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Alumni Commitment: Exploring the Process of Transition From Participants to Donors

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ALUMNI COMMITMENT: EXPLORING THE PROCESS
OF TRANSITION FROM PARTICIPANTS TO DONORS

by

TINA J. SILLER

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of the University of the Incarnate Word
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF THE INCARNATE WORD

December 2016

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God is the source of my being, the creator of my purpose, and the foundation of my existence. Without Him, none of this would have been possible. By His continued grace, He has sustained me every step of the way throughout this arduous but meaningful journey. Thank you, Lord, for the strength, fortitude, and faith necessary to finish this race. Continue to guide me according to your will.

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DEDICATION

Grandma, mi madre te quiero tanto, I honor and dedicate my greatest achievement to you. You were the wind beneath my wings and continue to be. You would always say the best is yet to come ... it has come. By God's grace and strength, and your sacrifices, unconditional love, prayers, and support, we have finished the race. Until I see you again, I love you.

ALUMNI COMMITMENT: EXPLORING THE PROCESS OF TRANSITION FROM PARTICIPANTS TO DONORS

Tina J. Siller, PhD

University of the Incarnate Word, 2016

Traditionally, the mission and values of institutions of higher education tend to be positioned around nurturing students to realize their full potential. This includes growing students holistically as whole people, through their academic, social, and emotional interactions while enrolled. Through this focus, institutions hope to connect with students and build an emotional connection or affiliation that will last beyond the student years and into the alumni years. Alumni play a pivotal role in institutional advancement in that they serve as sources of support through their active participation, networking representation, serving as community liaisons, and their charitable contributions. The 2 most essential aspects representative of alumni commitment are their participation and donation. The 4 main characteristics that influence alumni participation and donorship include capacity, student experience, alumni experience, and the motivation to donate.

Alumni relations departments are challenged with effectively identifying how to encourage alumni not only to participate in alumni-sponsored events, but additionally to donate as well. A qualitative research approach with constructivist grounded theory research design was utilized to gain insight into the processes associated with alumni organizations identifying effective strategies that encourage increased alumni affiliation. The aim of this study was to explore and obtain an understanding of the change that occurs when alumni transition from

participants to donors. The significance of this study is that it allows institutions a more substantial view of the intrinsic aspects associated with alumni participation and donation. This study offers various factors for consideration that would assist alumni relations departments in better connecting with students and alumni in a more meaningful manner.

The study's results led to the generation of the Theory of Alumni Transitional Donation, which revealed the internal and external transitional processes that occur as alumni transition from participants to donors. The internal transitional process includes the institutional community setting with which alumni surround themselves, the shift in understanding they experience because of their interactions within their community settings, the lenses that alumni use to view these interactions, the transitional growth aspect through which they go, and lastly the perceived benefit they attach to these social interactions and experiences. The external transitional process includes institutional opportunities for volunteerism, participation, and donation. Recommendations for future research were also provided. Results from this study encourage that alumni continue, as a lifelong process, to foster the relationship and maintain the connections with their alma maters as something mutually beneficial.

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Chapter 1: Alumni Commitment through Participation and Donation

Context of the Study

Institutions of higher education traditionally serve their student population not only by focusing on their academic, but also their social and personal growth as well. They continue to serve this population past graduation as students become alumni of the institution. This service is provided through the alumni relations department in the form of organizing events that connect alumni and their families with their alma mater. Institutions are faced with the continued challenge of increased operational costs that translate directly to increased tuition costs on families. Therefore, institutions are turning to sources of private funding in order to obtain funds that will cover these costs and deliver programs that were previously covered through tuition, state support, and federal assistance (Elliott, 2006). Institutions are increasingly turning to their alumni demographic for private funding contributions. Freeland, Spenner, and McCalmon (2015) mentioned that alumni donations signify one of the largest sources of voluntary private support for higher education, with a reported 26% contribution value in 2009. This is additionally supported by McDearmon and Shirley (2009), in that institutions of higher education are increasingly dependent on donations from alumni to be able effectively to maintain operational expenses for current students. As such, academic institutions are relying on their alumni relations departments to bridge the relations between institution and alumni.

Alumni relations efforts are aimed at promoting alumni participation at various alumni- or institutionally sponsored programs and events. The hope is that increased participation will lead to increased institutional affiliation, which will, in turn, lead to monetary donations from the alumni demographic. Alumni participation is characterized as

students who have graduated from an institution and are committed to giving back to their alma mater through volunteerism, participation at alumni-sponsored events, attending athletic events, and charitable giving (Weerts & Ronca, 2008).

Alumni who donate charitably back to their institution are known as alumni donors. Research on alumni donorship has presented that there is no one single factor that determines alumni donor tendencies. Instead, these tendencies are a result of many factors, especially those that occur interpersonally and between alumni and their institution (Wastyn, 2009). Research has also provided that certain attributes lead to increased alumni donor tendencies, which include the college experience, alumni experience, and motivation to give. A lot of the responsibility of connecting graduates with their institution actually lies on the institution itself. Representative of the college experience, institutions are responsible for providing competitive academic programs, opportunities for social engagement, and instilling in students the notion of community engagement. Representative of the alumni experience, institutions are responsible for providing alumni with opportunities to re-engage the institution through alumni-sponsored events, athletic events, and again, community engagement opportunities. Elliott (2006) promoted the notion of the institution being responsible for the growth of its students and alumni:

Right practice in higher education involves concern about three dimensions of the campus experience, all of which must be addressed in appropriate ways by any college or university. These three functions, for which the term “responsibilities” is more appropriate are: (1) the responsibility of the college or university for the identification, maturation, and enrichment of selfhood; (2) the responsibility of the college or university for the discovery/construction, extension, and dissemination of knowledge and culture; and (3) the responsibility of the college or university for the well-being of society. (p. 23)

As institutions are responsible for providing these learning opportunities, both academic and nonacademic, students and alumni are responsible for maintaining this

relationship too. This is done by actively engaging in these experiences for all they have to offer. Essentially, alumni donorship is a transactional process that requires the participation of both parties (Wastyn, 2009). The impressions that are experienced throughout the student and alumni years allow for institutional affiliation to be developed. This institutional affiliation is the “strong emotional connection of alumni to the alma mater can be a strong variable predictive of giving” (Tsao & Coll, 2005, p. 383). This is where alumni relations departments are responsible for bridging the connections between alumni and institution.

Experiences attained as students and alumni are key in developing this connection. More precisely, educational experiences that were transformational in nature are important and contribute to these strengthened relationships (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001). Since maintaining institutional affiliation is a continual process, so are institutional efforts to solicit funds from alumni as well. Alumni giving is determined mainly by institutional characteristics, student characteristics, and the institutional efforts necessary successfully to solicit alumni funding (Baade & Sundberg, 1996). This process requires an institution-wide cross-departmental collaboration to guarantee the success of students, who will, in turn, be more willing to participate and give back as alumni.

Statement of the Problem

Universities in the United States are challenged with identifying effective strategies that connect alumni with their academic institutions post-graduation. Many institutions have identified the need to be involved with students during the college years in order to build the institutional affiliation at the early stages of the student experience. It is during challenging economic times that institutions turn to sharing resources among departments

to meet institutional goals (Rissmeyer, 2010). This cross-departmental strategy has proven to be both necessary and challenging.

One way that alumni relations departments maintain their connection with alumni is through alumni-sponsored programs and events. Alumni relations staff are challenged with identifying and organizing fun and meaningful events in which alumni can participate. This challenge is associated with the different alumni subsets present within alumni associations. Some of the alumni subsets include young alumni, older alumni, single alumni, and alumni with families. The challenge lies with organizing events that appeal to all alumni subsets. Increased donative tendencies are linked with alumni satisfaction by still being involved in institutional activities (McDearmon & Shirley, 2009). Alumni want to feel that they are a part of their alma mater, and alumni relations must make this connection happen among the various alumni subsets.

With the decrease of state and federal support, institutions are relying more on alumni donations for sustainability. More specifically, institutional leadership is confronted with the need for additional funding sources while facing increased public resistance toward raising tuition and fees (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001). Through the continued efforts of alumni relations departments, institutions are attempting to meet this challenge by developing successful strategies for increasing alumni participation and donation. An institution's ability to establish lasting relationships with students and alumni serves as an opportunity to produce and maintain vital revenue streams. As it is important for alumni to participate in their alumni association in order to maintain the connection to their alma mater, it is of even greater importance for alumni charitably to give back to their institutions as well. Therefore, alumni relations departments are challenged with effectively

identifying how to encourage alumni not only to participate in alumni-sponsored events, but additionally to donate.

Furthermore, institutions are challenged with meeting student and alumni expectations in relation to the marketability of their academic experience and degree. The goal of obtaining a college degree is to be well prepared with the knowledge and skills necessary to enter the workforce upon graduation. Students who actively engage their academic experience by participating in various organizations, internships, networking, and volunteer opportunities have the expectation that this will lead to more favorable outcomes post-graduation. With the understanding that a degree impacts social mobility and provides occupational alternatives, students and alumni want to ensure that their educational investment yields long-term gains (Johnson, 2004). This notion of educational return on investment is imperative for encouraging future alumni donorship.

There are existing studies on alumni participation and donorship. Studies conducted by alumni researchers Weerts and Ronca (2007, 2008, 2009), McDearmon and Shirley (2009), and McDearmon (2010, 2013) provide insight into the importance of alumni participation and how it relates to alumni donorship. However, this is mainly from the quantitative research paradigm. Current research on alumni participation and philanthropic tendencies is largely based on quantitative methods that disperse surveys to an increased sample size. “The vast majority of the philanthropic literature is based on large-scale quantitative surveys and does not focus on how individuals are encouraged to participate in donative and prosocial behaviors” (Drezner, 2009, p. 152). Although a majority of alumni research is conducted quantitatively, qualitative research provides an intrinsic aspect lacking in the quantitative research. Qualitative methodology allows researchers to gain

insight into the thoughts and feelings of participants in a manner that derives information from the word data itself (McDearmon, 2010). Although quantitative research is effective in identifying numerical data, it misses the intrinsic aspect that qualitative research is better able to provide. An example of this includes the studies by McDearmon and Shirley (2009) and McDearmon (2010) in which the initial study was conducted quantitatively and then the subsequent study was conducted qualitatively so as to provide the most in-depth results that were supported by both numerical and word data. Therefore, there is room for qualitative researchers to provide a different view pertinent to alumni research.

Research that was identified for this study provided useful information confirming that alumni, with increased participation, tend to donate back to their alma mater. However, the research fell short as to a detailed description of why this occurs. There is minimal information as to what happens during the transition from alumni participants to alumni donors. More specifically, the depth of meaning associated with alumni experiences and interactions with their alma mater is missing.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory qualitative study was to gain an understanding of how alumni personify their commitment to their institution by participating in alumni-sponsored events and decide additionally to support their institution through financial donations. Using interviews rich in personal narrative descriptions of the participants' experiences, the study captured the meaning, understanding, and importance that participants place on subjectively experiencing those interactions. The aim of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the process that occurred when alumni transition from participants to donors.

Research Questions

In relation to the purpose of this study, there was one primary research question with four subset questions. The primary research question that this study aimed to answer was: How can universities develop alumni outreach initiatives to elicit effective and meaningful perception among alumni? The four subset questions that supported the primary question were as follows:

- How do alumni relations departments identify effective strategies that promote alumni affiliation?
- How do alumni create meaning and understanding of their experiences while participating in alumni-sponsored events?
- How does alumni perception of their participation in alumni-sponsored events lead to alumni donorship?
- How does alumni perception of their experiences as a student and graduate of the institution affect their decision to engage?

Theoretical Framework

The two theories used to support this study were social exchange theory and expectancy theory. These models emphasize the social exchanges and expectations associated with the alumni-institution relationship. More specifically, they help us better understand how these exchanges and expectations influence the willingness of alumni actively to participate in their alumni association and give back to their institution. By focusing on emotional and motivational aspects of alumni donorship, these models provided insight on how institutions can better connect with and engage their current and past students.

Social exchange theory. Social exchange theory is built on the importance placed on relationships and their social interactions, as well as that relationships are composed of “give and take” exchanges that focus on self-interest and interdependence among partners (Lawler & Thye, 1999; Weerts & Ronca, 2007). This theory supports increased giving as a result of building relationships. Alumni strengthen their relationships with their alma maters based on perceptions of their experiences associated with that institution (Skari, 2014). When alumni have positive experiences, they will be more inclined to give back or exchange their support for what they took away from the institution. When alumni have negative experiences, they will be less likely to make any exchanges with the university.

The strength of the alumni-institution relationship is reflective of the give and take dynamics of exchanges that occur between the two. “Social exchanges depend on unspecified obligations. As a result, returns are not subject to bargaining, but rather are left to the discretion of the person making the returns” (Nord, 1969, p. 174). Alumni seek returns, for what they invested while enrolled as students, from institutions in the form of professional preparedness, career advancement, and financial success for the time, money, and experience. Institutions seek returns in the form of donorship, participation, and support from their alumni for providing academic experience opportunities, prominent scholars, and intellectual professionals. Therefore, social exchange theory cultivates the institution’s efforts of connecting with alumni so as to build on relationships and exchanges. Another aspect of returns and exchanges is the notion of reciprocity or exchange orientation. Alumni need to believe that their donation is an act of reciprocation for something already received. Levels of reciprocity tend to differ among alumni, which essentially have an influence on their willingness to participate and give back. Alumni who

exhibit high exchange orientation are more likely to give back than those with low exchange orientation (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

With the emphasis of social exchange theory mainly being focused on the relationships between two or more parties, the emotional connections associated with these relationships are of even greater importance. Lawler and Thye (1999) provided that emotions had a central role in social exchange dynamics by continually entering and pervading the social exchange processes between members of a relationship. In reference to that study, the emotional connections made by alumni to their institution during their student years greatly determined their willingness to associate with their institution when no longer a student. Institutions tend to implement this theory operationally by cultivating efforts that focus on making connections and building relationships with students, alumni, and members of the surrounding community (Skari, 2014). This application of organizational strategy proves effective when pursuing related exchanges between the institution and its donors. Prosocial behavior has been considered as being a learned behavior that can be encouraged through external interactions, therefore the act of alumni participation and donations can be encouraged among alumni (Drezner, 2009). This leads to the notion that alumni relations departments can help encourage a behavior among alumni that will promote not only their active engagement but donations as well.

While making the connection between emotion and social exchange, Lawler and Thye (1999) identified six approaches to study emotion. They included the cultural-normative approach, structural-relational approach, sensory-informational approach, social-cognitive approach, social-attribution approach, and social-formations approach. Of the six approaches, the social-formation approach pertained the most to this study. It provides that

emotions are vital to the processes associated with establishing and maintaining the significance of the relationship and group. This approach identifies how emotions and feelings that social exchanges generate help foster cohesion and solidarity, as seen through increased interdependence, within social units (Lawler & Thye, 1999). Relationships are based on the interdependence of the members involved. Students rely on the institution to provide a quality education and experience that will prepare them for professional success after they graduate. Institutions rely on alumni to give back to the institution in the form of alumni participation and financial support. Lawler and Thye (1999) mentioned the following:

Mutual dependencies (or interdependencies) produce joint activities which, in turn, generate positive/negative emotions or feelings; to the extent that these emotions are attributed to the relevant social unit, they produce stronger/weaker individual-collective ties, and those groups memberships command more/less cooperation and compliance. (pp. 237–238)

These mutual dependencies are constantly being evaluated by at least one member as to whether they will continue to exist. This evaluation is based on the emotions that are tied to the interactions. Social exchange theory informs that relationships develop over time into trusting, loyal, and mutual commitments where associated interactions are interdependent and contingent on the actions of all members involved (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

For many alumni, it may have been years since they graduated from their institution, and their emotional ties to that institution may weaken over time. Therefore, alumni departments must continually attempt to engage their alumni through various means necessary. These engagement efforts encourage increased interpersonal attachment and commitment among alumni with their institution. This, in turn, promotes repeated

exchanges among the same partners over time (Cook & Rice, 2003). Alumni with weaker emotional ties continually evaluate whether or not they want to be an active part of their institution. This tends to be based on the costs and benefits associated with their participation and previous experiences. Weerts and Ronca (2008) mentioned that as social exchange theory was seen as a give and take relationship, it was also one based on the fact that costs and benefits determine whether a relationship would continue. This cost-benefit relationship is considered to be an indirect relationship. For example, the cost of donating back to the institution is based on the benefit that alumni believe they received while students. If their experience was positive and their benefit was perceived high, then they view the cost as low and will be more willing to donate. If their experience was negative and their benefit was perceived low, then they view the cost as high and will be less willing to donate.

Expectancy theory. Expectancy theory is a motivation theory derived from the research of behaviorist Victor Vroom. In this case, motivation is based on valence, instrumentality, and expectancy. Motivation is described as the process that directs choices among available alternative forms of voluntary activity (Vroom, 1964). Valence is the psychological value that is attached to the perceived outcome or the personal responsibility of donating. Instrumentality is the belief that certain behaviors influence outcomes or that giving back will help the institution achieve a certain outcome. Expectancy is the notion that specific actions are followed by specific outcomes or that alumni are willing and able to give back to their institution (Shapira, 1976; Weerts & Ronca, 2008). Various terms are used synonymously with the term valence, some of which include preference, incentive, attitude, and expected utility (Vroom, 1964). All of these terms represent the affective

bearings that are placed by individuals on the perceived outcomes. Essentially, expectancy theory provides that behavior is motivated by the expectations that individuals have attached to specific actions that will lead to intrinsically or extrinsically positive and meaningful results (Kopf, 1992). As students and graduates of the institution, alumni have attached certain importance to perceived outcomes they expected to gain from attending the institution. Vroom (1964) defined expectancy as a belief in the likelihood that a particular act would lead to a particular outcome. Value and satisfaction for time and money spent obtaining an education is of great importance for both students and alumni (Gallo & Hubschman, 2003).

In conjunction with student expectations, the institution also has certain expectations of its alumni as well. The institution provides resources to benefit the current student population that will help graduate students, who will hopefully provide donations that will benefit future student populations. There are two propositions associated with Vroom's model in order for these expectations to be met. First, valence must be assigned to the expected outcomes of a behavior. Second, individuals must determine their motivation to engage in a particular behavior (Shapira, 1976). Motivation to engage in a certain behavior is largely based on the anticipated satisfaction of the outcome. Alumni donor expectations are shaped by their previous experiences, which are taken into consideration when determining whether it is worth getting involved (Weerts & Ronca, 2008). Therefore, in order to increase participation and donation, alumni must be motivated to be engaged with their alma mater post-graduation.

In relation to this study, alumni expected a certain outcome from their academic and alumni experiences that in turn determines their inclination to give back to their institution.

This is supported in that "... expectancy theory argues that alumni have expectations about future events and that their giving and volunteer behavior reflects these expectations" (Weerts & Ronca, 2007, p. 22). When alumni expectations are met, based on their past student and alumni experiences, they will be more engaged with their alma mater. Therefore, when alumni associations solicit donations from their alumni base, the return response will be grounded on whether it has been worthwhile for alumni to support and give back financially to their institution (Wang & Ashcraft, 2014). If alumni expectations are met, based on those previous experiences, then they will be more willing to give back in the form of donations. If alumni expectations are not met, then they will be less willing to donate. For alumni to make charitable contributions, it must be worthwhile for them to do so.

Social exchange and expectancy theories were chosen for this study in order better to provide a theoretical perspective that supports the exchanges that occur when alumni departments provide meaningful events and alumni decide to donate as a result of their experiences at these events. This perspective reinforces the idea that institutional development through the alumni association must be focused on authentically developing alumni relationships (Gallo & Hubschman, 2003). It is in faithfully nurturing these relationships that alumni feel emotionally attached to social exchanges that take place with their academic institution.

Conceptual Framework

As this study sought to understand the phenomena that occurs when alumni transition from participants to donors, this study focused on alumni commitment made tangible in the form of participation and donorship tendencies. Therefore, the three levels

of interest included commitment (level 1), participation (level 2), and donorship (level 3). There are various ways alumni can put into practice their commitment to an institution. For the aim of this study, the specific aspect of participation through donation was examined in more detail. The most widely recognized and measured form of alumni participation is through financial contributions or donations (Gaier, 2005). It is one phase simply to participate by attending alumni-sponsored events, but it is another phase to participate by donating back to the institution. Together, both help shape the alumni experience by making it more meaningful. This blending of activities not only benefits the institution, but also reaffirms the social and emotional cohesion that is experienced by alumni when giving back. Therefore, in order to strengthen these relationships, it is imperative for alumni departments to gain an understanding of emotional aspects associated with alumni giving. More specifically, the interest is in the how and the when of social interactions and exchanges that lead to construction of positive feelings and whether these feelings precede a stronger sense of attachment and affiliation to an exchange relation in the form of the alumni association (Lawler & Thye, 1999). This study focused on attachments that are created and strengthened throughout the three previously mentioned levels.

