

**Young alumni perspectives about philanthropically supporting their alma mater**

by

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The student author and the program of study committee are solely responsible for the content of this dissertation. The Graduate College will ensure this dissertation is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

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**ABSTRACT**

Declines in the public funding of higher education have made philanthropic support from alumni an important component in the financial health of institutions, and this issue is not likely to go away. Previous research has indicated that alumni are more likely to philanthropically support their alma mater through financial giving, volunteering, and advocacy if they were philanthropically engaged in the institution as young alumni. However, little research has been done to understand young alumni philanthropic support of their alma maters.

Using social exchange theory, this basic interpretive study explored how young alumni philanthropically support their alma mater and how they plan to support their alma mater in the future, and examined their perspective about the costs and benefits of their philanthropic support. The key findings of the research were that participants derived a variety of benefits from philanthropically supporting their alma mater, and the benefits that they received outweighed the cost of their support. Meaningful student experiences also played a key role in why young alumni support their alma mater, and philanthropy is a skill that participants learned over time, and personal relationships played a key role in influencing their philanthropic behavior. In addition volunteer participation increased over time, and volunteering was a catalyst for advocacy and financial support. Finally, participants wanted to philanthropically support their alma mater in the future, but they were unclear about the opportunities for doing so.

The results of this study provided important implications for practice including providing students with meaningful experiences that make them feel connected, examining



inclusivity in young alumni activities, educating and encouraging student and young alumni philanthropy, providing flexible opportunities for involvement and advocacy opportunities, showing the impact of young alumni support, and recognizing the interrelatedness of campus units. Increased knowledge about young alumni philanthropic support has the potential to help higher education institutions significantly increase current and future private giving in order to help them better accomplish their academic missions.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Philanthropic support from young alumni is an important component in the long-term health of higher education institutions. In recent years public institutions have joined their private counterparts in their reliance on financial contributions from alumni and other donors (ASHE, 2011a). Declines in the public funding of higher education have made philanthropic support from alumni an important component in the financial health of institutions, and this issue is not likely to go away.

One of the most important components in generating philanthropic support is cultivating relationships between the institution and current and future donors. Young alumni and current students are key constituent groups in this process (Drezner, 2009). In 2011, the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) released a report about the importance of engaging students and young alumni in philanthropy. The report cited the growing need for voluntary financial institutional support as a primary reason to engage as many alumni as possible in giving (ASHE, 2011a). It also urged institutions to develop relationships with students and young alumni that would foster an environment of prosocial behavior and would encourage them “to support their alma mater upon graduation and beyond” (ASHE, 2011a, p. 65). Drezner (2009) also encouraged institutions to explore the ways that they can cultivate students and young alumni to become donors for the purpose of increasing future external support.

Pearson (1999) underscored the importance of cultivating relationships with alumni to increase institutional giving. The study found that positive alumni relationships with the university played a central role in alumni decisions to give:

Alumni are more likely to be donors if they are very satisfied with their student experiences, if they are involved and engaged as alumni with the

university, and if they are kept informed about what is happening . . . Simply put, the stronger the relationship, the more likely they are to be donor. (p. 7).

Therefore philanthropic support from alumni is likely to be greater if institutions build prosocial relationships with them during the time they are students and young alumni (ASHE, 2011a).

Few studies have examined philanthropic support by young alumni despite researchers' call for the increased literature in this area. According to the 2011 ASHE report on philanthropy and fundraising, most higher education research and practice related to engagement and fundraising has traditionally focused solely on wealthy White men. The report urged institutions to gain a better understanding of alumni from a variety of backgrounds in order to engage in more socially sensitive fundraising practices.

This need was further highlighted in studies that examined young alumni financial giving. Several studies have found that even very small measures of financial support by young alumni had a large effect on future giving (Lindahl & Winship, 1992; Monks, 2003; Nayman, Gianneschi, & Mandel, 1993; Okunade & Justice, 1991; Piliavin & Charng, 1990). Meer (2013) found that young alumni who gave annually in their first five years after graduation gave on average eight times more by their twentieth reunion than other alumni.

Despite the importance of cultivating philanthropic support from young alumni, little research has been done in this area. This study provides much needed literature about young alumni motivations for philanthropically supporting their alma mater from a qualitative perspective. Because developing prosocial relationships with students and young alumni plays an important role in philanthropic support, examining why young alumni philanthropically support their alma maters is essential in helping institutions accomplish their goals. Using social exchange theory as a theoretical framework, this study examined

how young alumni philanthropically support their alma mater, how they plan to support their alma mater in the future, and what costs and benefits young alumni derive from their support.

### **Context of Higher Education Advancement**

Private giving is becoming an increasingly important component in higher education finance due to decreases in financial support from federal and state agencies (Skari, 2014). State appropriations have declined more than 40% since the late 1970s, and state investments per person have fallen below levels from the 1980s. These cuts have left academic units, centers and student affairs programs with increasing pressure to find funding to supplement support. Private funding sources are increasingly being used to fill gaps not filled by tuition funding or state and federal support (Elliott, 2006).

Elliott (2006) cited several funding challenges in the landscape of higher education that have led to a need for private funding. These challenges include the shift from higher education as a privilege to a system of mass higher education; the increased costs of educating students; declines in state and federal funding and greater competition for funds from these sources; and greater competition among institutions for students and their tuition dollars: “Gone are the days when public academic institutions rested on their legislative appropriations. Public support became public assistance and is now, in many states, little more than public land upon which higher education is taking place” (p. 13). According to Wentworth (1995), a vice president for the Council for Support and Advancement of Higher Education, in recent years higher education philanthropy has become even more critical for institutions, and the private giving that was once used for special purposes is now being used to support more basic functions of institutions.

## University Advancement

As a result of the increasing reliance on private gifts, many institutions are forming advancement teams to build relationships with external constituencies to advance the missions of their institutions. “Advancement is a strategic, integrated method of managing relationships to increase understanding and support among an educational institution's key constituents, including alumni and friends, government policy makers, the media, members of the community and philanthropic entities of all types” (CASE, 2015a, np). Although models of advancement differ from institution to institution, most activities are carried out through the collaborative efforts of alumni relations, development, communication, and marketing offices. The professionals in these areas work together to: (a) secure private funding from donors; (b) engage alumni as volunteers, advocates and supporters of the institution; (c) promote the institution to prospective students; (d) communicate the excellence of the institution to external constituencies (CASE).

Advancement team professionals play a critical role in cultivating philanthropic support by working together to make strategic decisions about alumni communication, engagement, and fundraising. The core role of an advancement professional is to “...champion the institution's mission, encourage and foster alumni involvement with the institution, build long-term relationships with alumni and other constituencies, and engage with the research agenda” (CASE, 2015c, np). In addition, they help to raise private funds for the institution (CASE).

Young alumni are a key constituent group in institutional advancement activities. The results of this study may help advancement professionals increase philanthropic support by young alumni.

## College and University Endowments

Advancement professionals play a key role in building university endowments (CASE, 2015a). Endowments are funds from external sources that provide continuous support for specific programs or purposes. They help institutions remain financially stable and provide funding for special initiatives. Uses include operating expenses, student support and capital projects such as new facilities (Spitz, 1999). For this reason, many institutions are investing in additional resources to promote advancement because the cost of raising private gifts tends to be lower than the income from the gifts. This provides university administrators with additional discretionary funds (Cheslock & Gianneschi, 2008).

In 2014, colleges and universities were forced to pay a higher percentage of their operating expenses from their endowments due to declines in public funding and tuition revenue (Zalaznick, 2015). In recent years many institutions have seen an increase in their endowments, and alumni have played a key role in the increased support (Council for Aid to Education, 2015). According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, the endowment funds of colleges and universities in the U.S. were valued at about \$425 billion at the end of the 2012 fiscal year. The 120 institutions with the largest endowments comprised about 75% of the national total (2015). The FY2014 report on Voluntary Support of Education released by the Council for Aid to Education (CAE) showed that philanthropic giving to U.S institutions reached \$37.45 billion in 2014, an increase of 10.8 percent over the previous year. This increase accounted for the largest gain in support since 2000, and it was the highest total reported since the first survey conducted in 1957. Giving from alumni increased by 9.4% during this time, and the average gift was about \$1,535. The 2014 National Association of College and University Business Officers

(NACUBO) Commonfund Study of Endowments revealed that the institutions had an average 15.5% return on their endowment investments for the 2014 fiscal year, an increase over the 11.7% return in 2013. Colleges and universities used the rate increase to increase spending on student financial aid programs, research, and other activities vital to their missions (NACUBO, 2014). According to the CAE, giving is expected to increase in 2015 as well (Council for Aid to Education, 2015).

Because alumni financial support constitutes the greatest proportion of private giving to higher education institutions, it is critical to engage all alumni, including young alumni, in philanthropic support (Skari, 2014). The current study was conducted to provide much needed literature about young alumni philanthropic support.

### **Problem Statement**

Previous research indicates that alumni are more likely to philanthropically support their alma mater through financial giving, volunteering, and advocacy if they were philanthropically engaged in the institution as young alumni. However, little research has been done to understand young alumni philanthropic support of their alma maters. This study was conducted to address this issue.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this basic interpretive study was to explore how young alumni philanthropically support their alma mater, how they plan to support their alma mater in the future, and to examine their perspective about the costs and benefits of their philanthropic support.

This research answers the following research questions:

1. How are young alumni philanthropically supporting their alma mater?

2. How do young alumni plan to philanthropically support their alma mater in the future?
3. What costs and benefits do young alumni derive from philanthropically supporting their alma mater?

The results of this study provide insights about how to increase young alumni philanthropic support in the future.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social exchange theory was used as the theoretical framework for this study. This theory suggests that “actions that are contingent upon rewarding reactions from others” (Blau, 1964, p. 31). It implies a two-sided, mutually contingent and mutually rewarding system of exchanges between people (Emerson, 1976).

Weerta and Ronca’s (2007) framework for examining alumni philanthropic support from a social exchange perspective guided this study. This framework is based on the assumption that alumni philanthropic support is contingent upon the advantages that alumni perceive that they have received or believe they will receive from their relationship with their alma mater.

Several studies have used social exchange theory as a framework for examining alumni philanthropic support, but none have specifically focused on young alumni. Hunter, Jones, and Boger (1999) used this theory to show the relationship between alumni and philanthropic support of their alma mater. Drezner (2009) also used this theory as a basis for understanding how alumni perceived and engaged in philanthropic support of their alma mater. Other studies have used social exchange theory to examine how student extracurricular activities (Dugan, Mullin, & Sigfried, 2000; Harrison, Mitchell, & Peterson,



1995; Monks; 2003), the quality of the undergraduate academic experience (Clotfelter, 2003; Monks, 2003), and satisfaction and engagement with the alumni experience (Clotfelter, 2003; Monks, 2003) have contributed to alumni philanthropic support (Weerts & Ronca, 2007). In addition, some have used it to show the relationship between altruism and academic prestige and philanthropic support (Skari, 2014). This study used social exchange theory to examine young alumni perspectives about the costs and benefits of philanthropically supporting their alma mater from a qualitative perspective.

### **Research Approach**

A social constructivist epistemology was used for this study. Social constructivist believe that people create meaning through their experiences in the world, and they develop this meaning by interacting with others around them (Creswell, 2014). Applied to this study, the constructivist perspective was used as a framework for examining young alumni philosophies about philanthropy.

The population of interest for this study was comprised of current and former members of the young alumni council at a large public research university in the Midwest. At this institution young alumni are defined as those who have graduated with undergraduate degrees in the last 10 years. The young alumni council is charged with helping the alumni association form connections with young alumni of the institution. Their primary responsibilities are to assist with programming and activities for young alumni including event planning, membership drives, and marketing and communication efforts.

This population was selected because the members of this group provide a purposeful sample of the larger young alumni population of the institution. If we can begin to understand

the perspectives of those who are involved with this organization, it may help to provide insight into how to increase philanthropic support by young alumni in the future.

Two primary data collection methods were utilized in this study: online videoconference interviews, and an examination of documents and records such as website content and meeting minutes. These data collection methods were selected because participants live in several different locations around the country. All 13 members of the young alumni council were invited to participate. In addition eight former members of the young alumni council who fit the institution's definition of young alumni were also invited to participate. Participants were invited to participate in this study via an e-mail invitation.

Semi-structured online interviews served as the principal data collection method for this study, and they were conducted in the spring and summer of 2016 (Nehls, Smith, & Schneider, 2015). Online interviews were conducted due to the limited budget and time frame for the project. The interview protocol was based upon the conceptual framework of the study. It included open-ended questions about how and why participants philanthropically support their alma mater, the costs and benefits that young alumni derive from their support, and the ways in which they plan to support their alma mater in the future.

Participants were interviewed through Zoom Video Conferencing, and the interviews lasted for approximately 30 to 60 minutes. The purpose of the interviews was to discuss how they philanthropically support their alma mater. Field notes were taken during and following each interview. They were used to describe what happened during data collection and will include information about the events, setting and participants. Documents and records such as web content, e-mails, handbooks, meeting minutes, and other documentation were also used to provide additional context for this study.

Interviews were transcribed and the data were coded and analyzed according to the research questions they addressed. Coding was a two-step process beginning with open coding to identify themes and categories of interest based on the data (Esterberg, 2002). Focused coding was then conducted to focus on the key themes identified during the open coding process (Esterberg). Thick, rich descriptions including participant quotes, member checks, maximum variation, and an audit trail were used to ensure reliability and confirmability of the study (Merriam, 2002).

### **Rationale and Significance**

Prosocial relationships with young alumni play an important role in institutional advancement. Colleges and universities will rely on this population for volunteering, advocacy, and financial support. However little research has been done to study how and why young alumni philanthropically support their alma mater, how they plan to support their alma mater in the future, and what costs and benefits they derive from their support. This study helps to fill the gap in this research by examining this relationship. Increased knowledge in this area has the potential to help institutions to significantly increase philanthropic giving in order to help them accomplish their academic missions.

In addition, there is very little qualitative literature about young alumni or alumni in general. The quantitative studies of alumni that have been conducted so far were useful in collecting exploratory information about this population, but the findings were limited to the specific questions that were asked by the researchers. By utilizing a qualitative research design, this study allowed greater understanding of the lived experiences of young alumni. It also helped to bring greater context to the ways in which the participants described their experiences and behaviors, and it also helped to understand the process by which the actions

of the participants took place. In addition this design helped to find new phenomenon and themes that I was not necessarily looking for (Maxwell, 2008).

### **Definitions of Key Terminology**

This section provides operational definitions for key terms used in the study. The sources include Merriam-Webster dictionary and literature about higher education philanthropy.

***Young alumni:*** The term alumnus refers to “a person who has attended or has graduated from a particular school, college, or university” (Merriam-Webster.com, 2015b). The alumni association of the institution in this study considers those who graduated with undergraduate degrees in the last 10 years young alumni.

***Alma mater:*** The school, college, or university that someone attended (Merriam-Webster.com, 2015a)

***Advancement:*** “...advancement is a strategic, integrated method of managing relationships to increase understanding and support among an educational institution's key constituents, including alumni and friends, government policy makers, the media, members of the community and philanthropic entities of all types” (CASE, 2015c, np).

***Philanthropic support:*** advocacy, volunteerism, and/or charitable giving provided by alumni to advance a higher education institution (Weerts & Ronca, 2007)

***Prosocial behavior:*** actions that benefit others by gifts of time or money (Feiler, Tost, & Grant, 2012)

### **Summary**

According to a 2011 ASHE report about institutional giving, public institutions have joined private institutions in their dependence on financial contributions from alumni and

other donors for financial sustainability. Economic issues and declines in state funding to public higher education institutions have made it even more important for colleges and universities to develop strong prosocial relationships with their alumni including young alums that would encourage them to give (ASHE, 2011a).

Studies have revealed that alumni are more likely to give if their alma mater has fostered prosocial relationships with them as students and young alumni, but little research has been done to understand why young alumni philanthropically support their alma mater. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine this relationship. Increased understanding of this relationship has the potential to significantly improve future fundraising at this institution and at other institutions. Online interviews with current and former members of the institution's young alumni council were used to collect data for this study.

The following chapters provide a review of literature about the research topic and a description of the research design and methodology. Chapter 2 provides a summary of literature related to higher education philanthropy, alumni relationship cultivation and giving and the strategies that institutions use to build relationships with alumni. This literature is found primarily in the areas of higher education, education economics, and higher education institutional research. This chapter also provides a summary of social exchange theory, the theoretical framework for this study. Chapter 3 describes the study's research design and methodology. It includes the rationale for the qualitative design and basic interpretive methodology and descriptions of the population and sampling, pilot testing, IRB and informed consent, data collection methods, data analysis techniques, ethical considerations, the measures of trustworthiness and goodness, delimitations, and limitations. Chapter 4

presents the research findings. Chapter 5 offers conclusions based on each research question, a discussion of the findings, and suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature involving the study of philanthropic support of higher education by young alumni is limited, and much of the current literature about alumni philanthropy focuses on financial support. The literature that guided this study was primarily in the areas of higher education philanthropy, education economics, and higher education institutional research. This literature review provides a summary of literature related to the history and context of philanthropy in American higher education, motivations for engaging in philanthropic support, and current trends in higher education philanthropy. Previous literature was used to guide the development of the study and to provide a framework for interpreting the findings.

### **Context of Philanthropy**

Philanthropy has been defined in many ways. The first known use of the English word philanthropy was in 1628, and it was defined as “love of man, charity, benevolence, humanitarianism, social reform” (Thelin & Trollinger, 2014, p. 37). Robert Bremner, a prominent historian of philanthropy, later explained that it is “improvement in the quality of human life” (as cited in, Thelin & Trollinger, 2014, p. 37). The Council for Advancement and Support of Education defines philanthropy as “a voluntary exchange in which the values and aspirations of donors are matched with the values and benefits of those they benefit” (CASE, 2015c, np). Although the definitions may be somewhat different, the overarching concept involves what Robert Payton, the former head of the Exxon Foundation, described as “voluntary action for the public good” (Thelin & Trollinger, 2014, p. 38).

Philanthropy is deeply ingrained in the American culture (Cascione, 2013; Thelin & Trollinger, 2014). Research shows that almost 90% of Americans philanthropically support at least one charitable cause each year through donations of time or money, and more people

choose to participate in philanthropy than vote in elections (Thelin & Trollinger, 2014). Americans have a deep affinity toward philanthropically supporting their alma maters (Cascione, 2013). According to Giving USA (2014), about 15% of all charitable giving dollars went toward education. The American propensity for giving, the affinity that they feel toward their alma maters, and the need for institutions to raise external funds for institutional survival have made philanthropy an area of strategic focus for many higher education administrators (Elliott, 2006). Research about issues of philanthropic support and higher education has increased significantly in recent years. The following literature summarizes this research.

### **History of philanthropy in American education**

In recent years philanthropy has become more important to higher education. Declines in public funding have caused institutions to seek funding from alternative sources (Archibald & Feldman, 2006; Miller, 1993; Newman & Petrosko, 2011; Weerts & Ronca, 2006).

According to Miller, Newman, and Seagren (1994), although attention about the topic of academic fundraising has grown in recent years, the development of a comprehensive history of alumni relations and fundraising has been slower to evolve. Sears (1922) provided one of the first historical accounts of philanthropy in American higher education. He divided his description of higher education into three eras including the Colonial Period (1636-1776), the Early National Period (1776-1865), and the Late National Period (1865-1918). Trollinger (2009) later added two additional eras, the Interwar Period (1918-1945) and the Post-war Period (1945-2000), to provide historical context through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The following



literature provides an overview of these eras. An understanding of this literature is an important component in analyzing current practices in higher education advancement.

***Colonial Period (1636-1776).*** The history of philanthropy in American higher education dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It originated when colonial communities worked together to financially support important social causes such as education, religion, and social services (Boorstin, 1965). Much of the American tradition of higher education philanthropy is based on the traditions of religious and educational philanthropy in Europe (Curti & Nash, 1965). Just as European churches requested donations from parishioners for operating expenses, American colleges and universities requested donations from alumni and donors (Curti & Nash). Private support was the stimulus for the founding of America's first college, the Massachusetts Bay Colony's College at Cambridge (later named Harvard College) (Miller, 1993).

During the Colonial Period there was great interest in establishing a system of higher education in America. Colonists sought to build an "exemplary society in the wilderness of the new world," and churches and colleges were viewed as essential components in doing so (Trollinger; 2009, p. 49). Nine colonial colleges were established prior to the American Revolution. Because the legislative bodies of the colonies and student tuition were unable to sustain the financial needs of the colleges, they became dependent on private fundraising to achieve their academic missions (Brittingham & Pezzullo, 1990; Rudolph, 1990; Trollinger, 2009). Many began fundraising campaigns in Europe to solicit donations for their institutions (Miller, 1993).

The first fundraising efforts began shortly after Harvard College received its charter in 1636. A fundraising prospectus entitled "First Fruits" was used by the college to promote

institutional support from benefactors in England. “First Fruits” was considered successful in helping to solicit external funding for the institution (Thelin & Trollinger, 2014). The “First Fruits” was also successful in building the foundation for future fundraising campaigns such as the establishment of Yale College in 1701 and the creation of Harvard College’s first endowed professorship in 1721 (Miller, 1993). It was during this time that “higher education and its philanthropic support were planted as ideas and actualities in American soil” (Curti & Nash, 1965, p. 41).

The early fundraising campaigns of the colonial colleges helped to establish a collaborative relationship between state and donor support in advancing higher education. They also created a system of accountability by which the institution explained to donors how their gifts would be used to achieve their academic missions (Thelin & Trollinger, 2014). The most notable characteristics of higher education philanthropy during the colonial period were that most gifts were “in kind”; colleges relied on pledges from donors that were designated for future support; and they received a wide range of gifts, financial and in kind, from a wide range of donors (Thelin & Trollinger). One of the primary reasons for the success of higher education fundraising is that the colonial colleges were founded with a sense of public purpose, and they serve both a public and private good. That tradition continues in higher education today (Trollinger, 2009).

***Early National Period (1776-1865).*** Private giving played a more important role in higher education after the Revolutionary War when colleges forfeited financial support from England. As a result, colleges heavily relied on gifts from donors, many of whom were alumni. (Miller, 1993).

During this period, several dozens of new colleges were founded as settlers moved westward. The dramatic increase in the number of institutions was fueled by the idea that the new land must be civilized and Christianized. Local leaders saw colleges as a means for advancing their religious ideals, improving the community, and raising local property values (Trollinger, 2009). Even though state funding became more common during this era, private giving played an important role in helping institutions survive. Between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars only about one quarter of the colleges that were established survived (Trollinger).

According to Curti and Nash (1965), several curricular and social changes were seen at colleges during the Early National Period. The classical curriculum began to give way to subjects such as science, engineering and business. Alumni programs began to appear at many colleges at this time (CASE, 2015c). The first was at Yale in 1772, when a class secretary was appointed to track alumni records and to invite alumni to campus to participate in activities (CASE, 2015c). Several other colleges followed suit, and in 1820 the Society of Alumni at Williams College became the first official alumni association in America (Miller, 1993). The primary goal of these early alumni relations efforts was fundraising. The alumni who participated in these efforts were expected to become donors and to solicit donations from other alumni.

During the mid-1800s alumni associations grew rapidly, and they became powerful forces in higher education (Miller, 1993). Alumni donors served on college governance committees, helped to develop institutional traditions, performed legislative lobbying activities on behalf of their alma maters, and helped to recruit new students (Miller).

