estey, UW Regent Blaine Tamaki, and UW Regent Constance Rice had the chance to stand at the speaker's podium with Rep. Frank Chopp.

Higher Education Executive Officers Association. Meanwhile, since 2008, tuition at public institutions has grown at an average rate of 3% beyond inflation, according to the College Board. Put another way, since 2008, tuition has risen 35% for public four-year and two-year colleges, and 30% for private four-year colleges.

Around the globe, students have protested education funding decisions—in Canada, Gabon, and South Africa, for example, in the first half of 2019.

Lawmakers have made—and will continue to make—tough choices not only about funding education but also transportation, health care, prisons, and more, says John McArdle, director of development and government relations at Linn-Benton Community College in Albany, Oregon.

“There is a plethora of very legitimate needs and nothing has gotten cheaper,” he says. “This makes our job more important, to make sure people know what they’re investing in.”

On top of funding challenges—or related to them—public confidence in higher education has been shaken in the last decade: Only half of American adults

say they have strong confidence in it, according to a 2018 Gallup poll. Universities around the globe—including European ones faced with changes brought by globalization, Brexit, and immigration policies, as well as funding challenges—have launched campaigns to demonstrate their relevance.

“We see these headlines where legislators are cutting back on higher education and they’re being critical of it,” says Elizabeth Saxman Underwood, senior director of alumni engagement and annual giving at the University of North Carolina Asheville, who studied alumni advocacy for her 2012 doctoral research. “We need to educate our alumni now more than ever to tell the impact.”

Who better to tell that story than alumni: lawmakers’ constituents who can personally reiterate why leaders should support educational institutions.

Setting Agendas

Most institutions have legislative agendas or a strategic plan that guides the issues on which their government relations or public affairs teams act. Not every issue lends itself to alumni advocacy; savvy alumni



engagement and advocacy professionals align major institutional issues to what alumni care about and can speak about.

The road to the University of Washington's support of the Workforce Education Investment Act in April 2019 is a case study in setting an alumni advocacy

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agenda. Courtney Acitelli, who's led UW Impact since its inception in 2009, says her team does statewide surveys with an independent polling firm to gauge what alumni are passionate about.

"Our alumni consistently care about three areas: access and affordability; high-demand degrees that are going to benefit

our economy; and quality and excellence. Our alumni care very much that the quality of an education here at the University of Washington stays high," she says.

In talks about the Workforce Education Investment Act—which addresses affordability but involves a tax on local businesses—Acitelli and the UW alumni board fleshed out what proposal alumni would be willing to support.

"Alumni come from all political perspectives," she points out. "We had thoughtful, respectful, engaged conversations around this piece of legislation."

Bolstered by a joint op-ed by UW's president, the president of Microsoft, and the vice chair of the Washington community college system, the alumni board unanimously voted to support the bill. This agenda-setting process reveals a fundamental truth about alumni advocacy: It isn't about politics or choosing sides. It's about focusing on issues that matter to an institution.

For some institutions—especially community colleges—what's best for the school is wedded to regional needs. At Linn-Benton Community College, 70% of students

come from Linn and Benton counties in Oregon; most alumni stay if not locally, then in state, says John McArdle. The college's mission is to serve its community, so it relies on advisory committees and healthy relationships with business leaders to shape advocacy asks—funding for specific industry training, for example.

"It's not just what we think is important; it's what the employers who are hiring our students think is important. We're making sure that we are addressing those particular needs," he says.

The Alumni Education Business

Once an institution identifies key issues that lend themselves to alumni voices, the next step is informing alumni about them. And that's no simple task.

"We're really in the alumni education business," says Mike Fahey, managing director of state and university relations at the Wisconsin Alumni Association.

The University of Wisconsin has had to perfect its process of clarifying complex state budgets: Wisconsin is one of the top five U.S. states with the biggest decline in per-student spending between 2013 and



GATORS GO TO THE CAPITOL: The University of Florida’s annual Gator Day (left) brings supporters to the Florida State Capitol. Here, mascots Albert and Alberta meet with Sen. Rob Bradley.

GLOBAL CAMPAIGN: Jaspreet Singh, Hansika Jethnani, and Yinbo Yu participate in a University of Sheffield #WeAreInternational parliamentary event to highlight international students’ impact.

2018, according to the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association. The university briefs its alumni about advocacy with clear online messages, tele-town hall events, and in-person training.

“Don’t make the assumption that just because they are alumni, they are ready to storm the castle for us,” says Fahey. “It involves educating alumni to let them know about the issues, helping them understand why that’s important, and giving them the tools so they can speak out on our behalf.”

Thanks in part to that communication strategy, 8,000 alumni have taken action (signed a petition, participated in an event, or contacted a lawmaker) on behalf of the university during the last few years.

