

From Engagement to Impact

Turning alumni connection into institutional momentum

An executive briefing on the trends, challenges and opportunities shaping alumni engagement in higher education.

Executive summary

Alumni have not stopped giving, volunteering or seeking community – but they are directing much of that energy elsewhere. In the 2026 National Alumni Survey, 82% of respondents gave or volunteered to a charitable cause, yet only 35% gave to their alma mater in the prior year and 10% volunteered with it.[2] This is not a deficit of generosity. It is a challenge of relevance, relationship and trust.

Institutions earn alumni engagement by creating value before asking alumni to contribute. Alumni seek belonging, professional connections, lifelong learning and meaningful opportunities to help shape an institution they still regard as their own. In return, they mentor students, hire graduates, open doors to employers and community partners, advise leaders, advocate, volunteer and give. The strongest programs make this reciprocal exchange explicit and measure what it produces.

Four benchmarks frame the challenge: a weaker alumni experience, limited participation, underused volunteer talent and a narrowing donor base.

86%/50%	Alumni respondents satisfied with their student experience versus their experience as alumni, a 36-point relationship gap.[2]
14.7%	Median share of contactable alumni engaged in at least one of CASE's four modes of alumni engagement: philanthropic, volunteer, experiential or communications (398 institutions).[1]
0.6-0.8%	Median institutional volunteer engagement across graduation cohorts, showing how much alumni talent remains untapped.[1]
-3.5%/+8.7%	Median change in alumni donor count versus alumni dollars received across 533 institutions. More support is coming from fewer alumni. [3]

The figures come from different studies and should be read as directional benchmarks, not as a composite score. Together, they show where alumni programs must create more value and document more impact.

Institutions need to measure participation across philanthropic, volunteer, experiential and communications engagement, but they should not stop there. They also need to assess the strength of the relationship, the value alumni contribute and the outcomes those relationships help produce for alumni, students and the institution.[1],[2]

Joan Bahner, senior advisor with Lighthouse Counsel and former vice president for institutional advancement at Fisk University, captures the central challenge: “Are we truly engaging alumni or are we counting activity and calling it engagement? Those are not the same thing.”

Why alumni engagement matters

The alumni relationship can last 40, 50 or 60 years. That longevity gives alumni engagement strategic value across advancement, student success, career development, enrollment, reputation and institutional leadership.

CASE’s 2025 study included engagement data covering more than 11.8 million alumni across 398 institutions in 18 countries. The results revealed the median institution engaged just 14.7% of its contactable alumni.[1] This gap shows how much alumni capacity remains untapped.

Yet longevity does not guarantee loyalty. An alma mater competes with many other organizations for alumni attention, trust, service and generosity. Institutions must earn a meaningful place in alumni lives by offering value that matters now and roles that matter to the institution.

> *“We must see our alumni as important drivers of our future rather than simply reflections of years gone by.”*
>
> **Dr. Perry Moulds**
> *President, Bethel University*

That future-facing view is the proper starting point. Alumni can advise academic programs, identify changing workforce needs, create internships, mentor students, recruit prospective students, open professional doors, advocate for the institution and give. When coordinated, these contributions can expand student opportunity, improve institutional decisions, extend the institution’s reach and broaden philanthropic support.

From engagement to impact

The arc begins with engagement and ends with impact, but it is not a rigid funnel or a promise that one action leads to the next. Outreach is what the institution does to invite participation. Engagement includes how alumni respond and participate and how the institution encourages and supports that participation. Reciprocal value is the benefit alumni and the institution create for one another. For alumni, this includes belonging, professional and personal growth and meaningful participation. Contribution is what alumni add through time, talent, relationships and philanthropy. Outcomes are the changes that follow for alumni, students or the institution. Impact is sustained and strategically significant change that alumni engagement helped produce.

Movement between stages should be measured, not assumed. Contribution can be documented. Causation requires a credible comparison or another sound research design.

CASE's four engagement modes provide a necessary common language for where alumni participate. Philanthropic, volunteer, experiential and communications engagement are indicators, not a complete definition of success. The Lighthouse Counsel framework introduced near the end of this briefing builds on that foundation by asking what engagement produces. An email click and a year of mentoring should not carry the same strategic weight simply because both can be counted.[1]

> *"Let us figure out how we meaningfully measure not just check boxes."*

Dale Wright
Vice Chancellor for Advancement, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

What the evidence shows about alumni engagement

The evidence points to three conclusions.