The Civil War era provided several challenges for higher education philanthropy because much of the private financial and volunteer support began to go to non-profit organizations that supported the war effort. However, colleges and universities also played a major role in the war efforts with college and university presidents serving on the boards of the nonprofit organizations that supported the war such as the Red Cross. Several campuses also provided support for the war efforts by serving as hospitals for wounded warriors (Thelin & Trollinger, 2014).

Academic fundraising grew rapidly in the late 1800s and 1900s due to the Morrill Act (Carlton, 2002). The Morrill Act expanded higher education access to many minority groups including multicultural students and women. The costs and operating expenses at many colleges and universities increased significantly during this time due to the influx of new students (Miller, 1993).

***Late National Period (1865-1918).*** During the late national period, state support of higher education was fully established, but private giving still played a significant role in financing higher education in America (Trollinger, 2009). Following the Civil War, institutions became the beneficiaries of the new industrial fortunes of individuals and families who were associated with the steel, mining, oil, shipping, banking and development industries. Colleges and universities became a favorite beneficiary of philanthropists such as the Stanfords, Johns Hopkins, and the Rockefellers during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These philanthropists chose to support causes such as new buildings on campus and to serve as the namesakes for the colleges. It was during this time that college presidents also began to take on the role of fundraisers. Their goals were to increase the wealth of the institutions

by building the endowments (Thelin & Trollinger, 2014). More than half of the gifts given between 1871 and 1885 were to support endowments (Trollinger, 2009).

The idea of an American research university was also born during this period. Pressure from business and political leaders to create a more utilitarian style of education helped to bring the German model of the research university to America. The large-scale philanthropy of this era helped to make it possible (Trollinger, 2009).

In response to large-scale giving, higher education foundations also emerged during this era. The foundations allowed for “the transfer of decision-making from philanthropist to trustees whose efforts were supported by paid staff” (Trollinger, 2009, p. 62). The foundations of this time shaped many institutions by focusing on education reform and experiments instead of daily operations. They also tended to favor research over teaching (Trollinger).

Two other major higher education philanthropy advancements occurred during the late national period. The first was an organized alumni fundraising effort at Yale in 1890. The other was the ratification of the Sixteenth Amendment, which established income taxes, and the ensuing Revenue Act of 1913, which allowed for tax deductions for charitable giving. Tax deductions are credited with encouraging much of the growth in higher education philanthropy (Trollinger, 2009).

***Interwar Period (1918-1945).*** During the interwar period alumni became substantial donors to higher education, and the philanthropic interests of donors began to evolve. They became more focused on supporting educational and research initiatives than construction. Professional fundraisers such as Ward Hill and Associates also became much more common during this era as capital campaigns became the focus of higher education fundraising

(Trollinger, 2009). In most cases these campaigns focused on short-term objectives (Miller, 1993). Harvard was the first institution to establish a fundraising campaign, and by 1919 the campaign had surpassed its \$10 million goal. Several other institutions soon followed suit (Trollinger).

Alumni support became much more prevalent during this era as many alumni felt a desire to repay a debt their alma maters (Curti & Nash, 1965). Alumni donors also began to take on the role of trustees. The growing role of alumni donors in institutional advancement lead to the professionalization of alumni relations and fundraising at many institutions, and fund drives, capital campaigns and planned giving became much more prevalent (Trollinger, 2009). The Great Depression slowed higher education philanthropy in the 1930s, and unfortunately, some were forced to close their doors due to the financial strain. The loss of student and faculty to war efforts during World War II also impeded the advancement of many institutions during the Interwar Period (Trollinger).

***Post-War period (1945-2000).*** Although state and government funding dominated higher education funding during the Post-War Period, private philanthropy was still a major source of support for institutions. After World War II, college enrollment soared due to the G.I. Bill, which provided funds for servicemen to go to college. It also provided a much needed source of funds for colleges that struggled through the Depression and World War II (Trollinger, 2009).

In the 1950's fundraising practices changed significantly when institutions began to focus more on donor cultivation and the need for a comprehensive public relations efforts to attract donations (Miller, 1993). Between 1954 and 1961 foundations were the primary source of private funds for institutions, but by 1962 alumni became the primary source, and it

has remained that way ever since. By the 1970s more than half of the college-aged students were enrolled in college, and foundations, corporations, and alumni dramatically increased giving to support new generations of students.

During this period, alumni relations and fundraising began to take on a much more professional tone with more emphasis being placed on systems, procedures, techniques, and ethics. Capital fundraising campaigns also became much more of a priority for institutions (Miller, 1993). These advancements helped to build enormous endowments at many institutions including 235 that had endowments of more than \$100 million in 1997 (Trollinger, 2009).

*Higher education philanthropy today.* Today almost all institutions are focused on large fundraising campaigns. Advancement professionals have started to focus much more on supporting the strategic goals of the university (CASE, 2015c). The current economic climate at many institutions has made alumni engagement an important component in institutional advancement. Alumni relations, marketing and communication, and development officers work closely to develop the pipeline to future donors. Their primary goals are to strategically engage alumni through events, awards, programs and communication (CASE, 2015c). The preceding literature provides a summary of higher education philanthropy in America. This literature played an important role in understanding current practices in higher education advancement and in informing the framework of this study.

### **Motivations for Philanthropic Support**

Few studies have examined alumni motivations for philanthropically supporting their alma maters, and much of the literature currently focuses on wealthy White males.

Additional research about engaging non-traditional donors such as women and multicultural

alumni is needed (Drezner, 2009; Proper & Caboni, 2014). The following paragraphs describe some of the primary motivations for philanthropic support by alumni.

Many of the studies related to higher education philanthropy are grounded in the concept of altruism, although the concepts of philanthropy and altruism are not synonymous (Cascione, 2013; Thelin & Trollinger, 2014). Altruism may be defined as “an unselfish regard for the welfare of others” (Thelin & Trollinger, 2014, pp. 42-43). Philanthropy on the other hand may include acts that are somewhat more selfish such as recognition (Cascione, 2013). Those who philanthropically support their alma maters have been shown to do so for a combination of reasons, and research shows that not all of the reasons are completely altruistic (Elliott, 2006). Unfortunately, much of the current literature about philanthropic motivations focuses on giving. In this study, we must assume that the motivations for volunteering and advocacy on behalf of the institution are similar to the motivations for giving.

One of the primary questions involving higher education philanthropy is: why do alumni volunteer, advocate, and give? Unfortunately, there is not a single all-encompassing answer to this question. There are many reasons that alumni choose to philanthropically support their alma maters, and researchers have found that philanthropic giving is the result of multiple factors “interacting and overlapping” one another (Thelin & Trollinger, 2014).

According to Elliott (2006), donors typically provide philanthropic support for some combination of the following: religious, spiritual or philosophical beliefs; guilt or atoning for one’s sins; recognition; self-preservation or fear; tax deductions; feelings of obligation; pride and self-respect. Thelin and Trollinger (2014) provided similar categories on motivations for support including:



Religion: a moral authority that motivates human behavior and causes humans to think and talk about their actions in selfless terms;

Altruism: the unselfish desire to help others;

Exchange: giving in exchange for feel-good feelings or social acceptance

Psychosocial: meeting the psychic and social needs of the donor; and

Teleological: the unique and individual characteristics for the recipient or the organization.

Although multiple factors may influence motivations for giving, those who provide philanthropic support to higher education institutions tend to be the most motivated by recognition, tax deductions, feelings of obligation, and pride (Elliott, 2006). Knowing why alumni give was important to this study because understating motivations may help to increase their institutional support.

### **Financial Support by Alumni**

As noted previously, one of the primary goals of cultivating alumni relationships is to increase institutional giving. In recent years giving by individual donors has begun to play a more critical role in higher education in America (ASHE, 2011b). The recent economic downturn and decreases in state funding have increased the need for institutions to “engage all possible donors” and to specifically target alumni and donors who have disposable income (ASHE, 2011b, p. 26). Charitable donations are now a substantial source of income for many higher education institutions, and alumni are the single largest source of donations (Holmes, 2009). Many four-year institutions conduct research about their alumni in order to determine what characteristics are most likely to predict giving (Skari, 2014). Such research includes collecting data about student experiences, alumni experiences, personal

characteristics and motivations for giving (Skari, 2014). This section outlines some of the key findings.

### **Predictors of financial giving**

Several scholars have studied the characteristics that predict alumni giving, and many of the studies show that in addition to household income, institutional-alumni relationships play a key role in institutional giving. Many of these studies show that wealthy alumni, especially those with household incomes above \$60,000 are most likely to give (Clotfelter, 2003; Holmes, 2009; Weerts & Ronca, 2009). Research has indicated that those who live in close proximity to their alma mater, and those who are older, those who are employed, and those who are Caucasian are also more likely to give (Clotfelter, 2003; Holmes, 2009; Le Blanc & Rucks, 2009; McDearmon & Shirley, 2009; Monks, 2003; Weerts & Ronca, 2007). Researchers have also found that that cultivating quality relationships often begins long before graduation though academic and extracurricular experiences (Clotfelter, 2003; Hoyt, 2004; Monks, 2003).

McDearmon (2013) studied how alumni perceive their role with their alma mater following graduation and how that role contributes to the support of the institution. The study of 8,987 alumni who graduated between 1940 and 2009 from a large Midwestern public university found that those who participated in one or more support behaviors perceived a stronger role with the university. Support behaviors included activities such as attending alumni events, attending athletic events, membership on a university committee, volunteering at university events, joining the alumni association, and making financial contributions. Alumni who had a strong role identity with the university were more likely to support the institution.

Taylor and Martin (1995), and Weerts and Ronca (2009) studied the characteristics of alumni donors at Research I public institutions. Both studies revealed that perceived need for financial support, household income, involvement with the university following graduation, and religious affiliation such as being Protestant and being involved with faith-based organizations) most strongly distinguished donors from non-donors. In addition Taylor and Martin (1995) found that student involvement in departmental clubs and organizations or involvement in the Greek system strongly correlated to increased institutional giving.

Holmes (2009), Monks (2003), and Clotfelter (2003) each investigated the determinants of alumni giving at highly selective institutions. All three studies found that household income, student involvement, satisfaction with the undergraduate experience, and having other family members who attended the institution were strong predictors of giving. Holmes also found that female graduates who were married and who lived in wealthy neighborhoods close to the institution were more likely to give than other alumni. In addition, Monks found that those with advanced degrees in business and law and those who received substantial financial aid funding from their institutions gave more than their counterparts.

A few studies have also revealed a link between student debt and giving. Dugan et al. (2000) found that those who had to take out need-based student loans gave less to the institution following graduation. Monks (2003) also found that those with high amounts of student debt gave less than those who had less debt.

Tsao and Coll (2005) examined the intent of journalism and mass communication alumni to give to their institutions. The study of 1,600 journalism alumni of a public four-year institution found that the three most significant predictors of giving were program

communication and involvement with alumni, alumni satisfaction with the quality of their education, and income (Tsao & Coll, 2005).

Alumni giving plays a central role in institutional advancement, and the preceding studies provide a review of the predictors of alumni giving. Although several studies have shown that relationship building with alumni is related to giving, none of these studies focus specifically on young alumni. The preceding literature also shows that student experiences in college have a significant effect on their philanthropic behavior after college. Therefore, this study will also examine the student experiences that helped to guide participant's current philanthropic engagement.

Because young alumni play an important role in philanthropic giving at institutions, understanding relationships with young alumni is very important. This study explored how and why young alumni philanthropically support their alma mater, and how they plan to support their alma mater in the future. It also examined their perspective about the costs and benefits of their support. The results of this study will help to understand why young alumni philanthropically support their alma mater. They may also help to provide insights about how to increase young alumni philanthropic support in the future.

### **Alumni Volunteering and Advocacy**

Volunteering and advocacy activities are other methods of engaging alumni. Weerts and Ronca (2007) argued that these support activities are as important as financial giving in higher education advancement:

Alumni influence is critical to institutions because professional and personal connections held by graduates can open doors to the legislature, governor's office, corporations, foundations, and major gift prospects. In addition, alumni members of college advisory boards lend their experiences and expertise to help higher education leaders formulate strategic directions for their strategic direction for their institutions. Alumni volunteers also serve in other important

ways such as mentors, recruiters, and booster club leaders that raise the profile of the institution on their region. (p. 21)

Weerts and Ronca (2007) examined the profiles of alumni who give to and volunteer at their alma mater and those who do not. They found that age and employment were two of the most important variables in predicting an alumnus' capacity to give, with those who are older and employed being more likely to give and/or volunteer. In addition, they found that alumni donors have developed an expectation of supporting their alma mater, and they believe that the institution needs their help. They also revealed that positive attitudes about higher education and efforts to stay connected with the university following graduation were also predictors of philanthropic support by active alumni.

Weerts and Ronca (2009) investigated the characteristics of alumni donors to predict those who are the most likely to volunteer through activities such as advisory board service, advocacy, or alumni club support. They found that distance is a predictor of alumni volunteering with those who live closer to the institution being more likely to volunteer. They also revealed that student engagement (i.e. interactions with faculty, diverse viewpoints, high-quality programs) was a significant predictor of volunteering, meaning that student experience on campus plays a significant role in future giving and volunteering. In addition they found that alumni donors who volunteer are civically engaged and they also volunteer at other non-profit organizations.

Weerts, Cabrera, and Sanford (2010) studied the most common alumni support activities related to giving. The study, which involved a sample of undergraduate alumni between the ages of 30 and 70 who lived in the United States, utilized a sequential mixed method approach including focus groups and a survey. The authors found that the many important measures of volunteerism such as recruiting students, mentoring alumni, and

participating in events are often the most informal and least high profile activities of alumni supporters, and in many cases alumni who complete these activities go largely unnoticed by university administrators. The authors found that a large number of respondents were involved in political advocacy activities although they were not members of the formal network for completing these activities. In addition, they also revealed that there are few tools to help advancement professionals identify who is the most likely to engage in service activities such as volunteering of advocacy on behalf of their alma mater.

Higher education advancement professions suggest engaging alumni in volunteering and advocacy activities. Singer and Hughey (2002) provided several examples of these methods such as student recruitment, retention, and career development. These methods include asking alumni to host student recruitment events in their homes, providing alumni with student recruitment materials to share with prospective students and guidance counselors in their areas, participating in university mentoring and career programs for students, and providing internship and career placement assistance to students.

Rissmeyer (2010) offered many of the same insights about engaging alumni as volunteers in student affairs activities. Her primary recommendations include encouraging career services offices to work with alumni to provide students with internships and placement assistance, including alumni in new student and orientation activities, and inviting alumni to participate in convocations and award and scholarship receptions. She also suggests that alumni be invited to serve as advisers to student organizations or learning communities.

Program assessment activities are another strategy used to engage and build relationships with alumni. Ingram, Haynes, Davidson-Shivers, and Irvin (2005), and Plice

and Renig (2009) used alumni participant feedback to assess academic programs at two different universities. In both studies the alumni feedback was used to help the researchers better understand issues such as the skills that students should be learning through the major curriculum, what courses should be required in the major curriculum, and how well alumni felt they were prepared for their careers based on their academic preparation. In addition, Ingram et al. (2005) examined how to effectively engage and track program alumni as a part of their study.

McDonough (2016) assessed the relationship between an institution and its young alumni. The study found that young alumni are satisfied with their alma mater, and they view their post-graduation relationships with the institution positively. It also revealed that the strongest positive predictors of young alumni perceptions of relationship quality were satisfaction with their student experiences, the level of connection to the institution following graduation, membership in the alumni association, and religious affiliation. In addition, the study found that young alumni said that requests for money were the primary messages that they received from their alma mater, and such solicitations are not viewed positively; and young want to be engaged in non-monetary ways such as local alumni events, career service and student debt counseling resources, quality, targeted news and information, student mentoring programs, and advisory board/council service.

The preceding literature demonstrated that the characteristics of those who participate in volunteering and advocacy related activities are similar to those who give to their alma maters. Such characteristics include student experience, proximity to the institution, age, employment, the belief that the university needs their help, and a desire to stay connected to the institution following graduation. In addition, the research about alumni giving indicated

that those who engage in volunteer and advocacy activities for their alma mater are more likely to also provide financial support to the institution (McDearmon, 2013; Taylor & Martin, 1995; Weerts & Ronca, 2009). It also revealed that young alumni want to be involved in the institution in non-monetary ways.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social exchange theory served as a theoretical framework for this study. The foundation of social exchange theory is found primarily in the areas of anthropology, sociology, psychology, and microeconomics. The theory suggests that human actions are based upon the positive reactions of others (Blau, 1964). It implies a two-sided, mutually contingent and mutually rewarding system of exchanges between people (Emerson, 1976; Scott & Seglow, 2007). The premise of this theory is that humans have an inherent desire to help others (Piliavin & Charg, 1990).

Sir James George Frazer was the first to articulate a theory of social exchanges. Based on the idea that the free market helps to regulate beneficial social exchanges, he suggested that the economic motives were the impetus for the creation of human social exchange processes (McDonell, Strom-Gottfried, Burton, & Yaffe, 2006).

According to Trevino (2006), Homans (1958) expanded the concept of social exchanges in an article entitled *Social Behavior as Exchange*. In the article Homans explained that:

Social behavior is an exchange of goods, material goods but also non-material ones, such as the symbols of approval or prestige. Persons that give much to others try to get much from them, and persons that get much from others are under pressure to give much to them. This process of influence tends to work out at equilibrium to a balance in exchanges. (p. 606)



Homans later used psychological models of operant conditioning to refine his framework and added the propositions that actions increase with rewards and decrease without rewards, actions are based on the perceptions of greater awards, and anger and pleasure are the results of the withholding or granting of awards (McDonnell et al., 2006). According to Thibaut and Kelley (1959), the idea of profit is central to each exchange and such profits may be material or symbolic. However, the profit should bring satisfaction or gratification to the individual.

The norm of reciprocity also plays a key role in social exchange theory because it provides a moral lens to guide exchanges (McDonnell et al., 2006). It creates the expectation that rewards or profits are exchanged accordingly between parties, and that in addition to helping those who have helped you, you should also do them no harm (Gouldner, 1960).

Social exchange theory states that actions are based on the rewards of reactions from others (Blau, 1964). The assumption of this study was that alumni philanthropically support their alma mater based on the advantages they perceive that they have received or believe they will receive from the relationship (Weerts & Ronca, 2007).

### **Social Exchange Theory and alumni philanthropic support**

The concept of philanthropy as a social exchange dates back to primitive societies (Cascione, 2013). Gifts were exchanged between families for the purposes of “commerce, alliance, trust, and political savvy” (p. 20). Large gifts were given in order to signify prestige, power and wealth, and gifts were often contingent upon reciprocity. In current higher education philanthropy the benefits of maintaining the prestige of one’s alma mater and the prestige associated with philanthropic giving are primary motivations for giving (Cascione).

Several studies have used social exchange theory as a framework for examining alumni philanthropic support. Hunter et al. (1999) used this theory to show the relationship between alumni and philanthropic support of their alma mater. Drezner (2009) also applied this theory as a basis for understanding how alumni perceived and engaged in philanthropic support of their alma mater. Other studies have used social exchange theory to examine how student extracurricular activities (Dugan et al., 2000; Harrison et al., 1995; Monks, 2003), the quality of the undergraduate academic experience (Clotfelter, 2003; Monks, 2003), and satisfaction and engagement with the alumni experience (Clotfelter, 2003; Monks, 2003) have contributed to alumni philanthropic support (Weerts & Ronca, 2007). In addition, some have used it to show the relationship between altruism and academic prestige and philanthropic support (Skari, 2014). This study used social exchange theory to explore why young alumni philanthropically support their alma mater and to examine their perspective about the costs and benefits of their support.

Weerts and Ronca's (2007) framework for examining alumni philanthropic support from a social exchange perspective guided this study. This framework is based on the assumption that "the "cost" of financial or volunteer support for an institution is weighed against the benefits the alum has received from the university in the past or present (e.g., quality of education, career gains, social connections, and prestige)" (p. 23). In other words, alumni philanthropic support is contingent upon the advantages that alumni perceive that they have received or believe they will receive from their relationship with their alma mater. Drezner (2009) also contended that from a social exchange perspective, the needs and interests of alumni must align with the needs and interests of the institution before they will provide philanthropic support. This assumption is based on Kelly's (2002) finding that there

are two levels of motivation for philanthropic support including increasing the common good and receiving private good in return.

Using social exchange theory as a framework, this study examined young alumni perspectives about the costs and benefits of philanthropically supporting their alma mater from a qualitative perspective. It sought to find the ways in which young alumni are philanthropically supporting their alma mater; the ways in which they plan to philanthropically support their alma mater in the future; and the costs and benefits they derive from their support.

### **Summary**

Alumni philanthropic support plays an important role in institutional advancement. The preceding literature provided an overview of three areas of philanthropic support including giving, volunteering and advocacy. Understanding these support behaviors played an important role in informing interview questions about why young alumni philanthropically support their alma mater and in examining their perspectives about the costs and benefits of their support. In addition research studies that examine young alumni philanthropic support of their alma maters is limited. This study helps to fill this gap in the literature. Qualitative studies about young alumni are also very limited. This qualitative study allowed greater understanding of the lived experiences of young alumni; provided greater context to the ways in which the participants described their experiences and behaviors; helped to understand the process by which the actions of the participants took place; and helped to find new phenomenon and themes that were not necessarily being investigated (Maxwell, 2008).

### CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore how and why young alumni philanthropically support their alma mater and how they plan to support their alma mater in the future. It also examined their perspective about the costs and benefits of their support.

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How are young alumni philanthropically supporting their alma mater?
2. How do young alumni plan to philanthropically support their alma mater in the future?
3. What costs and benefits do young alumni derive from philanthropically supporting their alma mater?

Previous research has suggested that philanthropic giving by alumni can become a habit and may increase over time. Support may begin through activities such as volunteering or advocacy and then move to financial giving (McDearmon, 2013; Meer, 2013; Taylor & Martin, 1995; Tsao & Coll, 2005). Weerts, Cabrera, & Sanford, 2010; Weerts & Ronca, 2007, 2009). The population of interest for this study was already philanthropically supportive of its alma mater, and the young alumni council has been a primary means for their support. The research questions were designed to not only discover what activities young alumni are involved with through the young alumni council, but also to examine the other ways that they are supporting or will support their alma mater in the future. They were also meant to enable the researcher begin to understand why this population has chosen to support their alma mater. The results of this study may help to provide insights about how to increase young alumni philanthropic support in the future.

This chapter outlines the rationale for the research design and methodology, the population, sampling method, pilot testing, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and informed consent, data collection and storage, method of data analysis and synthesis, trustworthiness, ethical considerations, delimitations, and limitations. Each of these items is described in depth in the following sections.