As alumni donations assist institutional advancement initiatives, the most widely recognized forms of alumni donations include cash gifts, real gifts, planned giving, and gifts-in-kind. Cash gifts are actual monetary donations; real gifts include buildings, endowments, and equipment; planned giving includes wills and trusts; and gifts-in-kind include gifts other than cash (Levine, 2008). This study will focus on alumni who are committed to the growth of their academic institution and, through participation in alumni activities, have gone a step further and donated back to their alma mater. Though there are

many sources of alumni giving, this study particularly focused on alumni who had donated cash gifts as a result of their alumni participation. This aspect of alumni donation tendencies was chosen because, although donating requires minimal effort, participating in events requires more time, energy, and effort on behalf of alumni (Gaier, 2005). Therefore this study examined how commitment was made tangible in the form of participation and donation tendencies.

Definition of Terms

Alumni refers to those who have graduated from an academic institution.

Alumni association is a formal association of graduates from an institution of higher education and is organized by an institution's alumni relations department.

Alumni affiliation is the emotional connection, organizational identification, or institutional attachment that leads alumni to participate and donate back to their academic institutions.

Alumni participation is the act of alumni attending and participating in alumni-sponsored activities and events.

Alumni donorship is the act of alumni providing charitable monetary donations to the academic institution from which they graduated.

Overview of the Research Design

A qualitative research approach with a constructivist grounded theory design was used for this study. The aim of this study was to explore and obtain an understanding of the participants' experiences associated with the process that occurs when alumni transition from participants to donors. Therefore, this design and approach was the best fit.

Qualitative research is used to understand how individuals make sense and create meaning

of their lived experiences, and to identify the phenomena that occur in these experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This study intended to discover how alumni perceived their experiences in participating in various alumni-sponsored events, how they created meaning and attachment to those experiences, and how that meaning influenced donor tendencies. In turn, that helped identify how the transition occurred. The qualitative method allows researchers to identify the constructed realities of their participants. It provides researchers an avenue to identify the existence of and to understand the complexity associated with various social phenomena that occur. This is done through a set of systematic and interpretive practices that emphasize how social interactions among individuals and groups are continually created and sustained (Hammer, 2011). Lived experience is essentially the interaction of individuals with the world around them. The interpretation of these interactions is what qualitative researchers are interested in understanding and providing a tangible voice to express.

As the qualitative research method seeks to understand the individual's interaction with the social, constructivist grounded theory builds on this and seeks to provide a general explanation that describes this interaction (Creswell, 2008). Therefore, this combination of approach and design closely aligns with the purpose of this study of seeking to understand how meaning is attached to experiences in relation to the essence of alumni participation and donation. Constructivist grounded theory looks to inquire into a social phenomenon and develop a theory or model that is explanatory in nature (Lingard, 2014). It encourages understanding and appreciation, not an explanation, of the process being studied. Explanations simply skim the superficial level of an experience, whereas understanding and appreciation dive to a deeper level of the human consciousness. Constructivist

grounded theory allows for this deeper interface to occur. This method encourages the researcher to remain close to the process being studied in order to develop theoretical concepts based on the empirical data gathered and analyzed (Charmaz, 2005). This process allows for the researcher continually to be connected with not only the data collected, but also with himself/herself as a vital instrument of the study itself.

Background of the Researcher

The researcher is naturally interested in the intrinsic aspects associated with the interactions in which we as humans participate at any given point in our lives. The researcher is interested in how we participate and perceive our relationships with our surroundings and how we interact with the world around us. The researcher is interested in knowing how we understand and sequentially attach meaning to these experiences. The researcher likes to inquire about how these experiences influence ourselves individually and socially. In the years since the researcher began pursuing her academic dreams, she has become very involved with her academic institution. The researcher's experiences as a student while enrolled in her undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs have helped shape the person she is today. These experiences, along with continued reflection, have allowed the researcher to grow and better understand who she is as a student, educator, community member, leader, friend, sister, daughter, and human being. Throughout the years and experiences, she has gained a deeper sense of who she is.

With deep connection to her alma mater, the researcher became very engaged with her alumni association. The researcher started out by attending events occasionally, which sequentially led to attending events more frequently. She found it to be a great way to stay connected to her friends, faculty, and staff, while also making new connections with other

alumni members. It allowed her an opportunity to participate in the community by volunteering with her alumni group at events. As the researcher began to participate and attend the various alumni-sponsored events, she found herself increasingly interacting with the alumni association board of directors. She then decided that she wanted to give more of her time back to her alma mater and decided to apply for a board position. The researcher was elected in 2013 and currently serves as an alumni board member. At that point, she had become so involved with her alma mater that the next step she felt she needed to take in order to give back would be to donate financially. The researcher felt that she was at a point in her personal and professional life where she could give back in that capacity.

That journey provided the researcher an opportunity to understand other alumni perspectives and to respect all that goes into the processes of alumni relations. That journey has been a humbling experience for her. It has taught her to step outside of her comfort zone and take on challenges that she did not know she could successfully accomplish. The researcher truly believes that the amazing experiences in which she has had the opportunity to participate have encouraged and helped facilitate her overall personal growth. The researcher would only hope that other students and alumni would be able to embrace their academic experience for everything it is worth and appreciate the transformational processes associated with the overall higher education experience.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is that it served to add to the body of knowledge by providing information and perspectives from alumni that support the importance of the alumni-institution relationship. Since an institution's alumni serve as an important source of funding, it is imperative to have a detailed understanding of how alumni affiliation is

developed. It is also beneficial to understand the influence that alumni perception of institutional relationships has on future alumni participation (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001). With this study, the goal was to provide alumni relations personnel with information that would assist them in developing and/or maintaining effective strategies for event programming. A better understanding of the alumni-institution relationship is important for both academic institutions and surrounding communities (Johnson, 2004). The hope was to provide institutional leaders with an insight to the importance of their roles in actively engaging both student and alumni populations.

Information from this study assisted higher education administrators with the overall goal of development and institutional advancement. Universities must identify the intrinsic reasons behind alumni being actively engaged with their alma mater (Gaier, 2005). In doing so, they are be able to implement more effective strategies for increasing participation and donation inclinations among this demographic population. The implications associated with this study allowed institutions a view of the supplementary intrinsic aspects from the alumni perspective. That insight also fostered opportunities for alumni relations staff to better connect with their students and alumni in a more meaningful manner.

A qualitative research approach with constructivist grounded theory design was utilized to gain insight into alumni's perspectives and personal experiences relating to their participation and donation to their alma mater. That design was significant in that it provided a tangible voice for the participants' experiences to be heard. It allowed alumni to tell their stories and share their experiences with others. Since a majority of existing literature is based extensively on the quantitative research design, this study provided a

different perspective to this topic. It emphasized the process related to the transition of alumni participants to alumni donors.

Limitations of the Study

There are a few limitations associated with this study. First, the researcher's personal background included being very involved with her alma mater and alumni association, which may have led to researcher bias. Second, since this was a qualitative study, the researcher relied on a small number of participants to capture the essence of this study. Third, the institution selection for this study was limited to private Catholic universities located in southwest Texas and was not expanded to include surrounding public universities. Fourth, this study included participants who had graduated with only their bachelor's degree. Lastly, although the literature was rich in quantitative studies, there was a gap in the literature pertaining to the qualitative aspects associated with the process of transition that occurs between alumni participation and donorship.

Summary

This chapter provided an introduction to the study and significant concepts associated with it. Institutions of higher education are challenged with maintaining the connection with their students post-graduation. The chapter also mentioned that the goal of this constructivist grounded theory qualitative study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the meaning associated with the evolution of alumni participants. In support of this study's objectives, social exchange and expectancy theories were introduced to identify expectations associated with exchanges that occur between alumni and their alma maters. This chapter concluded with the significance and limitations associated with this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Presented in this chapter is a brief history of higher education and the evolution of the modern day alumni association. Discussed is the importance related to higher education institutions being fully committed to their alumni and, in return, the importance of the alumni commitment to the institutional development as a whole. This chapter focuses on the four main characteristics that influence alumni participation and donorship. These characteristics include capacity, student experience, alumni experience, and the motivation to donate. Wang and Ashcraft (2014) presented that the combination of commitment, involvement, level of generosity, and sociodemographics influences alumni motivation to give back to their association. All of these components, whether individually or combined, impact alumni participation and donorship. It is important to uncover the transition that occurs from simply participating in alumni events to being motivated to donate back to an institution.

History of Higher Education

The first American institution of higher education, which was patterned after the academic systems of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, was Harvard University (New College) established in 1636 (Brubacher & Rudy, 1958). Eight other universities were established throughout the following century to become known as the Colonial Colleges, which included the College of William and Mary (1693), Yale University (Collegiate School, 1701), University of Pennsylvania (College of Philadelphia, 1740), Princeton University (College of New Jersey, 1746), Columbia University (King's College, 1754), Brown University (College of Rhode Island, 1765), Rutgers University (Queen's College, 1766), and Dartmouth College (1769) (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Since the

establishment of the first institution, the purpose of higher education has been viewed as a source that promotes understanding, democracy, and serves to promote social awareness among its students and within the community (Wilkinson, 1954). The goal of higher education should be to shape students to be enlightened citizens who will promote positive change within the community. The role of the institution is to provide a nurturance of the student in a manner that allows the student to grow not only academically, but emotionally, cognitively, socially, and civically as well. According to Lagemann and Lewis (2012), academic institutions should educate students by providing them the skills necessary to be successful in life by strengthening their values, ideals, and civic virtues. The strengthening of these attributes will encourage students to appreciate their roles as graduates of their institution and the future impact they will have in their community.

In focusing on the growth of the whole individual, the purpose of institutions is to prepare future alumni who will serve as representatives of the institution within their community. “The purpose of higher education – the pursuit (in the form of teaching, learning, inquiry, and service beyond the institution) of knowledge and truth within an ethical and democratic institution” (Budd, 2009, p. 5). Therefore, the function of higher education is to educate students into enlightened citizens by challenging preexisting ideals and beliefs in a fashion that promotes respect and an understanding of diversity and inclusion of its members. Institutions give back to their communities by being servantly responsive and thoughtfully critical in a manner that provides opportunities for students to realize more fully their educational aspirations (Shapiro, 2005). When alumni are provided the chance to learn and grow from their experiences as students, they are better able to realize their potential impact as individuals and members of society. The venue for this to

occur should be within the institutions of higher education. Elliott (2006) strengthened this notion by asserting the following:

The unique mission of higher education reflects the institution's societal role ... generally speaking, institutions of higher education promote academic values ... academic values ... promote the discovery and exchange of knowledge and ideas. In terms of academic values a better world is one where people are wiser, more knowledgeable, and more intellectually resourceful. The activities that go on in academic institutions are supposed to serve these goals. (p. 21–22)

The institutions' societal role is pivotal when discussing expectations associated with academic institutions in a context that relates to their alumni and community. This role also provides a sense of accountability that institutions should have in order to ensure that they sustain the true mission of higher education. Cascione (2003) provided that the true achievement of higher education is not simply instructing how to make a living, but revealing how to make a life worth living. This truly is the main goal of higher education. When its recipients can intrinsically benefit from their academic experience, higher education has succeeded in making an effective impact on society.

History of the Alumni Association

While Harvard is credited with being the first formal institution of American higher education, Yale was the first to systematize its annual graduating classes starting in 1792 (Marshall, 2009). However, Williams College was the first to establish the modern day alumni association, in 1821, with the following universities subsequently establishing their alumni associations: Princeton, Miami, Virginia, Oberlin, Denison, Harvard, Amherst, Brown, Yale, and Michigan; with Elmira College establishing the first alumnae association in 1867 (Sailor, 1930). Over a one hundred-year period, institutions transitioned from being founded with the purpose of educating individuals in a formal academic setting slowly to incorporating those who graduated from the institution.

According to Wilkinson (1954), the development of alumni relations occurred during three periods: (1) early organization from 1865 to 1925, (2) reorganization period from 1925 to 1945, and (3) present period beginning in 1945. Alumni relations during the initial period was characterized simply by annual meetings at commencement. The second period brought the presence of associations working to organize annual fees, membership rolls, and alumni publications. In the last and current period, alumni offices were formally organized on campus settings with the initiation of annual programs. The earliest identified organizations for professional alumni personnel were the Association of Alumni Secretaries (1913), the Alumni Magazines Associated (1918), and the Association of Alumni Funds (1925), which combined to form the American Alumni Council (1927). The goals of this newly formed council were to inspire individual institutional endeavors, strengthen the collective relations among members, interchange common ideas, encourage professional pride in alumni efforts, and promote the consciousness of college-trained citizens (Sailor, 1930). This is fundamentally the initiation and transformation of the modern day alumni association.

Today, the alumni relations department is one of the most important departments within an academic institution. This department further develops opportunities among students who have graduated and have become alumni of the institution. This department is essentially responsible for connecting past students with current and future students. Alumni departments are relied upon to build life-long relationships with alumni while maintaining the history and traditions that help protect the institution's past and future (Newman & Petresko, 2011). Across the United States, academic institutions are turning to their alumni departments for assistance with recruitment, orientation, athletic, retention,

and advancement initiatives. Alumni departments assist with recruitment by making the connections with alumni who can refer potential students to the university. Universities have identified the need to include alumni in their orientation programming, since it provides new students and their families an opportunity to gain some insight of the student experience from the alumni perspective. Orientations serve as an opportunity to introduce students and families to the importance of being engaged with the institution during and after the college years. “Communicating the notion of a lifelong affiliation with the institution early in a student’s matriculation is one step in the philanthropic process for alumni” (Rissmeyer, 2010, p. 20). The presence of alumni relations, along with the active engagement of new and current students at various student events, promotes the students’ awareness and understanding that they are beneficiaries of another’s generosity while simultaneously introducing them to philanthropic role models (Cascione, 2003). This in turn will allow students to identify their academic benefit as being a result of another’s financial donation to the institution, hopefully continuing the giving cycle.

Institutions are also implementing ways to engage current students with alumni activities so as to inspire students to be active alumni members when they graduate. When students are involved in alumni and fundraising activities, this builds a community of participation that fosters active alumni support post-graduation (Drezner, 2011). With accreditation and ranking systems now including alumni participation as a standard, alumni and athletic programs are collaboratively working in a manner that will increase alumni participation at athletic events. Retention initiatives place importance on alumni presence as being an important aspect of retaining current students. Due to the growing impact that alumni relations departments have on effective institutional advancement, it is imperative

to understand the institutional growth potential associated with alumni participation and donation. For this reason, Singer and Hughey (2002) argued that alumni associations were relatively inexpensive yet highly effective in sharing institutional traditions with students while fostering alumni interactions. In this way, the alumni association attempts to connect past and present students through the commonality of their academic institution.

Importance of Institutional Commitment

As funding resources continue to be a concern, institutional departments are having to collaborate strategically with each other. “Institutional strategic plans reflect increased collaboration in commonly shared goals and objectives promoting the advancement of the institution” (Rissmeyer, 2010, p. 19). It is important for institutions to be able to connect alumni with current students, and this is done through increased institutional commitment to promote cross-departmental collaborations. Various departments such as athletics, campus life, career services, affinity groups, campus ministry, and alumni relations are working together to build a positive student experience. Institutions have become much more aware of the benefits related to the integration of institutional objectives as they relate to the cooperation of academic affairs, student affairs, and alumni relations (Singer & Hughey, 2002). This cross collaboration encompasses the three main institutional frames and encourages increased student and alumni development in a manner more profound than when performed individually. Collaborating with student affairs is especially pivotal in bridging the gap between students and alumni. This collaboration of programs and events allows students, faculty, staff, and alumni to build and strengthen their institutional pride and loyalty (Rissmeyer, 2010). Institutional pride and loyalty develop as students determine

how alumni view their institution and academic experience and their willingness to participate and give back to their institution in the years to come.

Another aspect that influences participation and donor tendencies is the university's mission and values. When alumni's values align with those of the university's, they will be more willing to give back to their institution. Cascione (2003) mentioned that it was how donors interpreted the university's mission that impacted their motivation and philanthropic behavior in giving back to that institution. Institutions are responsible for implementing the university's mission in a manner that not only grows the university but mainly the students. Therefore, alumni associations are responsible for reinforcing the institution's long-lasting mission and values among students and alumni from one generation to the next (Singer & Hughey, 2002). It is this implementation that allows the university to connect with its students, alumni, and community. The alignment of institutional and personal values is what allows this connection to exist in the first place. Alumni who have a strong sense and affinity for the institution's mission are more empathetic to supporting the achievement of institutional goals (Singer & Hughey, 2002). Alumni with this understanding are more willing to participate in various capacities that include alumni association, student success, or athletic-sponsored events, as well as by providing monetary donations. From an institutional perspective, there are certain essential criteria associated with determining the success of alumni relations fundraising endeavors. In Table 1, Elliot (2006) provided a list of the attributing factors that inspired alumni to donate to their alma mater.

As much as participation and donation depend on the intrinsic aspects of the alumni, external aspects evidenced within the institution are of comparable importance. "The experience students have will influence their attitudes toward the institution as

alumni. In addition, donations from current alumni are influenced at least in part by the current circumstances of the school” (Baade & Sundberg, 1996, p. 80). When academic institutions are committed to their students and alumni, they will see a greater return of interest from those who have graduated. In fostering student and alumni connections, academic institutions, specifically through the work of the alumni relations departments, shape the future of their academic and surrounding communities.

Table 1

Key Prerequisites for Sustained Fund Raising in Institutions of Higher Education

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1. Leadership (of president, trustees, deans, volunteers, staff, and other friends). This prerequisite subsumes a host of related variables such as willingness/desire to be involved in fund raising, skill/ability/aptitude in fund raising (salesmanship), effort, commitment, integrity, effective management of the institution, fiscal viability/vitality of the institution, effective stewardship of resources, momentum, effective planning donor confidence, and appropriate gratitude and recognition for earlier donations.
 2. Financial capacity/capability of constituency (wealth of donor base).
 3. Clarity and strength of institutional mission.
 4. Personal relationship between donors and a representative of the institution.
 5. Involvement of donors in the life of the institution.
 6. Prestige/reputation/image (perceived quality and strength of academic programs).
 7. History/age/maturity/consistency/tradition of both the institution and the advancement program. This prerequisite includes, for example, breadth and scope of academic programs, appropriate policies and support structures, adequate budgets and staff, established habits and patterns of giving, and continuity from one president to the next, one chief development officer to the next, and one year to the next in terms of overall quality.
 8. Informed and committed constituency (effective program of frequent, two-way communication between institution and donors).
 9. Donor predisposition to give (philanthropic impulse in society). While this prerequisite refers more generally to the religious heritage of the nation and the fact that many donors regularly attend religious worship services, it also acknowledges that there are regional as well as community variations in willingness to give, capacity to give, and established traditions of philanthropy.
 10. Continued public confidence in (the value and integrity of) higher education as well as the nonprofit sector generally.
 11. State of the economy/nation.
 12. Tax policy (federal and state laws encouraging or discouraging philanthropy).
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Importance of Alumni Commitment

Higher education is an expensive endeavor, both for the institution and the student. There was a time when tuition paid by students was sufficient to cover institutional operating costs. Unfortunately, that is no longer the case in today's world of higher education, and research on alumni-based funding as a source of financial support has increased over the last few years. Higher education is heavily subsidized by alumni donations, in that approximately one quarter of related costs are covered by endowments and donations (Dvorak & Toubman, 2013). Although there are various sources of financial support received by institutions, alumni donations in the form of private gifts are a major component. According to Skari (2014), both public and private higher education institutions received \$30.3 billion in private giving in 2011. Therefore, it is imperative for institutions to cultivate the alumni-institution relationship (Levine, 2008). As the declination of federal, state, local, and endowment support for institutions continues, cultivating this relationship is of great importance.

In cultivating this relationship, institutions need to inform alumni that their participation and financial contributions benefit students and the institution as evidenced in the various capacities that include scholarship, endowment, building, and athletics funds (Williams, 1934). Alumni organizations not only need to build and maintain relationships, but they need to clarify the significance associated with alumni being committed to the continued development of their institution. Quigley, Bingham, and Murray (2002) mention that alumni are more willing to make charitable donations back to their institution when they have an understanding of how their contributions will be used. In connecting with alumni, it's important to keep them aware of the current objectives that the institution is

aiming to achieve. Therefore, institutional goals should include increasing alumni support as part of their strategic initiatives in generating the revenue streams necessary for sustaining competitive academic programs and continued institutional growth (Kelleher, 2011; McDearmon, 2013; Newman & Petresko, 2011; Weerts & Ronca, 2008). The hope with increased alumni support and competitive programs is that students and future alumni would recognize their role in successfully sustaining the progress previously implemented. Alumni support through participation and donation can be viewed as a cyclical process in that participation leads to donation and donation leads back to increased participation. Singer and Hughey (2002) provided that alumni who financially contributed to their alma mater were more likely to be involved in various capacities relating to institutionally sponsored events. Therefore, alumni donations may generate a sense of interest among alumni in actively participating in their institution's success.

Alumni are integral in promoting institutional advancement in various ways other than through financial participation. Alumni not only give back to their institution, but to the community as well. They are the face of the institution within the community and are therefore a key asset for the advancement of institutional goals. Alumni are important because they are an institution's most loyal supporters, they provide word of mouth advertising to their various networks, they are great role models for current students, they have the ability to assist current students embarking on their professional paths, and essentially they are the institution's ambassadors to the community (Council for Advancement and Support of Education, n.d.). Alumni are vital because of their role in spreading the institution's mission within the context of their daily interactions. When alumni reconnect and give back, they leave their legacy by providing critical resources that

maintain the mission of promoting access to higher education for current and future students (Skari, 2014). Although many alumni may not realize the results of their donations, their gifts continue to make a difference. This is why institutions need to strive proactively to strengthen the alumni-institution relationship.