Simplicity is key, echoes Samantha Sexton, director of government relations at the University of Florida. On its Gators for Higher Education online platforms, UF offers videos, infographics, and digestible explanations about policy.

“Less is more,” she says. “That means giving alumni the high-level picture of what the bill is and the implications of it, versus ‘Here’s what the 120 proposals mean for us.’”

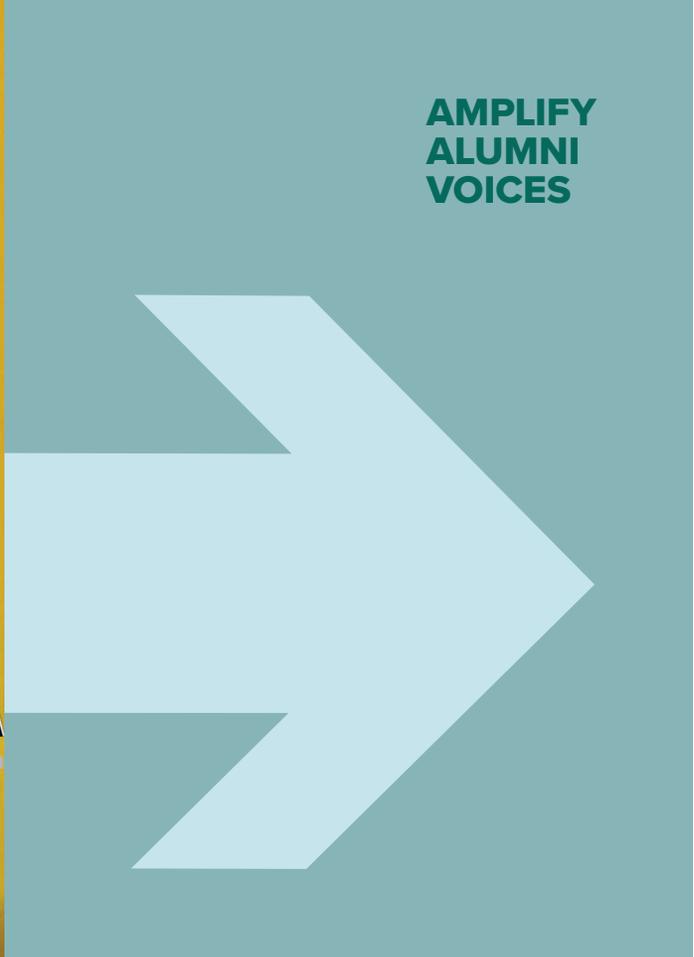
Mobilizing: Grassroots

Institutions marshal alumni for advocacy in a variety of ways—from writing letters to speaking at public events. The key, says Underwood, “is that they’re sharing a story and conveying a message.”

The two key methods are called “grassroots” and “grasstops” approaches. Grasstops advocacy involves having key stakeholders connect in person with lawmakers. Grassroots advocacy uses mass communication tools to compel supporters to send emails or letters or make calls to leaders and legislators.

Online engagement was critical for the University of Washington’s latest legislative push: UW advocates sent some 2,500 emails to legislators in spring 2019. It’s just as critical for the University of Florida, which pushes out weekly communication and calls to action during committee weeks and legislative sessions through Gators for Higher Ed—aiming for messaging that’s informative and targeted.

“Social media has been critical,” says UF’s Sexton. “But when there’s so much curated content, it’s not only



communicating at the right time but with the right message.”

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Mike Fahey, managing director of state and university relations at the Wisconsin Alumni Association

Social media is a powerful tool for public awareness campaigns about legislative or social issues, as well. When the University of Sheffield in Yorkshire, England, decided to take a stand to champion international students in 2016, it turned in part to a social grassroots approach. In the wake of the Brexit referendum in June, the university—with a diverse student body

of 28,000 from 150 countries—launched a campaign called #WeAreInternational. It called on its community to send in selfies, use the hashtag, and share campaign videos on how international students can apply for U.K. visas.

“We started this campaign because being an international institution means so much to us,” said Sheffield’s vice chancellor, Koen Lamberts. “We are incredibly grateful for the energy [international students and graduates] have brought to this community, this university, this city.”

Shared by alumni, university staff, students, and community members, #WeAreInternational was one of the most popular U.K. higher education hashtags in 2016. Today, in a survey of 67,000 prospective international students, 82% said campaigns like #WeAreInternational had positively influenced their perceptions of the U.K. as a welcoming place.

Mobilizing: Grasstops

The second dimension of alumni advocacy is known as grasstops work. Grasstops advocacy engages targeted groups of alumni who have more influential

connections with legislators or community leaders—to testify on bills, for instance, as Sarah Reyneveld did for Washington.

Many schools host legislative advocacy days at their state capitals or national capital. Alumni meet with legislators or the lawmakers’ staff for face-to-face policy discussions. Often, these involve students and donors, too; the University of Florida even brings its Gator mascots.