### **Rationale for Qualitative Research Design**

This basic interpretive study provides valuable information about why young alumni philanthropically support their alma mater. It is a qualitative research study. Qualitative research seeks to understand social processes, to consider the subjective nature of human life, and to understand social events from participant perspectives (Esterberg, 2002). “The key to understanding qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals and interactions in their world” (Merriam, 2002, p. 3). According to Merriam (2014) qualitative research focuses on meaning and context, and it relies on a data collection instrument that is sensitive to gathering and interpreting this type of data. People are well-equipped to collect data through interviewing, observing and analyzing. This inductive approach focuses on the individual meanings created by participants and the complexities of life (Cresswell, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

A qualitative approach was the most appropriate research design for this study because the purpose was to understand why young alumni philanthropically support their alma maters (Cresswell, 2014). According to Morse (1991), a qualitative approach is appropriate in cases where the topic has not been studied in relation to a specific group of people and in-depth information is sought. Patton (2002) stated that qualitative research methods enable issues to be studied in depth and in great detail, and it helps to answer

questions that cannot easily be answered numerically. Qualitative research helps to uncover meaning in personal experiences, and it contributes to depth, openness and detail in the data (Patton, 2002). “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meanings they attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2014, p. 7

Sandelowski (2000) asserted that the value of qualitative research is minimal intervention in the study of a particular phenomenon. The researcher attempts to provide an accurate description of the meaning that participants create about a phenomenon in a way that participants view as accurate (Sandelowski, 2000). According to Patton (1985), the understanding created through qualitative research:

...is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of the setting—what is meant for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what’s going on for them, what their meanings are, and what the world looks like in that particular setting—and in the analysis to be able to communicate that faithfully to others who are interested in that setting... (p. 14)

Qualitative research is needed to learn about various higher education philanthropic issues including relationship building with nontraditional donors such as young alumni (ASHE, 2011a). “The voices of alumni are needed to understand the details of quantitative studies looking at giving and vice versa. This work is particularly important, as the decision to give voluntary support—in service or monetary contributions—often cannot be fully explained through traditional survey methods” (ASHE, 2011a, p. 88).

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary tool of data collection and analysis. The role of the researcher is to gain understanding of the meaning that people ascribe to their experiences. There are several advantages to this approach including (a) increased

responsiveness and adaptation to changes that occur during the study, (b) expanded understanding through verbal and non-verbal communication, increased processing and clarification of information, (c) verification of the accuracy of interpretations, and (d) the ability to explore unusual or unanticipated responses (Merriam, 2002).

### **Epistemology**

An epistemology is the theory of knowledge used by a researcher to inform and justify the knowledge building process (Gringeri, Barusch, & Cambron, 2013). The epistemology guides all phases of the study including research design, methodology, and analysis (Gringeri et al., 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Qualitative researchers establish their epistemological orientation by providing a discussion of their research paradigm, and this discussion should be easily understood by readers (Marshall & Rossman). Gringeri et al. (2013) noted that “researchers must make explicit the decisions made in the process of inquiry if they are serious about contributing to the knowledge base of the profession” (p. 55).

The study employed a social constructivist epistemology. This epistemology encompasses a number of disciplines including philosophy, sociology, and linguistics. Although there is not a single definition for social constructivist, it emphasizes a critical approach to viewing our understanding of the world, and it argues that “there are no ‘essences’ inside of people who make them who they are.” Therefore, we are all a product of social processes (Burr, 2015, p. 6).

The constructivist view holds that “meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty, 1998, p. 43). Social constructivist adds another dimension to this view. From this viewpoint humans do not make sense of the

world based on individual experiences. Instead the world is viewed through the lens of our culture. Therefore all reality and meaning are socially constructed (Crotty). Within this model there are no absolute truths or interpretations. Instead some interpretations are more useful than others, and it is assumed that the more useful interpretations will take precedence over those that are not useful (Crotty).

Using a constructivist approach, researchers try to interpret the world through the meanings that others have created. They seek complexity of views instead of relying on limited categories or ideas. Their goal is to rely on participants views, which are often socially and historically constructed (Creswell, 2014). In the context of this study, the constructionist approach was used to understand young alumni philanthropic support from the perspective of the participants.

### **Rationale for Basic Interpretive Methodology**

This study utilized a basic interpretive methodology. In the basic interpretive approach, the research attempts to give meaning to a phenomenon from the perspective of participants (Merriam, 2002). The major assumptions of this methodology are that meaning is culturally and historically situated and the research seeks meaning and understanding through the social world (Merriam, 2002).

Corbin and Strauss (2008) defined basic interpretive qualitative research as “research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification (p.11). This method is primarily used to study lives, experiences, perceptions and behaviors. The purpose is to discover concepts and relationships and to organize them into a theoretical exploratory theme (Corbin & Strauss).



According to Kahlke (2014), basic interpretive research methodologies are particularly useful when the research questions do not fit well with an established methodology. They allow researchers to develop a research design that fits the epistemological stance, discipline and research questions. This approach enables the researcher to draw on the strengths of the established methodological approaches without being bound to them.

A basic interpretive approach was selected for this study because the purpose was to understand the experiences that have influenced young alumni decisions to philanthropically support their alma mater and the costs and benefits that they derive from their support. The meanings that young alumni ascribe to their relationships with their alma mater and the perceived costs and benefits of their philanthropic support were based on their social experiences and the environments in which they live.

Basic interpretative research draws from the areas of phenomenology and symbolic interaction. Phenomenology helps basic interpretive researchers understand how people interpret experiences based on the personal meaning that the experiences have for them. Symbolic interaction focuses on the meaning that people create from experiences while interacting with others in society (Merriam 2002). Therefore, basic interpretive researchers are concerned with: “(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam 2002, p. 38). According to Lim (2011), basic interpretive studies provide very rich descriptions of the phenomenon being examined, and the research methods are highly inductive (open coding, category creation, and thematic analysis).

The objective of this methodology is to understand how people create meaning of their lives and experiences (Merriam 2002). In this study participants were asked to interpret and attribute meaning to their relationships with their alma mater and to their perceived costs and benefits of philanthropically supporting their alma mater.

The basic interpretive methodology was selected for this study due to limited research about why young alumni philanthropically support their alma maters and the need to understand this phenomenon from the perspectives of those who experienced it. In this research study the issues being investigated included how young alumni are philanthropically supporting their alma mater; and the ways in which they plan to philanthropically support their alma mater in the future. The goals of this study were to better understand how young alumni interpret and ascribe meaning to the past and present experiences that have influenced their decisions to philanthropically support their alma mater and to determine their perceived costs and benefits of their philanthropic support. The basic interpretive approach allowed for increased understanding of participant experiences and will provide qualitative data that will help to answer the research questions. The results of this study may be used to provide greater understanding of how to increase young alumni philanthropic support in the future. Peer reviewed qualitative research that involves college and university alumni is very limited. No previous studies using a basic interpretive methodology were identified.

### **Researcher Positionality**

I am a White female, and, I have earned both Bachelor and Master of Science degrees from the institution where this study was conducted. In addition, I have worked for the institution for almost 11 years in various positions such as an academic adviser and internship coordinator and as a program coordinator for one of its academic units.

Currently I am employed as the director of alumni relations for one of the colleges at the institution where the study was conducted, and I serve on the board of directors of the alumni association at this institution. In addition, I worked with several members of the alumni association's young alumni council through my position on the board. In my current position, I oversee alumni engagement activities such as events, award programs, advisory councils, and communication for the college in which I work. As a result, I was able to provide in-depth knowledge of the institution and its alumni relations practices to the study.

However, this depth of experience may also have led to unintended bias in the research. I worked to minimize bias by conducting the study in a "rigorous, systematic, and ethical manner" (Merriam, 2002, p. 24). This was done by using the measures of confirmability and reliability mentioned above including thick, rich descriptions, member checks, peer review, maximum variation, and an audit trail (Merriam).

### **Context of the Research Site**

The institution where this research took place is a large Midwestern land-grant Carnegie Classification Research One institution, and it is a member of the American Association of Universities (AAU). The alumni association's primary mission is to build a lifelong connection between the institution and its alumni. The alumni association provides members with programs and services including career and networking programs, travel opportunities, and e-mail accounts. Young alumni of the institution comprise about 25% of 259,093 alumni of the institution. They also account for almost six percent of membership in the alumni association

### **Population and Sampling**

The population of interest for this study was young alumni of a large public research university in the Midwest. At this institution young alumni are defined as those who have graduated with undergraduate degrees in the last 10 years. This definition is similar to the definition used at many alumni offices across the country.

The purposeful sample for the study was eight members of the institution's young alumni council as well as four former members of the council who were still considered young alumni according to the institutions definition. This purposeful sample was selected because current and former members of the young alumni council are among the most philanthropically supportive young alumni of the institution.

The young alumni council accepts applications from all young alumni of the institution. In order to become a member of the young alumni council, prospective members must apply and participate in an interview and selection process. Only a handful of new members are selected each year. Those who are not selected for the council in a given year are encouraged to reapply in the future.

In recent years, the alumni association has shifted its focus from increasing membership to increasing engagement for all university alumni. As a result, the young alumni council also updated its goals to remain in line with the association's goals. The young alumni council is charged with helping the alumni association form connections with young alumni of the institution. Their primary responsibilities are to review the alumni association's current programming and activities for young alumni and to propose new ideas for engaging with the young alumni demographic. Members of the young alumni council also help the alumni association with event planning, membership drives, and marketing and

communication efforts related to young alumni. The young alumni council meets on campus twice each year, once in the fall and once in the spring. Members also meet a few times each year via conference phone call. In addition, council members serve on council sub-committees including the executive committee, the marketing and engagement committee, the membership committee, and the programming committee. Each committee meets several times each year via conference call.

In this study purposive sampling was used to examine critical cases that are very relevant to the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2002). This technique was the most appropriate for this study because there were no known qualitative studies of young alumni that focus on those who are philanthropically involved. If one can begin to understand the perspectives of those who are involved with this organization, it may help to provide insight into how to increase philanthropic support by young alumni in the future.

The basic interpretive methodology focuses on understanding how people create meaning of their lives and experiences (Merriam 2002). Concentrating on a small group of the institution's most philanthropically engaged young alumni helped to narrow the focus the study.

Effort was made to increase voluntary participation. Participants received alumni association gifts certificates for \$20 as an incentive for participating in the study.

### **Overview of the Research Design**

The information in the following subsections provide a summary of the research design of this study. They also include as summary of the individual steps required for carrying out research with human participants.

**IRB approval and informed consent**

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for research involving human subjects was obtained before data collection began. A copy of the approval is provided in Appendix A. This process protects the rights and safety of participants. Once approval was received, the researcher invited the members of the young alumni council to participate in the study. Participation was contingent on participants reading and signing an informed consent document. Those who did not sign the document were not allowed to participate. Participation communication is provided in Appendix A.

During data collection, an IRB modification form was submitted in order to expand the sample to include former members of the young alumni council. This decision was made in order to increase participation in the study. Once the modification was approved, the researcher invited former members of the young alumni council who were still considered young alumni to participate in the study. Participation of the former members was also contingent on them reading and signing an informed consent document prior to the interview.

**Data collection**

Two primary data collection methods were utilized in this study: online videoconference interviews and an examination of documents and records such as website content and meeting minutes.

The researcher received the support and permission of the alumni association at the institution where the research study will take place. The staff members at the alumni association supported this project by providing contact information for current and former members of its young alumni council.

Participants were invited to participate in this study via an e-mail invitation (see Appendix B-1). The invitation included the purpose of the study and a description of their role in the research project. When prospective participants agreed to participate, they received a copy of the informed consent document (see Appendix B-2). They were also asked about convenient dates and times for interviews.

### **Pilot testing**

Pilot testing involves testing the research protocol on a small scale prior to utilizing it on the sample. Wengraf (2001) recommended piloting the “design purpose” and the “fitness of your design for those purposes” with a small group of sample participants in order to improve the practice and design of a study (p. 187). The interview protocol was pilot tested on a convenience sample of three young alumni of the institution. A convenience sample involves selecting participants based on availability and ease of access (Patton, 2002). The pilot test participants were identified by the researcher. Current and former members of the alumni association’s young alumni council were not invited to participate in pilot testing. Adjustments were made to the protocol based upon the suggestions of the pilot test participants. The adjustments included rewording questions for clarity and understanding and reordering a few of the questions in the interview guide.

### **Participant interviews**

Semi-structured online interviews served as the principal data collection method for this study, and they were conducted in the spring and summer of 2016. Qualitative studies involving alumni philanthropic support are limited; however, Drezner (2009) and Wastyn (2009) also used interviews as the primary data collection method in their qualitative studies

of alumni philanthropic support. Online interviews were conducted due to the limited timeline and budget for this project.

Once IRB approval was received, all 13 members of the young alumni council were invited to participate in the study via a personal e-mail. Eight of the members agreed to participate in the study. They were provided with an informed consent document when they agreed to participate in the study. Because increased participation was desired, the study was expanded to also include former members of the young alumni council who were still considered young alumni by the institution. Four former members also agreed to participate. The total number of participants was twelve. All participants were required to read and sign the informed consent document before they were allowed to participate in the study (see Appendix B-3 and B-4 for interview invitations and consent forms for former members).

Janesick (1998) defined interviews as “a meeting of two persons to exchange information and ideas through questions and responses, resulting in communication and joint construction of meaning about a particular topic” (p. 30). Interviewing is a data collection method that is central to qualitative social research, and the primary purpose of this method is to learn information from individuals about a specific topic (Esterberg, 2002). Interviews are often described as conversations with a specific purpose. The interviewer usually asks questions and directs the conversation, and the interviewee discloses information such as perspectives about a topic or about experiences (Wengraf, 2001).

Semi-structured interviews allow for an open exchange of thoughts and ideas. The goal is to allow interviewees to respond to questions in their own words (Esterberg, 2002). The interviewer typically prepares a question outline prior to the interview, but the interviewee responses guide the discussion (Wengraf, 2001). Interviews are a very



appropriate method of data collection in situations when the sample is very small; when you are seeking a wealth of information about a specific topic or phenomenon; when in-depth information is needed about participant opinions, values, motivations, experiences and feelings; when you want to customize the interview to the individual; and when you want to develop rapport with each participant for the purpose of collecting rich data (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). Because semi-structured interviews allow for a free exchange of ideas, they were very useful in exploring this topic in-depth (Esterberg, 2002). Semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate data collection method for this project it sought in-depth information about opinions, values and motivations from a small sample of participants the format also allows for follow-up questions as needed.

Online videoconference interviews are a relatively new data collection method; nevertheless, they are becoming increasingly common in qualitative research. Online communication tools such as Adobe Connect, Skype, and Google Hangouts enable researchers to connect with participants who they may not otherwise be able to interview in person (Nehls et al., 2015). In addition, they allow for the recording of audio and video data (Paulus, Lester, & Dempster, 2014).

Online interviews are particularly useful in avoiding geographical issues in reaching a very specific group of participants (Cote & Raz, 2015). They also offer several other advantages over traditional face-to-face interviews including allowing participants to choose a comfortable interview space, low cost, and convenience. In addition, the quality of responses in online interviews is similar to that of face-to-face interviews (Nehls, et al., 2015). Because participants lived in many different cities in the U.S., online videoconference interviews were the most efficient and cost effective data collection method for this study.

The interview protocol was created based upon the conceptual framework of the study. It included open-ended questions about how and why participants philanthropically support their alma mater, the costs and benefits that they derive from their support, and the ways in which they plan to support their alma mater in the future (see Appendix B-5).

In the spring or summer of 2016 each participant was interviewed through Zoom Video Conferencing, and the interviews for each participant lasted for approximately 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded. This process is based on the Dresner (2009) and Wastyn (2009) studies.

The purpose of the interviews was to discuss how they philanthropically support their alma mater, the costs and benefits that they derive from their support, and the ways in which they plan to support their alma mater in the future. A copy of the interview scheduling email is provided in Appendix B-6.

Each interview was transcribed, and participants were provided with copies of the transcripts to solicit feedback and to make sure that the interview data were accurate. Participants were encouraged to send me their feedback and to clarify any of their statements.

Field notes were taken during and following each interview. They were used to describe what happened during data collection and will include information about the events, setting and participants. The purpose of these field notes was to document initial reactions to the data and to begin to create analytical themes (Keyton, 2011).

### **Documents and records**

Documents and records including the young alumni council handbooks, meeting minutes, and website content were used to provide additional context for this study. According to Esterburg (2002), documents and records include “any written materials that

people leave behind” (p. 121). The documents and texts provide an unobtrusive means of studying the phenomenon. Document and record review was used to enhance and triangulate the data collected during the interviews. The document and record review allowed me to check that data from the interviews against what I read in the documents and records (Merriam, 2002). The documents and records were shared by the alumni association during the data collection phase of the study.

### **Methods of data analysis and synthesis**

Because a large amount of data was collected for this study a systematic and simultaneous process guided the data analysis and synthesis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). This section outlines the process.

Following collection, data were securely stored in an online password-protected server space and on a password-protected computer hard drive. Interviews and field notes were transcribed and the data was coded and analyzed according to the research questions they address. The interviews were transcribed using an online transcription service called *Rev.com*. Once the interviews were transcribed, the audio files were destroyed and the transcript data was de-identified (Esterberg, 2002). The data was then coded by hand according to the research questions.

Coding was a two-step process beginning with open coding to identify themes and categories of interest based on the data (Esterberg, 2002). The first cycle in the coding process was to assign descriptive codes to groups of data. Descriptive codes assign labels to data in order to summarize a basic topic (Miles et al., 2014).

Once the descriptive coding process was complete, focused coding was then conducted to focus on the key themes identified during the open coding process (Esterberg,

2002). The second cycle of coding was used to identify patterns in the first cycle codes. It was used to narrow the data into fewer themes or categories (Miles et al., 2014).

Analytical memos were made during the coding process in order to document my thoughts and reflections about the data. The memos helped me provide an initial synthesis of the data. They will also helped me begin the process of ascribing analytical meaning (Miles et al., 2014). Interpretations were developed based on the data analysis and coding processes described above (Keyton, 2011). Once this process was complete, transcripts were reviewed a third time to ensure that interpretations are grounded in the data.

### **Confirmability and Trustworthiness**

Qualitative researchers must be concerned about the confirmability and reliability of their studies. “Without rigor, research is worthless, becomes, fictional, and loses utility” (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002, p. 14). If a qualitative researcher is unable to produce valid findings then the policies, programs, and predictions based upon them are invalid (Maxwell, 1992). Creswell and Miller (2000) stated that qualitative researchers have used many different terms to define qualitative credibility including authenticity, goodness, verisimilitude, adequacy, trustworthiness, plausibility, validity, and validation. The overarching theme in the descriptions is credibility. Research that is completely free of bias is impossible, but it is possible to mitigate the influence of bias by creating “rigorous field procedures” and by discussing the possible influence in the findings (Patton, 2002, p. 93). Research must be conducted ethically and systematically to ensure that the findings are good and trustworthy (Merriam, 2002). Some of the most standard procedures for ensuring qualitative research confirmability include member checking, triangulation, thick description,

peer reviews, and external audits (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Morse et al., 2002). The strategies that were used to ensure confirmability are discussed as follows.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability is the ability of the researcher to demonstrate the results of the study through an adequate description of processes and an audit trail (Lincoln & Gruba, 1985). There are several measures of confirmability that were used in this study to ensure its that the study can be confirmed. These measures include: rich, thick descriptions such as participant quotes, triangulation, member checks, maximum variation, and an audit trail (Merriam, 2002; Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Providing rich, thick descriptions involves supplying adequate description for readers to contextualize the study. This procedure involves describing the setting, participants and themes with great detail (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Denzin, 1989). The thick, rich descriptions allow readers to feel like they have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). It also helps them to determine if the findings may be applicable to other contexts (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). This method should be used to the extent that readers can determine how closely their situation matches the situation of the study (Merriam, 2002). In this study, rich, thick descriptions of the institution, the participants, and their statements were used to confirm the study.

Triangulation is the use of multiple forms of data to confirm the findings of the study (Merriam, 2002). The purpose of triangulation is to utilize several sources of data in order to rule out the biases of a single source and to deepen understanding of a phenomenon (Seale, 1999). This method helps researchers sort through large amounts of data to find common themes. Researchers often use methods such as observations, interviews, and document

review to triangulate their findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In this study interviews and a review of documents and records such as web content, the young alumni council handbook, and meeting minutes were used to triangulate the findings of the interviews.

Lincoln and Gruba (1985) stated that member checks are the most important procedure for ensuring confirmability. Member checks require the researcher to supply participants with interview data and preliminary interpretations to determine if they are reasonable (Merriam, 2002). During the member check process, researchers ask participants if “the themes or categories make sense, whether they are developed with sufficient evidence, and whether the overall account is realistic and accurate” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). The participants should recognize the reported data as accurately representing their experiences (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Participants in this study were invited to review their interview transcripts and the preliminary finding of the study including the interpretations of their statements (Merriam, 2002). No changes were made after providing the participants with the preliminary findings because none of them had any suggested changes.

An audit trail is a detailed description of the methods, research procedures, and decision-making practices for the study (Merriam, 2002). The purpose of providing an audit trail is to allow for the examination of the process and procedures of the study to ensure they are valid (Marshall, 1990). Common methods of establishing an audit trail include journaling and memos, keeping a research log, developing a data collection chronology, and recording data analysis procedures (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Researchers can achieve an audit trail by

- (a) describing the specific purpose of the study;
- (b) discussing how and why participants were selected for the study;
- (c) describing how the data were collected and how long the data collection lasted;
- (d) explaining how the data were reduced or transformed for analysis;
- (e) discussing the interpretation and

presentation of the research findings; and (f) communicating the specific techniques used to determine the credibility of the data. (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 153)

In this study the audit trail included a detailed description of the methods and procedures as well as interview transcripts, field notes, analytical memos, and notes about reflexivity.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness refers to the ability to replicate the study (Merriam, 2002). It can also be defined as “the degree to which the finding is independent of accidental circumstances” (Kirk & Miller, 1986, p. 20). Trustworthiness is difficult to document in social science studies research because human behavior changes. Therefore researchers must provide evidence that the findings are consistent with the data (Merriam, 2002). Some of the strategies for ensuring reliability include: peer examination, investigator positionality, and an audit trail.

Peer examination or debriefing includes discussion of the study, methods, findings, and interpretations with colleagues or someone familiar with the research area in order to ensure that they are congruent (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Merriam, 2002). The role of the peer reviewer is to provide support, challenge assumptions, and thoroughly examine methods, procedures and interpretations (Lincoln & Gruba, 1985). I discussed the methods, findings, and my interpretations with other researchers in the School of Education to ensure that they were congruent.

Qualitative researchers must maintain a reflective self-critical attitude about their assumptions related to their research topics (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). A position statement involves critical self-reflection by the researcher to identify issues that may influence the research (Merriam, 2002). Using this procedure researchers self-disclose their assumptions,

beliefs, and possible biases and reflect upon the social, cultural and historical influences that shape their beliefs (Creswell & Miller, 2000). A positionality statement and notes about reflexivity were maintained throughout the study.

As mentioned previously, an audit trail is a detailed description of the methods, research procedures, and decision-making practices for the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Marshall, 1990; Merriam; 2002). In this study the audit trail included a description of the methods, interview transcripts, field notes, analytical memos, and notes about reflexivity.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations are an important component of any research project. Esterberg (2002) recommended that all researchers consider five important questions before conducting a qualitative study:

How should we conduct research so as not to hurt others? What kinds of relationships should we attempt to create with our research subjects? What kinds of power relations are there between those who are doing the research and those who are being researched? Who benefits from social research? Who should benefit? (p. 44)

These questions served as the foundation for the ethical completion of this research.

The Council for Advancement and Support of Higher Education's (CASE) Statement of Ethics also guided the study. The underlying principles of this code are respect for truth fairness, free inquiry and the opinions of others; respect for diverse individuals; upholding high professional standards; protecting privacy and confidentiality; practicing ethical behavior including not accepting personal favors and avoiding conflicts of interest; and following all laws (CASE, 2015b).