All higher education institutions are part of a community. Therefore, an institution's success is dependent upon the success of the surrounding community. Chen and Chung-Ming (2013) asserted that alumni serve as a living representation of their institution by how they connect the institution with the community. Alumni represent their alma mater in their daily interactions within their professional, religious, social, and networking organizations. They serve as volunteers, mentors, recruiters, and leaders that raise the profile of their institution (Weerts & Ronca, 2008). Whether realized or not, alumni are always affiliated with their institution and are responsible for being a representation of their institution within their communities. Elliot (2006) provided that "Direct relationships exist between business and academic institutions to the benefit of both. This is a relationship of mutual benefit, mutual dependency, and mutual power" (p. 59). The institution is responsible for growing a social awareness among its students in a manner that benefits the community. Volunteer opportunities sponsored by student and alumni groups can be considered as one of the most basic forms of building this relationship. When alumni volunteer with their alumni association, this allows them to bond with their fellow members and organization while encouraging them to identify and be able to value the community services provided by the organization (Wang & Ashcraft, 2014). Being engaged and giving back to the institution not only benefits the institution, but the community as well. This allows for

alumni to come together for a common good, to benefit others. This in turn provides a view of their institution and community that they might not have otherwise obtained.

Due to the voluntary nature of alumni participation, institutions must effectively identify ways to continue building the relationship between alumni and alma mater. Alumni can serve as resources that relate to image (work performance or personal reputation that can affect the brand of the institution within the community), information (provide business development opportunities for schools or serve as information networks), media (publicize their alma mater and provide employment opportunities for students), financial (monetary donations), and educational (using their academic experiences to refer others to their alma mater) (Chen & Chung-Ming, 2013). Alumni have a great capacity to provide current students of their alma mater with opportunities relating to professional, social, and networking experiences to which they may not otherwise have access. Alumni associations, in cooperation with other campus departments, can also serve as a source for providing students with involvement opportunities that will allow them to cultivate their leadership and networking skills (Singer & Hughey, 2002). When students are able to connect socially and professionally with alumni contacts, they are better able to observe and participate in opportunities that may have a positive impact on their future professional endeavors. Therefore, alumni sequentially have the ability to enhance the overall student experience for those who are currently enrolled. Elliott (2006) mentioned that former students were implicitly encouraged to support people like themselves and that several assumptions existed regarding the alumni-institution connection:

- (a) A desire among former and current students to connect with one another
- (b) The unstated belief that graduates should donate to their alma mater and, given the opportunity, will do so

- (c) The assumed responsibility of graduates to donate despite the lack of any internal motivation on the part of alumni
- (d) The realization by the student that, upon graduation, the institution will expect that same effort from him or her
- (e) That it is reasonable to expect students to participate in fund-raising activities for the school
- (f) That there is no privacy concern in collecting information regarding a graduate's activities as a student and using that information for development purposes or with sharing it with a current student. (p. 76)

These assumptions are based on the ideology that institutions are proactively working to connect with their students in a manner that will transcend from their time as students to long after they leave the institution as alumni. These assumptions also provide students with an understanding of institutional processes and the vital role they will have as alumni in moving the institution forward.

Characteristics of Alumni Donors

“Colleges and universities try to proactively ‘cultivate and retain the loyalty and support of continuing assistance ... institutions of higher education need allies and supporters; and they rely on their own alumni to play this role’” (Levine, 2008, p. 177). Various factors determine alumni financial contribution. Institutional and personal characteristics serve as the two most important factors. Some institutional characteristics that can be internally or externally controlled include whether the institution is private or public, communication and alumni cultivation activities, expenditures per full-time student, institutional prestige and national ranking, long-standing campus traditions, whether the university was the student's first choice institution, and financial assistance awarded (Levine, 2008; McDearmon, 2010, 2013). Some personal characteristics include age, income level, number of years as alumni, involvement in the institution as students, alumni perception of the value of the education received, satisfaction with one's collegiate

experience, emotional attachment to the university, and nonfinancial participation in alumni programs (Levine, 2008; McDearmon, 2010, 2013). Demographics has already been mentioned; other personal factors include psychographic (satisfaction with the alma mater and college experience) and behavioral (alumni involvement after graduation) (Tsao & Coll, 2005). These institutional and personal attributes greatly influence whether alumni will not only participate, but charitably contribute to their alma mater. Therefore, it is important to understand how these factors effect alumni interactions.

The four main characteristics of alumni donation are student experience, alumni experience, capacity, and motivation. Student experience, otherwise referred to the college experience, is characterized by levels of satisfaction, involvement, and the relationships built during the college years through both the academic and social systems (Gaier, 2005). Alumni experience and membership enhance giving, in that the more engaged alumni are with their alumni association the more likely they are to give back (Skari, 2014). Capacity refers to the ability to give monetarily. Typical demographics of alumni who give back to their institutions are household income, age, and residential proximity to their alma mater. Motivation is the willingness of alumni to give back to their institution and is reflective of their student and alumni experiences. Effectually, alumni donation is determined by their commitment to the alumni association, level of generosity, and sociodemographic characteristics (Wang & Ashcraft, 2014). These aforementioned factors are pertinent in alumni research in that commitment is evidenced through organizational involvement, there are associated intrinsic aspects related to the motivation for being generous in the form of donations, and the importance of the ability to give back. Alumni research must take all of these factors into consideration in that it is one thing for alumni to be able to give back, but

it is another thing for them to want to give back. Figure 1 provides Wang and Ashcraft's (2014) model of decision to give to associations and includes the expected negative or positive impact each factor will have on the likelihood of giving to associations.

It is imperative for alumni associations effectively to identify the factors that encourage "wanting to give back" behavior among alumni. In doing so, a cultural shift among alumni will begin to occur in that they will view their participation and donation not with a negative connotation, but more as an act of good will between alumni and their institution, and effectually their community.

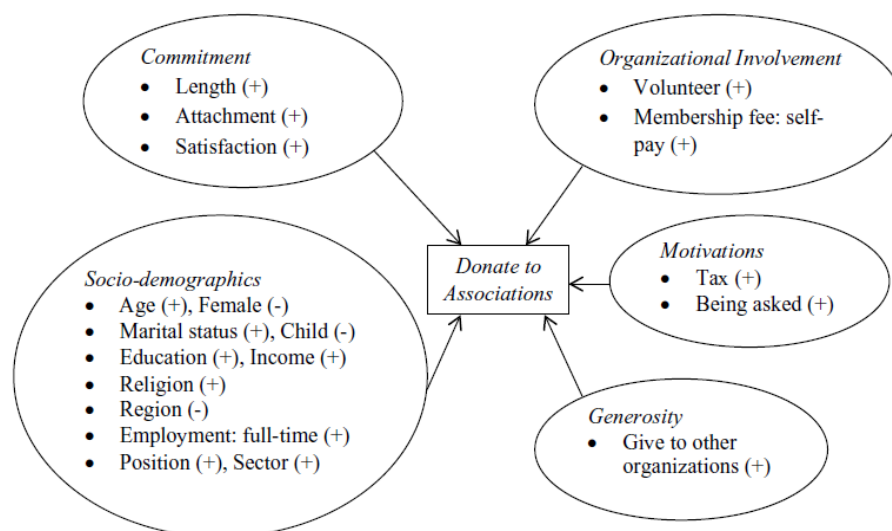


Figure 1. Model of decision to give to associations.

Student experience. The relationship between alumni and their institution is dynamic in nature. One of the most important aspects associated with alumni participation is emotional connection. This connection is nurtured during the student years, and fortifies the alumni's willingness to participate after they have graduated from the institution. The more satisfied alumni are with their academic experience, the more likely they will be involved with the institution after they graduate (Gaier, 2005). Therefore, it is important to

recognize the impact that the college experience truly has on alumni support for their academic institution. It is during this time that students continue to develop cognitively, personally, and socially (Weerts & Ronca, 2008). With this in mind, institutions are challenged with developing and implementing effective strategies for providing students with competitive programs and meaningful academic experiences. In relation to the experiential context of higher education, institutional leadership should encourage meaningful connections for students (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001). This includes facilitating peer connections, faculty/mentor connections, as well as alumni interactions at various campus-sponsored events. It is the interpreted quality and broad range of the educational experiences that students received, which will have an effect on the bond between alumni and alma mater (Baade & Sundberg, 1996). The power of alumni perception of past academic and social experiences, as well as institutional and academic quality, determines future generosity of their time and money.

Marketability of the students' academic experience and degree achievement plays a pivotal role in the overall perception of student experience. Students go to college in order to educate and prepare themselves for future career opportunities. The quality of the education received, along with the community's view of the institution, influences future alumni participation and donation (McDearmon, 2010). This is also explained that with the improvement in alumni capacity, industry and community evaluations of the school's academic quality output have a positive impact on the institution itself (Chen & Chung-Ming, 2013). When students actively engage their college experience, as exemplified by participating in clubs and organizations, internships, networking opportunities, or volunteering within the community, they are able to get a more well-rounded overall

academic experience than those students who are not actively engaged. Institutions are responsible for encouraging and providing resources for these avenues and opportunities for engagement. This is so that when students graduate they are better able to position themselves for future success while representing the institution.

As college freshmen, students are novice to what the institution expects from them and what they can expect from the institution. As students progress down their academic path, they begin to obtain a sense of self, a sense of awareness that reflects their growth. From the academic standpoint, this growth is a result of being actively engaged in their college experience. Institutions encourage this active engagement through exposure to diverse academic programs, faculty interaction with students, nonacademically related social activities, community support opportunities, clubs and organizational participation, and athletics. Student success depends on how involved they are in the academic and social communities around campus, in that those who are not socially involved as students are likely to not be involved as alumni either (Burley, Butner, Causey-Bush, & Bush, 2007; Gallo & Hubschman, 2003). This is attributed to the diversity awareness, collaboration, and growth that occurs when being active on campus. Therefore, it is necessary for institutions to be able to cultivate relationships and offer quality educational experiences in order to encourage future support from future alumni (McDearmon & Shirley, 2009; Weerts & Ronca, 2008). It is this student experience aspect that greatly influences future alumni participation and donation.

Gallo and Hubschman (2003) mentioned Tinto's model of persistence to propose an outcome assessment for higher education. According to that model, successful college involvement was a result of successfully integrating into the social and academic systems.

That occurred by navigating through the stages of separation, transition, and incorporation. Separation was when students learned partially to disassociate themselves from the norms of their past communities. Transition was when students had separated, but had not yet embraced, the norms of their new community. Incorporation was when students finally adopted the norms of their new community. Essentially, this is the manner in which students can integrate their past experience with their college experience. It is this integration process that plays an important role in the students' perceived college experience. Providing a sense of community is crucial to strengthening the students' emotional connection to the institution. A sense of belonging creates a motivation among students to engage their academic experience in a more profoundly impactful manner. This in turn creates a commitment to the institution that is evident in alumni's willingness to give back (Gallo & Hubschman, 2003). The sense of belonging and community is created and strengthened when students spend increased amounts of time on campus, whether due to residing, studying, attending athletic events, or participating in organizations.

Research has shown that the key timeframe of building this relationship is not when alumni leave the institution, but actually while they are enrolled as students. Drezner (2011) provided the importance of promoting an academic ethos of giving among undergraduate students so that they would be more likely to donate as alumni:

If you are going to develop responsive alumni you don't do it by talking to them when they are in their caps and gowns ready to go, and then expect them to respond by giving handsome gifts to the college The need is to develop a systematic plan for the alumni to contribute and stimulate their interest through what is done while they are at the college for four years, and if you don't get a good response out of them during those four years, the chances are 99 [percent] that you won't get much of a response after they have gone. (p. 66)

It takes time to develop relationships, therefore it is important that institutions start developing the connection with their students especially during the first year. So by the time they graduate, the students will recognize the importance of giving back to their institution.

Effective relationship development programs take place prior to students arriving on campus in an effort to get them to identify with the institution from the beginning, which allows for the transition from students to alumni to be much more meaningful (Kelleher, 2011). An institution's social image and branding play an integral role in how students formulate their academic experience. A strong relationship between the institution and its students and alumni improves overall service quality, increases student satisfaction, enhances solidarity for current students, promotes alumni allegiance, and is strongly associated with alumni financial support (Chen & Chung-Ming, 2013; Weerts & Ronca, 2007). There is a strong relationship between how alumni perceive their academic experience and their future alumni giving (McDearmon, 2013). If students had a positive experience while enrolled in the institution, they are more likely to participate in alumni events and give back financially. If students had a negative experience, they are less likely to invest in their alma mater's future (Gallo & Hubschman, 2003). Therefore, it is important for alumni departments to have a strong campus presence for current students to become familiar as they progress along their academic journey. Johnson (2004) provided that past behavior was a strong indicator of future behavior, as seen with the student experience (past behavior) influencing alumni participation and donation practices (future behavior).

Alumni experience. As students' experience is a strong indicator of alumni participation and giving, so is the actual alumni experience as well. Once students graduate, their ties to their institution do not simply end, they change. It is essential for institutions to provide frequent opportunities for alumni to interact and strengthen their relationships with their alma mater (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001). This is where the institution's alumni department is responsible for fostering the continued growth of the alumni-institution relationship, through the use of programs, events, and communication. Weerts and Ronca (2007) stated that alumni support was linked to alumni's perceptions regarding their academic and alumni experiences with the institution. Some examples of this include inviting alumni to participate in various alumni or family events, attend athletic events, volunteer within the community as representatives of the institution, as well as mailing publications that keep alumni abreast of the happenings with other alumni or campus events, mailing "Thank You" letters for donations, and even sending "Birthday" e-mails to celebrate alumni's birthday. These examples generally have a positive bearing on the psychological factors, attitudes, and beliefs that pertain to alumni association perceptions (Newman & Petrosko, 2011; Weerts & Ronca, 2009). It is important constantly to strive for continued alumni interaction with their institution. A lack of interaction will sequentially lead to a lack of institutional commitment. A lack of institutional commitment will lead to a lack of institutional support and gifts (Gallo & Hubschman, 2003). Interaction and participation are a few of the most impactful ways alumni can stay connected to their institutions.

As alumni continue to connect with their institution years after they graduate, their emotional attachment to their alma mater strengthens. Cascione (2003) offered that status

and strongly held beliefs were helpful in predicting donative behavior, with some of the best predictors being “emotional attachment to the school, participation in alumni events, and participation in and donation to other voluntary and religious groups” (p. 6). Alumni affiliation, otherwise known as organizational identification or institutional attachment, tends to be a strong indicator of alumni participation and donation. Affiliation or identification is developed by participating in institution-sponsored events, assuming these experiences are generally positive, and attaching a sense of appreciation for opportunities presented in association with these experiences (Cascione, 2003). This is how both student and alumni experiences truly influence alumni participation and donation tendencies. When alumni view their participation in an alumni association in a positive light, they have interpreted their experience as being pleasant and beneficial.

Organizational identification is the result of individuals classifying themselves with an organization, specifically in the context of higher education, it is exemplified with the phrase, “*I am a student/alum of (insert academic institution here)*” (Drezner, 2009). A strong alumni affiliation is the product of an emotional attachment and institutional connection experienced by alumni who actively engaged their student and alumni interactions.

The pairing of alumni perceptions of their institutional bonds with their educational experiences has a tremendous capacity for influencing future long-term alumni loyalty (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001). Figure 2 specifies both the institutional and personal aspects that lead alumni not only to identify organizationally with their alma mater, but to give back charitably as well (Drezner, 2009). It is imperative to gain an understanding of the importance of organizational identification with respect to alumni participation and

donorship tendencies. In doing so, alumni relations will be better able to provide alumni with meaningful activities and events that will continue to increase their affiliation to their alma mater.

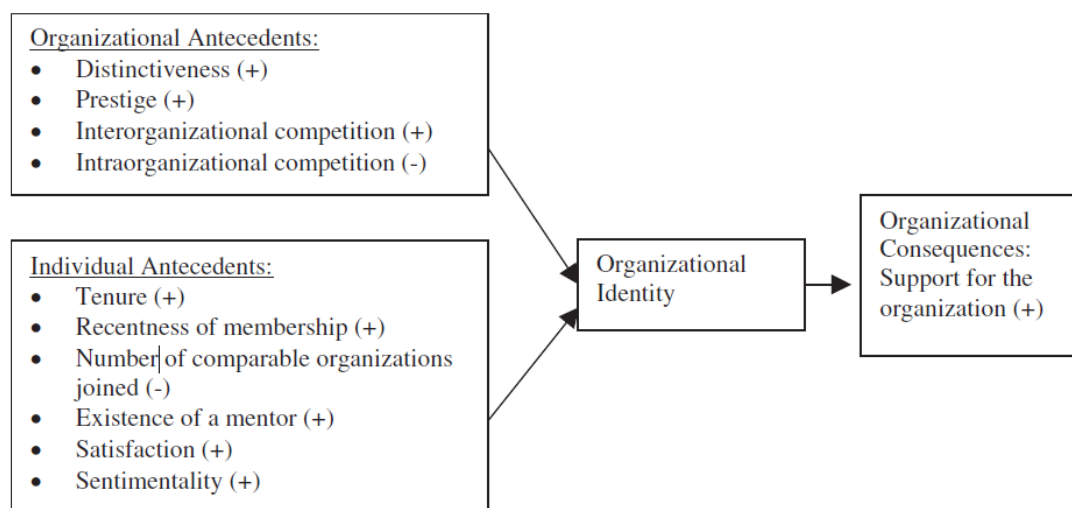


Figure 2. Proposed correlates of organizational identification.

Capacity. Capacity is the ability to make a charitable gift or donation. Age, number of years since graduation, income, and residence are strong predictors of alumni giving (Newman & Petresko, 2011; Skari, 2014). Older alumni, who traditionally tend to have increased number of years since graduation, tend to be more professionally advanced in their careers, and are therefore at a higher earning potential than their young alumni counterparts. Young alumni are defined as those who graduated 10 to 15 years from the current date and are approximately between the ages of 25 to 35 years old, with older alumni being anyone who graduated beyond those time and age specifications (McDearmon & Shirley, 2009). The capacity for charitable giving typically increases with age due to the increased financial resources of older alumni (Wang & Ashcraft, 2014). Alumni with income levels of \$60,000 or more have increased giving tendencies, with wealthier individuals giving the most (Skari, 2014). Residence also has an influence on

alumni giving. Those who live in the same city or state as the institution are more likely to give than those who live out of state. Residential distance, in-state or out-of-state, between alumni and their institution significantly determines alumni participation, with in-state alumni participating and donating more so than out-of-state alumni (Gaier, 2005; McDearmon & Shirley, 2009). Those who reside in the same area have stronger ties to their alma mater and community due to residential connections. Although gender may not be a strong predictor of alumni giving, it still has an impact on the amount and recurrence of giving. As men tend to make sizably larger gifts less frequently, women tend to give smaller gifts more frequently (Dvorak & Toubman, 2013; Newman & Petrosko, 2011). This is generally seen in fund raising in that men will make a single large donation to make an impact at a given time. Women will give smaller donations at different times, allowing them to continue being engaged with their institution at various times. One additional factor that has a bearing on alumni donations is the level of financial burden experienced during the student years, particularly the sources of their educational funding (McDearmon, 2010; Weerts & Ronca, 2007). Students who relied heavily on student loans to pay for their education are less likely, compared to those who received scholarships or grants, to give back as alumni. Therefore, need-based assistance received during the college years influences the inclination for future donations.

Motivation. All three previously mentioned donor characteristics influence the motivation for alumni to give back. Motivation is exemplified through the emotional attachment to the institution, positive memories associated with student and alumni experiences, and a genuine concern for the institution's well-being (Gallo & Hubschman, 2003). Alumni attitudes toward their institution strongly effect their motivation to give

back. Those with positive experiences tend to personify more supportive attitudes. Some factors that determine alumni willingness to participate and donate to their institution include student and alumni involvement, academic and economic success, emotional attachment to the institution, and overall satisfaction with student and alumni experience (Gaier, 2005). It is these factors, in addition to alumni relations efforts, that greatly influence the willingness and motivation of alumni interaction. Additionally, it is the alumni's established deeper connection to their institution that impacts their understanding of the institution's needs and their role in meeting these needs (Weerts & Ronca, 2007). This connection is personified in their post-graduation relationship with their institution, such as attending various campus-related events after graduation, participating in various charitable opportunities associated with the institution, participating in alumni events, and being active in both their campus and community. Cascione (2003) described motivation not from a moralistic noble perspective, but more from an "array of associations, experiences, goals, and orientations that generate people's charitable giving" (p. 7).