Other grasstops opportunities include in-person advocacy training, socials, or community events. Linn-Benton Community College regularly offers to host town hall meetings with Oregon lawmakers; one with Sen. Ron Wyden drew 1,600 community attendees. Meanwhile, the University of Florida hosts quarterly Orange & Blue Plate Luncheons for alumni and local leaders to connect and explore the university’s priorities and research.

The University of Wisconsin serves up in-person engagement with a sweet twist. Faced with anti-higher-education sentiment in the state three years ago, the university launched a summer awareness tour with a retrofitted 1957 ice cream truck—appropriate for the institution that launched

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KEY CONVERSATIONS: University of Wisconsin alumni advocates (left) join UW-Madison Vice Chancellor for University Relations Charlie Hoslet in a meeting with Rep. Mark Pocan's staff during the 2019 UW-Madison Day in Washington, D.C.

CHAMPIONS FOR EDUCATION: Representatives from all 17 Oregon community colleges (right) advocate collectively on the steps of the Oregon State Capitol in Salem.

America's first dairy school. The truck tours the state every summer, handing out free ice cream along with games, trivia, and key messages about the university.

"It's busting myths about the university," says Wisconsin's Fahey. The truck helps the university and alumni association connect directly with community members and alumni. "It's one of a variety of ways to get out and be visible in the state."

Measuring Impact

In her research, Underwood found that grassroots advocacy was perceived by government relations professionals to be more impactful. But for alumni advocacy, both methods work in tandem.

"In an in-person conversation, you're able to have the most influence and be the most persuasive. The same is true in fundraising: Your results tend to be higher when you have that face-to-face interaction," she says. "We just don't have time to do that as much, so you employ your mass communication efforts more often."

But what does that impact look like? Sometimes, the results of advocacy work in higher education are tangible, as was

the case for the University of Washington: A law is passed (or not passed), a budget proposal is nixed, or funding for a new science center is approved. Sometimes, the wins are incremental: A specific step in a budget process moves forward, for instance.

Equipped to tell stories of life-changing research, civic good, and community impact, alumni have great power.

Often the work is ongoing. The University of Sheffield's #WeAreInternational campaign hosted two in-person events with lawmakers—but it says the work to create a welcoming atmosphere in higher education for international students continues. Alumni advocacy can be a process that yields results in the long run—especially for shaping public perceptions. The University of Wisconsin is a case study for that.



“In our state, we’ve really worked to turn the tide around the feeling of the university,” says Wisconsin’s Fahey. “The appreciation for the university has shifted to the positive in the last couple years here.”

Partly behind the sea change? Alumni advocacy and the collaborative work on campus of sharing impact messages, he says.

What characterizes alumni advocacy at any institution, anywhere in the world, is this: stories and real experiences. These are what give advocacy power and resonance.

In 2019, Oregon’s 17 community colleges collectively lobbied the state legislature for an additional \$70 million for career and technical education programs. That would allow colleges to double the number of graduates in fields like welding, electronics, and manufacturing. Linn-Benton’s McArdle says it was his job to offer those statistics to lawmakers. But alumni put a face to those numbers and give them life.

“Just last week, a legislator said to me, ‘I like it when you bring [students, alumni, and community members] to my office because it’s a breath of fresh air.

They talk about how to move forward and how we can do good things,’” he says. “A veteran who’s back from Iraq, a single parent, a first-generation graduate: Those are the kinds of stories that legislators like to hear. They like to see people who are making a difference.”

The Future of Alumni Advocacy

As colleges and universities work to address affordability and grapple with political and social changes, alumni advocacy is poised to become more vital. Millennials and Generation Z hold interesting promise for alumni advocacy: They’ve grown up with the concept of engaging in advocacy, says UW’s Acitelli.

“The idea of advocating for higher education when it’s so close to their most recent experience is appealing to them. We will often get young alumni who care deeply about the university, who are used to activism and aren’t afraid to stand up and use their voice,” she says.

Take, for instance, the April 2019 walk-out by students from 600 schools in Canada protesting proposed education cuts, or U.S. graduate students organizing in 2017

to object to proposed federal tax increases. The challenge for alumni relations professionals will be aligning young graduates’ passions with institutional priorities.

Alumni engagement and advocacy go hand in hand. It’s a dimension of advancement that can deepen graduates’ connections to an institution, says Acitelli, and offer them an avenue to give back and support students.

Alumni voices can sound the call for funding and policies that help students thrive while reinforcing higher education as a force for good. Using alumni voices to convey this broader impact entails setting an agenda they value, arming them with clear messaging, and mobilizing them strategically. Equipped to tell stories of life-changing research, civic good, and community impact, alumni have great power.

Or, as John McArdle puts it: “Victories go to people who are engaged—the ones who show up who share what’s important.” ■

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