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained before the study began, and informed consent was obtained from each participant. No minors or vulnerable persons were



asked to participate in the study. Participants were made aware of who was conducting the study, the purpose of the study, why they were invited to participate, what they would be asked to do as a study participant, and how the information from the study will be used. No covert or deceptive research strategies were used to acquire data from participants (Esterberg, 2002). There was no anticipated risk or discomfort for study participants, and participants were advised that they may choose not to answer any questions or to stop participating in the study at any time. They would not be penalized in any way if they chose not to participate. Participants did not incur any costs for their participation, but they did receive an incentive if they choose to participate. The incentive was alumni associate merchandise that did not exceed \$20 per person.

Efforts were made to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants to the extent possible. Complete anonymity was not guaranteed due to the sample being used in this study. It was possible that participants could be identified based on their service on the young alumni council. However, efforts were made to prevent individual responses from being linked to participant identities in the report. Data were stored securely on a password-protected private server network and on a password-protected computer hard drive. Participant pseudonyms were used instead of participant names when transcribing interviews and in writing the report (Esterberg, 2002). Discussion of contact information and identifying information was very limited throughout the completion of the project (Esterberg, 2002). The information was only be available to those who need to know to successfully complete the project.

Finally, efforts were made to conduct interviews that accurately depict participant experiences. The interview protocol was pilot-tested on a convenience sample of young

alumni of the institution to help minimize bias in the interview questions. This process helped to reduce unclear or confusing questions. It will also help to determine if there are any issues with the research process (Keyton, 2011). Pilot test participants were identified by the researcher, and selected participants were invited to participate via e-mail. In the final study transcripts and results were provided to participants for member checks (Esterberg, 2002).

### **Delimitations**

This study examined the past and present experiences that have influenced young alumni to philanthropically support their alma mater and the perceived costs and benefits of their support. The primary source of data for this research was interviews with current and former members of the institution's young alumni council. The study utilized social exchange theory as the theoretical basis for data analysis, discussion, and recommendations. The results of this study are not intended to be generalized or transferred to other institutions or situations, although they may be used to inform our understanding of young alumni philanthropy.

### **Limitations**

Efforts were made to ensure the confirmability and reliability of this project, but there were some limitations. Because this is a qualitative study, the results have limited external validity or generalizability to other situations or populations (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). There has been limited research about young alumni and philanthropic support; therefore, this study was more inductive than deductive. Thus, specific observations were used to make broader generalizations about the phenomenon.

The sample used for this study also presented limitations. I interviewed young alumni who were already very philanthropically supportive of the institution. In many cases, they were invited to join the council based upon their philanthropic involvement as students and young alumni. Many of the current and former members of the young alumni council were members of the student alumni association and the Greek system as students. There was not a wide range of diversity among the participants.

It was more difficult than I expected to find participants for the study. When I did not receive enough participation among the current members of the council, the study had to be expanded to include former members. Some of the former members' experiences were somewhat different than those of the current members.

The interviews were also subject to some self-selection bias because participants made the decision to participate (Keyton, 2011). Due to the population of interest selected for this study, the views of participants may not be representative of all young alumni of the institution including those from underrepresented populations.

The online interview format did not allow me to build the same level of rapport with participants that in person interviews would have. In addition, more interviews with each participant would have yielded additional depth to many of their responses.

Furthermore, all qualitative studies are subject to at least some researcher bias. Bias was potentially mitigated by including a positionality statement with the project and by providing a detailed audit trail of the methods, interview transcripts, field notes, analytical memos, and notes about reflexivity. Efforts were made to minimize the effects of these potential limitations.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this basic interpretive study was to explore what past and present experiences have influenced young alumni decisions to philanthropically support their alma mater and to examine young alumni perspective about the costs and benefits of their philanthropic support. The population of interest for this study was current and former members of a young alumni council at a large public research institution in the Midwest. Data were collected through online videoconference interviews and through a review of artifacts such as web content and meeting minutes. Interview data were transcribed, and the data were coded and analyzed according to the research questions it addressed. IRB approval and informed consent were obtained before data collection began. Thick, rich descriptions including participant quotes, member checks, maximum variation, peer examination, and an audit trail were used to ensure the confirmability and reliability of the study. The results of this study provide greater understanding of why young alumni philanthropically support their alma mater. In addition, the results of this study can be used to provide greater understanding of how to increase young alumni philanthropic support in the future.

## CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore how young alumni philanthropically support their alma mater, how they plan to support their alma mater in the future, and their perspective about the costs and benefits of their support. This chapter provides a description of the key themes that emerged during the study.

### Participants

This section provides descriptions of each of the participants in the study. Pseudonyms were used for each participant. All of the participants graduated with undergraduate degrees from the same large Midwestern research institution, and have served as members of the young alumni council. In addition, all of the participants are current members of the alumni association. They graduated in the ten-year period between 2005 and 2015.

The sample used in this study included seven females and five males. Eight participants were current members of the young alumni council at the time of their interviews, and four were past members. The participants had primary undergraduate majors in agriculture, art and design, business, engineering, human sciences, and liberal arts. A majority of participants graduated in the five-year period from 2005 to 2010, and a majority live in the Midwest region. The participants worked in a variety of industries including communication and marketing, engineering, fundraising, healthcare, retail, sales, and technology. A profile of the participants is provided in Table 1.

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<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>N</i>	Table 1.
<i>Gender</i>	Female	7	Demographic
	Male	5	
<i>Primary major area</i>	Agriculture	3	characteristic s of participants
	Art and Design	1	
	Business	2	
	Engineering	1	
	Education and Social Sciences	3	
	Liberal Arts	2	
<i>Graduation year range</i>	2005-2010	9	
	2011-2015	3	
<i>Region of residence</i>	Midwest	9	
	Northeast	2	
	Southeast	0	
	Southwest	0	
	West	1	
	<i>Employment industry</i>	Communication and Marketing	2
Engineering		1	
Fundraising		2	
Healthcare		2	
Retail		1	
Sales		2	
Technology		1	
Did not specify		1	
<i>Council membership status</i>	Current	8	
	Former	4	

## **Amanda**

Amanda majored in social sciences in college, and she currently works in alumni relations and development at another university. She and her husband live in a small town in

the Midwest, and they have two small children. As a student Amanda was involved with an alumni council for students, the senior class council, and a large student-run festival on campus. She also worked at the university's dining center, catering department, and a student-run on-campus restaurant. Amanda came to be involved in the young alumni council when she was doing research for her job, and she came across the application for the young alumni council on the alumni association's website. She applied and was accepted for a position on the council. Amanda was a current member of the young alumni council at the time of her interview.

### **Jane**

Jane had a health-related major in college, and currently works for a healthcare organization. She and her husband live in a large metro area in the Midwest, and they have a small child. As a student she was not involved in many extracurricular activities. Her husband was in the military, lived in a different city, and was deployed while she was in school, and she was very focused on finishing her degree. After graduation Jane earned a master's degree at another institution. She also worked with wellness and recreation programs for the military for several years before beginning her current position. Jane is the 33<sup>rd</sup> person in her extended family to graduate from her alma mater.

Jane has been very involved with the alumni association club in her area. She learned about the young alumni council from her involvement in her local alumni club, and she saw her involvement with the young alumni council as a way to strengthen the relationship between the alumni association and her local club. Jane held a leadership position on the young alumni council and was a current member of the young alumni council at the time of her interview.

**Leo**

Leo majored in the liberal arts in college, and he currently works in a position that is not related to his major. He lives in a large city on the east coast and works from home. Leo was a first-generation college student. As a student he was very involved in the student newspaper as an advertising sales account executive. Although it was originally intended as a temporary, part-time job, it ended up being almost full-time for him. Leo was very involved in the alumni club in his previous city of residence, and he started the alumni club in his current city of residence. He came to be involved in the young alumni council when a fellow alumni club member suggested that he apply. In addition to his work with the council, he participates in an alumni organization for his major department at his alma mater. Leo was a current member of the young alumni council at the time of his interview.

**Megan**

Megan majored in fashion and currently works for a print communication company. She and her husband live in a medium-sized city near her alma mater. As a student she was very involved in her classes and the student-run fashion show. She finished her undergraduate degree in three years. Following graduation Megan moved to a large Midwestern city to work in the retail industry, but she later moved to her current city of residence to be closer to family. She got involved in the young alumni council because she was looking for networking opportunities when she moved to her current city of residence. She did an Internet search and found the application for the young alumni council. She applied and was accepted. At the time of her interview, she was a current member of the young alumni council, holding a leadership position.



**Nicholas**

Nicholas majored in agriculture at his alma mater, and currently works as a sales representative for a multi-national agribusiness company. He and his fiancé, who is also an alumna of the institution, live in a small city that is fairly close to their alma mater. Nicholas was very involved in extracurricular activities while he was in college. He was in a fraternity and was involved as a student ambassador for the alumni association. He held memberships in the senior class council, an alumni council for students, the homecoming planning committee, and a student support program for the athletics department. Nicholas' student involvement with the alumni association was the catalyst for him joining the young alumni council. He is a third generation graduate of his alma mater, and is very proud of his family connection to the institution. Nicholas was a current member of the young alumni council at the time of his interview.

**Patrick**

Patrick majored in business in college, and he currently works as a consultant for a multi-national healthcare company. He lives in a large city in the Midwest. As a student he was involved with a fraternity and the interfraternity council, working on recruitment for all of the fraternities on campus. Patrick has a strong family connection to his alma mater. Both of his brothers attended the institution, and his aunt and uncle attend and currently work as professors at the institution. Patrick was encouraged to apply for the young alumni council by a friend who had previously served on the council. He was not selected the first time he applied, but he reapplied a few years later and was accepted. Patrick was a current member of the young alumni council at the time of her interview.

**Paul**

Paul majored in art and design in college, and he worked at an architecture firm before accepting his current position in store design at the corporate office of a multi-national retail company. He and his family live in a large metro area in the Midwest. As a student he was involved with the institution's hockey club. He got involved in the young alumni council after finding information about it as he was looking through the student newspaper. Paul was a former member of the young alumni council at the time of his interview.

**Sarah**

Sarah majored in liberal arts in college, and she currently works as a fundraising consultant. She and her fiancé live in a large city in the Midwest. As a student she was involved with a sorority. She also worked with the alumni association and the homecoming planning committee. Sarah was familiar with the young alumni council through her involvement with the alumni association as a student. She applied for the council when a friend and former council member encouraged her to do so. Several of Sarah's family members attended her alma mater, and her father currently works there. Sarah was a former member of the young alumni council at the time of her interview.

**Steven**

Steven received undergraduate degrees in agriculture and business, and is currently a consultant for a multi-national technology corporation in a large city in the Northwest. Following graduation he worked for a business consulting IT firm in the Midwest and as a market researcher for animal health and products. A few years later, he earned an MBA from a private research institution in the Midwest. Steven was very involved as an undergraduate student. He participated in a fraternity, the planning committee for a student-run festival, a

Greek celebration committee, a student leadership council, an athletics promotion committee, and he was president of the senior class council. He joined the young alumni council while he was in his MBA program, but he did not finish his entire term because he was busy with school. Steven is a third generation graduate of his alma mater and is the fourth generation to attend. He was a former member of the young alumni council at the time of his interview.

### **Tara**

Tara majored in engineering in college, and she works as an engineer for a large general contractor with its headquarters on the east coast. She and her husband live in a medium-sized city near her alma mater. They have a young daughter. As a student she was involved with an engineering learning community, an alumni association council for students, and student leadership opportunities in her academic department. She also served as the student member of the young alumni council during her senior year, and she currently serves on the alumni association's board of directors. A handful of Tara's family members also attended her alma mater including her grandparents, father, and cousins. Tara was a former member of the young alumni council at the time of her interview.

### **Vanessa**

Vanessa majored in business in college, and she works in marketing and communication for a government agency on the east coast. Vanessa was very involved as an undergraduate student. She was an intern in the athletic marketing department at her alma mater and was in a sorority. She helped to start a student club for her major, and she was a part of a major-related council. She also helped with several committees for a student-run festival and homecoming. Study abroad was an important part of her student experience. Vanessa got involved with the young alumni council when a former council member

encouraged her to apply, and she was a current member of the council at the time of her interview.

### **Zoe**

Zoe had two majors in agriculture in college, and she lives in a medium-sized city near her alma mater. She currently works as the communication director for a national agricultural advocacy association in the Midwest. As a student she was involved with a sorority, an alumni association council for students, and the homecoming planning committee. She was the senior class council vice president and was involved with major-related activities in her college. Her student involvement with the alumni association caused her to apply for the young alumni council. Zoe was a current member of the young alumni council at the time of her interview.

### **Research Question 1: How are young alumni philanthropically supporting their alma mater?**

The first research question was: “How are young alumni philanthropically supporting their alma mater?” In order to answer this question, participants were asked to discuss their involvement with the young alumni council. They were also asked how they philanthropically support their alma mater. Previous research suggests that philanthropic giving by alumni can become a habit and that it may increase over time. Support may begin through activities such as volunteering or advocacy and later change to include financial giving. This study focused on a population that is philanthropically supportive of their alma mater. The young alumni council is one of primary methods of their support. The purpose of this question was to examine their involvement with the young alumni council as well as to examine the other ways that they may be supporting their alma mater (McDearmon, 2013;

Meer, 2013; Weerts, Cabrera, and Sanford, 2010; Weerts and Ronca, 2009; Weerts and Ronca, 2007; Tsao and Coll, 2005; Taylor and Martin, 1995). The following sections describe their responses.

### **Volunteering**

Volunteering was the primary method of philanthropic support discussed by the young alumni participants. The principal means for participants to provide volunteer support was outreach and engagement with other alumni through their work on the young alumni council. The participants described a variety of roles that they had taken on with the council, and many of them described their level of responsibility with the council increasing over time. In almost all cases, the volunteer experiences of the council members did not stop with the young alumni council. They also described volunteering to engage other alumni through local alumni clubs and activities and through other alumni association, college, and departmental alumni groups. Some also discussed participating in student success and mentoring activities and helping to provide students with internship and employment opportunities.

### **Outreach and engagement through the Young Alumni Council**

Most participants devoted much of their volunteer time with their alma mater to the young alumni council. The purpose of the young alumni council is to connect young alumni with the institution through events, membership drives, and marketing and communication. In all cases the participants in the study began in smaller support roles, and over time they took on leadership roles with much more responsibility.

Jane began her service on the council by serving on committees and providing support in keeping young alumni engaged. She recently completed a term as the chair of the

council. In this role she facilitated council meetings and phone conferences and managed the work of all of the committees of the council. Additionally, she served as the primary liaison to the alumni association and as the spokesperson for the young alumni council. Jane thinks that she and the other members of the council helped to grow the engagement of young alumni during the last year. She directed several large initiatives related to young alumni engagement.

During the last few years, Megan has served on almost every committee of the young alumni council, and she just finished a term as the chair-elect of the council. In her work on the engagement and outreach committee and the membership committee. *“It was reaching out to seniors and young alums and trying to just connect with them,”* she said. She also helped plan engagement strategies for a graduating senior event and homecoming. As the chair elect, she oversaw special projects for the young alumni council including facilitating nominations for the executive committee, facilitating the young alumni awards process, and updating operating guidelines for the council. She has now become the chair of the council.

Leo was also very involved as a volunteer for the young alumni council. During his first year on the council, he was a member of the membership and programming committee. *“...we really focused on a few events throughout the year to ... promote membership within the Alumni Association and then programming at the club level and also back closer to [University] in [City],”* he said. Last year he served as the vice-chair of a new committee that was charged with helping to make alumni association events and activities more appealing for young alumni. *“We were also really more focused on...events that are happening across the nation and pulling in alumni that might not be able to go back to games as often.”*

Nicholas volunteered for the young alumni council for three years. He began his service by attending meetings and being a member of one of the committees. Last year he took a leadership role with the membership and programming committee. In this role he coordinated outreach to young alumni to encourage membership in the association. He said that he was responsible for *“reaching out to young alumni to renew their memberships to the alumni association...It was a lot of cold calling...and that's what I did.”*

### **Outreach and engagement through local alumni clubs**

In addition to the young alumni council, many participants also volunteered for their local alumni clubs, which are also coordinated by the alumni association. The local alumni clubs serve as a means to network and build relationships with other alumni in areas throughout the country. Those who are involved in coordinating the clubs help to keep other alumni informed about the university and engaged in alumni activities. A few of the participants had taken an active role in coordinating local club activities. In most cases the participants who were involved with their local clubs began volunteering before they joined the young alumni council, and they continued these activities while they were on the council.

Jane has coordinated several events and activities for her local alumni club after the club leader talked her into helping plan a few events. She started by planning easy events like happy hours and now coordinates larger events such as alumni outings to professional sporting events in her local area.

Leo began volunteering for a local alumni club in his previous city of residence. He was a new graduate of his alma mater and was looking for ways to network and stay involved with the institution. Shortly after getting involved with that club he took on the responsibility of serving as the marketing coordinator for the club. When he moved to his current city of

residence, he learned that there was not a local alumni club, and decided to create one. He worked with the alumni club coordinator at the alumni association to determine if a club would be successful in his area. He began coordinating game watches: *“We started as a game watch site, and she realized that people started coming to the events, and it slowly transitioned into a club.”*

As a relatively new graduate of her alma mater, Vanessa began to get involved with her local club. Shortly after getting involved with the club, she began volunteering to plan events and activities. After a couple years she took on the role of the vice president of the club. In this role she helped manage alumni outreach activities, volunteer coordination, and social media. Tara played a similar role with the local alumni club in her previous city of residence. She began attending club events and, shortly thereafter, she became a member of the events committee where she helped plan events such as game watches.

### **Outreach and engagement through college and departmental alumni groups**

Participants were involved with college and departmental alumni groups that helped to engage alumni. Those who are involved in these groups help to keep other alumni engaged in their academic areas. In some cases they also help with student-related activities. In most cases participants became involved in these activities during or after their time on the young alumni council.

Leo, Zoe, and Tara have participated in alumni groups for their academic colleges or departments. Leo recently got involved with an alumni leadership group for his academic department. His role is to *“...help out with local outreach...so we can reach our alumni that are [Academic Department] grads.”*



Zoe currently serves as a member of her college's young alumni group. The purpose of the group is to connect young alumni of the college and have them promote the college and achieve its goals. Her current role with the organization is to promote the college through social media and to attend meetings to represent the college.

Tara serves on a similar young alumni group for her academic department. The goal of this group is to connect young alumni back to the university and engage them in the department. Tara helps recruit recent graduates to serve on speaker panels once a semester. She also helps coordinate some social outings for young alumni. She sees her role in these activities as “...*trying to connect young alumni back to [University] and engage them through the department.*”

### **Engaging alumni through service on the Alumni Association Board**

Tara is an elected member of the alumni association's board of directors. She began this role after her time on the young alumni council. The role of the board of directors is to establish policies related to the management of the association and to oversee activities related to engaging constituent groups. The board plays a key role in overseeing the alumni engagement for the institution. The board of directors is different from the young alumni council in that council members serve in more of an advisory capacity, and they do not have fiduciary or policy responsibilities. Tara has played an important role in ensuring that young alumni have a voice in board decisions. She believes the board has benefitted from having “a younger alumna's perspective.” She viewed her role as “...*trying to network and get newer people engaged with [University].*” She added that she will become president of the board next year.

### **Serving on a College Dean's Advisory Council**

Steven served his college in a slightly different role, as a member of the Dean's Advisory Council. The purpose of the council is to advise the Dean on matters of importance to the college. The council is comprised of alumni, government officials, and industry professionals who have a connection to the college. Steven was invited to participate on the council by the dean of the college. Although he was young and did not have a lot of career experience, he felt that he served a valuable role on the council because he was able to offer advice from a different perspective than most other people on the council:

*...that was kind of my niche within the council because I didn't have a lot of industry experience or high level knowledge, but I was still, I think, able to answer a few questions here and there and provide perspective...of the young alumni...*

### **Student success and mentoring activities**

Jane, Paul, Tara, Patrick and Zoe were involved in student success and mentoring activities. The majority of their work in these areas was for the academic colleges and departments where they received their degrees. Patrick and Zoe also helped mentor students by advising their Greek chapters. Most of these experiences occurred during or after their time on the young alumni council. The participants were invited to participate in these activities by faculty and staff members in the units or organizations where the experiences took place.

Jane and Paul recently started getting involved with the student success and mentoring activities. A few months ago, Jane visited campus to speak with a group of freshman students in her major. The primary reason for her visit was to discuss careers in her field with the new students, an experience she found to be especially meaningful.

Paul has also recently had the opportunity to mentor students. Every year his company hosts a group of students from his alma mater for a career day. The purpose of the career day is for students to learn about what it is like to work in his field from young professionals: *“Sometimes we do break-out sessions in there and help to build resumes and build portfolios and give advice to soon and up-and-coming graduates.”*

Although Paul did not start the program, he has taken a leadership role in helping to coordinate it each year. The program was set up through a collaborative effort by his company and faculty members in his college.

Tara has also been very involved in mentoring students in her academic department. Each semester she volunteers to teach a few classes to help students understand what it is like to work in the field and to make sure they are well-trained for their future careers:

*I feel like the industry experience is important for the students to see, especially younger alumni adults coming back and teaching them...I have a strong passion to make sure the next person is trained or knows what they're expected to do.*

She was invited to take part in this opportunity by faculty in her college.

Zoe recently participated in a study abroad experience with students from her college. She was asked by a faculty member in her academic department to serve as a chaperone for a recent trip. Zoe was selected due to her professional experience. Her knowledge of the industry was an important educational area for students on the trip.

Patrick and Zoe also mentored students in their Greek chapters. Although neither of them shared much detail about their involvement with their sorority or fraternity, they both took pride in being involved and enjoyed working with the students. Patrick said that he has enjoyed participating in chapter meetings and volunteering to help the men in his fraternity.

Zoe served as a professional adviser for her sorority after she graduated. During this time she had a great deal of responsibility in ensuring that the chapter was running effectively.

### **Providing internship and employment opportunities for students**

Nicholas and Tara serve as internship and employment recruiters for their companies at their alma mater. Nicholas and Tara have both volunteered for these roles with their employers. Nicholas began this role during his time the young alumni council, and Tara began doing so after her time there.

Nicholas took his role as a recruiter very seriously, and viewed it as an important part of his job. Although his company pays him to attend university events like career fairs, he volunteers to take on the responsibility of recruiting students to join his company in addition to his other work responsibilities. *“I try to promote the company as much as I possibly can to students and then vice versa,”* he said. His company typically hires about three students each year based on the work that Nicholas does. In addition to attending the career fair activities on campus, he talks with students about opportunities at his company. He also answers e-mails from students about employment questions in his industry and serves as a professional reference for some of them.

Tara also serves as an employment recruiter for her company, and her employer is very supportive of her work in this area. She actively recruits students to work at her company through the career fairs at her alma mater by *“...giving back my time and efforts as in recruiting for our company, when we come to the career fair, and do interviews.”*

### **Advocacy**

In this study advocacy was defined as public support of one’s alma mater in an effort to influence the opinions of others. All of the participants described themselves as advocates

of their alma mater in terms of promoting the institution and the alumni association to others. In many cases their engagement through volunteer experiences has influenced their advocacy. The advocacy that they described most often involved promoting their alma mater, and encouraging young alumni involvement in the alumni association.