It is difficult to determine a single specific reason for why alumni donate to their institution. It generally relates to the different experiences that alumni have lived through while enrolled as students and being alumni. Some of the diverse reasons for donating include religious/philosophical/spiritual beliefs, guilt, recognition, self-preservation, fear, tax rewards, obligation, pride, and self-respect (Elliot, 2006). For some, their donating tendencies reflect a much deeper understanding and respect for giving back. Some of these more profound reasons for donating include perceptions of experiences, participative behaviors, motivation to donate, and a personal understanding of the effect that making a donation will have on others (Tsao & Coll, 2005). Motivation to donate and the

understanding of what donating means as a benefit for others are the two fundamental characteristics personified by alumni donors. For some, donations equate to an intrinsic experience in that they are giving back because it is the right thing to do, to pay it forward for current students. For others, donating is more for show and what they can get out of it, such as a sense of pride or a tax break. “Mixed motives are the rule rather than the exception” (Cascione, 2003, p. 5). There are many reasons why alumni donate, but one is no better than the other. It is this motivational mix that propels alumni to give back to their institution.

Weerts and Ronca (2009) mentioned that there were four categories of motivation, which included awareness and efficacy, solicitation, costs and benefits, and altruism. When alumni are made aware that a need exists, they are more willing to contribute with the belief that their donation will make a difference within their alma mater. It is important for alumni to identify with the needs of the institution, which generally occurs as a result of developing a sense of attachment through increased group participation as student and alumni (Freeland et al., 2015). This awareness of need and sense of attachment play an important and truly impactful role in inspiring alumni motivation. It is this inspiration of motivation that influences alumni willingness not only to participate, but to donate as well. Donor awareness, recognition of personal responsibility, and perception of ability to help are some of the psychological conditions that influence donor charitability (Tsao & Coll, 2005). Therefore, giving generally occurs in response to the solicitation efforts of the alumni association. Alumni tend to be more “willing to donate as long as they can choose where the gift will go and how it will be used” (McDearmon, 2010, p. 41). Motivation increases when alumni are informed on how their donation gifts will benefit the institution,

department, organization, or students. In accordance with the social exchange theory, increased participation and charitable contributions occur when alumni interests and institutional needs are aligned (Drezner, 2009). An example of this is when institutions reach out to alumni to participate by giving back to a specific campaign, such as new uniforms for the marching band or renovating the fine arts building. Campaigns like these allow alumni to see directly how their donations are positively impacting their alma mater.

The costs and benefits of giving refer to the other institutions or nonprofit organizations competing for charitable donations. The altruistic aspect of alumni giving reflects the willingness to give back to one's community, in this case one's college community. People like to know what they invest, whether with their time or money, will have a positive and lasting impact as a whole. "Utility is derived from the feeling among alumni that their gift makes a difference" (Weerts & Ronca, 2009, p. 114). This is where alumni's emotional attachment or alumni affiliation to their university plays an impactful role on their willingness to give back to their institution. This connection is considered to be long lasting, dynamic, and impactful, therefore requiring dedicated time and effort to foster and enhance (Chen & Chung-Ming, 2013). The fostering of this relationship is initiated while being involved during the student years and continues to be nurtured by being involved as alumni. This strengthened organizational identity influences alumni philanthropic commitment, in the form of participation and donation, back to their alma mater (Drezner, 2009).

The motivational aspect associated with generosity is an important consideration when it comes to determining why alumni donate. The propensity to donate to an alumni association may be affected by alumni's level of generosity (Wang & Ashcraft, 2014).

With all the financial responsibilities handled by alumni and their families, philanthropic tendencies serve as an interesting facet of alumni dynamics that is best explained by

Cascione (2003):

Habitual acts of generosity lead to the formation of philanthropic habits ... Philanthropy to higher education often reflects an appreciation for the dynamic academic and social enterprise that affords individuals the opportunity to grow intellectually and inter-personally. It also symbolizes an attitude of generosity – regardless of which motivations may have engaged the philanthropic decision making process. The symbolic nature of philanthropy draws upon the intangible “patterns of meaning” which lie at the core of human existence, a hint of how love manifests itself in the world. (pp. 112, 127)

Philanthropy is an act of appreciation and good will. When alumni are motivated to be generous with their income, they are essentially demonstrating the reality that they have shared in positive and beneficial experiences while associated with their academic institution. These involvements had such deep intrinsic association that they felt it necessary and meaningful, and therefore were motivated to give back.

Related Studies in the Literature

One set of studies in particular within the literature was by alumni relations researchers McDearmon and Shirley (2009) and McDearmon (2010). In those studies, the researchers aimed to identify characteristics and institutional factors that related to young alumni donors and nondonors. In the initial study, McDearmon and Shirley conducted a quantitative study in order to identify survey data with several open-ended questions relating to alumni donorship and nondonorship tendencies. In the second study, McDearmon qualitatively used the same dataset, however now focused on analyzing the open-ended questions from the initial study. The researcher implemented the grounded theory design in order to generate a theory relating to young alumni nondonors. Those

studies proved to be a great example of using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies in a manner that complemented each other.

Summary

This chapter provided a review of the literature pertinent to today's alumni relations efforts. It began with a brief history and background of the American higher education system and the sequential establishment of the alumni association. The chapter then mentioned factors of consideration for today's alumni relations departments. It focused on the institutional commitment to alumni and the importance of the alumni commitment to the institution. This chapter continued with the trends associated with alumni donor characteristics. Those characteristics included capacity, student experience, alumni experience, and motivation to donate.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Design

This study implemented a qualitative research approach with a constructivist grounded theory design. The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how alumni personify their commitment to their institution by participating in alumni-sponsored events and decide additionally to support their institution through financial donations. In accordance with this purpose, this combined approach and design was applied to gain as much insight as possible into alumni perspectives of participation with their alumni association and how this interaction has shaped their willingness to donate to their alma mater. The grounded theory design is characterized as being a systematic procedure aimed at generating an explanation grounded in the data provided by participants (Creswell, 2008). It is this explanation garnered from the structured meaning associated with the participants' experiences that this study aims to achieve a better understanding.

This study utilized a set of primary and subset research questions to gain an understanding of the associated central phenomena. The primary research question that this study aimed to answer was: How can universities develop alumni outreach initiatives to elicit effective and meaningful perception among alumni? The four subset questions that supported the primary question were as follows:

- How do alumni relations departments identify effective strategies that promote alumni affiliation?
- How do alumni create meaning and understanding of their experiences while participating in alumni-sponsored events?

- How does alumni perception of their participation in alumni-sponsored events lead to alumni donorship?
- How does alumni perception of their experiences as a student and graduate of the institution affect their decision to engage?

With the nature of the information trying to be obtained, interviews were utilized to collect data. Open-ended semi-structured questions were used in order to provide the interviewer additional flexibility when conducting interviews. This allowed the researcher to follow up on participant leads while maintaining the focus of the interview (Merriam, 2002). The interview questions that were asked were structured in a way that simply served as a guide to obtaining the detailed descriptions from participants. Open-ended questions allowed for participants to gain an understanding of what the research was seeking to study and, with their responses, were able to provide rich thick descriptions of what their experiences had been. Giorgi (2012) best characterized descriptions as the “intentional use of language to articulate the intentional objects of experience” (p. 6). The use of those questions also allowed room for the researcher to navigate the interview process without limiting the participants’ responses.

Qualitative research. Qualitative or normative research is an approach to research with the notion of searching for meaning and understanding of experiences from the participants’ perspective. The four main commonalities that connect the various designs of qualitative research include (a) the search for meaning and understanding; (b) the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis; (c) this type of research is an inductive process; and (d) the overall product is a rich thick description of the phenomena (Merriam, 2002). The focus of qualitative research is to gain a deeper

insight into the experiences lived and shared among individuals. The researcher is responsible for serving as the main instrument of data collection, because he/she will conduct the interviews and analyze the information gathered in order to make sense of the word data. Qualitative research is best befitting for understanding meaning, understanding particular contexts, understanding a process, identifying unanticipated phenomena and influences, and developing causal explanations (Maxwell, 2013). Research that seeks to identify any of these components is best conducted by using this method. It ensures an intrinsic quality that may not otherwise be obtained.

Qualitative research can best be defined as research that seeks an awareness and understanding of the meanings and perspectives from individuals who personally lived the experiences; how these perspectives are shaped and continue to shape various contexts relating to physical, social, and cultural interactions; and the interconnected processes that are required continually to maintain or alter these phenomena and relationships (Maxwell, 2013). Qualitative research is inductive, and it includes the process of moving from general observations to specific conclusions. The resulting data gathered is characterized as descriptions or accounts from individuals that are rich and thick in describing experiences. Therefore, the main goal in this approach is to gain an awareness and understanding of the complex world of the human experience from the subjective point of view of those engaged in the situation of interest (Krauss, 2005). The individuals' point of view is where qualitative researchers gain the depth of their information that will provide insight into the phenomena, experience, or occurrence being studied.

This method is an important research paradigm in that it is an approach to research with the idea of searching for understanding of experiences from the participants'

perspective. Qualitative research involves an interpretive and naturalistic approach to the world in which researchers attempt to make sense of or interpret the phenomena or experience in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In relation to this study, qualitative research was able to provide the necessary rich and detailed descriptions from the alumni's perspective. Specifically, their involvement and participation in various alumni-sponsored events and how that participation had influenced their willingness to donate back to their institution were clarified. Meanings are trans-behavioral, and human beings have a natural inclination to understand and make meaning out of their lives and experiences (Krauss, 2005). The naturalistic or normative approach involves personal experiences, introspection, life stories, and observational, historical, and interactional texts to provide meaning to individual experiences. This approach therefore encourages a reflective aspect of individuals' dealings with their surroundings. This reflective aspect allows for individuals to interpret their experiences and be able to apply meaning to them.

One's world and reality are not fixed, single, or agreed upon, but are multiple constructions and interpretations of reality that are constantly changing over time (Merriam, 2002). This constant flux of reality, experience, and interpretation is what allows qualitative research to answer the "other" aspects of research, therefore providing a more detailed, warm, and humanistic approach to the cold and generic data of numbers. It provides a humanness to the data, in which Creswell (2007) perfectly described qualitative research:

We conduct qualitative research because we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue. This detail can only be established by talking directly with people ... and allowing them to tell their stories unencumbered by what we expect to find ... We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower

individuals to tell their stories, hear their voices. We cannot separate what people say from the context in which they say it. (p. 40)

Positivist researchers oftentimes overlook the true value of qualitative research, in that it can actually be effectively used to answer different but complementary sets of research questions that cannot be answered simply with quantitative research alone (Hammer, 2011). Where one design can provide general data, the other provides subjective, specific, and detailed information pertaining to experiences. Reisetter, Yexley, Bonds, Nikels, and McHenry (2003) provided that qualitative research was simply a different paradigm that implied a noticeably different worldview and consideration for the sources of truth. The main difference between the positivist and naturalist approaches is that one is objectivist and the other is subjectivist, respectively (Krauss, 2005). The backbone of qualitative research is the concept of meaning being subjectively and socially constructed by individualistic interaction with the world and surroundings. It is these interactions that occur between individuals and their surroundings that formulate the interpretation of and meaning that is attached to these lived experiences.

Human interaction and participating in the mind of another human being to acquire social knowledge are imperative in being able to understand fully the experiences of others (Krauss, 2005). Qualitative research provides a unity of meaning between the physical, psychological, and emotional experiences of those lived by individuals. Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002) provided that good naturalistic inquiry should open the mind of the investigator to the reader. Through this type of research, the audience should be able to gain an outlook of the information that the researcher has collected, analyzed, and provided findings so as to better understand the issue or phenomena being studied. Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world (Denzin & Lincoln,

2008). This refers to individuals being engaged, but still observant of the world around them. For the successful implementation of qualitative research, it is important to apply a combination of methodological practices. Qualitative research is inherently a multi-method process, which when combined with multiple methodological practices as a strategy, will add rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). It is this profundity that allows qualitative research to give life and familiarity to the lived experiences of these individuals. It allows the personal to be shared and understood in a manner that could not be otherwise gained from the quantitative research method.

Constructivist grounded theory. Grounded theory design was first introduced by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the late 1960s. It is mainly concerned with generating a broad theory or model that is derived inductively of the qualitative central phenomenon and that is wholly grounded in the data (Creswell, 2008). Researchers use the data collected and analyzed to formulate a theory in order to explain a process or interaction that occurs between participants and their surroundings. Substantive theory is the type of theory that emerges from being grounded in the data (Merriam, 2002).

Therefore, the result of this nature of research is the development of a substantive theory that will contribute to the general knowledge of the phenomenon being studied.

Traditionally, grounded theory has five main goals: (a) to provide researchers the tools necessary to be able to predict and explain behavior; (b) to encourage theoretical advances in research; (c) to provide a usability for practical applications; (d) to provide a perspective for better understanding behavior; and (e) to guide and provide a style to aid research on particular areas of behavior (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The main goal is essentially to

provide a means for researchers to be able to conduct research and generate theory that will add to the overall body of knowledge.

Grounded theory has been further developed in a manner that embraces a more constructivistic approach, which was pioneered by researcher Kathy Charmaz. Constructivist grounded theory allows us to learn about the experiences and surroundings that we study by encouraging methods for developing theories that will support a better understanding of them (Charmaz, 2014). It is this development of theory that fosters a deeper understanding of the phenomena being studied. Constructivist grounded theory examines the interactions experienced by individuals and the meanings constructed in relation to these experiences. An experience requires an interaction to occur between individuals and their surroundings. Charmaz's overall focus was more on the participants' meanings relating to their "views, values, beliefs, feelings, assumptions, and ideologies" rather than on the actual gathering of facts themselves (Creswell, 2008, p. 439). Constructivist grounded theory focuses primarily on the notion that people are constantly creating and maintaining meaningful interactions, as they attach meaning and act according to these attachments, with their world around them (Charmaz, 2003). This refers to individuals interacting with their surroundings and in doing so they create, attach, maintain, and further build on their perception and meaning of these interactions. It is the study of experience from people living it. This style explores how individuals not only interact with the world around them, but the processes associated with how they interpret these interactions through their consciousness and attach meanings. It focuses on "The ways that the life world – the world every individual takes for granted – is experienced by its members" (Holliday, 2007, p. 16). This attachment of meaning is of key importance in

qualitative research. Therefore, the only way to identify the process is by asking participants for their description, their reflection, and their meaning of their experiences. It is this act of reflection that encourages detection of the process of meaning conferral or the interpretive act to occur, sequentially leading to the description of the experience and meaning by individuals (Giorgi, 2012). When participants are able to reflect on their lived experiences, they are then able to gain a better understanding of their experience. This process also allows them to define and associate meanings to these experiences and interactions. The combination of participants' implicit meanings, experiential views, along with the researcher's grounded theory that comprise an additional construction of reality itself (Charmaz, 2014). It is this essence of meaningful construction of knowledge from the experiences of various sources that constructivist grounded theory aims to inspire.

Constructivist grounded theory is characterized as a process that provides systematic yet flexible guidelines for researchers to gather, synthesize, analyze, and conceptualize qualitative data for the purpose of theory construction (Charmaz, 2001). One of the benefits of this design is that it provides the researcher a logical step-by-step process to serve as a guide throughout the study. Although the steps are provided, the researcher is allowed the flexibility to navigate the research process in a manner that encourages an openness to change that may occur within the study itself. The following features make constructivist grounded theory distinctive from the other qualitative designs: (a) data collected and analyzed concurrently, (b) constant use of comparative methods of data collected, (c) category development early within analysis, (d) write-ups between coding and initial draft, (e) improvement for future interviews, and (f) theory development (Charmaz, 2001). This distinctiveness is an essential aspect of constructivist grounded

theory, in that it is a specific yet fluid process that must occur in order for the researcher to be able to develop a theory from the research. Constructivist grounded theory adopts the traditional characteristics that were originally provided by Glaser and Strauss that include inductive, comparative, and emergent approaches, as well as treating research as a construction of knowledge itself (Charmaz, 2014). Therefore, constructivist grounded theory embraces the construction of knowledge and meaning related to the experience of social interaction.

This study focused on the interactions that take place between alumni and their alma mater, more specifically with their alumni association. Alumni commitment includes participation and donation. One can simply participate by attending alumni-sponsored programs and events. One can simply make a donation and never participate. However, there is a phenomenon that occurs when alumni participate at these events and then at some point decide to give back financially to their alma mater. Therefore, the goal of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of how alumni construct meaning relating to the process that occurs when alumni transition from participants to donors. For this study, the human experience as it relates to individual and group interactions and the associated transition that occurs as a result of these interactions were explored in detail.

Setting of the Study

The setting for this study was private Catholic universities located in southwest Texas. These universities were chosen because of the researcher's connectedness with her private alma mater's mission and values. Also one goal of this study was to determine whether alumni from private Catholic institutions shared in the connectedness when participating in their alumni association's events. Interviews were conducted in a quiet

environment optimally suitable for this type of data collection, such as on/off-campus meeting rooms or offices of the participants' choosing.

Participant Selection

Since this study intended to gain a better understanding of the central phenomenon being studied, purposeful sampling was implemented. This sampling method encourages specific settings, persons, or activities to be selected in order to gather information that is distinctly germane to the questions and goals being studied (Maxwell, 2013). In order to strengthen the sampling selection and because participants were alumni and part of a subgroup associated with an institution, purposeful sampling through the use of homogenous sampling and snowball sampling was utilized. "In homogenous sampling, the researcher purposefully samples individuals or sites based on membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics. To use this procedure, you need to identify the characteristics and find individuals or sites that possess it" (Creswell, 2008, p. 216). The choice for participants was restricted to those who have graduated with only their bachelor's degree from private Catholic universities located in southwest Texas where the study was conducted. Consent forms were given to each participant prior to conducting the interviews. Subject participation was completely voluntary, and selection was based on their willingness to participate in the study.

Quality Standards: Trustworthiness and Credibility

Qualitative research is characteristically ambiguous, fluid, and has an interpretive nature (Reisetter et al., 2003). Trustworthiness and credibility are two challenges associated with this design, where the researcher must ensure measures of controlling these threats. Therefore in order to support and strengthen the nature of this study, these standards must

be met. Researcher bias and reactivity are the two most common threats to validity (Cascione, 2003). Researcher bias refers to the researcher's preconceptions associated with the study. More specifically, this is the researcher's personal perceptual lens or beliefs, and the focus is on understanding how this may influence the conduct and conclusions of the study (Maxwell, 2013). A researcher who is an active participant in the topic field of study must be cautious as to not let personal preconceptions bias the research. Reactivity, or reflexivity, refers to the influence that the researcher has on the study itself. It is important for a researcher to be aware of his/her powerful and inescapable influence over the interview situation (Maxwell, 2013). As a researcher, it is important to understand the preconceptions and influence that exist while conducting interviews. Merriam (2002) provided elucidation on the importance of the researcher associated with the interview process:

Interview is the primary method of data collection wherein one attempts to uncover the essence, the invariant structure, of the meaning of the experience. Prior to interviewing others ... researchers usually explore their own experiences, in part to examine dimensions of the experience and in part to become aware of their own prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions. (p. 94)

The researcher must not only take into consideration how he/she will gather the data, but the researcher must also consider his/her role and any associated prejudices and influences relating to the process of the study itself. Finlay (2002) provided that reflexivity was characterized by the researcher's thoughtful and conscious awareness of his/her role in the research process. Part of the responsibility of the researcher is to observe credibility standards, and in order effectively to do so, the researcher must continually strive to identify and work through personal biases. Reflexivity should not be confused with reflection. Reflection allows one to look back on experience in order to gain insight,

whereas reflexivity is a self-awareness of consciousness that influences the researcher's decisions throughout the research process (Engward & Davis, 2015). A researcher must be cautious when gathering and analyzing data so as to not allow his/her bias to interfere with the research.

There are several techniques utilized to minimize these threats and increase the credibility of the conclusions related to the study. Anfara et al. (2002) recommended eight verification procedures to increase the credibility of qualitative research, including prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer-review, negative case analysis, clarifying researcher bias, member checks, thick description, and external audits. For the purpose of this study, the researcher selected three quality standards to implement. The researcher used thick rich descriptions to ensure that the participants' answers were rich in detail pertaining to their experiences in participating with their alma mater. Rich data provides detailed and varied descriptions that essentially reveal every aspect associated with the lived experience itself (Maxwell, 2013). This allowed the researcher to gather as much information from the participants as possible. Secondly, the role of the researcher was thorough and exact in that the researcher was the main tool of data collection and analysis. A researcher cannot observe feelings, thoughts, intentions, past behaviors, or how people interpret and attach meaning to the world around them; therefore a researcher must ask questions about these experiences and meanings (Patton, 2002). A researcher serves as the core instrument of the research process as a whole. That person is responsible for effectively conceptualizing his/her understanding of the participants' interactions and meanings by offering interpretation and implication of the data (Charmaz, 2005). Lastly, member checks or respondent validation was implemented in that the

participants were provided the transcriptions to review and determine whether the researcher captured the essence of their responses. With member checks, the researcher asks participants “whether the description is complete and realistic, if the themes are accurate to include, and if the interpretations are fair and representative” (Creswell, 2008, p. 267). That allowed for the researcher to cover all areas of the transcription with the actual participant to ensure that the interpretation of those experiences was assessed accurately.