- Engagement rates must be read with raw counts and denominators.
- Relationship quality must be measured, not inferred from activity volume.
- Contribution can be documented, but impact and causation require stronger evidence.

CASE's 271-institution three-year cohort illustrates the first point. From 2023 to 2025, median engagement fell from 16.7% to 15.7% as the number of contactable alumni grew 8.8%. Separately, 56.9% of institutions responding to the 2025 survey reported an increase in the number of engaged alumni from 2024.[1] A growing database can increase the number engaged while lowering the rate. Leaders need both measures to understand actual reach.

> *"Engagement is not the root condition here. It is the outward expression of something deeper, and that is alumni identity."*
>
> **Dr. Jay Le Roux Dillon**
> *Chief Alumni Officer, University of California, Berkeley*

Research on identity and relationship quality supports the second conclusion. Foundational research linked alumni identification with institutional support and involvement.[5] A 2024 peer-reviewed study of 1,711 alumni at one Norwegian university college found that perceived value alone did not drive loyalty. Satisfaction with alumni activities strengthened the relationship between value and loyalty.[6] One institution cannot settle the question across higher education, but the practical standard is clear. Measure not only whether alumni participated, but also whether the experience was useful, high quality and relationship building.

The evidence also draws a firm boundary. An email click, event attendance or a recorded volunteer hour documents activity or contribution. It does not by itself prove reciprocal value, a stronger relationship or an institutional outcome. Leaders should ask whether alumni found the experience useful, whether connection deepened, what alumni contributed, what changed and how confidently that change can be linked to the engagement. That distinction underpins the trends and leadership choices that follow.

Trends and challenges shaping alumni relations

1. Assumed loyalty is giving way to reciprocal value

The alumni experience is not keeping pace with the student experience. In the 2026 National Alumni Survey, 86% of respondents were satisfied with their student experience but only 50% with their alumni experience. Forty percent felt disconnected, and 48% felt ill-informed. Only 14% believed their institution understood their current career or life stage, and just 13% said their giving and volunteer priorities were very or extremely well known.

The decline in satisfaction was steeper among recent graduates, suggesting that disengagement can begin early. These are benchmarks from participating institutions, not population estimates.[2]

Dr. Jay Le Roux Dillon identifies the strategic shift: Institutions can "no longer rely on inherent or inherited loyalty." His practical test of a strong relationship is whether alumni "say 'we' and not just 'you.'"

Alumni expect value, not only tradition and nostalgia. Matthew Winston Jr., executive director for alumni engagement at Binghamton University, puts it this way: "Every alumnus essentially seeks three enduring connections with their alma mater — a community where they belong, a university that continues to thrive and the assurance that their own life and contributions have helped shape that success."

The Voluntary Alumni Engagement in Support of Education (VAESE) findings suggest that post-pandemic expansion has focused more on communications than on new benefits for alumni. In the 2024 study, 73% of respondents expanded digital communications and 57% increased personalization, but only 16% added compelling alumni benefits.[7] More communication without greater value may increase volume without strengthening the relationship.

Anita Branch-Brown, vice president for institutional advancement at Hollins University, identifies the payoff: "When alumni feel known, valued and connected to the mission, they become partners in our students' success and the institution's future."

2. Recorded engagement dips in the middle years

CASE data show that recorded communications and experiential engagement peak during the first five years after graduation, reach their lowest levels 11 to 20 years out and then rise among later cohorts.[1] Those middle years often bring demanding careers, young families, care responsibilities and other constraints that leave little room for programs built around campus events and fixed schedules.

This is not evidence that younger or mid-career alumni do not care. In CASE's cross-sectional cohort data, median philanthropic engagement ranges from 1.6% among alumni within five years of graduation to 7.9% among those more than 50 years out.[1] The data do not prove that the same people become more engaged as they age. They do show why institutions need relevant ways to sustain relationships across decades. Career networks, family-accessible regional programs, mentoring, lifelong learning and flexible volunteer roles can keep the relationship active when conventional programming does not fit.

3. Volunteer potential remains largely untapped

Median volunteer engagement remains between 0.6% and 0.8% across the graduation cohorts CASE measures.[1] Those rates are not universal ceilings, but they show how little of the available alumni talent institutions are activating.