### **Promoting their alma mater**

Jane and Amanda consider themselves active promoters for the university. Their primary means of advocacy is sharing news and information about the university and the alumni association with their social networks. They perceived their advocacy creates awareness and positive feelings about the institution and alumni association. Steven also described himself as an active promoter of his alma mater:

*I would say that I'm a fan. All of my friends who know me—and even the people who don't know me that well—know I really love [University] ... how much I—I wouldn't call it advocacy—but how much I promote it.*

One of the ways that Leo advocates for his alma mater is by promoting his alma mater to family members: “... *I have some cousins that are just graduating high school right now, and they were considering [University], and of course I'm pushing that on them...*”

Tara, Sarah, Patrick and Steven advocate for their alma mater by showing their school pride in the community and at home. Much like Jane and Amanda, they believe that their efforts create awareness and positive feelings about their alma mater.

Tara has been a strong advocate for her alma mater in her workplace. Other people in her office sometimes tease her about wearing so much clothing from her alma mater:

*Basically, they're like, "[Tara]'s our [University] gal." We have a lot of [University] people, but I live and breathe [School Colors]. They joke like, "If she's not wearing [University], she's wearing [Company] clothing." ... I'm always plugging in for [University], like our company.*

Sarah also considered herself an advocate of her alma mater in her workplace and in her social circles:

*Advocating for [University] not only in [City of Residence], but also in my workplace... my personal life, where I'm very surrounded by people from other universities. I would say if you asked, "Who is the biggest advocate for [University]?" People would probably think of my name...*

Steven and Patrick shared similar experiences. *"I'm pretty sure everybody that I know knows that I went to [University], knows that I support [University]. Half my wardrobe has [University] logos on it, so pretty much everybody knows that,"* said Patrick.

### **Encouraging young alumni involvement in the Alumni Association**

Leo, Patrick, and Sarah advocate for their alma mater by encouraging other young alumni to get involved with the alumni association. Their advocacy with young alumni helps to keep other young alumni engaged and to increase philanthropic support of the institution.

Leo has actively worked to make young alumni aware of opportunities and activities related to the young alumni council and in local alumni clubs:

*Usually with the Young Alumni Council, when it's closer to finding new councilors, I'll let [young alumni] know... "Did you know that there's a club in your area?" or "Did you know that the Alumni Association can help you out with this networking...?"*

Patrick has tried to advocate for his alma mater by helping his friends and other young alumni understand the benefits of the alumni association and being involved:

*My friends have moved all over the country at this point. They're all over, so there's nobody still in [University City], really. They don't have that clear avenue to [the university], so I'm trying to help them identify the ways that they can still be engaged and still help out. [For example] when I go visit them, finding the game watches for football games...*

Sarah has also encouraged other young alumni to get involved with the alumni association and the young alumni council:

*I'm always trying to do what I can to get people I know that are moving to [City Of Residence] to join the [City Of Residence] alumni association club. I actually have a couple of friends right now that are on the young alumni council, that I pushed to do that when my term was up....*

### **Financial giving**

Seven of the participants are giving financially to their alma mater, but these amounts vary greatly. Those who are giving financially targeted their giving toward areas that were meaningful to them and with which they were involved as students and young alumni. The most common area of financial support included the alumni association, athletics, academic programs, and scholarships. In most cases, participant financial support followed volunteer and advocacy activities by young alumni. Participants understood that their financial contributions were being used to advance the institution in areas in which other funding was not available.

### **Alumni Association support**

Sarah, Jane, Tara, Steven, and Nicholas have provided financial support to the alumni association. They said their support is meant to foster future alumni engagement in their alma mater and to ensure that the association is supported for future generations.

Jane said that most of her financial support has gone to the alumni association: *“As I’ve gotten involved with Young Alumni Council, I really saw more of the need and desire to give back to [University] financially, too. Mostly [it] has been to the Alumni Association.”*

Tara has also directed financial support to the alumni association: *“...we’ve donated to the Alumni Association for the last several years, have been sustaining life donors there with them.”*

Steven has contributed to the alumni association facilities and endowments. The purpose of his contributions is to ensure that the areas that he supports continue to have the resources they need:

*I’ve given money to the alumni association for helping them build the alumni center, and then giving some endowments to help establish and make sure that*



*long term things I believe in or things I support and appreciate both as a student and alumni continue to be great and to be fulfilled.*

### **Academic program support**

Tara and Jane have provided financial support to their academic programs. They said they want to make sure that the programs remain strong or continue to grow. Tara contributes to her academic department's excellence fund, which provides the department chair with funds for departmental needs. Jane recently began contributing to a fund in her major department: *"I set up a new recurring donation for a program I know is totally grassroots and probably doesn't get any funding."*

### **Athletics support**

Nicholas and Zoe provide financial support to the athletics programs. Their support helps provide the athletics department with the resources and facilities that they need to maintain the athletics programs at their alma mater. Both Nicholas and Zoe have enjoyed attending athletic events as students and young alumni. Nicholas shared: *"I give a pretty big check for athletics. About \$2,500 a year for athletics, so I'm a pretty big fan. ...it's worth it for the new facilities."*

It should be noted that the alumni who make contributions to the athletics program receive a personal benefit from their contribution. In some cases contributions can lead to premium ticket options at athletic events. This benefit will be discussed in a later section.

### **Scholarship support**

Vanessa, Sarah, Steven, and Tara have contributed to student scholarships. They said they want to ensure that future students can attend their alma mater without a large financial burden. Financial giving has provided a means for Sarah to stay engaged with her alma

mater: “Over the last couple of years, I make...a gift to the foundation for a scholarship fund that was set up by the young alumni council.”

Steven supports scholarships because he learned how much they helped him while he was in grad school at another institution. Even though he did not receive a scholarship from his undergraduate alma mater, he wanted to be able to support students who need financial assistance:

*What really actually helps my scholarship perspective was I got a scholarship to [Private University] that was— basically half of my tuition to [Private University] was paid so that made me a big proponent of scholarships. So I know I give to scholarship funds that I know help students very immediately and very directly.*

Tara and her husband are in the process of funding a scholarship in the department of her major. They learned about the value of scholarships when they were in school, and they want to help other students in the same way that they were helped:

*...we both benefited a lot through scholarships. I had a lot of scholarships. My husband had a free ride for tuition paid for. We know that without all of that assistance, we wouldn't have been able to finish college without a larger debt...we feel that helping somebody else with a scholarship, or providing part of it, or providing money to continue further development of our [academic department] program, is going to help us in the future and help our industry as well.*

## **Summary**

The participants described a variety of roles that they had taken on with the council, and many of them described their level of responsibility with the council increasing over time. In almost all cases the volunteer experiences of the council members did not stop with the young alumni council. They also described volunteering to engage other alumni through local alumni club activities and other alumni association, college, and departmental alumni

groups. Some also discussed participating in student success and mentoring activities and helping provide internship and employment opportunities to students.

Participants described themselves as advocates of their alma mater but not in a political sense. The advocacy that they described involved sharing news and information about the university and alumni association, encouraging prospective students to attend their alma mater, and encouraging young alumni involvement in the alumni association.

Several participants were giving financially to their alma mater, and their giving was targeted toward areas that were meaningful to them. The primary areas of financial support were the alumni association, academic programs, athletics, and student scholarships. In most cases participant financial support followed volunteer and advocacy activities as young alumni.

**Research Question 2: How do young alumni plan to philanthropically support their alma mater in the future?**

The second research question was: “How do young alumni plan to philanthropically support their alma mater in the future?” The themes of volunteering advocacy and giving naturally emerged in this section. All of the participants said that they planned to continue to philanthropically support their alma mater in the future. Most said that they wanted to continue to volunteer in the future, but they were not sure what opportunities may be available for doing so outside of the alumni association board of directors. Those who were not yet financially supporting their alma mater said that they planned to do so in the future, and those who said that they were already financially supporting their alma mater said that they plan to increase their giving in the future. Although most of the participants described themselves as advocates of their alma mater, only a few mentioned advocacy as a future

philanthropic endeavor. The responses to these questions are summarized in the following section.

### **Volunteering**

Many of the participants said that they would like to continue to support their alma mater through volunteering. Several discussed the possibility of serving on the alumni association board of directors; however, many said that they were unsure about what other opportunities are available.

### **Service on the Alumni Association Board of Directors**

Several participants expressed their interest in service on the alumni association's board of directors as a future means for volunteering. The alumni association's board of directors is an all-volunteer board comprised of alumni and friends of the institution who are charged with establishing policies related to the management and operation of the alumni association. The goal of the board's activities is to advance the institution and the alumni association. A review of institutional documents found the role of the board of directors is different than that of the young alumni council in that it is the governing body of the alumni association and that it oversees property, management, finances, and activities of the association. The young alumni council serves the association in an advisory capacity. It is not a decision-making organization for the association.

Amanda said that she would like to have the opportunity to serve on the board, and she thinks her skills and experience would be an asset to the board's activities. *“Eventually, I would love to be a part of the board of [directors] as well as just being able to volunteer for their events and that kind of stuff.”*

Sarah said that being a member of the board for the alumni association or for another unit at the institution is a goal for her. She said, *“One of my dreams I think down the road is to be on some sort of board of directors with the university, whether that is with the alumni association or elsewhere ...”*

Jane, Leo, Megan, Nicholas, Paul, Patrick, and Steven also discussed possible future involvement with the board. Steven said, *“...I'm already on one of the councils, so the board is on my radar... I have a relationship with [alumni association CEO] where I think when the timing is appropriate it's something he might ask me about it.”*

### **Unsure about opportunities for involvement**

Several participants discussed interest in and willingness to volunteer for the institution in the future, but they were unsure about the opportunities that exist for doing so. Jane asked, *“How can we volunteer every once in a while?”* Patrick was not exactly sure about what opportunities may exist for him to volunteer in the future, but he is ready to do so if the right opportunities come along. He added, *“What specifically, I don't know.”*

### **Advocacy**

Only a few participants mentioned advocacy in their future philanthropic support of their alma mater. Vanessa was the only participant who discussed advocacy in depth. She viewed her employment position as a possible gateway to help educate legislators about higher education funding:

*Advocacy work, I think, is one thing that I'm really lacking, in terms of what I do for [University]. If I could be an advocate here [with government body] or [with] elected officials nationally to understand how important education, especially that secondary education is.*

The other participants who mentioned advocating did not expand how they might do so. Most simply said that they would continue to advocate for the institution. Megan said that she was interested in “*advocacy opportunities*,” and Paul said that he would “*continue to be an advocate*.”

### **Financial giving**

Most of the participants intended to financially support their alma matter in the future. Those who were already financially giving to the institution indicated that they would like to be able to give more in the future. Several of the participants saw financial giving as an “easy” way to support the institution because it does not require as much time or effort as volunteering. Financial giving also does not have location constraints.

#### **Giving more in the future**

A few of the participants who were already financially supporting the institution said that they would continue to give, and they planned to give more in the future. Vanessa said she currently financially supports the institution, and she wants to meet with her financial planner soon to discuss options for future financial contributions. She talked about giving more in the future. “*Let's talk about my portfolio. What can I do?*” *Be it pre-tax dollars that I could give to the school. Maybe it's [after tax dollars], but just figuring out of it's a scholarship I want to help endow or whatever the case is. Trying to figure out that monetary piece is important.*” Nicholas also currently gives financially to the institution, and he wants to increase the amounts that he gives in the future. “*Financially I'll always give unless I financially shouldn't...if I'm going bankrupt or something crazy like that. You got to do what's best for your family. If I financially can give, I will always give, and I will financially give more as I continue to feel more comfortable giving.*”

### **The “easy” way to support the institution**

Paul, Sarah, and Steven also financially support the institution, and they perceived that this will be their primary involvement with the institution during the next few years due to the current constraints on their time and their distance from campus. *“I do plan on continued support, and I would imagine at this point going forward, it's probably more financial support than it would be volunteer support. More just because of the distance than having a family and the time,”* said Paul. Steven added, *“the financial thing is easy.”* He also believed that his support during the next five years will be primary financial.

### **Summary**

Nearly all of the participants who have volunteered for their alma mater would like to continue to support their alma mater through volunteering in the future. Several discussed the possibility of serving on the alumni association board of directors. Many also said that they were unsure about what other opportunities are available. All of the participants said that they consider themselves advocates of their alma mater, but only a few discussed advocating for their alma mater in the future. All of the participants would like to financially support their alma mater in the future. Those who are already financially giving to the institution indicated that they would like to be able to give more in the future, and those who are currently not giving plan to begin giving in the future.

### **Research Question 3: What costs and benefits do young alumni derive from philanthropically supporting their alma mater?**

The third research question was: “What costs and benefits do young alumni derive from philanthropically supporting their alma mater?” According to the theoretical framework used for this study, alumni support is contingent on the benefits of the support outweighing

the cost (Weerts & Ronca, 2007). In addition, alumni need to perceive that their philanthropic interests align with the needs of the institution (Drezner, 2009). In order to answer this question, participants were asked what has been the greatest benefit they have derived from philanthropically supporting their alma mater. They were also asked to talk about the greatest challenges they have experienced in philanthropically supporting their alma mater. In addition they were asked about how they think that the institution benefits from their support. Their responses are described in this section.

### **Challenges of participant philanthropy**

The participants shared several challenges in supporting their alma mater. The word “challenge” was used in questioning instead of the word “cost” in order to prevent participants from only discussing the financial cost of their involvement. Four themes emerged in the participant responses including the feeling of not being able to give enough time or money, finding meaningful areas to volunteer, challenges in feeling that their work is valued, and feeling disrespected by fundraising tactics. The financial cost of travel and activities associated with membership on the young alumni council were not discussed by any of the participants.

### **Constraints of time and money**

Constraints of time and money were the challenges most often mentioned by the participants. All of the participants said they were at a stage in their lives when their careers and their families are their top priorities. They also did not have as much disposable income to give to their alma mater as do some older alumni. Although all of the participants were very involved in philanthropically supporting their alma mater, many of them said they wished they could do more.



Amanda would like to give much more time and money toward supporting her alma mater, but she had too many other commitments in her life. She also did not live close to the institution:

*If I had every single minute of my day devoted to giving back to [University], I would do it in a heartbeat. ... If I can give back, that's great, but time was always a factor. And distance, being in [City], I don't always have the chance to get back there all the time. Also, money. I think that right now, I'm a young professional... the money that I do have is split between a lot of different things that I'm interested in.... If I didn't have to worry about money, my paycheck would just go straight to all the things I want to support.*

Sarah shared a similar perspective about time and money constraints. She said that her career was very demanding and did not leave much time for volunteering. As a young professional, she also said that she did not have a lot of extra money to give:

*During my time on [the] young alumni council, when I first started, I was in grad school and I didn't really mind leaving grad school behind for several days and going to [University] and spending my time on the council. In the last year that I was on the council, I just didn't have the personal time to be as involved. My job can be at times pretty demanding... I wasn't able to make many of the conference calls or the meetings ... I travel a lot for work. Right now, giving of my time is not really an option...I'm young, so I don't have a ton of extra money to give away. That's definitely a challenge.*

Patrick said he would like to give more time to support his alma mater, but he also felt like he needed to be careful not to overcommit:

*When you start to get involved, whether it's in the Alumni Association, you volunteer to do a watch party or you volunteer to do this, then inevitably, somebody is going to come to you to help with this, and then some other organization is going to come and ask you to do this. The trickle effect of that when I want to get involved with this piece of it, and just this piece of it, making sure that I'm not overextending myself....*

### **Difficulty finding meaningful volunteer experiences**

Some of those who would like to volunteer for their alma mater in the future were concerned about finding opportunities that will work for them. They were also concerned about finding opportunities that are meaningful to them and to the institution.

Paul and Steven had an interest in volunteering in the future, but they wanted to make sure that the opportunities that they participate in are valuable to them and to the institution.

Paul shared:

*...if it was something specific where they need my experience, [I have] been on a board and worked in large corporations, understand investments, sure. If it's 'hey, we need help digging a hole for something,' I'm kind of like, 'No, not really' ... It's [got to be a] really good value. ... I want to make sure that the time is well worth it....*

Steven was in a similar position. He wanted to volunteer in a meaningful way, but he was not sure how to do it. He was also concerned about the time commitment involved with volunteering: *"I would like to give more on the volunteering side and [help] out in either giving advice or mentoring students. I don't know how to do that, I don't know a good mechanism for that."*

### **Challenges in feeling valued**

A few participants discussed challenges with feeling like their opinions or the work that they were completing as members of the council was not valued. In spite of this frustration, these participants continued to philanthropically support their alma mater through volunteering, advocacy, and giving.

Amanda, Jane, and Zoe also felt like the alumni association does not always listen to them and that the work of the young alumni council is not always meaningful or appreciated.

Zoe said she did not always feel like the young alumni council is appreciated:

*I love the Young Alumni Council, and we talked about this at our last meeting, but sometimes I felt like we were just another checked box. Even towards the end, I was like, 'They're just trying to tell the board that they did this and we met and [they were] never actually listening to some of us.' I get that when you're an organization that runs on funding and there's never enough dollars and there's never enough time and there's never enough staff, but sometimes I felt like it's different with the [college alumni group] .... [With the Young Alumni Council,] there wasn't always that appreciation for the time that people invested.*

Jane made a similar statement:

*... I think we used to be a little bit of a checkbox, just another program to say the Alumni Association had a Young Alumni Council. We did fluffy things, which are great. We had to start somewhere, but as we grow, we need to be able to really make an impact on our demographic.*

Amanda felt like her time is not always used effectively:

*I think it could be even more beneficial in the future. I think that we're utilized, but I don't know if we're utilized to our potential. I just feel like utilizing us as far as marketing and just being what we— We're always set up with a thousand different things. We always are getting things in the mail and just maybe giving our opinion on what would catch our eye versus what wouldn't.*

### **Feeling disrespected by fundraising tactics**

Several of the participants also discussed frustrations with the fundraising tactics of the foundation at their alma mater. The university's foundation does all of the fundraising for the university. It is also a non-profit organization that is separate from the alumni association and managed by a board of directors.

Participants said that giving to meaningful areas and feeling connected to the university were two of the primary reasons that they give, however they described experiences with the university foundation that are in direct conflict with those reasons. Participants shared two primary frustrations with the foundation's tactics: phone calls and e-mails soliciting funds and a lack of knowledge and strategy about communicating with the

young alumni audience. Many young alumni seemed to feel disrespected by their experiences with the foundation. Despite the fact that participants were frustrated by the fundraising phone calls, almost all of the participants were either currently financially supporting their alma mater or they said that they planned to do so in the future.

Jane was frustrated that young alumni are being asked to give large contributions:

*Our young alumni are getting hit up sometimes before they even graduate. They're getting phone calls from the foundation before graduation even happens. Most young alumni, and I'm not one of them... have lots of student loan debt. They're being asked for \$500 right off the bat. ...but being asked right outright for \$500 to a place that you're still paying off your loans for doesn't sit well.... The tactics with how they're trying to get funds or donations from young alumni I think are putting a bad taste in young alumni's mouths.... It's unfortunate for us, for the Alumni Association, but I think down the road, it's going to hurt the university overall.*

Megan also shared her frustrations with the foundation. She was really frustrated by the phone calls for money that she received following graduation. She said she firmly told the foundation not to call her anymore:

*I didn't understand, it was my first call, and so I didn't exactly understand what the girl was trying to get at. Finally when she got to her message of asking me for money, she asked for...some \$200 or something for books for the library. It wasn't her fault, but all I wanted to say to her was, are you kidding me? I am still paying back school loans. I moved back, I'm living on my own, I'm supporting myself all by myself. I don't have money to give you guys at all. She's like, "No, it's fine. It's \$200," and she just kept pushing the whole "it's only \$200." Then finally I just kind of got mean because I was tired of hearing from them. Even the communications and stuff from the foundation...don't ever make me want to give money. I will probably forever want to volunteer for [University], but I have no desire to give the foundation money because I don't want them to call me. I don't appreciate their approach to it, and I think it's really damaging on the relationship...*

Megan offered a different approach that she thought would work better with a young alumni audience:

*If they really wanted to talk to me and get to know me, it would be better for me if they actually called and said, "Hey, I wanted to check in with you," and*

*I don't know exactly how the conversation would go but something of just maybe trying to understand better of like, "I see you're living in [City], what are you doing? How's everything going?" Maybe more of a conversation to better understand maybe I can't donate that kind of stuff.*

Zoe shared a similar frustration with fundraising phone calls:

*I wish there were ways for them to see that they haven't always handled their phone calls very well. I just ignore their phone calls. I know it's the foundation. I ignore it when they call to ask for money. I wish I didn't feel that way...I would say I know \$10 doesn't seem like a lot, but if they would've started me out at \$10, I would probably be giving them \$200 or \$300 a year now, at a minimum, and now I'm just going to send that money to the [college] or athletics. That's where I'm going to put my money. I'm not going to write that check to the foundation.*

Nicholas was very respectful of the work of the foundation, but he also had some suggestions related to the fundraising strategy:

*I'm not a huge fan of the foundation giving me the generic phone call, [the student caller]. It's okay, and I listen, and I think being respectful is what you should be. Listening and hearing them out. I always say the foundation needs to get a little bit more tactful with their student phone calls. I think you'd get more people, and I know you can't research every young alumni and what they were interested in, but even [having] a little bit more preparation before those calls are made, I think, would be pretty beneficial.*

Steven said that he was fortunate to be in a place where he can give money, but he sympathized with those who are not in a similar position and who continue to receive solicitations for money:

*I'm sure if you did a graph of like–student debt ratio to philanthropic giving is probably closely related... .. to 20 years out of college you should still be in this kind of giving to [the young alumni] to [help them] develop. I always think of the [University] as family where if [University]'s a member of my family, I would not want [University] to be the uncle that's always asking for money.*

### **Personal benefits of philanthropy**

The participants shared several personal benefits that they received from their philanthropy including the feeling of giving back, a sense of duty or responsibility,

networking, staying informed about the institution, feeling a sense of home at the institution, and a feeling of pride in the institution. Those who financially supported athletics also received the personal benefit of being eligible to purchase premium tickets for athletics events. These themes are described as follows.

### **The feeling of giving back**

Nearly all of the participants said that one of the biggest benefits of their philanthropic support is the feeling that they get from giving back to the institution that gave them so much. Many said that they felt like supporting their alma mater was a duty or responsibility and that it made them feel good to help the institution and its students.

Zoe supported her alma mater because she felt her experience at her alma mater helped her advance both personally and professionally: *“That feeling of just being able to give back and doing something good for...organizations that have done good things for me and have helped me, I want to help them.”*

### **Responsibility or duty**

Several participants also discussed a personal responsibility or duty to give back to the institution that gave them so much in terms of the ability to advance personally and professionally. Steven felt like it was his obligation to the institution to give his support:

*I think it's more of an obligation or a duty of someone who's gotten so much. It's probably one of those things like I can try, maybe if I'm a billionaire, I can give a lot of money, but I don't know if I'll ever be able to give back what it is I have received. Now either through philanthropy as far as giving or through volunteerism...It's still one of those things where I feel it's given me so much and really changed my life. It gave me a very strong foundation on which to build my life, and so it's hard to quantify...*

Vanessa also felt like it was her duty to give back:

*I think it also states the need and the feeling of responsibility I have to give back to others. The university gave me so much more than I could ever even describe in terms of education, my experiences, skills. It helped me shape who I am today.*

Jane credited much of her current success to the experiences she had on campus. She said did not understand what a great education she received right away, but she had come to realize it over time. This realization has influenced her decision to give back:

*I started giving back because I really felt like I wanted to give back to [University], because [University] gave me so much. Probably it took me until after grad school to really have that full realization, and that's why I didn't really get involved right after I finished my undergrad.*

## **Networking**

Several participants felt that networking and the ability to meet other alumni of the institution were a benefit of their philanthropy. Most seemed to value the personal and professional relationships they formed because of their philanthropic support of the institution. Megan shared:

*...I feel like the biggest benefit is...the connections I've made. I've met so many more people than I ever would have if I wouldn't be involved or volunteered,... but between staff, board members, past alums. I've met seniors [in college] that I still keep in contact with.*

Joe also felt like networking has been a benefit of his philanthropy. It has allowed him to meet people with more diverse backgrounds than those in the small town where he currently lives: “It's the people that I was able to meet through young alumni council, the people I meet at homecoming events, the people I meet at sporting events.”