Protection of Human Subjects

In order ethically to protect the human rights of the participants, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was applied for and obtained in order to conduct this study. Confidentiality and anonymity were upheld to the strictest standards throughout the duration of the study. Signed consent forms, voice recording devices, field notes, transcribed interviews, memos, and analyzed data were locked in a desk drawer to which only the researcher had the key. Each participant was provided a pseudonym in order to ensure anonymity of his/her responses. The researcher was the only person to know the true identity of each participant and his/her responses. Two copies of consent forms were provided to each participant at the beginning of each interview session to sign explaining in depth the purpose and goal of the study. One copy was provided to the participant to keep and the other copy was kept by the researcher. A copy of the approved IRB form was also included for each participant to review. Each participant had the opportunity to clarify any questions that he/she might have had in order to gain a thorough understanding of the study and the participant’s role in the process. Participation in this study was completely voluntary, and any participant could withdraw his/her consent for participation at any time.

Data Collection

The duration of the study was less than one year. One-on-one intensive interviews were conducted on/off campus in a private room of the participants' choosing to ensure a nondistractive location for the participants. Charmaz (2005) characterized interviews as providing a view of the participants' experience as they presented them rather than as they happened, by providing a depiction of an experience during a specific moment in a person's life. Intensive interviews refer to the researcher encouraging, listening, and learning while gently guiding the one-sided conversation in which the participants' perspective of their experience is explored in detail (Charmaz, 2014). With this type of interviewing process, the researcher simply serves as a guide that inspires participants to share their story. Interviews were allotted 1-hour time frames per interview. The interview consisted of descriptive, semistructured, and open-ended questions in order to capture effectively information from and about the participants' personal and real experiences (Brenner, 2006). Interview questions were carefully and fully organized prior to conducting the interviews, and were open-ended in order to gain open-ended responses from the participants. This was to ensure a decreased variation among interviews, by promoting highly focused interview sessions, and to allow easier analysis of future transcriptions (Patton, 2002). Data were collected using voice recorders and field note documentation. An interview guide was utilized in order to ask the interview questions and write down any notes pertaining to the interview sessions. An interview guide is a form designed by the researcher and is used during the interview sessions, providing instructions for the process of the interview, the questions to be asked, and has available space to take interview notes (Creswell, 2008). Data were then transcribed manually by the interviewer after each

interview session was completed in order to ensure accuracy. Constructivist grounded theory focuses on inductive theory or model construction that occurs through continuous interaction with the data collected throughout duration of the study (Maxwell, 2013). For that reason, the researcher was continually engaged with the data collected in order to ensure an accurate understanding of the participants' responses.

Data Analysis

Data collected were generally analyzed by first focusing on the description, reduction, and interpretation of the information gathered. The description is simply the expression of the conscious experience, the reduction is the critically reflective aspect of the description, and the interpretation is the meaning that is revealed in the process (Sadala & Adorno, 2002). As these three components were identified, data were then analyzed by conducting a preliminary exploratory analysis in order to obtain a general sense of the data. It is important for the researcher to immerse himself/herself in the details, reading the transcripts as a whole several times before breaking them into parts (Creswell, 2008). Data continued to be analyzed using categorizing strategies that included transcription and thematic analysis, in the form of multilevel coding and memo writing.

Constructivist grounded theory is set apart from other designs by use of the following three mutually supportive analysis features: (a) iteration, the practice of analyzing new data as soon as they are collected and transcribed in order to improve the process of the subsequent data collected; (b) constant comparison, the comparison of statement with statement, story with story, or theme with theme; and lastly (c) theoretical sampling, when necessary, which promotes data collection procedures to focus specifically on emerging themes in the analysis (Lingard, 2014). These analysis procedures are used in

order to identify effectively any hidden meanings and common themes that may be present within the data. As data were collected, each interview was individually transcribed and analyzed. As collection and analysis continued, existing transcriptions were compared with each other.

The common analysis and theory development processes associated with grounded theory consist of three main strategies that include coding, memo writing, and theoretical sampling, when necessary (Charmaz, 2001). Thematic analysis, through the constant comparative method, was used to identify common themes and categories as they emerged. As constructivist grounded theorists are focused on understanding the process related to a substantive topic, categories serve as a collection of themes that have been identified to assist in better understanding the process being studied (Creswell, 2008). These categories serve to strengthen additional data analysis procedures, including the constant comparative method. This method is characteristic of constructivist grounded theory, in that it (a) compares different participant's responses, (b) compares data from the same participant multiple times, (c) compares incident with incident, (d) compares data with categories, and (e) compares categories with categories (Charmaz, 2003). This encourages the researcher to be engaged actively with the data analysis in order to identify effectively the study's resulting theory or model. The constant comparative method allows for the researcher to code data in a manner in which themes and categories begin to emerge. The researcher is constantly comparing data with other data gathered in the study.

The goal of coding is not simply to count responses, but to fracture the data in a way that the researcher can rearrange the information into categories that identify broader themes and issues that will aid in the development of theoretical concepts, while providing

the ability to view the assumptions of the participants and researcher (Charmaz, 2005; Maxwell, 2013). This process allows the researcher to identify the emerging themes or gerunds within the data in a more fluid manner. In order to initiate a closeness with the data, initial or open coding, in the form of line-by-line coding, was the first coding practice to be implemented. Subsequently to synthesize larger fragments of the data, focused coding was the second coding practice to be implemented. Those two forms of coding were used since initial coding allowed for gerunds to be identified within the data, and focused coding allowed for broader categories to be identified (Charmaz, 2001, 2014). Gerunds and categories allow for similarities in responses to be grouped in an organized manner that better allows the researcher to make sense of the data collected. Next, theoretical coding was utilized in which the categories were analyzed into a single central/core category. Theoretical coding serves as an umbrella that ensures that all codes and categories generated up to that point are covered (Saldana, 2013). This analyzing process is a critical precursor that leads the way to the approaching construction of theory. Lastly, analysis of the central/core category led to the end result of this study, which was theory generation. It must be said that although theoretical sampling is a characteristic of constructivist grounded theory practice, it was not used in this study as the researcher did not identify any gaps in the analysis of the data collected. Effectively to generate codes from the data, the researcher must be fully engaged with the data at all levels (Charmaz, 2014). This refers to the necessity of the researcher embracing all aspects of the research process and taking full ownership of it, from the interview setting to combing through the data for insight to the participants' responses.

Memo writing is the process of exploring the codes in a more detailed manner and is considered the next step in the grounded theory analysis process. This allows the researcher to explore further the coded data, expand on the processes identified, sort the data more explicitly, link the analytic interpretation with the empirical reality, and identify gaps within the coded data (Charmaz, 2001, 2003). Essentially, this keeps the researcher actively involved in the research by identifying the analyzed data and any associated shortcomings prior to the final draft. Memos are the researcher's personal written notes that allow him/her to expand on any thoughts and ideas about the data that may be formed throughout this process (Creswell, 2008). This promotes within the researcher the practice of constantly evaluating ideas about the data that may assist in further identifying themes and categories that will better lead to theory formation.

Summary

As the purpose of qualitative research is to understand, this chapter focused on gaining an understanding from the participants' experiences as to how they were related to the alumni interactions that included participation and donation. This chapter described the study's design and approach. Information regarding the procedures that were implemented to collect data included the duration and setting of the study. This chapter provided the ethical considerations regarding the participants' protection. This chapter also specified how the data were analyzed specifically using transcription, layered analysis, and thematic analysis in order to identify effectively any hidden meanings, common themes, and categories from the participants' responses.

Chapter 4: Results

Experience is a powerful aspect of the human interaction with their surroundings. More powerful is the construction of meaning associated with these experiences. The purpose of constructivist grounded theory is to understand the constructions of a participant's reality through implicit meanings and experiential views (Charmaz, 2014). With this in mind, the researcher worked to identify and understand the views of the participants on their commitment to their institution through their participation and donation tendencies illustrated in Figure 3. The transcribed data were analyzed in relation to the four subset questions of this study that related to alumni relations departments identifying effective strategies to promote alumni affiliation, alumni creating meaning of their alumni-related experiences, alumni perceiving their participation leading to donation, and alumni perceiving their student experience affecting their decision to engage after graduation.

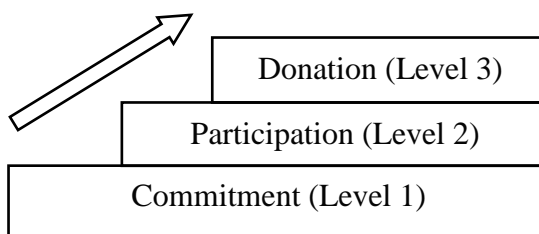


Figure 3. Levels of commitment.

Participant Descriptions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of how alumni personify their commitment to their institution by participating in alumni-sponsored events and decide additionally to support their institution through financial donations. Participants for this study were those who graduated from private Catholic universities located in

southwest Texas with only their bachelor's degree. For this study, 10 participants, five female and five male alumni, were interviewed to identify their commitment to the institution recognized through their participation with and donation to their alumni association and institution. Their participation and donation tendencies are summarized below.

- Alum 1 (A1): Had previously been an active participant in his/her alumni association. Was not currently an active participant. Is an active financial donor. Does not engage with the institution outside of the alumni association.
- Alum 2 (A2): Had previously been an active participant in his/her alumni association. Was not currently an active participant. Is an active financial donor. Does not engage with the institution outside of the alumni association.
- Alum 3 (A3): Had never been an active participant in his/her alumni association or financial donor. Does not engage with the institution outside of the alumni association.
- Alum 4 (A4): Had previously been an active participant in his/her alumni association. Was not currently an active participant. Is an active financial donor. Does engage with the institution outside of the alumni association.
- Alum 5 (A5): Is an active participant in his/her alumni association. Is an active financial donor. Does engage with the institution outside of the alumni association.
- Alum 6 (A6): Is an active participant in his/her alumni association. Was not an active financial donor. Does engage with the institution outside of the alumni association.

- Alum 7 (A7): Is an active participant in his/her alumni association. Is an active financial donor. Does engage with the institution outside of the alumni association.
- Alum 8 (A8): Is an active participant in his/her alumni association. Was not an active financial donor. Did not engage with the institution outside of the alumni association.
- Alum 9 (A9): Had previously been an active participant in his/her alumni association. Was not currently an active participant. Was not an active financial donor. Did not engage with the institution outside of the alumni association.
- Alum 10 (A10): Is an active participant in his/her alumni association. Was not an active financial donor. Does engage with the institution outside of the alumni association.

Initial Coding: Codes/Gerunds

Data were analyzed utilizing the constructivist grounded theory design. The analysis process consisted of multilevel coding and category generation that included initial, focused, and theoretical coding practices. Through analysis, the researcher was able to gain a deeper understanding of how alumni view their experiences with their alma mater and their willingness to engage after graduation. The initial coding process produced numerous gerund codes, some of which have been identified below in Table 2 with an example of meanings.

Table 2.

Examples of Initial Codes

| Initial Codes | Interview Statements |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Serving as a resource | <p>(A1) Yes, as well as you know, providing like a service of like helping students with the resumes, that gives more of like a service type.</p> <p>(A4) Maybe approaching it in a different way to where alumni relations can say, hey we still have Career Services out there for you, we have other resources.</p> <p>(A8) After graduation was pretty tough and maybe the university didn't have ways to go ahead and transition you from a graduate to a person that's in the workforce ... I wish it was promoted more like all the career fairs and that stuff.</p> |
| Being able to connect | <p>(A1) It's fun to kind of remember and connect with people who might not have gone to school with you at the same time, but have the same traditions that you have. So you can connect with that, and it helps build the sense of community, and once the alumni relations get their alums to feel that that group is a community of theirs, they'll be more willing to open that pocket book.</p> <p>(A2) It's just, I guess, it just allows me to keep connected to people who share the same kinds of perspectives or who share the same perspective on the world and want to try to make the world a better place.</p> <p>(A4) So I think that in and of itself is a great way to for everyone to connect and to interact with one another.</p> <p>(A7) Having a connection to what's currently going on and being in the know whether through monthly newsletters and e-mails from the university.</p> |
| Donating having a broader meaning | <p>(A4) Alumni donorship, it can be of course the most obvious thing is like donating financially, but it can also be a way of or maybe volunteer your time with a certain group of students ... I know not everyone can financially donate and that can be another avenue where they're donating, because they're donating time that's basically they're donating their expertise in a certain area of knowledge.</p> |

- (A8) I think a way that the alumni relations can encourage alumni donations is by creating some sort of value. I think being able to identify how the dollars going to be used would be a great way to encourage donations.
- Paying it forward (A7) Knowing what it meant to me helps kind of give me that hope that it's going to mean the same to the current students and then I can continue to give other students the same opportunities that I have had, then it mean a lot to me to be able to do that.
- (A8) I'm at a point where I can give back my time and try to make an impact, a positive impact, with the university.
- Timing in life (A7) Time has a lot to do with it, you know. I have a little three year old so that's a big thing, and the schedule that I work is also kind of hectic so it's hard for me to get away and attend any events.
- (A3) You still talk to them but now it's time to, I guess, meet new people, meet new friends, network more.
- (A5) Mainly because of time constraints, but I do contribute, I do as they say "write the check" every once in a while to either the organization, the alumni association itself, or to the university just depending on the year and who asks and when that kind of thing.
- Gaining a different perspective (A2) But it was fun; it was a great experience. It allowed me just to see a different part of the organization and structure and see what really went into making all of our events happen.
- (A5) I needed a little bit of a break, just a little, as it turns out just a few years, but I feel like my alumni experience after that break, when I came back, has been very positive.
- (A8) Well I think my meaning from participating is being able to actually attend, but not only just attend and take in all of the things that are provided for the alumni like food, experiences, and stuff like that, but also being part of it by setting up and tearing down.
- Providing others an opportunity (A4) Kind of putting it in a way to where "wouldn't you want this experience for someone else?" or kind of like passing on that, not torch per se, but passing on the legacy of [institution] education to someone else who without this aid or assistance wouldn't be able to experience that.
- (A5) So I want to be able to do little things like that. That car was

donated through the efforts of the Service Learning Center and the leadership that was there at the time. They petitioned for a donation from a local dealership and they got the car.

Mixing students and alumni (A2) When it comes to the co-mingled alumni events, I think it's a breath of fresh air to be able to see the students and like see how they're doing, talk to them, and say "oh yeah I did the same thing." So it's kind of being able to understand the up and coming students. It's nice just to be able to see them and see their success and see their struggles, and see where they came from.

(A8) There's definitely a family reunion because that's the one week where people will travel to come to these events and it just brings a lot more diversity to the alumni. You don't see just my age of people, you see a range of ages so that's a great week for that.

(A10) It's like a 10-year class reunion every year though. That one means a lot to me, because you get to see the younger girls and you get to see every, because of course I'm Greek, to me you get to see how your Chapter is developed.

Focused Coding: Categories

As the initial coding process transitioned into focused coding, the researcher was able to identify five main categories. The categories comprised scope of community, shift in perception, lenses we use, transitional growth, and perceived value. Table 3 illustrates examples of meanings related to each category. The five categories that emerged from the data are discussed in further detail below.

Scope of community. The three main scopes of community identified among participants were students, alumni, and faculty and staff. Interactional experiences within any or all three of these scopes is key to how alumni form and strengthen their affiliation to their institution. When asked about how best to promote alumni affiliation, responses included unifying terms such as connection, support, and motivation; and bonding phrases such as mixing students and alumni at events, still being able to participate and enjoy the

traditions of the school, making one's mark on the institution, motivating students through alumni experiences, growing students is growing donors, generational connections, and transferring of information/legacy of the institution. The researcher was able to identify that alumni are very much interested in either reconnecting or maintaining connections with the institution through relationships with other alumni, students, and faculty/staff. For example, A4 provided:

I think communication such as newsletters and keeping us up to date with different projects on campus, different programs that are starting that keeps me very interested and that motivates me to donate. Because I know that when I donate, I'm helping these different initiatives start or continue, and everything that we do here is ultimately going to benefit the students and grow our university, which is something that is great because more growth and we can offer our students more opportunities.

This shows how alumni are genuinely interested in "being in the know" of what is currently happening on their campus. This information allows them to be connected to something to which they have committed so much of who they are as individuals and into which they invested so much of their time and money. It is something that has had a tremendous impact on their lives. This vested interest is captured in A7's response:

A lot of the events that were being done back then are still being done now, so we got to say "oh well, you know I remember when I was there and this is what I got to do" and I think that has a lot to do with it too is that you were able to share those memories with the new group, and if you didn't have any other opportunity to go back to school for any reason, you wouldn't be able to share those memories with the current students. So I think it is one thing to go over the same stories over and over, the same people that you always do but to share it with a new group is always something really important.

For many alumni, generational connection is important. This connection is important to restore past experiences associated with the institution and to continue the legacy of the institution's mission and values as well. Generational connections are two sided and allow for alumni to share experiences among themselves, but more importantly, to share

experiential history with the current student population. This passing down of information and sharing of legacy serve as a living history of the institution itself and serve as an example of what it means to be alumni of that institution.

Table 3.

Examples of Focused Coding Categories

| Categories | Interview Statements |
|---------------------|---|
| Scope of community | (A4) I think another thing is to maybe maintain constant communication with the alumni, whether it be through social media ... and maybe reach out to them and kind of like try to listen to what their stories are, how they are doing after graduation, what are their successes, and maybe utilize that to formulate maybe programs or maybe pairing them up with current students to help that mentorship relationship. |
| | (A5) I think the break helped highlight what my college experience meant, and it helped bring to light that fact that I'm now part of this community. I'm part of, I'm no longer a student, I am now a member of those people who have successfully gone through college and graduated. |
| | (A8) My growth within the university has always been through the School of Business. So it would be awesome for me to be able to relay over what I've learned, what I've done with what I've learned, and what I've done in my career. |
| Shift in perception | (A5) Going from undergraduate to all of a sudden you're an alum and being participating in the workforce and having the ability now to decide I'm going to give you money or I'm not going to give you money, or I'm going to participate or I'm not going to participate. I think that internally takes time to realize. |
| | (A9) My alumni experience was fun and rewarding but very exhausting but very challenging. I mean you learn a lot about what other people's way of involvement. |
| Lenses we use | (A4) I think one thing that I really hold close is the mission of the university, and I try to exhibit that in everything that I do every day with students. |
| | (A7) It means a lot, especially as she gets older and her name being ... |

so it's really cool to have something concrete to show her that relates to who she is so she can kind of grow on that herself.

(A9) It means that you're giving back to a university that has helped you become the person you are now and now you're kind of wanting to say thanks and I want to give thanks so someone else can have a good experience like it did or better.

Transitional
growth

(A2) It just gave me this new, I guess, footing that allowed me to continue growing even though my parents weren't able to help me and I found faculty members that were very influential in my life that I still speak with today.

(A4) That kind of opened my eyes to what I really wanted to do in life and those experiences I learned a lot from them. They helped me grow professionally and personally and I think those have really helped me become who I am today.

(A5) It takes some time for everybody else around that department to kind of accept the new responsibilities of that person as they make their transition from one role to another. So you know going from undergraduate to all of a sudden you're an alum.

(A10) I would just say that being involved has changed. It's a part of my life now. Like I could not see myself not being involved.

Perceived value

(A5) Providing some kind of value adds to the donation structure. So if somebody says "Hey, give us \$100," well great I'll give you \$100. What does that do for me? You know, what do I get in return for that \$100?

(A8) I'm not reaching back 4 years to try to find a connection to the university, but it's the connections that I have now that are letting me engage more.

(A10) With me, I'll go to the alumni events alone because I know I'm going to see 20–30 people that I know, that I'm comfortable with.

Shift in perception. Shift in perception refers to gaining a better understanding and applying a deeper meaning of institutional occurrences by participation. This can mean participating at alumni-sponsored events or being engaged with the institution in other ways. In analyzing the transcriptions, the researcher was able to identify that alumni

perception of participation has many connotative meanings. Some of these meanings include participating at alumni-sponsored events, providing monetary donations, and providing non-monetary donations such as time, knowledge, skills, and networking opportunities. The viewpoint of A2's response captured the essence of the importance of alumni donations:

So even if it's not a million dollar donation, it's still maybe like \$100 every month or something like that, so we understand why we want to do that and I think it's just more of people having to take it within themselves and realizing that if my institution doesn't succeed then the quality of what I have as a piece of paper saying that I graduated from there will no longer be valid. So the validity of the degree needs to have some kind of stance and the support of its alumni.

A2 inspires alumni to "take it within themselves" and reflect on their alma mater's success. To take it one step further, this would include the success of the current student population as well. This is where tying in scope of the community is important in that when alumni are connected to students, they will see it as a vested interest of future alumni. The alumni perception shifts from being disconnected and focusing on the institution to being connected and focusing on the students.

Another feature of shift in perception is the transparency aspect of knowing how the donation is being used. Participant responses provided that alumni want to know how their donation is being used. Oftentimes, institutions do not necessarily advertise their allocation of donations to specific uses. However, the tangibility of the donation is evident when new buildings or sport complexes are built. Although a lot of attention is given to financial donations, it is important to provide attention to the nonmonetary aspect of donation tendencies. Alumni who are not in a position to donate financially, strongly favor these types of donations as their contributions to their institutions. These types of donations are

pivotal to the continued success of the institution and its students. This is evident in A8's response:

Well I think the donorship, I mean I guess it could also mean like for participation would be meaning to you follow the mission of the university, you want to improve and educate like-minded people to better themselves I think for me time and participation at this point outweighs my donorship, because I feel I could do a lot more participating my time than I can donate cash. I feel like it's more as far as me the amount of cash I can donate, I feel like my participation and volunteering time outweighs and has a greater impact than maybe \$100.