## **Staying informed**

A few of the participants felt that the communication and information they receive about the institution as a result of their philanthropy was a benefit. They did not think they

would have the same level of knowledge of the university if they were not involved philanthropically.

Tara liked knowing about what the university and the students are doing. She enjoys receiving e-mails, and publications that keep her connected and provide her with information about what is happening on campus:

*I love getting the emails and connections ... [Alumni Association Newsletter] and the [department] emails. Getting those emails and having the opportunity to read what's going on, the [Alumni Association] magazine, I love reading those... Getting those one-offs, once a month emails, or once a quarter magazines. I feel that's my benefit, is just being informed from—staying involved with [University], and in return I get occasional correspondences that keep me informed on the university as a whole.*

### **Maintaining their connection**

The majority of the participants said that they still feel a strong connection to the university, and they see maintaining their connection to the institution as a benefit of their support. The alumni association and the young alumni council play a key role in their connection to the university today.

Jane had a strong connection to the university, and her work with the young alumni council and her local alumni club have helped to strengthen the bond with the institution. Although she had experienced challenges in her relationship with the alumni association, she still viewed the experience very positively. She said the connection she feels is an important part of her life, and it is a connection that she wants to maintain:

*I have a really strong connection to [University], primarily because of Young Alumni Council. It's strengthened by working on club events here, as well. I will say, because it is a strong relationship, there's good things and bad. Just like anything in your life, I think if it wasn't such a strong relationship, I would not have some of the strong opinions I have because I wouldn't be as intimately close to some of the challenges the Alumni Association has, for sure. I still view it as one of the most positive things that I've done in the last few years. I'm glad not only because the leadership experience is a good*



*resume builder, but just the connection back to [University] has been very important to me.*

Megan said that her work with the young alumni council has created a very strong connection between her and the university, perhaps stronger than when she was a student.

Maintaining the connection with the institution was also important for her:

*...I'm way more connected with [the university] now because I talk to them on a daily basis. We're working towards goals, working with staff members, board members, and I feel like that connection is strong and probably almost stronger than even when I was in college, because I feel more engaged and more connected to campus and people that are involved in the campus activities.*

### **Feeling a sense of home at their alma mater**

Participants also said that the sense of home that they feel every time that they visit their alma mater is a benefit to them. Their philanthropic support provides them with the opportunity to visit campus. Tara said she feels a sense of home every time she visits campus: *"We go back to [University City] as much as we can...It feels like it's going home. Doesn't matter the time of year, it's just a comfort to go back."*

Sarah also described the sense of home that she feels when she visits the university:

*I think that [University City] is always going to be home for me. ... I will never drive into [University City] and not get choked up, because [University City] is such a special place to me. I think that my relationship with [University] and the people associated with [University] is probably what has been one of the biggest parts of my life and will continue to be.*

### **Pride in the institution**

Paul, Nicholas, and Leo described their personal benefit in supporting their alma mater in terms of pride in the institution. They wanted to make sure that the institution remains strong for future generations. Paul said that maintaining the reputation of the

institution was important to him because he saw it as a reflection on his skills and experiences:

*I feel like you spend so much time and energy there, it's like you want to keep maintaining that reputation of how great that university is. That's the part where I like to step in and help and guide where I can. It comes off maybe on paper as philanthropic, but there is just a little piece at the end that's also my reputation and academics and money and planned time that I've spent with it. I want to make sure that that's maintained.*

Nicholas also felt a strong sense of pride in the institution:

*It's your school. It's what you did for four years of your life. That's a lot of your life, four years, four full years, and I just always feel like the reason you give is because it gives—you have that sense of pride and commitment to your university.*

Leo was a first generation college student. He expressed a strong sense of pride in the institution and in himself because of his achievements. He also felt a strong sense of loyalty for the experience that he received and for the benefits he has received following graduation:

*I was really excited to come to [University], and I think that just being that first generation student, it's a big deal within my family, and I think that it's something I hold on to. I think that also plays into why I'm so passionate about [University].*

### **Premium tickets for athletics events**

Nicholas and Zoe both financially supported the athletics program at their alma mater. One of the personal benefits they received for their support has been the ability to purchase premium tickets for university athletic events. They viewed the availability of premium tickets as a benefit of their support. Nicholas explained that he and his family had good seats for football and basketball games: “You can't just buy these tickets for \$60, but you've got to give \$1,000 before you can even get the ticket.”

### **Institutional benefits of participant philanthropy**

Drezner (2009) stated that alumni philanthropic support is contingent on their perceptions that the support is benefitting the institution. In order to answer this research question, participants were asked how they feel their alma mater benefits from their support. Participants believed their alma mater benefits primarily from their efforts in marketing the university and the alumni association, helping to recruit new students, serving as a sounding board about young alumni engagement, increasing young alumni engagement, and financially supporting students and university initiatives.

### **Marketing the University and the Alumni Association**

A few of the participants said that their marketing efforts benefit the university and the alumni association. They think that their efforts create a positive image of the university and the alumni association.

Vanessa perceived that her philanthropic support creates brand awareness for her alma mater and that her work may inspire others to support the institution, “... *that brand recognition, especially out east, outside of the greater [City] area.*”

Leo had similar thoughts. He viewed that his support helps to market the alumni association to young alumni:

*I would say definitely the visibility of the programming and I guess the clubs that are across the nation have been impacted. A lot of people don't realize that the Alumni Association has a lot to offer beyond just a membership. I think that our committee, and also our council in general, has done a great job of promoting the Alumni Association, letting either graduating seniors or young alumni know what it has to offer. You don't have to be in [City] to... get those benefits.*

### **Helping to recruit new students**

Paul and Nicholas said that their volunteering and advocacy benefit the university primarily in the areas of recruiting new students and contributing to the quality of the institution. Paul perceived that increasing student enrollment will help create a stronger institution overall:

*I know part of [University]'s goals were an increase in student population, so I'd like to think my advocacy would help influence students to consider or investigate going to school there and to help achieve their long-term goal of an increased student body.*

Nicholas shared, *"I think they probably benefit more from me just being an active promoter of the university. If I ever run into a high school kid, or if I'm ever at an [industry] event, which is a [organization name] type event, I always promote [University]. I always have the logo on, and tell them to continue to look at things."*

### **Sounding board about young alumni**

A couple of the participants said that the university benefits from them serving as a sounding board for decision makers at the institution about young alumni engagement. Tara perceived that her current position on the board of directors for the alumni association provides a valuable young alumni perspective on organizational initiatives and policies. Megan also believed that she and other members of the young alumni council are a valuable sounding board for the association:

*..[the young alumni council] is an avenue to sound off about the association and [University] in general, so I feel like that's really beneficial for them. I don't know if they see it that way, but we're just one more person to go out and talk to things about the association and the college in general.*

### **Increased alumni engagement and support**

Several participants believed that their philanthropic work has helped to increase young alumni engagement and support of the institution. Megan expressed that the programs she has helped create help to educate and involve other alumni with the institution:

*Every time we talk to somebody and they say, 'Oh, what are you doing this week?' or, 'Are you still involved with your alumni association?' or anything, I bring it up, the topic constantly when people ask what I did this past weekend or things that are important to me.*

Sarah said that her volunteering and advocacy helped to expand the university's alumni network, and helped other alumni engage with the institution:

*...I think that they benefit from the people that then I can bring back the university that hopefully then can do something similar to what I've done and help to grow the university or push people to the university or just bring more people and just help to expand the [University] network.*

### **Financial support for students and university initiatives**

Tara, Steven, and Zoe believed that their financial support is an important benefit for the institution. They were the only ones who mentioned financial giving. All of them believed that the institution benefits from their financial support by helping students and by supporting the longer-term initiatives of the university.

### **Summary**

Participants shared several personal benefits they received from their philanthropy including the feeling of giving back, a sense of duty or responsibility, networking, maintaining their connection with the institution, staying informed about the institution, a sense of home, and a feeling of pride in the institution. They also believed that their alma mater benefits from their support. The primary areas in which their alma mater benefits include their efforts in marketing the university and the alumni association, helping to recruit

new students, serving as a sounding board about young alumni engagement, increasing young alumni engagement, and financially supporting students and university initiatives. Participants also discussed a few of the costs or challenges that they experienced with their philanthropic support. These challenges included the feeling of not being able to give enough time or money, difficulty finding meaningful areas to volunteer, feeling that their work is not valued, and feeling disrespected by fundraising tactics.

### **Reasons Young Alumni Support their Alma Mater**

Participants were not specifically asked why they philanthropically support their alma mater. During the interviews, however, participants shared some of the reasons as part of their personal narratives. There were several themes that emerged as they discussed their philanthropic involvement and their meaningful student experiences. Themes include philanthropic involvement as students, family connections to the institution, the role of personal relationships in encouraging their involvement having gratitude for the personal relationships that they formed as undergraduates, and having gratitude for personal and professional success. The themes are described in the following section.

#### **Philanthropic involvement as students**

Several, but not all, of the study participants mentioned that they were involved philanthropically with their alma mater as students. In most cases these students were involved with an alumni association council for students. The primary purpose of this council is to enhance pride and school spirit among alumni and current and prospective students. Student-run committees within the organization coordinate student events such as homecoming, student picnics, career preview days, and graduating senior events. They also assist with new student orientation events and student activities at athletic events.

Additionally, members help to sell memberships in the student alumni association and to raise funds for a senior class gift (Institutional Documents).

A few of the participants also mentioned involvement with fraternities and sororities at their alma mater. The Greek community at the institution has a strong spirit of philanthropy. Each chapter participates in several activities each year through volunteering and fundraising. In most cases these activities provided a foundation for future philanthropic involvement with the university.

Amanda, Nicholas, Sarah, Steven, Tara, Vanessa, and Zoe were members of an alumni council for students, and most were also members of the Greek system at their alma mater. These participants said that their experiences with the student alumni leadership council were some of their most meaningful student experiences. There were only three participants that did not mention that they were involved with the Greek system as students.

Amanda was a member of the student alumni council for two years. The duties during her first year included selling memberships in the student alumni association and being a student ambassador for the alumni association. She took on more responsibility during her second year: *“...I moved to Senior Class Council and that had to deal with the senior dance and senior send offs. That is an event that they have for seniors to educate them about the alumni association.”*

Vanessa was involved with the student alumni council and several other volunteer organizations on campus. She even helped to start a major-related club on campus. Most of the activities that she describes were a part of her committee work for the student alumni leadership council:

*I was in a sorority, [Sorority Name]. I helped to start the [departmental club] my senior year when I was there. I was also part of the [departmental student*

*council] ...[University] Ambassadors. I volunteered with the [Student-run Event] Committee...basically it was all about getting students active and involved in homecoming that weren't necessarily just part of the Greek system. I helped to organize events for homecoming for the [student council].*

Zoe was also involved with the student council as a student. *"I was on [organization] when I was at [University], so I was on [Homecoming Planning Organization], was a co-chair for public relations, and then also was Senior Class Council Vice President. I think that connection with the alumni association just carried through."*

Nicholas shared a similar story. He was also in a fraternity on campus:

*I think freshman through senior year in college, I always was part of a committee. I was a student ambassador for the alumni association. I was on [Student support program for athletics] a year ...I was on senior class council for a year and ... homecoming [committee] for a year or two.*

Steven was also involved with the Greek system:

*I was in a Greek organization, so I was in a fraternity and then was very involved with the alumni association as well as, I did the usual [Student-run Festival], [Greek Celebration], Fraternity, [student council]. So I was on the—it was called the [athletic promotions committee]...and then I was on the Senior Class Council. I was president of the senior class council and then ... various other things...*

## **Family connections**

Approximately half of the participants mentioned a strong family connection to their alma mater. Several also mentioned the role their families play in their motivations to philanthropically support their alma mater.

Jane described a strong sense of family pride in attending her alma mater. *"I'm from a family that higher education is just an expectation. I think I was the 33rd graduate from [University] even in my family. Even going to [University] is ... We're not brainwashed, but probably pretty close."* She also joked that her young son is already a supporter of the



institution. *“My son prayed for [University Mascot] the other night before he prayed for me.”*

Patrick also discussed his strong family connection to his alma mater. His family has a lot of pride in the institution. This connection is one of the motivations for his philanthropic support:

*My older brother went there, and now my younger brother goes there, and my aunt and uncle are both professors there...They went to school there. There's a lot of that history in my family, so I didn't have any one particular goal with the Alumni Council when I joined it like, "I want to get this out of it." It was more—ultimately I want to do more things for the university than just wear my [University] shirt around [City of Residence], and I thought it'd be a great way to start trying to find avenues and provide some of that benefit where I was able to.*

Much of Sarah's family attended her alma mater, and they have a strong sense of family pride in the institution. Sarah's family has helped inspire her support:

*Most of my cousins, my grandparents, my parents, my brothers all went to [University]. The [University] connection runs pretty thick in our family. ... I also grew up in a household where [University] was probably our number one philanthropic priority. I was in the habit of already giving back to the university.*

Much of Nicholas' family also attended his alma mater. They were all very proud of the institution, and all provided philanthropic support. *“I love [University]. It's a third generation type thing. My mom and dad went to [University]...both grandpas went to [University].”* Nicholas attributed much of his philanthropic spirit to his parents:

*I think coming straight from my parents, I got to give them credit—growing up, I did not live in a wealthy family. We lived nice. It was a nice lifestyle, but it wasn't go out and buy boats and live on a lake every weekend or anything like that. My parents worked very, very hard but they always gave money regardless of if they were \$10,000 in the green or breaking even that month or something. They always gave back, and it's kind of one of those deals where you give and you receive.*

Vanessa also attributed much of her philanthropic involvement to what she learned from her parents:

*In my household, we started as early as three years old, ringing the bell for the Salvation Army. Service and giving back is something that's been instilled in me since I was very, very young. Especially with my dad being gone and him being that primary driver for me, he instilled this sense of duty, that this is my responsibility.*

### **Personal relationships and young alumni involvement**

When the participants were asked how they came to be involved with the young alumni council or other units at the institution, the majority said that they were encouraged to get involved by a specific person. This person was usually a personal or professional contact.

Jane and Leo were encouraged by members of their local alumni clubs to get involved. The person who encouraged Leo to get involved was also a former member of the young alumni council. Leo shared: *“One of our [Event] coordinators actually was on the council before me, and she recommended that I apply. I applied, and I've been on it for two years now.”*

Nicholas, Patrick, Sarah, Vanessa, and Zoe were encouraged to apply for the young alumni council by friends and acquaintances whom had previously served on the council.

Vanessa described her experience:

*...a guy came to the watch party, [Alumnus]... But he was actually on the Young Alumni Council. I started talking to him because we realized that we recognized each other, and it turns out we knew each other in college briefly. I started talking to him about what he was doing and why he was there, and then Young Alumni Council came up.... He really encouraged me to look at time commitments and things like that of course, but this was a really great way to get re-energized and reinvigorated when it came to supporting the—not just the university, but also the Alumni Association. ... He really helped me to understand what the commitments were and eventually make that commitment myself.*

Nicholas had a similar experience:

*...I ran into a guy named [Name], and [Name] was on the young alumni council. He's an [academic major], and he actually is from [Eastern State]. He ran into me and just said, 'Hey, you should apply for this, have a lot of fun, and good experience,' and I got to know [Name] pretty well [on the day that they met], and I applied and interviewed and was able to participate. I actually just finished my third and final year on the young alumni council, so it was a good experience.*

Tara was encouraged to get involved with the alumni association by alumni association staff members, and she was encouraged to get involved with her academic department by a faculty member. Steven was encouraged to become involved in the dean's advisory council by the dean of the college, who he met as a student.

### **Gratitude for personal relationships**

Participants expressed a sense of gratitude for the meaningful relationships that they formed as undergraduates at their alma mater. Many of the participants said that they remain in contact with friends, faculty, and staff members today. They said that the meaningful relationships they formed were a big part of their undergraduate experiences and that they continue to be an important part of their lives today. Most of the relationships were formed through extracurricular activities and through classes.

One of Leo's most meaningful student experiences was his job at the student newspaper. He said that the money that he earned and the skills that he learned were not the most important takeaway for him. Rather, he said, it was the friends that he made through the experience:

*A lot of my time actually was spent at our [academic department]. We have a great newspaper, the [Student Newspaper] that I was really active in...A lot of my time was spent there. I've made a lot of great friends that I'm still in contact with, and I think all of it stems back to that, just because of the time that I spent there. Again I think really just making lifelong friends there. We were a really close-knit group across all departments even when I worked there. I have friends all over the country now that have ties back to the*

*[Student Newspaper] or back to the [academic department] in general. I think that it's great to stay connected with them.*

Amanda said it was her academic experiences that were the most meaningful to her. She said although she may not have appreciated them during her time in school, she now values her professors and what they taught her. She has remained in contact with them since graduation, and some of them have helped her advance professionally:

*...the most meaningful ones were really when I got into my core major classes. I had some great teachers that, while I despised the classes as I was going through them because they took a lot of work or time or the teachers required things of me more than I wanted to give, I thoroughly now appreciate and enjoy what they've done. Some of those personal connections that I've made with them, they've helped once I graduated, I was able to call them back. They helped me get connected with different people in the industry that I could contact and see if I wanted to go and look at these jobs or that job.*

Nicholas, Sarah, and Patrick found their academic experiences and their experiences with the Greek system especially meaningful. Patrick shared:

*[I] got a great education, did all that, but the bigger experiences that I've taken into my professional life and beyond, it came more from personal interactions working with either in group projects, whatever the class might have been, and my fraternity and leadership roles. Doing the Interfraternity Council and the leadership of the broader Greek community...*

Nicholas expressed similar thoughts:

*I was Greek at [University], and it might sound a little generic, but I loved it. It wasn't just a fraternity that I was in, it was the people that I got to meet, the different types of people that I got to meet and their personalities and their backgrounds, and you really get to know them pretty well. I just liked the level of engagement that I was able to have with other fraternities and sororities and then even just the advisors that you worked with.... Academically just all my professors...I enjoyed the experiences...It was a good learning experience with some fun behind it.*

The relationships that Sarah formed through her sorority, a mentoring relationship with a former supervisor, her experience on a homecoming committee, and her experiences with faculty members in her major have been especially meaningful for her. She remains in

contact with many of her connections today. She also felt like some of the relationships have helped her advance personally and professionally:

*The vast majority of people that I spend my time with socially in [City Of Residence], and then that I get together with in reunion settings from [University], were either in my sorority or in another Greek house on campus. Pretty much my whole social network, I think, comes from that...Then I was involved with the orientation program at [University]. Not only the friends I made, but my relationship with the director of orientation, the director of new student programs, who I still have a relationship with. She really served as a mentor to me and helped me to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. Then the alumni association and my time on homecoming—once again, friendships and all that but also helping me to define where I saw myself going in my life and in my career....I have a [major] degree too, but part of the reason that I chose my academic program is because the professors in the [department] at [University] are so phenomenal... I had a lot of really great working relationships through my graduate program as well ....*

### **Gratitude for personal and professional success**

The majority of participants said that their experiences at their alma mater prepared them well for their lives after graduation. They were grateful to their alma mater for helping them learn skills and leadership qualities that they need to be successful in their jobs and in life.

Amanda said that her extracurricular experiences at her alma mater helped her to find her professional passion. The skills she learned through her experience with the alumni council for students prepared her well for the position she holds today in alumni relations at another institution:

*I've ended up doing a job that I really care about and really like a lot. I never thought that in my time at [University], when I was on [organization], that I would ever work in alumni relations anywhere else. I just thought that was all I would ever be involved with at [University] and that was it. I think being involved with that has cultivated me for what I'm passionate about doing, so that's a strong benefit because I do have a good job.*

Jane said that, although she is not exactly working in the area in which she received her degree, she believed her experiences taught her the skills she needed to be successful at work and in life:

*I think without [University] having prepared me for grad school in real life, I wouldn't have been able to juggle my husband, a full-time job and grad school ... The responsibility I learned at [University], that doesn't happen other places, and especially not in [State]. I was a lot more prepared, I think, for the level of responsibility that I had, but I was also very shocked that not everybody prioritized work and school above other things like most [University]ers do. I think the biggest benefit for me is that I was really prepared for what was the next phase of my life.*

Leo also did not currently work in a career related to his major, but he thought that his degree and extracurricular activities set him up for success in life. He was ready to “*hit the ground running*” when he started his first job after graduation:

*I would say looking back again on my experiences at [University], it really put me in a position to be ready for the real world as everyone calls it. I had a lot of time interacting within my classes on projects that really set me up for success in life and then also again back to my job at the [Student Newspaper]. That honestly with my transition to my first job outside of college, I was more than ready to work, and I knew what I needed to do.*

Patrick credited his alma mater with helping him find his first job after graduation, and he still worked at the same company today. He said that he continued to use the skills he learned in his classes and through extracurricular experiences. He was very grateful to his alma mater for helping him get started in his career:

*...the career fair at [University] is how I found out about the company that I ended up joining. It's the reason why I got a job, broadly. A lot of the skills that I'm using today on a day-to-day basis are things that I'd picked up either in working with groups or outside of my day-to-day curriculum.*

Vanessa credited her professors with teaching her the professional and life skills that have made her successful in her career:

*They did a wonderful job of teaching me the foundations that I needed...They taught me to be creative and think outside the box, and never be scared to push the envelope. It's really benefited me in my career now...But in reality, I work for [government agency]... My professors teaching me ingenuity and being creative and always making sure to look within myself to find a creative solution to issues and problems I may have, that has stuck with me and resonated throughout my entire professional career as well.*

Steven believed that the skills he learned outside of the classroom have made him successful in his career and in life. The leadership skills that he learned throughout his extracurricular activities helped develop him into the leader that he is today:

*I think the emphasis on [University] to come here, do what you want, make what you want and develop yourself as a leader because class is there, but its class, so do as much as you need to, really that focus as developing yourself as a leader and someone who can go out and change the world I think is what really I have benefited from because it creates the drive and it creates the environment.*

## **Summary**

Participants described several reasons for their decisions to philanthropically support their alma mater. These reasons included being philanthropically involvement as students, having family connections to the institution that influenced their philanthropy, having a personal connection that encouraged their involvement as young alumni, having gratitude for the personal relationships they formed as undergraduates, and having gratitude for personal and professional success.

## **Summary of Findings**

Semi-structured online interviews with current and former members of the young alumni council served as the principal data collection method for this study. Field notes were taken during and following each interview. Documents and records such as web content, e-mails, handbooks, meeting minutes, and other documentation were also used to provide

additional context for this study. Interviews were transcribed and the data were coded and analyzed according to the research questions they addressed. Coding was a two-step process beginning with open coding to identify themes and categories of interest based on the data (Esterberg, 2002). Focused coding was then conducted to focus on the key themes identified during the open coding process (Esterberg, 2002).

The data analysis process yielded the following key findings:

- For members of the young alumni council, volunteering increased over time. In addition volunteering was a catalyst for advocacy and financial support.
- Participants want to philanthropically support their alma mater in the future, but they are unclear about the opportunities for doing so.
- Participants derived a variety of benefits from philanthropically supporting their alma mater, and the benefits that they received outweighed the cost of their support.
- Philanthropy is a skill that participants learned over time, and personal relationships played a key role in influencing their philanthropic behavior.
- Meaningful student experiences play a key role in why young alumni support their alma mater.

The next chapter discusses the implications of these findings and provides recommendations for practice.



## CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The goal of the research was to better understand why young alumni philanthropically support their alma mater. This topic has become even more important in recent years due to significant declines in state funding of higher education (ASHE, 2011). As a result institutions are dedicating significant time and resources to increasing their donor bases. This includes involving younger alumni in philanthropy (Drezner, 2009). Increased knowledge about young alumni philanthropic support may help institutions significantly increase giving in order to help them accomplish their academic missions. Very little research has been conducted about young alumni and philanthropic support, and this study helps to fill the gap in the literature. In addition there are very few, if any, qualitative studies related to alumni philanthropic support. This study helped to provide greater understanding of the lived experiences of young alumni and brought greater context to their experiences.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How are young alumni philanthropically supporting their alma mater?
2. How do young alumni plan to philanthropically support their alma mater in the future?
3. What costs and benefits do young alumni derive from philanthropically supporting their alma mater?

Interviews were conducted with a select group of young alumni at a large public Midwestern institution in order to answer these question. Several key themes also emerged during data collection. The remainder of this chapter includes discussion of the key findings including the similarities and differences between this study and previous studies of social

exchange theory and alumni philanthropy. It also includes implications for practice and conclusions.

### **Costs and Benefits of Philanthropy**

All of the participants in this study were philanthropically supportive of their alma mater. The results of this study revealed that the participants derived a variety of costs and benefits from their support and that the benefits they described were more important than the costs. Although the participants experienced some frustrations in the support of their alma mater, the participants have chosen to continue to support their alma mater. These costs and benefits identified in this study relate directly to social exchange theory. The connection between the results of this study and social exchange theory are discussed in the next section.

#### **Costs**

Participants discussed several “costs”, or challenges, involved in their philanthropic support. The main challenges included not being able to give enough time or money to their alma mater, difficulty in finding meaningful volunteer experiences, not always feeling like their support is valued, and feeling disrespected by fundraising tactics. In the context of social exchange theory, if these costs become too high, philanthropic support from young alumni may begin to subside. It would be beneficial for alumni associations to work to lower the costs of young alumni philanthropic support if they want to increase participation.

Nearly all of the participants said they wanted to be able to give more time and money to their alma mater, but factors such as careers, family, distance, and income prevented them from doing so. They felt they needed to be giving larger amounts of time and money to make an impact at their alma mater. They did not seem to be aware of volunteer and advocacy opportunities that were beneficial to the institution, but did not require a large

time commitment. In addition, most participants did not feel like the smaller amounts of money that they were giving was enough to make an impact on the institution. Educating young alumni about volunteer and advocacy opportunities that do not require large time commitments or close proximity to the institution, such as sharing news and information and talking with prospective students about their alma mater, may help to minimize this perceived challenge. A 2014 report by the Educational Advisory Board stated that offering highly engaged alumni opportunities that have a direct impact on institutional priorities may help to strengthen their affinity. Finding ways to demonstrate the impact of small acts of philanthropy, including volunteering, advocacy, and financial giving, may help young alumni feel better about what they can do to support the institution. It may also help encourage involvement by other young alumni who do not get involved because they do not feel their support will make a large impact.

A second challenge described by participants was finding meaningful volunteer experiences. Several of the participants said they want to volunteer for their alma mater in the future, but they wanted to make sure the experiences were meaningful for them and for the institution. Many participants also did not seem to be aware of the types of opportunities available. These findings were similar those highlighted by the Educational Advisory Board (2014), which stated that there are often mismatched expectations between high affinity alumni and the opportunities that are available for them. High affinity alumni want to participate in activities related to student development and careers, but many alumni associations and development offices only offer opportunities that focus on alumni socializing. Developing a system for managing information about various volunteer opportunities available on campus may help to mitigate this challenge. Educating young

alumni about these opportunities and showing them the impact these activities have on supporting the institution may also help to alleviate concerns about this perceived challenge.

Some of the participants felt as though the alumni association or the institution did not always value their work on the young alumni council. They described the work they were doing as “fluffy things,” and they felt the council was just a “checked box” to say that young alumni were engaged and had a voice in decision-making. McDonough (2016) found similar results in examining young alumni perceptions of relationship quality with their alma mater. In the study young alumni reported that they did not feel they had a voice in decision making at their alma mater and that their alma mater did not value their opinions or input.

This challenge may be allayed by having the council and the staff re-examine the goals and objectives of the organization to ensure they align with the overall mission of the institution and the alumni association. Developing an assessment mechanism that relates to the goals and objectives of the council may also help the members of the council to see the impact of their work and to feel like they are making a difference and helping to advance the institution.

Participants also felt strongly that they were disrespected by the fundraising tactics at their alma mater. This finding was also similar to that of McDonough (2016). Negative perceptions about requests for money from young alumni were prevalent in responses from participants. The most prominent reasons for such frustrations seemed to be the manner in which requests were made and many young alumni not being financially stable enough to give back at the point when they were being asked. This finding is important due to the possible repercussions that it may have on future giving. Several studies that have found that very small measures of financial support by young alumni had a large effect on future giving

(Lindahl & Winship, 1992; Meer, 2013; Monks, 2003; Nayman, Gianneschi, & Mandel, 1993; Okunade & Justice, 1991; Piliavin & Charng, 1990). If current fundraising tactics frustrate young alumni, it may have a significant impact on future giving. One possible solution for this issue is for the alumni association to work closely with the university's foundation to align their goals and to develop a communication plan for effectively communicating their goals with young alumni. This finding lends support to engaging young alumni in volunteer and advocacy positions before asking for money. It also supports a careful examination of the current strategy for fundraising with young alumni. The foundation may consider asking young alumni for smaller donations to start then increasing its asking over time.

### **Benefits**

Participants also shared several personal benefits they receive from their philanthropic support of their alma mater. These benefits include the feeling they receive from giving back, a feeling of responsibility or duty, the feeling of home they feel toward the institution, networking, staying informed and connected with the university, and a sense of pride in the institution. Some of these benefits are supported by literature about alumni motivations for philanthropy and by studies that examine the predictors of alumni giving.

Most of the participants said that the good feeling they received from giving back to their alma mater is a benefit they receive from their support. This finding is supported by Thelin and Trollinger's (2014) suggestion that alumni are motivated to support their alma mater due to an exchange, for example giving in exchange for feeling good or for social acceptance. The institution and the alumni association can continue to improve such feelings by making young alumni feel their support is valued and by showing them the impact of their

support. Helping to generate positive feelings about support may also help to give young alumni stronger role identity with the institution, which may also help to increase future support (McDearmon, 2013).

Another benefit participants received from their philanthropic support of their alma mater was a feeling of carrying out a duty or responsibility. Several participants felt it was their responsibility to give back to the institution that had contributed significantly to their personal and professional success. Elliott (2006) stated that feelings of obligation are a strong motivation for those who support higher education. Alumni feel particularly responsible for ensuring their alma mater continues to provide students with similar or better experiences than they received. The institution can continue to inspire feelings of duty or obligation by providing meaningful academic and extracurricular experiences for students and by working to ensure that students graduate with a strong foundation of skills needed to be successful both personally and professionally.

The feeling of home or the ability to visit a second home is another benefit of participant philanthropy. They described the sense of community they feel at their alma mater. Several participants described a feeling of home and community when they think about or visit their alma mater. Elliott (2006) described similar psychosocial motivations for alumni philanthropic support. Such feelings help to meet alumni psychic and social needs. The institution can continue to nurture this sense of home by providing a welcoming, inclusive, and supportive environment for students and alumni. It can also help to promote feelings of home by providing opportunities for young alumni to visit campus and to be involved in campus activities. Ingram et al. (2005), Plice and Renig (2009), Rissmeyer (2010), and Singer and Hughey (2002) provided several suggestions for involving alumni in

student recruitment, retention, and career activities and in academic assessment activities. These activities included events such as advising student groups, speaking in classes, participating in student orientation activities, and serving on alumni career panels. Giving young alumni the opportunity to participate in such activities may help to enhance their connection to the institution and make them feel more at home when they visit. McDonough (2016) found that young alumni want to be involved with their alma mater in non-monetary ways that are similar to those described above.

Networking is another benefit that participants feel they received from their philanthropic support of their alma mater. They described networking connections they made through their support activities that helped them both personally and professionally. This benefit was described as a combination of what Elliott (2006) defined as exchange and psychosocial motivations. Participants felt their support was exchanged for social acceptance as well as meeting their social needs. The institution may continue to provide the benefit of networking to young alumni through alumni events and activities both on and off campus. Activities such as alumni councils and advisory boards may help bring together alumni from various backgrounds and experiences. Alumni events, both on campus and in areas around the country and around the world, may also help provide young alumni with networking opportunities.

In addition, participants shared that staying informed and connected with their alma mater was a benefit of their philanthropy. They valued the communication and the information they received from their alma mater because of their support, and they did not feel like they would have the same level of connection without their support. Previous studies found communication (Tsao & Coll, 2005) and involvement with the university after

graduation were also predictors of giving (McDearmon, 2013; Taylor & Martin, 1995; Weerts & Ronca, 2009). The institution and alumni association should continue to provide young alumni with quality, targeted information about the institution and its units and programs (McDonough, 2016). Such communication may help to inspire additional support by young alumni.

A sense of pride in their alma mater is another benefit that participants received as a result of their support. Elliott (2006) described pride in the institution as a strong motivation for alumni philanthropic support. Previous research studies found pride in one's alma mater is linked to giving (McDearmon, 2013). The institution and the alumni association may continue to inspire young alumni pride through various means such as offering an outstanding student experience and promoting significant awards and accomplishments.

Drezner (2009) contended that philanthropic support from alumni is contingent on their perceptions that their alma mater benefits from their support. This research corresponds with similar research in this area. In most cases participants felt like the institution benefitted from their support, and this feeling makes them want to continue to give their support. However, as described in the challenges section, more can be done to help young alumni feel their support is beneficial to their alma mater. The participants said their efforts in marketing the university and the alumni association, helping to recruit new students, serving as a sounding board about young alumni engagement, increasing young alumni engagement, and financially supporting students and university initiatives are some of the ways their support benefits the institution.



### **Social Exchange Theory**

Social exchange theory states that “actions that are contingent upon rewarding reactions from others” (Blau, 1964, p. 31). The theory implies a two-sided, mutually contingent and mutually rewarding system of exchanges between people (Emerson, 1976).

According to Weerts and Ronca (2007), alumni philanthropic support is contingent upon the advantages they perceive they have received or believe they will receive from their relationship with their alma mater. The cost of philanthropic support must be weighed against past and present benefits from their relationship with their alma mater. In order for alumni to support their alma mater, their perceived benefits must outweigh the costs (Weerts & Ronca). In some cases there is a delay between the action and the rewarding reaction. In the case of this study, the reaction of philanthropic support by young alumni was based upon the institution’s action of providing a meaningful student experience that help the participants advance in life.

The results of the study support social exchange theory because it found that the benefits that young alumni feel they have received from their relationship with their alma mater led them to philanthropically support their alma mater. Participants felt the benefits they received from the institution, in terms of their ability to advance professionally and the personal relationships they formed at the institution, outweighed the cost of philanthropic involvement with their alma mater after graduation.

Although the results of the study support the theory, there was a finding that did not completely fit with the tenets of social exchange theory. In the study, participants felt like the benefits of their relationship with the institution outweighed the cost, but this feeling did not necessarily carry over to the organizations that are closely affiliated with the institution and

use the institution's name. Several of the participants were very frustrated by the fundraising tactics of the institution's foundation. The foundation has a strong connection to the institution, and it plays an important role in alumni relationships with the institution. The foundation reports to a board of directors, but it follows direction from the leadership of the institution. A couple of the participants were so frustrated that they asked the foundation to never contact them again. However, the participants seemed willing to look past this frustration and base their perceptions of the institution on the positive experiences with their alma mater and the alumni association. They seemed to be able to compartmentalize what many of them considered a significant cost, and did not view the institution or the alumni association as accountable for the work of the foundation. Based on the results of this study, it may be beneficial to add an element to the theory that states that with very large organizations with many units, such as universities, costs and benefits may be weighed on a unit-by-unit basis. In addition, the perception of the costs related to one unit may not necessarily apply to other units. It should be noted that the participants in this study are unlike many other young alumni of the institution in that they are aware of the differences between the institution's alumni association and the institution's foundation.

The results of this study also add to current literature about social exchange theory and alumni philanthropic support because it shows that the most important social exchange with alumni happens when they are students. Young alumni support their alma mater because they had meaningful student experiences. They get involved or stay involved as young alumni as long as their experience as young alumni is mostly positive and they feel their support benefits the institution. The following sections describe the results of the study and provide implications for policy and practice and recommendations for future research.

### **Philanthropic Support Increases and Evolves Over Time**

For members of the young alumni council, volunteering with the organization increased over time. Many of the participants began volunteering as members of the council then participated in or helped with council activities and events. Over time they took on much more responsibility such as chairing a committee of the council, which required much more time and work. Some participants took on executive team roles with the council that required several hours of work each week. For most participants volunteering with the young alumni council was only one piece of their support. Participants volunteered for the alumni association and the university in multiple ways, and many of their other volunteer activities happened during or after their time on the council. Their work primarily involved outreach to other alumni, providing advice to administrators, and participating in student success and mentoring activities.

Many of the advocacy activities that the participants described were connected to their volunteering with the alumni association and the institution. This finding is similar to past research that has illustrated the connection between volunteering and giving (McDearmon, 2013; Taylor & Martin, 1995; Weers & Ronca, 2007, 2009). Activities such as sharing news and information about the institution and the alumni association and encouraging others to get involved in the alumni association were directly related to their volunteer positions at their alma mater. Volunteering also served as a catalyst for financial giving among the participants. Every participant who was financially supporting their alma mater said they were supporting the alumni association. Those who were financially supporting other areas of the university were either currently involved in volunteer activities with the units they were supporting or had done so in the past. Almost all of the participants

said they plan to financially support their alma mater in the future, and those who are already financially giving plan to increase the amount that they are giving in the future.

The finding that young alumni philanthropic support increases and evolves over time is linked to the findings of other studies about alumni philanthropic support. Although the results of this study did not reveal that financial giving by participants has increased as a result of their volunteering and advocacy, they showed that the participants intended to increase their financial support. Other studies such as McDearmon (2013), Taylor and Martin (2005), and Weerts and Ronca (2009) revealed that alumni involvement is a predictor of giving and that giving increased over time.

This finding also has important implications for alumni associations and foundations. The support that young alumni provide to the institution and the alumni association also provides a benefit to the institution's foundation. Because there is a strong connection between student experiences, young alumni volunteering and giving, it is important that these organizations collaborate and coordinate their efforts. Bad experiences for students and young alumni have an impact on giving, and likewise a bad experience with the foundation may have negative consequences for young alumni involvement with the institution and alumni association.

McDearmon (2013) found that alumni who have completed one or more support behaviors with their alma mater such as volunteering and making financial contributions had stronger role identity with their alma mater and were more likely to financially support their alma mater at larger levels later in their lives. Taylor and Martin (2005), and Weerts and Ronca (2009) also found that involvement with the university after graduation distinguishes donors from non-donors.

In addition, the finding that participants intend to increase the amount that they give over time is related to other studies about alumni philanthropy in which very small measures of financial support by young alumni had a large effect on future giving (Lindahl & Winship, 1992; Meer, 2013; Monks, 2003; Nayman, Gianneschi, & Mandel, 1993; Okunade & Justice, 1991; Piliavin & Charng, 1990). Although the results of this study did not reveal that the participants gave more, it indicated the intention to give as concluded in other studies. The findings of this study and the previous literature about alumni philanthropy provide strong evidence that the institution and the alumni association would benefit from philanthropically engaging students and young alumni and staying engaged with them over time.

### **Unsure about Future Opportunities for Support**

Although volunteering and advocacy activities play a very important role in philanthropic support, not all participants were aware of additional opportunities for support. This finding was unique to this study. This finding may help to highlight why many young alumni do not get involved with their alma mater following graduation. It is not that they do not want to be involved; rather, they do not know how to get involved.

All of the participants planned to continue their philanthropic support of their alma mater in the future, but most were not sure what opportunities are available besides the alumni association's board of directors. Even though all of the participants were already involved in supporting their alma mater, some were not sure how to get involved in supporting other areas of their alma mater such as volunteering for their academic departments and colleges. Not having easy ways for young alumni to be involved may prevent future involvement. It would be beneficial for alumni association staff to communicate with young alumni about opportunities for involvement that currently exist

both on and off campus. In addition, it is important for the institution and the alumni association to think about new and different engagement activities for young alumni.

The majority of the participants in this study said that a specific person asked or encouraged them to get involved. In addition to creating additional opportunities for involvement, an alumni ambassador program may help to get new young alumni involved and to communicate about opportunities for involvement. It may be beneficial for the staff at the alumni association to work with faculty and staff members at the institution, especially those who have worked closely with students, to identify and invite young alumni to engage or reengage with the institution. Working closely with faculty and staff ambassadors would also provide the opportunity to target young alumni from diverse populations of young alumni that have not historically been engaged with the institution.

In addition to volunteering, participants were interested in continuing to advocate for their alma mater. However, most did not describe a plan or ways that they might do so. In most cases participants were aware of how to financially support their alma mater, although not everyone was sure what areas they want to financially support.

### **Philanthropy: A Skill Learned from Others**

Several participants described learning about philanthropic behaviors from others, and these experiences helped to foster their philanthropic involvement. Some of the participants described a family legacy with their alma mater and, in many cases, this family legacy included philanthropic support of the institution through volunteering and financial giving. In other cases, participants grew up in families that were very philanthropically supportive of a variety of organizations. Young alumni who have grown up in families that are active in philanthropy may be a key demographic for the alumni association and the

institution to engage in philanthropic activities. This finding is supported by literature that revealed a connection between family members who attend an institution and financial giving (Clotfelter, 2003; Holmes, 2009; Monks, 2003). If young alumni have not learned about philanthropy through their families it may be beneficial for institutions and alumni associations to work with key faculty, staff and alumni to educate and mentor students and young alumni about philanthropy.

Studies have also shown a strong connection between student organization involvement and giving. Taylor and Martin (1995) found a correlation between student involvement in clubs and organizations and the Greek system and financial giving. Clotfelter (2003) and Monks (2003) also revealed a significant relationship between student extracurricular activities and alumni involvement. Therefore, it may be beneficial for institutions to focus on promoting philanthropic support among those who have had meaningful experiences in extracurricular activities.

Many of the participants engaged in philanthropic behaviors at their alma mater while they were students. They were heavily involved in volunteering for the alumni association and the university through an alumni council for students. Several were also involved in philanthropic activities through Greek chapters. These experiences helped to foster a spirit of giving back to the institution while they were students, and their philanthropic spirit toward their alma mater continues today. This finding suggests student organizations and the Greek system may serve as feeder organizations for the young alumni council and for other volunteer positions for young alumni. Actively working with the student organizations and the Greek system to foster an environment of young alumni philanthropy may also help to diversify the young alumni who are philanthropically supporting the institution.

Personal relationships also played a role in fostering philanthropic behaviors for participants. When the participants were asked how they became involved with philanthropically supporting their alma mater, almost all of them named one specific person who encouraged them to get involved. In most cases this person was another alum who was also philanthropically involved at the alma mater. In other cases, it was a faculty or staff member at the institution who asked them to get involved. This finding suggests alumni and faculty or staff ambassadors may play an important role in educating and encouraging young alumni philanthropic involvement. This finding was also unique to this study in that it highlighted the specific role that faculty and staff may play in alumni relations.

### **Meaningful Student Experiences and Philanthropic Support**

Several studies have revealed that meaningful student experiences play a key role in alumni philanthropic support. Holmes (2009), Monks (2003), and Clotfelter (2003) found that satisfactory student experiences were a strong predictor of financial giving. In addition McDonough (2016) found that satisfactory experiences were an important predictor of young alumni perceptions of their relationship with their alma mater. Those who had satisfactory student experiences had higher perceptions of relationship quality. The findings of this study were supported by this literature.

Participants discussed how meaningful student experiences and the advantages that young alumni received from their student experiences play a key role in philanthropic support. Participants expressed gratitude to their alma mater for the friendships and personal relationships they formed during their undergraduate experiences, and many of them continue to maintain these connections today. They felt that the institution is responsible for these connections and that it continues to provide them with a shared experience in their



relationships today. Participants also expressed gratitude to their alma mater for what they learned inside and outside the classroom. They believed their experience at their alma mater taught them how to be successful in life and in their careers. They did not feel they would be where they are today without their student experiences.

### **Implications for Practice**

The results of this study provide several implications for professional practice, and it is important to note that some of the implications relate to practice before students become alumni. Others relate directly to alumni relations practices. The implications include providing students with meaningful experiences that make them feel connected, examining inclusivity in young alumni activities, educating and encouraging student and young alumni philanthropy, providing flexible opportunities for involvement and advocacy opportunities, showing the impact of young alumni support, and recognizing the interrelatedness of campus units.

#### **Provide students with meaningful experiences that make them feel connected**

Meaningful student experiences play a key role in philanthropic support by young alumni, and this suggests that alumni associations and foundations should be as concerned with student experiences as the institution's administrators, faculty, and staff. Participants expressed a very large sense of gratitude for the relationships they developed during their time as students. These relationships made them feel connected to the institution. This connection created a sense of caring and wanting to do their part. They were also very grateful for the personal and professional success that they received as a result of their student experience. Several studies have shown the link between student engagement and student success and persistence (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2001, 2003; Kuh, Douglas, Lund, &

Ramin-Gyurnek, 1994; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). They had found that student engagement is a strong predictor of academic success and degree completion. This study revealed that the effects of meaningful student engagement reach far beyond graduation.

It is important that institutions continue to invest in resources that maintain and improve the student experience and build community, and alumni associations should champion these activities. Some of the key areas for institutional support may include faculty and staff, student support services, and curricular and extracurricular activities. By providing students with the resources they need to be successful and to be meaningfully engaged in the campus community, the institution will continue to create feelings of gratitude and of duty or responsibility to give back.

The results of this study add to the literature regarding the impact that student engagement and the student experience have an impact on students' lives long after graduation. Student experience and engagement activities play an important role in inspiring future support. The results also suggest that faculty and staff members at the institution play a key role in developing long-term relationships with alumni. They may also be an important component in identifying former students who should be engaged with the institution. The alumni association should work to strengthen connections with faculty and staff and help to educate them about the role they play in young alumni philanthropic support.

In addition, it would be beneficial for the institution to examine the overall student and campus environment. The welcoming environment and sense of home that participants felt on campus as students played an important role in their support as young alumni. All of the participants in this study were White, as were all of the members of the young alumni

council. It is important for the institution to determine if the welcoming environment and sense of home are the same for multicultural students. If the institution and the alumni association are seeking philanthropic support from young alumni from diverse backgrounds, learning about the student experiences of these populations is important (Garvey & Drezner, 2013; Harper & Quayle, 2009).