Here, A8 shared that he/she was more impactful through his/her time and volunteerism than a financial donation. A8 understands the brevity of monetary donations, but shows support for his/her institution the best way he/she knows how to do.

Lenses we use. Lenses we use depict how alumni view the meaning of participating and donating back to their institution. This includes the lenses of student, alumni, family, and helpers. This also relates to the different stages of personal growth that alumni experience. The researcher was able to identify that typically during the student years, students view their experiences with their peers, faculty, and staff, and other alumni as being more of a support system while in school. This support system allowed them to feel comfortable in their growth process as individuals. This support system allowed them to feel valued, important, and like they mattered at their institution. A7 shared this sentiment:

I wasn't just a number, I wasn't just a face, I was actually a part of the [institution] community. I never felt like an outsider because I was a commuter or because I was at school for a little bit and I had to leave to go to work. I never felt like I wasn't ever a part of [institution], I always felt like I had a place there.

A5 shared this while referring to being able to just go and hang out at his/her friend's office:

I was telling this guy—he was the Interim Director of an office on campus—I had previously done work study in that office and we became friends and in my free time between classes and what not, I was a commuter, I would go sit in that office

because it was a comfortable place, a place that I was familiar with, my friends worked there.

When viewing experiences through the student lens, the view is generally from a present perspective. Students view these experiences as they happen. The lens grows and transitions when students graduate and become alumni of that institution. In this perspective, students now view their experiences with the institution using their alumni lenses. This is how institutions have an opportunity to strengthen the alumni affiliation that was started during the student years.

When viewing through the alumni lens, the view is generally from the past perspective in looking back, but also in the present perspective in that the experience is now from alumni interactions. It is the alumni lens that really strengthens the alumni's willingness to participate and donate. A7 depicted this with the following:

I wanted to make sure that I graduated from there with my diploma, with my degree. I think that meant a lot to me the fact that I was able to do it and I'm the first college graduate in my family. So the fact that I graduated from [institution] when you grow up in the West Side of San Antonio, you know graduating from [institution] is a big deal and just graduating from college in general, but a place like an institution like [institution] carries a lot of weight especially within your family and within, you know, the San Antonio community where they hear "Oh you graduated from [institution]." That carries a little bit of weight behind it, and that really has helped with me wanting to give back, is by knowing that my time there at [institution] wasn't wasted, it was time well spent. It was time getting to know people, it was time being active in my community there, and it kind of taught me to be active in my community and so it gave me a kind of foundation.

As the alumni lens strengthens alumni affiliation, the next lens allows for alumni to share their experiences with their family. So this progresses to include the different life stages of that alumni experience. This view is also generally from the past perspective in looking back, but also in the present perspective in that the experience is from alumni interactions that now include the alumni's family aspect. A10 shared:

I look forward to be able to take my husband and kids to that and you know that will be a part of your life like that will I mean just like anybody who marries somebody who's alumni knows that so does all these events also come along with the marriage.

When asked about being able to share alumni experiences with their daughter, A7

provided:

Being able to bring my daughter with us and showing her "Oh yeah, this is the school and these are the people and this was Mommy's friend and this was Daddy's friend" that kind of thing ... it means a lot, especially as she gets older ... so it's really cool to have something concrete to show her that relates to who she is so she can kind of grow on that herself.

Alumni like to share their experiences with their family. It allows them to connect their family-family with their school-family. This allows alumni to strengthen the bonds they have built in a manner that is both impactful and meaningful to them.

Participant responses provided that the family lens was the pivotal lens that led to the use of the helper lens. This encourages them to see current students as themselves, and therefore become more willing to participate and donate to their institution. With the helper lens, alumni want to help students who are just like them. A10 described it as "being in their shoes" as represented with the following:

I think donorship I guess wanting to give back to somebody who it's kind of you were once in those shoes, so you would want to give back to yourself I guess in a sense ... you're going to even though you don't see who you are directly helping you know that you're helping somebody like yourself or somebody you were once in their shoes you know and maybe create more scholarships and less heartache for someone or parents

As alumni are more involved with their institutions, the lens in which they view their experiences tends to be transferal in nature. So as it is, this study has shown the impression of one person viewing one institution with four different and meaningful lenses can impact the success of that institutions growth.

Transitional growth. Building on the previously revealed lens that alumni use when interacting with their institution, alumni experience a transitional growth as a result of these interactions. Transitional growth refers to any aspect related to milestone life changes. These changes include being a student, graduating and becoming an alumni of the institution, entering the work force after college, starting a family, growing professionally, feeling comfortable in a certain life phase, and being able to donate back to one's alma mater. This is evident in alumni having different goals while enrolled as students compared to when they have graduated. Some goals after graduation and participating at alumni events are to be able to share these experiences with their children, as described by A7:

I think anytime you have the chance to show your children the place that you went to school is always a big draw.

Whereas for other alumni, their goals reflect more of a professional focus. A8 provided the aspect of this time being a transition process that alumni experience:

I think it's a transition process. I mean you also have to realize that the people that are graduating are 21 year olds that are still trying to find a career, are still trying to go ahead and pay out their debt, their student debt, and so I don't know if everybody's like me but they don't donate cash but they donate time and participate.

A5 shared the same sentiment:

So but at that point, at that juncture in my life, I didn't feel drawn to dive into participation.

As evident in the participants' responses, alumni experience a transitional growth process related to their life phases. This transitional growth allows alumni to identify where they are in a certain point in their lives and to identify their impact willingness to participate with their institution after graduation. Transitional growth leads to an understanding and appreciation of the last category of perceived value.

Perceived value. Alumni want to know the perceived value or benefit of their participation and donation. Alumni are continuously faced with personal, professional, and social responsibilities in their daily lives. For alumni to participate in nonrequired interactions, they must have an attached value associated with them. Perceived value can refer to being able to connect with others from the institution (students, alumni, faculty, and staff), realizing that their donation has a positive impact on other students, being able to share their alumni experiences with their families, and having a school family with which to connect. A8 provided the importance of providing a perceived value to encourage alumni donations:

I think participation is pretty easy just in, you know, event driven, and um, promotion of events. Now donation itself, you're asking for people's money right so that's a little bit different. I think a way that the alumni relations can encourage alumni donations is by creating some sort of value. So what do I get when I donate \$1 kind of thing, aside from feeling great because I'm providing for my alma mater, would be it needs to create some value for me. I need to feel like "you know what yeah this dollar is going to go a long way." So I think being able to identify how the dollar is going to be used would be a great way to encourage donations. So for like every dollar, I don't know like, 10% goes to the Business School, 5%, that kind of thing, and maybe we can go ahead and target donations to specific schools, which is I think something we already do.

In this response, A8 recommended providing donation campaigns to the various schools within the university. More specifically, A8 mentioned the Business School as being the school from which they graduated. Therefore a piece of A8's perceived value would be donating back to the school from which he graduated.

A4 provided his/her perceived value as being something related to wanting other students to have opportunities he/she had:

Knowing that I'm going to be able to make a difference through that financial donation even no matter how small or what the size of it is, it's all going to go for the benefit of the students and for me that's something that I'm very proud of that I can be a part of that, because I had a great experience as a student and I know

people donated money for that experience. So to be able to continue giving that gift is something I really enjoy doing.

This perceived value is understanding and appreciating that previous donations allowed them to have a great student experience. It is also wanting to share their student experience opportunities with current students. As previously evidenced, it is an important aspect that institutions must take into consideration when reaching out to alumni for participation and soliciting donations.

Theoretical Coding: Central/Core Category

The coding and categories previously discussed led to a single central/core category that was identified through the theoretical coding process. The central/core category of this study was characterized as transitional donation among alumni and was characterized as a process order sequential structure as seen in Figure 4. Throughout this study, the researcher was able to identify that alumni approaches to participation and donation were comprised of a transitional process over time.

From the analysis of the participants' responses, the researcher was able to gain insight into alumni perception of their commitment to their institution after graduation. Being involved in the alumni community allows for a shift in perception to occur.

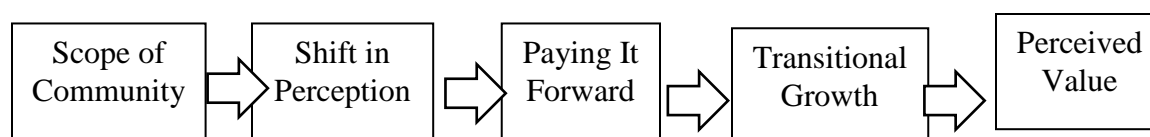


Figure 4. Process order of alumni participation and donation (internal).

This shift is a result of volunteering, participating, and gaining a deeper understanding of the alumni role in relation to the success of the institution. This

understanding impresses on the lens that alumni use to view their interactions with others in their community. The use of lens provides alumni an appreciation for the fluid aspects of taking pride in one's alma mater. These lenses and how meaning is attached to experiences encourage a transitional growth to occur within the individual. Alumni experience different transitions from student, to alumni, to personal and professional growth. This transitional growth can be seen as both challenging and rewarding. Lastly, transitional growth leads to applying a perceived value with interactions among the community. For alumni to participate and donate, there has to be an intrinsic or extrinsic perceived value. As this core category was characterized as transitional donation among alumni and looking at the transitional processes alumni experience when interacting with their institutions, the researcher was able to identify the following theory.

Theory Generation: Theory of Alumni Transitional Donation

Grounded in the codes, categories, and mainly the central/core category above, the theory constructed from this study was the theory of alumni transitional donation. Based on the categories described above, the researcher was able to identify that alumni transitional donation was both an internal and external process dependent upon both the individual and the institution. When questioned about their student and alumni experiences, alumni responses were processual. Alumni approach their participation with their alma maters as being progressive rather than precipitous. A8 provided his/her reasoning for participating after graduation:

It's grown. It's now I went from just a casual participant and attendee of events to a full blown I'm going to be going to all of the events that the alumni and other organizations host because I want to be there and be able to provide insight as to what I've accomplished with what I've learned at the university.

A8 explains how he/she first started attending events casually or once in a while, to participating at events more often that included the alumni association and other organizations. He/she went on to explain in further detail his/her understanding of transitioning from participant to donor:

I think it's a transition process, I mean you also have to realize that the people that are graduating are 21 year olds that are still trying to find a career, are still trying to go ahead and pay out, um, their debt, their student debt, and so I don't know if everybody's like me, but they don't donate cash but they donate time and participate. So in their mind donating time is money, right? So liking a post, promoting a post you know letting people know that will in a sense turn into some sort of cash equivalent for the university. So I think as we grow and we realize and we become more confident and comfortable with our careers, that's going to lead us go ahead and make that switch from cash equivalence to actually donating and I think I'm in the cusp of that. I'm like teetering on whether, like you know I think I've done enough, um, with my participation that now maybe I have to start donating.

When students graduate, their main goals are related to initiating their career paths. After a few years dedicated to career establishment and development, alumni tend to experience a shift and appreciate reconnecting with their institution and for what it stands. A8 additionally shared a timeframe for when alumni may initially transition from participant to donor that would not be immediate, but actually a few years after graduating from the institution:

And I think I don't know and I don't know what the statistics would be for when a life what life event switches for an alumni to start donating. Is it more finally settled with your career? I would say it's not entry level that's for sure. I would say maybe that it's middle level after you've been out in the field for maybe three to five years then you and as long as you're participating you still have that connection to the university I think that's when, at least for me, that's when it would start to transition from a participant to a donor.

Most alumni experience a tumultuous time right after graduation, trying to figure out what the next step in their life entails. As recommended by A5, sometimes taking some time

away from the institution may lead to future participation and donation. A5 shared the following:

At that point, at that juncture in my life, I didn't feel drawn to dive into participation as an alum from the university. I had just spent 4 years, you know, navigating. It was almost exhausting at that point. Especially my senior year, the culmination of a college degree I was tired, I was ready to graduate, I was ready to enter into the workforce full-fledge and didn't have to worry about answering to [institution]. I mean that was kind of the thing. I needed a little bit of a break, just a little, as it turns out just a few years. Um, but I feel like my alumni experience after that break, when I came back, has been very, very positive. You can be as engaged and as active as you want to be. There's room for someone to come in to do a lot, or you can just participate or volunteer for, you know, auxiliary kind of things. Whatever you want to do at whatever level you want to participate, the alumni association has been very, very accepting, which is nice.

A5 provided the following response referring to the importance of volunteerism as alumni's first interaction with their institution after graduation:

So I think donating time is, I honestly believe that, the very first interaction that an alum has after they've graduated is going to be the donation of time. Like they there's not a lot of money to be had in most cases. So especially in a demographic where we have a lot of first generation graduates, first generation college students. You know the donation of money isn't always an option and so there needs to be made an emphasis on and an importance of giving of time.

When asked about the transitional process of volunteering and participating leading to their donating back to their institution, A5 shared the following:

Yeah, yes. In a lot of ways yes. I mean I told you that being part of this led to some professional growth. Well you know if that didn't happen then I wouldn't have the money to give back to the university. So yeah indirectly or directly one way or another yes it did, the donation of time led to my willingness to donate monetarily.

When asked about their volunteering experiences with their institution after graduation, A6 mentioned:

I don't feel so awkward about showing up and volunteering and things, but it took a while to get there, so like I saw that they were looking for volunteers for the event coming up for Easter and so I was thinking, um, how can I do that? Let me see and so it's interesting, it just is We got to invite our community and it was, that was

probably one of the times that I felt most connected to the university was volunteering like that, in that aspect, I liked that.

When differentiating between participating and volunteering, A6 provided the following:

I think from the participant aspect I wish there were more events and more networking. From the volunteer, I wish I had volunteered more and sooner.

A6 shared his/her understanding of what donorship meant to him/her:

When I think of donorship, I think of not only monetary, but physical time, and so I feel like if someone's asking me for a donation, it should be ok if I say "I can't give monetary, but I can give of my time. How can I help?" something like that. So that's what it means to me, donorship, doesn't just mean dollars.

The previous responses from A8, A5, and A6 resonated the mindset of most alumni shortly after graduating from the institution. Most are looking for their first professional employment, trying to determine whether they want to be engaged with their institution post-graduation, and if so, not really knowing how but through volunteering or helping out as they did when they were students.

As alumni begin or maintain their connecting processes with their alma mater, the institution must be cautious as to not make that connection solely about the funding and donating aspects. This study provided participant responses that supported this notion presented. The researcher was able to identify that when interacting with alumni to build or maintain alumni relationships, institutions must employ more meaningful approaches that will inspire donation. This is done by approaching it as a transitional process. This theory recommends implementing a model of transitional donation that encourages alumni exchanges with their institution through the different stages of volunteerism, participation, and donation. These exchanges facilitate more meaningful and lasting interactions between alumni and their institution as seen in Figure 5 below.

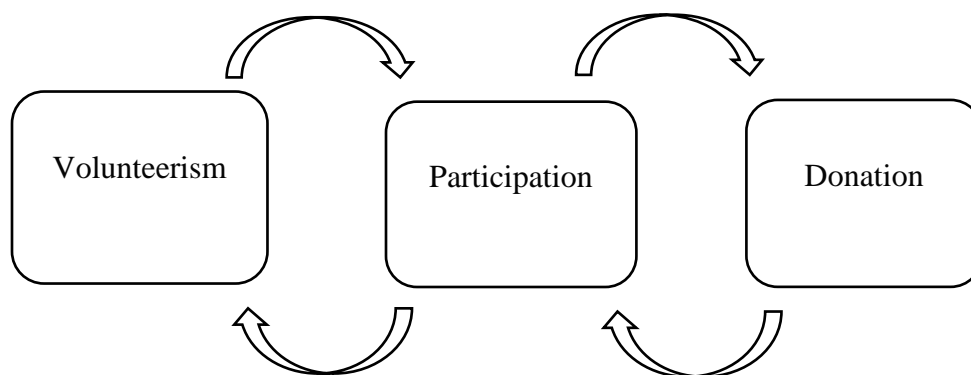


Figure 5. Alumni transitional donation (external).

Initiating with volunteerism provides a general overview of how alumni can interact with their academic and surrounding communities. This allows for alumni to reconnect in an altruistic manner that does not require money, but time. For younger alumni who have just graduated and are trying to enter the workforce, sometimes time is their best donation that they can give back. It's imperative that institutions recognize and appreciate this. Moving on to participation allows alumni to see a different aspect of volunteerism by simply attending an event. This aspect would serve as a networking opportunity to connect with other alumni in a more casual manner. Lastly, donation allows for alumni to move beyond volunteerism and participation, to actual tangible support of the institution. At this phase, sometimes alumni cannot provide their time, so a monetary donation may be their best donation they can give back. Interestingly enough, the researcher was able to identify that alumni apply a connotative meaning to participation that includes characteristics of all three phases.

The internal process of transition from participant to donor is initiated when alumni embrace their institutional community. In doing so, they gain a deeper understanding related to the impact that they have on this community. They are then able to view fully the

role that they provide while being connected to their community. Next they experience a transitional growth as human beings and are then able to identify their value in transitioning from participant to donor. The external process of transition facilitated by the institution occurs when alumni are provided opportunities to volunteer, participate, and donate in a manner that is both meaningful and impactful.

Summary

This chapter illustrated the analysis process implemented by the researcher and the results of this study. Included were some of the initial codes obtained from participant responses that included serving as a resource, connecting, donating having a broader meaning, paying it forward, timing in life, gaining a different perspective, providing others an opportunity, and mixing students with alumni. Focused codes led to the generation of the five main categories that were scope of community, shift in perception, lenses we use, transitional growth, and perceived value. The five condensed categories contributed to the central/core category of transitional donation among alumni. The culmination of this research yielded the theory of alumni transitional donation, which described the internal and external transitional processes alumni experience as they transition from participants to donors.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Recommendations

This dissertation study used a constructivist grounded theory design to examine the transitional process that occurs as alumni transition from participants to donors. The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how alumni personify their commitment to their institution by participating in alumni-sponsored events and decide additionally to support their institution through financial donations. Participants from this study were 10 alumni, five female and five male, who graduated and currently had only their bachelor's degree from private Catholic institutions located in southwest Texas. Five alumni were donors and five were non-donors. The previous chapter identified the transitional processes that alumni experience, as well as introduced the theory of alumni transitional donation. This chapter is dedicated to discussing the results and providing recommendations for future research in this subject area.

Theoretical and Conceptual Integration

This dissertation study identified that internal and external transitional processes occur as alumni transition from participants to donors. In relation to the theoretical framework, this study was in alignment with the social exchange and expectancy theories previously introduced. Social exchange theory focuses on the “give and take” exchanges that occur within relationships and social interactions experienced among partners (Lawler & Thye, 1999; Weerts & Ronca, 2007). This study examined the alumni-institution relationship and the exchanges that occur throughout student and alumni experiences. Expectancy theory is a motivation theory derived from the research of behaviorist Victor Vroom and is based on valence, instrumentality, and expectancy (Vroom, 1964). The

expectations associated with the alumni-institution relationship and the influence on participation and donation tendencies were identified and presented in this study.

These theories reinforced the importance of the social exchanges and expectations experienced between alumni and their alma mater. Lawler and Thye (1999) characterized social exchange as including multiple representatives who each have valuable substance and decide whether to exchange and in what amounts. Social exchanges occur as alumni incorporate scope of community, lenses we use, and transitional growth in their interactions with the institution. Social exchange in relation to scope of community is the community settings that alumni build within the institution itself. Members of a community are more willing to engage in activities, take responsibilities, and share goals, practices, and knowledge in a manner that benefits the community and its members (Nistor, Daxecker, Stanciu, & Diekamp, 2015). In relation to the lenses we use, social exchange is evident in the perception alumni view their previous academic experiences and their willingness to contribute to the academic experiences of the current student population. Regarding transitional growth, alumni experience changing life phases and continue to develop throughout their years enrolled at the institution and post-graduation. Commitment is shaped by the social exchanges experienced between alumni and their institution (Borden, Shaker, & Kienker, 2014). This affiliation is formed and strengthened throughout the continuous interactions associated with these exchanges.

Expectancy occurs when there is an identified likelihood of a particular outcome that is derived from a particular action (Vroom, 1964). Expectations are incorporated when alumni experience a shift in perception and identify a perceived value with these interactions. Alumni encounter a shift in perception associated with their expectations

when they involve themselves with their institution. Their views change from “What can my institution do for me?” to “What can I do for my institution?” In relation to their expectations and perceived value, alumni attach various meanings of value to their post-graduation interactions with their institution. When alumni expectations are met, alumni gain a sense of fulfillment of their interactions with their institution (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014). Therefore, the fulfillment of alumni expectations plays a crucial role in future participation and donation tendencies. As previously mentioned, institutions must emotionally engage their alumni in a manner that strengthens their institutional commitment. Emotional energy is the cohesive unit in situations and relations that connects group members together (Lawler & Thye, 1999). Therefore, it is important that institutions understand the social exchanges and expectations that are present and be able to connect emotionally with alumni in an effective and meaningful manner.

This study supported the conceptual framework of alumni commitment made tangible in the form of participation and donation tendencies. Positive alumni attitudes relating to satisfaction, involvement, and commitment are characteristic traits of organizational commitment behavior (De Lara, 2008). When alumni experience these traits associated with their involvement with their alumni association and institution, they are demonstrating their commitment to the organization’s success. As identified in this study, alumni experience internal and external transitional processes as they transition from participants to donors. The internal process is characterized as embracing scope of community, experiencing a shift in perception, viewing through the lenses we use, experiencing a transitional growth, and applying a perceived value to their participation and donation. The external transitional process is characterized as the institution providing

opportunities that encourage this transition initiating with volunteering, to full participation, and lastly donorship. These transitional processes build on the notion that alumni commitment is clearly demonstrated through their willingness for strengthening their participation and donation tendencies.

Importance of Volunteerism

In analyzing and making sense of the data, the researcher identified two characteristics related to alumni involvement that were not initially considered. These characteristics were the importance of volunteerism and the importance of connection. The researcher was able to gather from the participants that volunteerism with their alma mater was an important aspect for them to give back and stay connected with their institution. When alumni feel connected and value this attachment to their institution, they will work to enhance their institution through volunteering (Tidwell, 2005). This positive relationship between alumni and their institution is impactful. When alumni value their experiences associated with the institution, they will show their support through giving of their time. Alumni are more willing to volunteer and give back to their institution if it is part of their social network, and therefore student and alumni success is dependent on their involvement in the social and academic communities within the institution (Burley et al., 2007; Farrow & Yuan, 2011). Volunteering allowed alumni to help in a manner that did not require a financial aspect, but focused more on a temporal aspect. Participants referenced sometimes feeling more comfortable volunteering and helping out at alumni events. This way they knew they were contributing something useful through their time and support. A5 shared the following:

I volunteered with the university even as a student, gave time to the university to help advance programs, did some freelance work, graphic work for a couple of

classes that I wasn't taking, like they were not my classes. I've never taken these courses but I knew the professors in one way or another; they needed certain things done for them so I contributed to it. I never billed for it, I never wrote anything off, I was just doing it because I was proud of where I came from and what I did and I was flattered of course that, you know, even after I've left the university they still come to me for these things. So I think donating time is I honestly believe that the very first interaction that an alum has after they've graduated is going to be the donation of time. The donation of money isn't always an option, and so there needs to be made an emphasis on and an importance of giving of time.

A5 also referenced volunteering his/her knowledge and experience to provide current students a sense of nonacademic support he/she wished he/she had when he/she was a student. Alumni serve as a resource since they are able to provide students first-hand experience of their time while enrolled as a student at the same institution.

Volunteerism is supported by the attributes presented in both social exchange and expectancy theories. Costs of volunteering are evaluated based on the benefits alumni have received in the past or present (Weerts & Ronca, 2008). In other words, when alumni evaluate whether they will participate in volunteering with their institution through their time, knowledge, or expertise, they reflect back on their experiences associated with the institution, such as their student experiences, the quality/marketability of their education, and their alumni experiences. Hence, alumni are more willing to volunteer their time back to their institution if they identify a positive relationship between their efforts having led to an expected desirable outcome (Weerts & Ronca, 2007). Alumni willingness to volunteer is based on their analysis of their expectations associated with these social exchanges. When alumni feel connected to their institution and associate a value to this attachment, they are more likely to nurture the institution's success through increased volunteerism (Tidwell, 2005). Referring to the institution's success is evidenced in programming, development, and growth, more specifically by ensuring the success of its students and alumni. It is

imperative that institutions instill in both their current students and alumni a culture of giving, whether monetary or temporal (Terry & Macy, 2007). Students are future alumni. It is important to initiate volunteerism practices within the student population in a manner that promotes the notion of learning by giving. This will, in turn, encourage a positive shift in understanding, views, attitudes, interests, intentions, behaviors, and interactions leading to personal growth (Olberding, 2009). This is an additional approach institutions can utilize when initiating the notion of institutional affiliation among students, the same affiliation that will later impact alumni interaction. Past volunteerism behavior determines future volunteerism behavior (Tidwell, 2005). It is important that if institutions want to benefit from the volunteerism of their alumni, they have to first promote the importance of student volunteerism. This will encourage the notion of giving back to the institution and community as being a social responsibility of both students and alumni.

Importance of Connection

The second characteristic the researcher identified related to alumni involvement that was not initially considered was the importance of connection. Connecting alumni with their institution is an example of the institution employing its mission in an impactful manner (Williams, Leatherwood, Byrd, Boyd, & Pennington, 2010). Alumni want to feel connected to their institution, faculty, staff, and current students. This connectedness encourages alumni to experience increased trust and empathy for the institution's success and that of its student and alumni population (Tidwell, 2005). Volunteerism is a way for alumni to stay connected to their institution in a meaningful and productive manner. A6 provided these comments:

One of the times that I felt most connected to the university was volunteering ... being able to say that I'm doing something with my school.

Participants mentioned that they were interested in knowing what current students are doing on campus. Alumni were interested in whether students were still participating in certain events, if a specific instructor was still teaching, if students knew about certain landmark locations on campus, and if certain traditions were still practiced. This interest shows how alumni connect with their past through connecting with the present. It is important to close the loop between alumni and students before they leave the institution upon graduation (West, 2012). This closing of the alumni-student loop is facilitated by connecting alumni with students throughout their time at the institution.

Alumni like to share their stories and experiences with other alumni and students. This can serve as a great resource by sharing their experiences since graduating and show students how they can use their degrees in meaningful and successful ways (Cushing, 2012). The transition after graduation can be a stressful process for some students, and this would serve as an extra support knowing that they are not alone in this life phase. Alumni view participation as being able to connect among the generations of a school family. These intra- and inter-group relationships between alumni, students, faculty, and staff serve as positive predictors of institutional support (De Lara, 2008). This encourages alumni to reflect on their time spent at the institution and reminisce back to when they too were students. As alumni acknowledge the value of their education, they can help current students recognize the value of their academic experiences as well (Williams et al., 2010). This reflection allows alumni to appreciate the bonds that were created and shared with faculty, staff, student groups/organizations, and their peers back when they were students.

Alumni view the importance of connection as a way to keep the institutional spirit, traditions, and legacy as an ongoing and cross-generational experience. A4 shared the following:

To me it means keeping that spirit alive, because I am proud of our institution, and that's something I feel a lot of when I go to different events like that and I want to keep that going and hopefully that'll keep me engaged with our university even if even later than just being a student. So kind of keeps that connection alive, keeps that spirit in me.

This connection is a way for alumni to show current students what it means to be alumni of that institution and what is expected once graduated: to not only come back to the institution and connect, but to go out into the community and be true representatives of the institution from which they graduated. The importance of volunteerism and connection linked to the transitional processes alumni experience in relation to alumni participation and donation is discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Discussion

Findings from this dissertation study concluded that alumni experience internal and external transitional processes when interacting with their alma mater. As mentioned in the literature review of this study, student experience serves as an indicator for the alumni experience. Students who had a positive experience while enrolled in the institution are more willing to participate with their institution after graduation. Students who were active with their institution tend to be more active and giving as alumni (Martin, Moriuchi, Smith, Moeder, & Nichols, 2015). Therefore, it is important that universities recognize the importance of alumni relationships in supporting the institution. Alumni who experience a sense of community within their institution, while student and alum, tend to be more satisfied with their interactions with their institutions and are more likely to provide support

when solicited (Delaney, 2004). Community fosters the sense of connection that is pertinent to increasing alumni support. As alumni feel a deeper connection to their alma mater, they will be more willing to help out as they can.

As introduced in the previous chapter, alumni experience internal transitional processes related to the scope of community, shift in perceptions, lenses they use, transitional growth, and a perceived value. Alumni also experience external transitional processes related to the opportunities provided by the institution that include volunteering, participating, and donating. A distinguishing characteristic between supportive and inactive alumni is the level of interaction with the institution after graduation relating to attending athletic events, cultural activities, and campus visits (Weerts & Ronca, 2007). The more alumni are involved with their institution after graduation, the more willing they will be to donate, as they will be in constant connection to be able to identify the necessity of institutional support.

Scope of community. As previously introduced, scope of community referred to the interactions experienced among students, alumni, and faculty and staff that initiate institutional affiliation. Martin et al. (2015) provided the notion of brand communities and their importance in leading to institutional growth through focusing on the strengthening of the student and alumni communities. Community is an important aspect for both students and alumni. It provides students a place to share experiences, challenge their ideals, and grow as individuals in a safe manner. Later, when students graduate, this then allows alumni a place to reflect on their past experiences that helped shape who they are as individuals and reconnect with their peers and faculty in a comfortable and familiar environment. This sense of community is experienced when alumni interact with current

students, other alumni, and the faculty and staff of the institution that helped shape their growth.

Oftentimes alumni serve as the best source of experiential information for current students. Alumni serve as an untapped resource that institutions should utilize for providing students with a nontraditional aspect of encouragement and guidance (Williams et al., 2010). Alumni can provide students advice from their own personal lived experiences while enrolled as students and since graduating from the institution. They can provide opportunities for internships, mentorship, and support additionally to what they can get in the classroom. Alumni involvement can also lead to increased student placement, sharing job opportunities, participating in mentorship programs for new students, and recruiting for prospective students (Pottick, Giordano, & Chirico, 2015). They can serve as an additional resource to various student pursuits. Students look to alumni for developmental interactions that include mentorship, guidance, advice, skill development, and support (D'Abate, 2010). Alumni can serve their institution by providing their experiential knowledge and sharing that with the students. Alumni possess the unique insight of being able to connect their student experiences with the professional requirements of their industry by drawing on their personal knowledge of the work responsibilities and the associated skills necessary to help sustain successful careers (Plice & Reinig, 2009). The sharing of this knowledge is vital to what students have to look forward to when they graduate from their institution. Students who are provided realistic job views and what they should expect when graduating and entering the workforce will be positioned to be able to make better-informed career decisions (Kline & Rowe, 1998). It is important to be able to gain inside knowledge of the positive and negative aspects associated with industry prospects and how

to navigate effectively through the post-graduation journey. This is where alumni affiliation is made evident, in that they are willing to come back, be involved with their institution, and ensure the success of its future graduates.

Alumni enjoy being able to connect with other alumni. This provides them a sense of camaraderie only shared with others who graduated from the institution and share the understanding of its traditions and rituals. Alumni exhibit stronger affiliation to their institution when they perceive the institution to have valued, meaningful, and well established traditions and rituals (Martin et al., 2015). This is a sort of in-group status shared with other alumni. They are able to reminisce back to when they were students and to share their personal experiences understood and shared with other alumni. These interactions, when experienced cross-generationally, allow alumni from different generations and times to connect in a symbolic manner. As stated before, alumni are the legacy of the institution. This is personified when alumni, no matter what year they graduated, are able to share their experiences with those who are part of their institutional community and outside as well.

Alumni also enjoy being able to connect with the faculty and staff of the institution. These individuals had an important role in challenging, shaping, and growing students into alumni. Therefore, faculty and staff play a crucial and pertinent role in graduating students into alumni and strengthening their affiliation to the institution. Faculty and staff not only grow students academically, but interpersonally as well. They encourage students to interact with each other, reach out to faculty members, participate in internship and mentorship opportunities, treat others with respect, and listen to others' opinions in a productive manner (Kline & Rowe, 1998). Within the academic setting, they challenge and

grow students in a manner that teaches them the importance of appreciating teamwork, communication, and diversity. Alumni who received developmental support in the form of mentorship from their faculty and staff are more likely to provide that developmental support for others (D'Abate, 2010). When alumni reflect on the impact that this developmental support had on their academic and professional successes, they are more appreciative and willing to do the same for current students. Reconnecting with faculty and staff allows them to see the impact that their work had on their students. Therefore, alumni are also the legacy of their faculty and staff life's work.

Shift in perception. Alumni experience a shift in perception when they participate and invest in their institution's success. When alumni initiate their participation with their alumni department, they may not have a true understanding of what goes into ensuring the success of alumni events or the background of why participating is important. As they continue to attend events, connect with other alumni, students, and faculty and staff, they are able to gain a deeper understanding of the impact that their participation has not only on them, but on the institution as a whole. This shift in perception is what allows alumni to identify with the institution's successes and failures, internalize them as their own, and assist in efforts to promote their institution's success (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014). Participation serves as a catalyst to re-establishing the alumni connection to their alma mater. This also encourages alumni to reflect on their past experiences with the institution in a manner that includes their student experiences.

The relationship between student intellectual development and alumni perception of personal growth is important (Erwin, 2012). Alumni understanding of this relationship truly impacts their willingness to participate with their institution after graduation. As

institutions are increasingly dependent on alumni support, participation prepares alumni for the next phase of donation. When asked by the institution for a donation, alumni are more willing to donate as they have previously invested their time and energy into the success of their institution. Gottfried and Johnson (2007) provided that solicitation not only generates a higher dollar amount and an increase in the number of alumni donors who donate, but also drives up participation rates as well. The shift in perception that alumni experience takes place from the time alumni begin their student journey and continues to shift throughout their interactions during the different life phases. This shift in perception is an ongoing process and simply changes or shifts throughout the various interactions that alumni experience with their alma mater.

Lenses we use. The examples of the participant responses provided in the previous chapter exemplify how alumni view their interactions with their institution as having been positive experiences. Alumni use different lenses throughout their involvement with their alma mater. Initially the student lens is used when alumni were enrolled as students. During that time, alumni were the most impressionable regarding laying the foundation for institutional affiliation. They depended on their peers, faculty, staff, and the institution to help pave the way for their growth. Some alumni feel more loyalty to faculty members and academic programs than the institution itself (Williams et al., 2010). This is due to having a positive impact when viewing and remembering their experiences through the student lens. As they graduated from their institution, their lens shifted from student to alumni.

Alumni serve as a resource in offering their unique perspectives relating to being prepared for life outside of school after graduation (Delaney, 2004). Alumni are able to provide a perspective that cannot be provided by the institution. With this shift, the alumni

perception of their relationship shifts as well. Instead of looking toward the institution as what can the institution provide them, it shifts to how they can help their institution and current students by reconnecting and giving back. The relationship between intellectual development as a student and alumni growth supports the impact that the student experience has on the value of alumni perceptions (Erwin, 2012). The lens alumni use influences future activity with the institution. With a sense of connectedness, alumni will engage in attending functions that will support their institution, participate in informal recruiting, and contribute financially (Tidwell, 2005). This is where the external shift is important in that the institution should provide ways for alumni to volunteer, participate, and donate back to their institution. As alumni engage their institution, they tend to include their family as a reason for strengthening their commitment. As the alumni lens is incorporated, the family lens is also incorporated in how they view these interactions.

This study provided that alumni not only want to reconnect with their alma mater, but they also want to share this reconnection with their families. They want to be able to share their personal past with their personal present. This is where they include their parents, spouses, and children at various alumni events. Family bonding practices with the institution encourage family legacy aspects associated with the alumni-institution relationship. Alumni frequency and amount of gift giving increases with the number of relatives, especially parents, who attended the same institution (Meer & Rosen, 2010). Bonding and affiliation between family and institution are strengthened when multiple members or generations of a family graduate from the same institution. Children of alumni who are involved with their institution tend to be more willing to attend that same institution themselves, as they become familiar with the mission and traditions of their

parent's alma mater. "Alumni giving behavior is consistent with the notion that families bond with universities" (Meer & Rosen, 2010, p. 656). Family-institution bonding allows alumni to share with their family the experiences that had an impact in shaping and growing them. With this lens, the view is generally from three perspectives: the past perspective in that alumni are looking back at their student experiences, the present perspective in looking at the current alumni interactions, and the future perspective in looking at the impact their participation and donation has on current and future students. This lens requires that alumni look at both their student and alumni experiences in a manner that influences their willingness to reengage with their institution after graduation.

Transitional growth. Transitional growth is any aspect related to the milestone life changes associated with being a student, graduating and becoming an alumni of the institution, entering the work force after college, starting a family, growing professionally, to feeling comfortable in a certain life phase and being able to donate back to one's alma mater. The university experience as a whole is a transformational experience in and of itself (Martin et al., 2015). A student is not the same person leaving the university from when he/she entered it. Years, experiences, and time are all integral and impactful aspects of the transitional growth that a student will experience during his/her time with the institution. When a student graduates and becomes an alum of the institution, the person continues to grow throughout life. Goals and expectations continue to change throughout time. The varying life stages through which an alum lives are important predictors of that alum giving and volunteer support (Weerts & Ronca, 2007).

Part of the alumni relations department's knowing their alumni demographics is understanding the impact that the different life phases have on the capacity and willingness

for alumni to participate and donate. “The timing of achieving alumni status and a full-time position may also be important to consider” (Borden et al., 2014, p. 213). When students first graduate, they tend to be looking for their first post-graduate job. They are more focused on finding a job than they are on if they are going to donate back to their institution. A few years later, when they are more situated in their careers, they may begin to revisit whether they can donate at that time. Alumni have varying goals after graduating. Some may want to start a family and be able to share their experiences with them. It is evident in the participants’ responses that the transitional growth process is related to the changing life phases through which alumni grow. This allows alumni to identify and determine where they are in a certain phase and will influence their willingness to participate and donate.

Perceived value. Human nature is to appreciate experience. Humans are social beings who appreciate the communities they create for themselves. Communities are characteristic of selectively being involved with something valued. Alumni appreciate their past student and present alumni communities in which they have situated themselves. The subjectivity of this perceived value is an important aspect that institutions must take into consideration when reaching out to alumni for participation and soliciting donations. The perceived value of institutional affiliation is an important determinant of future participation and donation. This identification is a sense of oneness between alumni and the institution (Borden et al., 2014). Therefore, the perceived value that alumni attach to their interactions is important to understand and be able to respond to in an effective and meaningful manner.

As introduced in Chapter 2, alumni are more willing to donate when they understand the impact of their donation. Oftentimes alumni are interested in knowing how their donation is being used or how they are impacting their institution with their donation. Therefore, it is important to show alumni how their donations are impacting students and the institution in a meaningful manner. This study provided that alumni have an appreciation for their time while enrolled as students, and they want to be able to provide the same opportunities for other students. Alumni donate legacy gifts and appreciate being able to see and understand that the money they are giving back is making a clear difference in someone's life (McNall, 2008). Alumni understanding of the impact of their donations is that they are helping to create opportunities for students like them. It is this impact that encourages additional donations and continued support from alumni. As the results of this study provided that alumni experience an internal transition process from participation to donation, they also experience an external transition process associated with the opportunities provided to them by the alumni relations department and institution.

Volunteerism. As previously mentioned, volunteerism was a characteristic not initially considered by the researcher when conducting this dissertation study. The importance of volunteerism that alumni hold as meaningful was clearly identified as a result from the analysis process. Volunteerism allows institutions to show their alumni how they can initiate their participation with the institution. This is why some alumni perceive their nonmonetary donation as a donation to their institution. Volunteerism can impact future participation and donation tendencies of alumni. Stephenson and Yerger (2014) provided that alumni participation and satisfaction in those types of activities with the institution affected future donorship behaviors. That was because as alumni volunteered

their time within their community, whether institutional or general, they were helping at events representing their alumni association and institution. “Alumni who give and volunteer have formed deeper connections to their alma mater and this may impact their understanding about institutional needs and their role in meeting these needs” (Weerts & Ronca, 2007, p. 26). Volunteering and giving of time provide alumni the opportunity of identifying that a need exists within their campus and encourage them to meet this need through their time. This awareness creates a meaningful interaction between alumni and their alma mater. This also builds deeper connections and leads to understanding the importance of increased participation among alumni.

Participation. Alumni participation is a crucial aspect that leads to alumni donation. Through participating with alumni relations and the overall institution, alumni are able to reconnect with their alma mater. In reconnecting, they are able to gain insight into the needs that contribute to the institution’s continued success. It is important that institutions continue to ensure alumni satisfaction and commitment through promoting institutional identification (Tidwell, 2005). Institutional identification or affiliation strongly influences the various aspects of alumni commitment. Alumni who identify with their alma mater are more willing to participate and donate. Post-graduation participation with the university increases alumni contact with the institution, connects alumni with students, and solidifies in-group membership (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014). Participation allows alumni to be involved while simultaneously strengthening their institutional commitment. Satisfaction and perceived personal and professional growth attributed to the student experience influence alumni participation (Delaney, 2004). Alumni who participate with their alumni association and institution tend to experience a strengthening of their

institutional bonds that were initiated during the student years. There is a strong relationship between student and alumni participation (Johnson, 2004). Alumni who were active college participants tend to graduate and become active alumni participants. This is due to alumni being already familiar with the role of active participant and the impact their commitment has on the institution's success. This opportunity allows alumni to reengage their institution with a different and more meaningful lens. It allows them to get involved with the knowledge and experience only time can afford.