### **Examine inclusivity**

Alumni associations may also benefit by examining who is currently involved in philanthropically supporting the institution, and their current practices for recruiting membership on its young alumni council. According to Garvey and Drezner (2013), many institutions are now working to philanthropically engage more diverse alumni populations, but they are finding it difficult to create connections because they have felt ignored by their alma maters. They suggest that finding means for “cultivating and sustaining relationships among underrepresented minorities is critical” (p. 200). If all or most of the members of the young alumni council are White and if those who are recruiting new members of the council are White, it may lead to issues with inclusivity among those who are involved. Thus, it is important that the young alumni council and other young alumni groups are representative of the institution as a whole. All of the members of the institution’s young alumni council and all of the participants in this study were White. Students of color may have had meaningful student experiences, but they may be connected to the institution in other ways (Garvey & Drezner, 2013). Because meaningful experiences play an important role in connection with the institution and the philanthropic support, it is important for institutions to examine who is not engaged with the institution, and what can be done to increase involvement from underrepresented populations. If young alumni from diverse populations do not see

philanthropic engagement from others like themselves they may not feel as valued by the institution and may be less likely to get involved.

### **Educate and encourage students and young alumni philanthropy**

Many of the participants in this study learned about philanthropy through others. They learned about philanthropy through student organizations, family members, or others who were philanthropically involved with their alma mater. Previous research suggested that alumni do not automatically know how to be philanthropically supportive of their alma mater and that students must be taught about philanthropy in the same way they learn about other subjects during their college education (Hurvitz, 2010). In addition, Bentley and Nissan (1996) identified several key factors that led to philanthropic behavior in young people. These included having a young person witness a trusted adult modeling altruistic behavior; having an adult help the young person understand the cause, effect, and benefit of altruistic behavior; and giving the young person the opportunity to participate in philanthropic behaviors.

The current practices related to educating and encouraging philanthropy are largely informal, and they only target certain students and young alumni who participate in activities such as student organizations, the Greek system, or alumni association activities. A more formalized plan for educating students and young alumni about philanthropy and for encouraging them to get involved may benefit the alumni association and the institution. The alumni association may also consider work with trusted individuals at the institution such as faculty and staff and student organizational leaders as well as other alumni to help educate and spread the message of philanthropy. Expanding efforts in this area will help not only to increase involvement, but also to bring greater diversity to those who are philanthropically

supporting the institution. As was mentioned previously, all of the members of the institution's young alumni council and all of the participants in this study were White. It would be beneficial for the institution to look at diverse populations of students and young alumni who are not philanthropically involved and to determine how to best encourage their philanthropic involvement.

### **Provide flexible opportunities for involvement and advocacy opportunities**

The participants in the study said they wanted to remain involved in their alma mater, but they were also very busy with work and family and unable to dedicate substantial time to volunteer and advocacy activities. In addition, they wanted to ensure that their work was meaningful for them and for the institution. As competition among organizations for volunteers has increased, flexible volunteer positions have become even more important (Evans & Saxton, 2005). Volunteers now look for flexible positions that are enriching and have flexible time commitments (Evans & Saxton, 2005; Finlay & Murray, 2005; Lockstone-Binney, Baum, Smith, & Holmes, 2014). Providing young alumni with a variety of flexible experiences in order to encourage them to get involved and stay involved with the institution may help the alumni association achieve its alumni engagement goals. Descriptions of these experiences may include being family friendly, not taking a large time commitment, or being close to their areas of residence.

Participants in this study were interested in continuing to advocate for their alma mater, but most were unsure how to do so. A coordinated system of communicating advocacy opportunities and talking points may be beneficial. The alumni association could work with the university's administration and the university's foundation to identify the areas of support that would be the most beneficial to the institution. These advocacy opportunities

may involve different areas that will help to advance the institution such as talking with prospective students and their families, talking with employers about offering internships and jobs, talking with legislators about higher education funding, and encouraging philanthropy. The alumni association could then prepare the talking points and then ask for alumni volunteers to help spread the messages.

### **Show the impact of young alumni support**

Participants shared several challenges related to their philanthropic support of their alma mater including a feeling that they could not give enough time or money to their alma mater to make an impact and feeling that their work was not always valued. This relates directly to the theoretical framework for this study. If the benefits of philanthropic support are outweighed by the cost, young alumni may not continue to support their alma mater (Weerts & Ronca, 2007).

Engaging in an assessment of the current goals and objectives related to young alumni support will help to ensure that the volunteer work that young alumni complete is meaningful and valued by the institution. An assessment of the effectiveness of young alumni support based on the goals and objectives of their strategic plan would also be beneficial. Such an assessment may then be used to show young alumni how their support impacts and advances their alma mater (Pritchard, 2011; Waters, 2009). If young alumni understand the goals and how their work is making an impact, they feel better about the work that they are doing, and they may be more likely to continue or increase their support in the future.

### **Recognize interrelatedness of campus units**

Several of the participants in this study said they felt disrespected by the fundraising tactics that were being used by the foundation at their alma mater. Many of their concerns

stemmed from the methods by which they were being asked to give and the amounts they were asked to donate. McDonough (2016) found similar results. Young alumni said that fundraising solicitations were the primary message young alumni were receiving from their alma mater, and these solicitations were not viewed positively. This finding is also connected to social exchange theory. If the young alumni feel disrespected, they may not continue their relationship with their alma mater or support it in the future (Weerts & Ronca, 2007).

Although the current fundraising tactics may be causing damage to young alumni relationships with their alma mater, the alumni association does not have control over the fundraising messages because they are being coordinated and communicated by the institution's foundation, which is a separate organization. This is an issue at many institutions where the institution's alumni association and the institution's foundation are separate entities, but students and alumni do not perceive them as separate organizations. Because there is a strong connection between the work of alumni associations and foundations, it is important that they collaborate and coordinate their efforts. Once again, bad experiences for students and young alumni have an impact on giving and, likewise, a bad experience with the foundation may have negative consequences for young alumni involvement with the institution and alumni association.

It is also important for alumni associations to recognize how events or administrative decisions at the institution can affect their work. Young alumni may have benefitted when the institution provided them with a good student experience, but alumni associations may suffer consequences when issues that are out of their control arise and the young alumni do not like what is happening. This is also related to social exchange theory. Young alumni will

support the institution and the alumni association as long as the past or present benefits outweigh the costs.

Taking a leadership role in communication and engagement with the young alumni of the institution would help the alumni association work toward resolving this issue. Collaborating with the institution's administration and the foundation to develop a coordinated plan for young alumni that focuses on engagement (McDonough, 2016) and education about philanthropy (Hurvitz, 2010) may enable all three organizations to better achieve their goals in the long term. Financial giving should be a component of the plan because the research literature shows that even very small amounts of financial giving by young alumni can have a significant impact on future giving (Lindahl & Winship, 1992; Meer, 2013; Monks, 2003; Nayman, Gianneschi, & Mandel, 1993; Okunade & Justice, 1991; Piliavin & Charng, 1990). Reviewing and revising the current strategy for asking young alumni to give may have a significant impact on future fundraising at the institution.

### **Future Research**

The results of this study suggest that more research regarding young alumni is needed. Future research areas may include the characteristics of young alumni who are active volunteers and advocates but who do not financially support their alma mater. Learning more about these alumni may provide insights about why they are not giving. It may also provide some understanding about what factors would encourage them to start giving. Future research may also examine young alumni who give financially, but do not support their alma maters through volunteering or advocacy. Learning more about these young alumni may help to determine why they are not involved in other ways and if being involved in other ways would help to increase future support. Conducting additional research about young alumni



may also help institutions to learn more about the quality aspects of the experiences that they offer. This would provide an additional performance indicator in addition to graduation rates and placement statistics. This research area has the potential to significantly impact future engagement and fundraising efforts.

An examination of campus climate and the experiences of multicultural, LGBT+, and international young alumni is also needed. Current research has revealed the connection between campus climate and student recruitment and retention (Elliott & Healy, 2000; Hurtado, 1992; Solorzano & Yasso, 2000); however, little, if any, research has been conducted regarding how campus climate affects young alumni philanthropic support. Understanding the experiences of these young alumni may help to broaden the pool of active volunteers and donors to institutions. It may also provide insights about how alumni associations can support multicultural alumni and better connect them with the alumni association and the institution.

Future research may also examine institutional administrator and alumni relations staff perceptions of philanthropic support by young alumni. The perceptions of these individuals are important because these people develop the strategy for engaging and communicating with young alumni. They are also the people who are most likely to be in direct contact with young alumni. Knowing more about their perceptions would help to identify misconceptions about the young alumni audience. It would also help to create educational information and programming about effectively engaging young alumni in philanthropic activities.

A longitudinal study that examines the effectiveness of alumni relations strategies and their effects on philanthropic support would also be beneficial. Because most institutions

focus on current donors and prospective donors, very little is known about how alumni engagement activities for young alumni actually impact their future giving. Conducting a longitudinal study that follows philanthropically involved young alumni from graduation through the time when they make a major gift to their alma mater would provide very valuable insight about the effectiveness of alumni relations strategies. This type of study would provide valuable information about what engagement strategies are most effective throughout the alumni lifecycle.

A longitudinal study that examines alumni relations strategies from the social exchange theory lens would also be beneficial. For example, one could investigate if there is a certain point at which young alumni feel that the costs of their philanthropic support outweigh the benefits. Knowing what factors may lead young alumni to stop being involved may help to ensure that the appropriate alumni relations strategies are in place to keep young alumni involved in the future.

Future research may also examine life-long major donors of time, advocacy, and financial support. Such a study may examine when they started to become philanthropically supportive of their alma mater. Learning about their philanthropic journey may also provide evidence about engagement strategies that are effective for younger alumni.

### **Conclusion**

According to a 2011 ASHE report about institutional giving, public institutions have joined private institutions in their dependence on financial contributions from alumni and other donors for financial sustainability. Economic issues and declines in state funding to public higher education institutions have made it even more important for colleges and

universities to develop strong prosocial relationships with their alumni including young alums that would encourage them to give (ASHE).

This is the first known study that examines young alumni philanthropic support of their alma mater. It provides valuable information about how to increase philanthropic support by young alumni in the future. It also provides greater understanding of the lived experiences of young alumni and brought greater context to their experiences. Increased knowledge about young alumni philanthropic support has the potential to help higher education institutions significantly increase current and future private giving in order to help them better accomplish their academic missions.

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**APPENDIX A. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL**

**IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY**  
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board  
Office for Responsible Research  
Vice President for Research  
1138 Pearson Hall  
Ames, Iowa 50011-2207  
515 294-4300  
FAX 515 294-4267

**Date:** 3/23/2016

**To:** Kim McDonough  
207 East 12th St  
Ames, IA 50010

**CC:** Dr. Ann Gansemer-Topf  
2621 Lagomarcino

**From:** Office for Responsible Research

**Title:** Young alumni perspectives about philanthropically supporting their alma mater

**IRB ID:** 16-067

**Approval Date:** 3/22/2016      **Date for Continuing Review:** 3/21/2018

**Submission Type:** New      **Review Type:** Full Committee

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- **Use only the approved study materials** in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.
- **Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study**, when documented consent is required.
- **Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes** to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.
- **Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences** involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.
- **Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses**, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.
- **Complete a new continuing review form** at least three to four weeks prior to the **date for continuing review** as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. **Approval from other entities may also be needed.** For example, access to data from private records (e.g. student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. **IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.**

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or [IRB@iastate.edu](mailto:IRB@iastate.edu).

**APPENDIX B. PATRICIPANT COMMUNICATION****B-1. Interview Invitation E-mail for Current Members**

Dear [Participant],

As you may know, I am currently a doctoral student in the [Department] at [University]. I am working with the Alumni Association on research for my dissertation, and I am planning to conduct online interviews with young alumni for this project. I received your name and e-mail address from the Alumni Association.

You were selected to participate in this study because you are a member of the Young Alumni Council. The purpose of the interview is to better understand why young alumni philanthropically support their alma mater. In this study philanthropic support includes volunteerism, advocacy, and/or financial giving. The interview will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

Are you willing to participate in this study? If so, please let me know. I will follow up with you to schedule a date and time that is convenient for you.

Let me know if you have any questions. I can be reached at [kmm@iastate.edu](mailto:kmm@iastate.edu) or 515-450-3210.

Your input is an important component in the success of this project.

Sincerely,

Kim McDonough

## **B-2. Informed Consent Document for Current Members**

### **Young alumni perspectives about philanthropically supporting their alma mater**

Investigators: Kimberly M. McDonough, School of Education, Iowa State University  
Dr. Ann Gansemer-Topf, School of Education, Iowa State University

This form describes a research project. It has information to help you decide whether or not you wish to participate. Research studies include only people who choose to take part—your participation is completely voluntary. Please discuss any questions you have about the study or about this form with the project staff before deciding to participate.

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to explore past and present experiences that have influenced young alumni decisions to philanthropically support their alma mater and to examine young alumni perspective about the costs and benefits of their philanthropic support.

You are being invited to participate in this study because you are considered a young alumnus/alumnae of [University], and you are a member of the [University] Alumni Association's Young Alumni Council. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate.

#### **Description of Procedures**

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in an in-depth interview via Zoom Video Conferencing. The interview will last for approximately 60 to 90 minutes. A follow-up interview may be conducted if necessary to clarify information from the first interview. The length of the follow-up interview will not exceed 90 minutes. The interviews will be audio recorded and the data will be transcribed following the interview.

The purpose of the interview is to discuss how and why you philanthropically support your alma mater, your past and present interactions with your alma mater, the costs and benefits that they derive from your support, and the ways in which you plan to support your alma mater in the future.

Follow-up interviews may be conducted on an as needed basis to clarify information from the first interview.

#### **Risks or Discomforts**

There are minimal risks to you by participating in this study. You may experience emotional discomfort by answering questions about your experiences. You may choose to skip interview questions that make you uncomfortable. You may also choose to stop the interview at any time. You will have the opportunity to read and edit your interview transcripts after data collection is complete. The documents will be e-mailed to you, and you will have one week to review and edit the document.

#### **Benefits**

If you decide to participate in this study, there will be no direct benefit to you. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit society by helping higher education institutions to significantly increase philanthropic giving in order to help them accomplish their academic missions.

#### **Costs and Compensation**

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will receive alumni association merchandise as an incentive for your participation. The value of these items will not exceed \$20.



There may be a follow-up interview, but there will be no additional compensation. If you decide to not continue your participation in the study, you will still receive the merchandise.

### **Participant Rights**

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part in the study or to stop participating at any time, for any reason, without penalty or negative consequences. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

### **Confidentiality**

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy study records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: I will remove identifying information from the data after you are given the opportunity to review the data for accuracy. When the results are published, a pseudonym will be used in place of your name. I will also not use the name of your alma mater in the report. All of the data from this study will be stored securely on password-protected private server network and on a password-protected computer hard drive.

You are a member of a select group of [number] people who are being asked to participate, and your membership in this select group is posted online. Therefore, it may be possible that your identity be known. Confidentiality will be maintained to the extent possible, but cannot be guaranteed in this study. Please initial to indicate that you have read and understand that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. \_\_\_\_\_

### **Questions**

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study. For further information about the study, contact Kimberly McDonough at (515-450-3210) or kmm@iastate.edu or Dr. Ann Gansemer-Topf at (515-294-7635) or anngt@iastate.edu.

### **Consent and Authorization Provisions**

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant's Name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**B-3. Interview Invitation E-mail for Former Members**

Dear [Participant],

I am currently a doctoral student in the [Department] at [University]. I am working with the Alumni Association on research for my dissertation, and I am planning to conduct online interviews with young alumni for this project. I received your name and e-mail address from the Alumni Association.

You were selected to participate in this study because the Alumni Association has identified you as a young alum who is philanthropically involved with the university through volunteering, advocacy, and/or financial giving. The purpose of the interview is to better understand why young alumni philanthropically support their alma mater. In this study philanthropic support includes volunteerism, advocacy, and/or financial giving. The interview will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

Are you willing to participate in this study? If so, please let me know. I will follow up with you to schedule a date and time that is convenient for you.

Let me know if you have any questions. I can be reached at [kmm@iastate.edu](mailto:kmm@iastate.edu) or 515-450-3210.

Your input is an important component in the success of this project.

Sincerely,

Kim McDonough

## **B-4. Informed Consent Document for Former Members**

### **INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT**

#### **Young alumni perspectives about philanthropically supporting their alma mater**

**Investigators:** Kimberly M. McDonough, School of Education, Iowa State University  
Dr. Ann Gansemer-Topf, School of Education, Iowa State University

This form describes a research project. It has information to help you decide whether or not you wish to participate. Research studies include only people who choose to take part—your participation is completely voluntary. Please discuss any questions you have about the study or about this form with the project staff before deciding to participate.

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to explore past and present experiences that have influenced young alumni decisions to philanthropically support their alma mater and to examine young alumni perspective about the costs and benefits of their philanthropic support.

You are being invited to participate in this study because you are considered a young alumnus/alumnae of Iowa State University, and you have been identified by the Alumni Association as being philanthropically involved with your alma mater. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate.

#### **Description of Procedures**

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in an in-depth interview via Zoom Video Conferencing. The interview will last for approximately 60 to 90 minutes. A follow-up interview may be conducted if necessary to clarify information from the first interview. The length of the follow-up interview will not exceed 90 minutes. The interviews will be audio recorded and the data will be transcribed following the interview.

The purpose of the interview is to discuss how and why you philanthropically support your alma mater, your past and present interactions with your alma mater, the costs and benefits that they derive from your support, and the ways in which you plan to support your alma mater in the future.

Follow-up interviews may be conducted on an as needed basis to clarify information from the first interview.

#### **Risks or Discomforts**

There are minimal risks to you by participating in this study. You may experience emotional discomfort by answering questions about your experiences. You may choose to skip interview questions that make you uncomfortable. You may also choose to stop the interview at any time. You will have the opportunity to read and edit your interview transcripts after data collection is complete. The documents will be e-mailed to you, and you will have one week to review and edit the document.

Benefits

If you decide to participate in this study, there will be no direct benefit to you. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit society by helping higher education institutions to significantly increase philanthropic giving in order to help them accomplish their academic missions.

### Costs and Compensation

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will receive alumni association merchandise as an incentive for your participation. The value of these items will not exceed \$20. There may be a follow-up interview, but there will be no additional compensation. If you decide to not continue your participation in the study, you will still receive the merchandise.

### Participant Rights

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part in the study or to stop participating at any time, for any reason, without penalty or negative consequences. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

If you have any questions *about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury*, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, [IRB@iastate.edu](mailto:IRB@iastate.edu), or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

### Confidentiality

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy study records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: I will remove identifying information from the data after you are given the opportunity to review the data for accuracy. When the results are published, a pseudonym will be used in place of your name. I will also not use the name of your alma mater in the report. All of the data from this study will be stored securely on password-protected private server network and on a password-protected computer hard drive.

You are a member of a small group of young alumni who are being asked to participate in this study. Therefore, it may be possible that your identity be known. Confidentiality will be maintained to the extent possible, but cannot be guaranteed in this study. Please initial to indicate that you have read and understand that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. \_\_\_\_\_

### Questions

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study. For further information *about the study*, contact Kimberly McDonough at (515-450-3210) or [kmm@iastate.edu](mailto:kmm@iastate.edu) or Dr. Ann Gansemer-Topf at (515-294-7635) or [anngt@iastate.edu](mailto:anngt@iastate.edu).

### Consent and Authorization Provisions

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant's Name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **B-5. Interview Protocol**

### **Subject:**

Young alumni perspectives about the costs and benefits of philanthropically supporting their alma mater

### **Interviewer:**

Kimberly M. McDonough

### **Welcome:**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Your ideas and opinions are important to me. I will conduct the interview today.

### **Purpose of the Interview:**

I am working with the alumni association to conduct interviews about why young alumni philanthropically support their alma mater. In this study, philanthropic support includes volunteerism, advocacy, and financial giving. Advocacy is your public support of your alma mater in an effort to influence the opinions of others. We are conducting these interviews to learn about your motivations for and the costs and benefits of your support. The goal of this research is to better understand why young alumni philanthropically support their alma mater. We need your input, and I want you to share your honest and open thoughts with me.

### **Procedures:**

I want you to do the talking. There are no right or wrong answers. Your experiences and perceptions are important. Please share them freely. I will protect your confidentiality to the extent possible.

I will be audio recording this session because I want to capture everything you say. I will not identify anyone by name in the final report. You may stop the interview at any time, and you do not need to share any information or opinions that make you feel uncomfortable. I will begin recording now.

### **Introduction:**

During the interview I will be asking you a series of open-ended questions about your motivation for philanthropically supporting your alma mater and the costs and benefits of your support. Please speak clearly as you answer the questions. Do you have any questions?

I will be using pseudonyms for each study participant. Do you have a pseudonym that you would like me to use for the study?

1. How did you get involved in the young alumni council?
2. How does giving, in the context of volunteering, advocacy, or financial giving, make you feel?

3. How do you philanthropically support your alma mater and why? Please makes sure that you discuss volunteering, advocacy, and financial giving.
4. How do you think your alma mater benefits from your philanthropic support?
5. Do others know about your philanthropic involvement with your alma mater? What do they think?
6. What student experiences with your alma mater, academic or social, were the most meaningful to you? Why?
7. Tell me about the greatest challenges that you had to overcome to complete your undergraduate degree.
8. Talk about the benefits that you feel that you received by earning your undergraduate degree at your alma mater.
9. Describe your relationships with your alma mater following graduation. How have you been involved? Talk about your connection.
10. What do feel has been the greatest benefit do you derive from philanthropically supporting your alma mater?
11. Tell me about the challenges you've experienced in philanthropically supporting your alma mater.
12. Do you plan to continue to philanthropically support your alma mater in the future? How so? Why not? Please discuss from the perspective of volunteering, advocacy, and financial support.

**Conclusion:**

Thank you again for participating in this interview. I will stop recording now. The content from this interview will be transcribed, coded, and analyzed. A summary of the results will be sent to you for verification prior to writing the final report. If you think of any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at [kmm@iastate.edu](mailto:kmm@iastate.edu) or 515-450-3210. Thank you again.

**Follow-up Interview Questions**

1. Is there any other information that you would like to share about how you are philanthropically supporting your alma mater?
2. Can you think of any other past or present experiences that have made you choose to philanthropically support your alma mater?
3. Are there any other costs or benefits that you derive from philanthropically supporting your alma mater?
4. Is there any other information that you want to share about how you plan to philanthropically support your alma mater in the future?
5. Is there any other information about your experience as a young alum that you would like to share for the purpose of this study?

**B-6. Interview Scheduling E-Mail**

Dear [Participant],

Thank you for your willingness to participate in an interview for my research project about young alumni philanthropic support of their alma mater. The purpose of the interview is to better understand why you philanthropically support your alma mater. In this study philanthropic support includes volunteerism, advocacy, and/or financial giving.

Below is the scheduled meeting time. Please visit this link at the time listed below to join the interview videoconference. You may also join by dial in phone line if that is easier for you. If you decide to join by videoconference from a PC, Mac, iPad, iPhone or Android device, you may need to download the Zoom program before the meeting. You can do so at the link below. Please note that the conferencing system will not allow you to join until the exact time listed.

Time: [CST]

Join from a PC, Mac, iPad, iPhone or Android device:

Please click this URL to start or join. [Link]

Or, go to [Link] and enter meeting ID: [Number]

Join from dial-in phone line:

Dial: [Number]

Meeting ID: [Number]

Participant ID: Shown after joining the meeting

International numbers available: [Number]

If you have any questions or concerns or if you need to reschedule please contact me at [kmm@iastate.edu](mailto:kmm@iastate.edu) or 515-450-3210.

Sincerely,

Kim McDonough