Donation. The legacy of any institution is its alumni. This group serves as an integral part of the institution's past, present, and future endeavors. Alumni are the personified representations of the institution's mission and values. They serve as the true representatives of the institution within their communities. As alumni focus will always be based on growing personally and professionally throughout life, so too will the institutional focus always be based on funding and growth. Participation is an evolving process, and institutions are responsible for encouraging alumni to realize their involvement potential. Sequentially, donating is truly personal, and institutions must be able emotionally to reach out to their alumni in a manner that strengthens this sentiment.

It is important to understand that alumni affiliation or loyalty starts when alumni are enrolled as students of the institution. This affiliation is evident in their current alumni behavior (participation and donation) and behavioral intentions (future participation and future donations) (Martin et al., 2015). Affiliation is a component of the institutional relationship that is built over time. It is commitment strengthened to a level of donation. Alumni donation is imperative for all universities in relation to the various aspects of institutional growth and student success (McNall, 2008). Alumni donation is not only

commitment to the institution, but also to the current students graduating from the institution. With this commitment, alumni make a tangible and crucial impact on the success of others. Institutions must create an awareness among alumni of the institutional needs that exist, as there are many alumni who participate but have not yet participated in other ways such as volunteering or donating (Weerts & Ronca, 2007). As alumni volunteer and participate, they become aware of the varying needs that may exist in promoting the success of the institution and its students. It is this awareness that leads to a deeper alumni understanding of the importance and impact of their donation. Participation is significant to the amount and frequency of donations that alumni are willing to provide (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014). Volunteering and participating impact alumni responsiveness to the deeper meaning of donating. Alumni who have experienced success in their career paths after graduation are more willing to donate based on their sense of connection to their alma mater and awareness of institutional needs that exist (Terry & Macy, 2007). It is important for institutions to connect with alumni in meaningful ways and to bring awareness that the need for alumni help is necessary. Alumni are more willing to donate to their institution when they are actively involved, feel connected, and know there is a need (Farrow & Yuan, 2011). This connection and knowledge is what makes the difference for alumni when deciding if they will donate to their institution when asked. This awareness and responsiveness from alumni is what impacts the success of current students, other alumni, and the institution as a whole.

Conclusions

The results of this dissertation study were significant in that they have several practical implications for alumni relations' efforts. This study identified the transitional

process that occurs as alumni transition from participating at alumni-sponsored events to donating back financially to their institution. The primary research question that this study aimed to answer was: How can universities develop alumni outreach initiatives to elicit effective and meaningful perception among alumni? The four-subset questions that supported the primary question were: (1) How do alumni relations departments identify effective strategies that promote alumni affiliation? (2) How do alumni create meaning and understanding of their experiences while participating in alumni-sponsored events? (3) How does alumni perception of their participation in alumni-sponsored events lead to alumni donorship? (4) How does alumni perception of their experiences as a student and graduate of the institution affect their decision to engage?

Data analysis led to the discovery that alumni experience both internal and external transitional processes when transitioning from participants to donors. The researcher identified that the alumni approaches to participation and donation are comprised of an internal transitional process over time. This transitional process includes the institutional community setting with which alumni surround themselves, the shift in understanding they experience because of their interactions within their community settings, the lenses that alumni use to view these interactions, the transitional growth aspect through which they go, and lastly the perceived benefit they attach to these social interactions and experiences. The researcher also identified that the alumni approaches also included an external transitional process that encouraged alumni exchanges with their institution through the different stages of volunteerism, participation, and donation. This external transitional process leads to more meaningful and lasting interactions between alumni and their institution.

The practical implications found in this study will aid alumni relations departments in implementing effective strategies for engaging alumni and building affiliation. With higher education being an investment in human capital, alumni relations departments should be considered as being important strategic and essential assets as they serve to engage alumni with the institution and its traditions and rituals (Martin et al., 2015; Terry & Macy, 2007). Alumni departments are institutional representatives responsible for reengaging alumni with their alma mater in a manner that leads to meaningful participation and donation. Institutions should reach out to alumni often and not wait until they are requesting donations. In order to increase alumni donations, institutions need to bring awareness of institutional needs and the impact alumni have on the continued success of the institution and its students (Terry & Macy, 2007). Alumni want to feel important and that their institution takes a sincere interest in them, not just when it wants money. Therefore, it is important for alumni relations departments to know their alumni demographics, as this will lead to the most effective method for connecting with alumni. Attention to relationship building and communication is pertinent to creating meaningful and impactful alumni partnerships (Pottick et al., 2015). Some alumni respond better to the traditional e-mail and mail, however, with the increase of social media presence in daily life, it is important to put this mode into use as well. It is difficult for many universities to reach their full alumni base with the traditional high-cost direct mailing methods, therefore universities should utilize this widely accepted media resource as a tool for connecting with alumni more efficiently (Farrow & Yuan, 2011). When trying to get the information out to alumni of upcoming events and opportunities for connecting, it is necessary to get it out often and through various mediums.

It is important for institutions to understand the impact that the opportunity to connect at alumni-sponsored events has on alumni. This study provided examples of how alumni want to feel connected to their institution, to other alumni, and interestingly to current students as well. In being able to participate at alumni-sponsored events, alumni are able to gain a sense of community and nostalgia for the institution that helped shape who they are today. This sense of community is the feeling of sense of belonging and that individuals matter to each other and to the group as a whole (Nistor et al., 2015). Alumni are also sincerely interested in also connecting with current students to pass on the legacy of the institution and its traditions. Therefore, these opportunities of the institution reengaging alumni are not only meaningful, but are imperative for alumni satisfaction.

Alumni donation is a transitional process starting with volunteerism and participation. Alumni perception of their involvement with their institution, as student and alumni, is what determines future donation tendencies and whether or not they will personify their commitment to their institution in an impactful manner. It is important to engage alumni not only when needing donations. Institutions must continuously engage alumni so they can reach out to their alumni base and already have a strong and committed group willing to give back when asked.

As alumni experience is important, student experience is of even greater importance. These experiences combined are what truly serve as a precursor to the transition process from participant to donor. There is no such thing as an alumni experience without there being a student experience first. The time, challenges, opportunities, growth, and relationships built are what comprise the student experience. This plays a huge role in determining whether students will engage with their institution after graduation. Alumni

can provide feedback on how well their academic experiences enhanced their interactive and personal attributes in preparing them for the professional setting after graduation (Delaney, 2004). Therefore, it is of utmost importance that institutions start engaging their students as future alumni and future donors of the institution. This is done by providing quality academic programming, facilitating competitive opportunities, connecting current alumni with current students, and engaging students in a manner that will lay the foundation for future alumni affiliation. The alumni-institution relationship, as well as alumni affiliation, is something to be initiated and cultivated throughout the student experience that will lead to the alumni experience (Martin et al., 2015). Students need opportunities to engage and be provided nonacademic experiences and insights that only alumni can provide. Alumni should provide a living example of what it means to be alumni of the institution. These experiences and opportunities for connection show students that their institution is invested in their success as an individual and contributing member after graduation. Education does not end when students graduate, as education is a lifelong process in which students graduate and become alumni of the institution (Chen & Chung-Ming, 2013). This exemplifies that the student journey does not end at graduation, but it transitions into the alumni journey where there is still opportunity for them to be a part of their alma mater.

This study provided examples in which institutions can successfully develop alumni outreach initiatives that elicit effective and meaningful perception among alumni. Alumni relations departments are responsible for providing meaningful and impactful opportunities for connection, community, and growth among their alumni. These departments should create new, cultivate existing, and revitalize old events in a way that meaningfully

incorporates campus traditions and rituals so alumni can participate in (Martin et al., 2015). Alumni relations departments should engage their alumni prior to graduation to build the sense of institutional affiliation and to work continuously to reengage often. When alumni feel valued by their alma mater, their motivation to stay connected is evidenced in their willingness to give back. To develop effective and meaningful outreach initiatives, institutions must first recognize and understand that alumni experience is a transitional process. Internally, alumni engage their community, experience a shift in their perception, utilize different lenses, undergo a transitional growth, and apply a perceived benefit to their affiliation. Externally, the institution should provide opportunities for volunteerism and participation. Social ties play a key role in influencing alumni attitudes toward the importance of volunteerism and donation, therefore universities should understand how to best foster these attitudes for positive connections (Farrow & Yuan, 2011). Over time, this will lead to the strengthening of alumni affiliation to their institution and motivation for donation. Strong social ties lead to strong and impactful alumni connections to their institutions. Alumni commitment is strongly dependent upon alumni affiliation (Tidwell, 2005). As long as alumni feel affiliated and connected to their institution, they will continue to be committed to its success. Essentially, institutions need to invest in their alumni as they invest in their students. In doing so, institutions will encourage a meaningful and valuable perception among alumni. It is this perception that will lead to increased affiliation, commitment, participation, and donation among alumni that is both meaningful and impactful.

Recommendations for Future Research

This qualitative study presented information pertaining to the alumni transitional process. The researcher provides five recommendations for future research that would add to alumni relations research. First, data gathered for this study were from participants who currently only held a bachelor's degree from private Catholic universities located in southwest Texas. Further research should explore aspects of this study in different ways. Suggestions for future research include that studies be conducted with alumni who have earned a bachelor's degree from public four-year institutions that are also located in southwest Texas to see if there are any similarities or differences between the two types of institutions and alumni sentiment. As funding between public and private institutions differ, in relation to what is allocated to programming and alumni relations, student and alumni experiences may differ as well. Research should also be conducted with similar institutional settings that are located in differing national regions. This would help identify cross-regional alumni-institution interactions.

Second, additional to studying institutional and regional similarities and differences, research should be conducted that incorporates international alumni relations. With increasingly globalized economies, it is important to understand the impact that internationalization has had on alumni relations' initiatives. Studies should identify how international alumni from varying cultures view their connection to the institution in relation to their participation and donation tendencies. It should also incorporate their perception of giving and the importance they attach to supporting their alma mater.

Third, the influence that multiple degrees earned from multiple institutions have on alumni affiliation. More specifically, how do alumni determine their affiliation to specific

institutions and their willingness to participate and donate to these institutions. As this study determined that alumni experience a transitional process when participating and donating, this study was limited to one degree and one institution. To be explored would be if the transitional process stated in this study is the same when additional degrees from other institutions are added to the criteria.

Fourth, what is the impact of service learning components introduced to students as a means of bringing awareness relating to community needs. Service learning is an experiential-based educational strategy that integrates civic responsibility and engagement into the classroom setting (Olberding, 2009). Service learning promotes an awareness of various community needs, connects students with their community so they can take an active role in meeting these needs, and encourages students to relate social awareness to what is taught in the classroom. Institutions are incorporating service learning components into their programs to educate students of the importance of community issues and to graduate good citizens (Tomkovick, Lester, Flunker, & Wells, 2008). As alumni are the legacy and true representation of the institution after graduation, they are the ones who will respond to these issues. Therefore, it is important that institutions remind students that there is a world beyond the classroom, and it is up to them to have a meaningful impact and make a difference.

Finally, as the point of this study was to discover a theoretical construct process model, it is recommended that the findings from this study be tested by conducting an action research study. The purpose of action research studies is to study a problem, identify a solution, and implement a plan of action to improve practice and procedure (Creswell, 2008). This sequential phase of research would allow practitioners an opportunity to take

into consideration the theory generated from this study and be able to apply it in an impactful manner. Moreover, this would encourage a theoretical approach to be applied in a practical setting. With this study's findings, practitioners should be able to implement the information introduced and redesign their alumni relations departmental approaches to engaging students and alumni in more meaningful and impactful ways.

Summary

This dissertation study focused on the experiences of 10 alumni, five female and five male, who graduated with their bachelor's degree from private Catholic universities located in southwest Texas. They shared their experiences in relation to how they perceived their commitment to their institution and their willingness to participate and donate. Through constructivist grounded theory, the researcher was able to organize, interpret, and make sense of the participants' responses in a manner that led to the generation of the theory of alumni transitional donation. Results from this study provided that alumni experience an internal and external transitional process when transitioning from participant to donor. The internal process related to subjective interpretation of alumni experiences while enrolled as a student and graduate of the institution. The external process related to institutions providing opportunities for volunteerism, participation, and donation. This study supported the theoretical and conceptual frameworks initially introduced. Two main characteristics related to alumni involvement that were not initially considered were volunteerism and the importance of connection. Recommendations for future research were also provided by the researcher. Lastly, it is important to take away from this study that institutions must invest in their alumni so their alumni will want to invest in them. It is not the end of a journey when one graduates, where ties are completely cut, but simply a

transition of roles. It is encouraged that alumni continue, as a lifelong process, to foster the relationship and maintain the connections with their alma maters as something mutually beneficial.

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Appendices

Appendix A



1/29/2016

Tina J. Siller

[REDACTED]

Antonio, TX
78216

Dear Tina:

Your request to conduct the study titled *Alumni commitment: Exploring the process of transition from participant to donor* was approved by exempt review on 1/29/2016. Your IRB approval number is 16-01-009. Any written communication with potential or current subjects must be approved and include the IRB approval number. Electronic surveys or electronic consent forms, or other material delivered electronically to subjects must have the IRB approval number inserted into the survey or documents before they are used.

Please keep in mind these additional IRB requirements:

- This approval is for one year from the date of the IRB approval.
- Request for continuing review must be completed for projects extending past one year. Use the **IRB Continuation/Completion form**.
- Changes in protocol procedures must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Use the **Protocol Revision and Amendment form**.
- Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others must be reported immediately.

Approved protocols are filed by their number. Please refer to this number when communicating about this protocol.

Approval may be suspended or terminated if there is evidence of a) noncompliance with federal regulations or university policy or b) any aberration from the current, approved protocol.

Congratulations and best wishes for successful completion of your research. If you need any assistance, please contact the UIW IRB representative for your college/school or the Office of Research Development.

Sincerely,

Ana Wandless-Hagendorf

Ana Wandless-Hagendorf,
PhD, CPRA Research Officer
University of the Incarnate Word IRB

Appendix B

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

Dear Sir or Madam,

My name is Tina J. Siller and I am a doctoral candidate in Organizational Leadership at The University of the Incarnate Word. In partial fulfillment of the requirements for this degree, I am conducting a dissertation study titled: "Alumni commitment: Exploring the process of transition from participant to donor". The purpose of this study will be to gain an understanding of how alumni personify their commitment to their institution by participating in alumni-sponsored events and decide to additionally support their institution through financial donations. You are invited to participate in this research study. The information obtained from this study will provide alumni relations personnel with information that would assist them in developing and/or maintaining effective strategies for event programming and connecting with their alumni base in a more meaningful manner. Participation in this study will include one-hour interview sessions and verifying that the information the researcher obtained is correct. Participation is completely voluntary and you may decline your participation at any time if you choose. Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study. Please note there is no direct benefit that will accrue to you from participating; however, your participation will contribute greatly to our knowledge and future alumni efforts.

For questions about your rights as a research participant or to discuss problems, complaints or concerns about a research study, or to obtain information or offer input, contact the UIW Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (210) 805-3036. This research and survey tool has been approved by the UIW IRB (IRB #16-01-009).

Thank you in advance for your time.

Sincerely,

Tina J. Siller
Doctoral Candidate
University of the Incarnate Word

Appendix C

**Alumni commitment: Exploring the process of transition from participant to donor
Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
University of the Incarnate Word**

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by doctoral candidate, Tina J. Siller, under the supervision of Norman St. Clair, Ph.D. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of how alumni personify their commitment to their institution by participating in alumni-sponsored events and decide to additionally support their institution through financial donations.

If you agree to take part in this study, you will participate in the following procedures:

- One hour, voice-recorded interview over alumni participation and donation
- Review the transcribed interview to ensure accurate participant responses
- If necessary, a second interview to provide additional information important to the study
- Review the transcribed second interview to ensure accurate participant responses

Since the interview will be recorded, there is a chance you could be identified. This risk will be lessened by ensuring that the voice recordings are maintained in a secure and locked location that only the researcher will have access to. Your identity will be kept confidential. The interview will be transcribed. Your identity will be protected by a pseudonym that will be assigned to you by the researcher. Data will be destroyed after five years. The results of this study may be published. Participation is voluntary and you have the right to refuse participation without penalty of any kind. You have the right to stop participating at any time, including leaving during an interview session, without penalty of any kind. You have the right, at the end of the study, to be informed of the findings of this study.

The possible benefit of this research is adding to the knowledge of alumni organizations regarding alumni participation and donation tendencies.

If you have questions, please ask them at any time. If you have additional questions later or you wish to report a problem that may be related to this study, contact:

Tina J. Siller
(210) 687-8708
tsiller@uiwtx.edu

Norman St. Clair, Ph.D.
(210) 829-3138
stclair@uiwtx.edu

To contact the University of the Incarnate Word committee that reviews and approves research with human subjects, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and ask any questions about your rights as a research participant, call: UIW IRB, Office of Research Development (210) 805-3036. This research and survey tool has been approved by the UIW IRB (IRB #16-01-009).

If you completely understand the expectations and rights of participants in this study, all of your questions have been answered to your satisfaction, and you are willing to participate in this study please sign and date this consent form in the space provided. To sign this consent form, you must be 18-years-old or older by today's date.

Participant Signature

Date Signed

Researcher Signature

Date Signed

Appendix D

Interview Guide

Alumni commitment: Exploring the process of transition from participant to donor

Primary Research Question: How can universities develop alumni outreach initiatives to elicit effective and meaningful perception among alumni?

Subset Question 1 (SQ1): How do alumni relations departments identify effective strategies that promote alumni affiliation?

Possible Probative Questions (SQ1):

- Are you currently involved with your alumni association or institution? If you are, please explain your level of involvement.
- What can alumni relations do to encourage alumni participation?
- What can alumni relations do to encourage alumni donation?
- What approaches has alumni relations implemented that you feel have motivated you to want to participate and/or donate to your institution?

Subset Question 2 (SQ2): How do alumni create meaning and understanding of their experiences while participating in alumni-sponsored events?

Possible Probative Questions (SQ2):

- Describe your alumni experience.
- What has your alumni experience meant to you?
- Describe the alumni-sponsored event that has meant the most to you.
- Describe what motivated you to participate in alumni-sponsored events.

Subset Question 3 (SQ3): How does alumni perception of their participation in alumni-sponsored events lead to alumni donorship?

Possible Probative Questions (SQ3):

- Do you donate to your institution?
- What is your motivation for participating and/or donating to your institution?
- Since actively participating with your institution after graduation, what motivated you to contribute to your institution by donating?
- What does alumni donorship mean to you?

Subset Question 4 (SQ4): How does alumni perception of their experiences as a student and graduate of the institution affect their decision to engage?

Possible Probative Questions (SQ4):

- Describe your experience while enrolled as a student at your institution.
- What is your perception of your student experience in preparing you to enter the workforce upon graduation?
- Has your student experience or alumni experience motivated you to further engage with your institution in other ways?
- What would you tell other alumni about being involved with their institution after graduation?

Appendix E

From: [Drezner, Noah](#)
To: [Siller, Tina J.](#)
Subject: Re: Permission Request for Material Use
Date: Thursday, June 09, 2016 12:03:22 PM

Hi Tina.

You have my permission.

What is your dissertation about? I would love to know more! Noah

Noah D. Drezner, Ph.D.
Associate Professor & Program
Director Higher & Postsecondary
Education

Founding Editor, [Philanthropy & Education](#)

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212-678-3787 - drezner@tc.columbia.edu - <http://www.noahdrezner.com>

On Tue, Jun 7, 2016 at 11:36 AM, Siller, Tina J. <tsiller@uiwtx.edu> wrote:

Dear Dr. Noah D. Drezner,

I am currently a doctoral candidate in Organizational Leadership at The University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Texas. I am contacting you to seek permission to include the following material within the print and electronic versions of my doctoral dissertation:

Figure 1: Proposed correlates of organizational identification from the article Drezner, N.D. (2009). Why give?: Exploring social exchange and organizational identification theories in the promotion of philanthropic behaviors of African American millennials at private-HBCUs. *International Journal of Educational Advancement*, 9(3), 147-165.

If you are not the rights holder for this material, it would be greatly appreciated if you would advise me who to contact. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best Regards,
Tina J. Siller

Appendix F

From: [Deni Elliott](#)
To: [Siller, Tina J.](#)
Subject: Re: Permission Request for Material Use
Date: Tuesday, June 21, 2016 7:33:41 PM

Yes you may. Good luck with your work. Prof. Elliott

On Tue, Jun 21, 2016 at 2:57 PM, Siller, Tina J. <tsiller@uiwtx.edu> wrote: Dear

Dr. Deni Elliott,

I am currently a doctoral candidate in Organizational Leadership at The University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Texas. I am contacting you to seek permission to include the following material within the print and electronic versions of my doctoral dissertation:

Table: Key prerequisites for sustained fund raising in institutions of higher education from Elliott, D. (2006). *The Kindness of strangers: Philanthropy in higher education*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

If you are not the rights holder for this material, it would be greatly appreciated if you would advise me who to contact. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best Regards,
Tina J. Siller

Appendix G

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SAGE Publishing

Title: Organizational Commitment and Involvement: Explaining the Decision to Give to Associations
Author: Lili Wang, Robert F. Ashcraft
Publication: Nonprofit & Voluntary Sector Quarterly
Publisher: SAGE Publications
Date: Apr 1, 2014
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