Alumni-specific evidence makes the missed opportunity clearer. In the 2026 National Alumni Survey, 70% of respondents who had volunteered with their alma mater during the prior year also gave to it, compared with 25% of those who had never volunteered. Recent volunteers were also eight times more likely to report feeling very connected and five times more likely to report feeling very informed.[4]

These associations do not prove that volunteering caused connection or giving. Volunteer propensity, age, income and prior affinity may help explain the differences. They do show why institutions should treat volunteer engagement as a strategic pathway and measure it far more carefully.

Volunteer time can be reported as contributed value, with limits. Independent Sector's national estimate values a volunteer hour at $36.14 for 2025.[9] It approximates general volunteer labor, not cash revenue, return on investment or specialized expertise. It belongs beside, not instead of, the outcomes volunteers help produce.

The design of the opportunity matters. Sedrik Newbern, president of the NASBA Center for the Public Trust, chief ethics officer of NASBA and immediate past president of the Western Kentucky University Alumni Association Board of Directors, explains the volunteer's concern: "If my only option is to pick and choose what you have already created, then that feels like I am just being added as a cog in the wheel." Alumni want useful work, clear expectations and evidence that their contribution matters.

The strongest volunteer pathways offer several ways to deepen involvement. Alumni boards belong within that pathway as strategic advisory bodies, not as prestige rosters or substitutes for staff. Dr. Karen Meshad Baldwin, senior advisor with Lighthouse Counsel and former vice president for advancement at The University of Alabama, advises: "Alumni boards should be partners in strategy not a substitute for governance or staff." Their most useful work includes interpreting alumni needs, opening networks, recruiting volunteers and advising on a small number of institutional priorities.

4. The alumni donor base is narrowing

CASE reported a fourth consecutive annual decline in alumni donor counts in fiscal 2025. Across 533 institutions, median alumni donor counts fell 3.5% while funds received from alumni rose 8.7%.[3] Institutions are receiving more support from fewer alumni, increasing concentration risk and weakening broad-based ownership. This is not only a fundraising problem. It suggests that fewer alumni see the institution as one of the causes they choose to sustain. A resilient pipeline depends on relationships built long before financial capacity peaks.

Donor concentration is also a generational challenge. In the National Alumni Survey, 42% of respondents did not view their institution as a philanthropic priority. That rose to 54% among millennials and 59% among Gen Z alumni.[2]

Mitch Blonde, CFRE, vice president for institutional advancement and public affairs and chief advancement officer at Tiffin University, captures the change: “Gone are the days of making a gift in support of your alma mater just to pay back.” The response is to connect philanthropy with relevance, trust and visible impact, not place an appeal inside every alumni experience.

Dr. Reshunda L. Mahone, associate vice chancellor for alumni engagement and annual giving at North Carolina State University, draws the boundary: “We are not trying to attach a giving strategy to every alumni experience. Instead, we identify the places where engagement, volunteerism, communications and philanthropy naturally reinforce one another and can create greater value together.”

5. Alumni engagement must become institution-wide work

No alumni office can produce institutional impact alone. Every campus unit that touches alumni shapes the relationship and must share outcomes, data and ownership. Among VAESE respondents, integrated alumni and fundraising operations rose from 53% in 2016 to 59% in 2024.[7]

Dr. Karen Meshad Baldwin describes what alignment looks like: “Alignment becomes visible when alumni engagement stops being a calendar of events and starts functioning as an engine for priority-setting, relationship-building, volunteerism and philanthropy.”

6. Data quality and AI are raising the stakes

Before institutions expand their use of AI, they need trustworthy data. In the 2025 CASE survey, only 16.8% of institutions were confident in the completeness of their communication-engagement data, while 38.7% were not very confident.[1] AI can find patterns in what is captured; it cannot repair unclear definitions, missing information or disconnected systems on its own.

For alumni teams, AI can help analyze interests, identify life-stage patterns, recommend relevant opportunities and detect relationships that would be difficult to see manually. However, it can also accelerate weak strategy and erode trust when personal data is used without clear governance. In an EDUCAUSE study of 1,960 higher education respondents released in January 2026, 94% had used AI tools for work during the prior six months, 54% were aware of institutional policies or guidelines governing use, and only 13% said their institution measured the return on investment for work-related AI tools. These figures are not specific to alumni relations, but they describe the institutional environment in which alumni teams now operate.[8]

Dr. Jay Le Roux Dillon summarizes the central risk: “The big risk is to use AI to automate more noise.” The test is whether technology helps the institution understand and serve alumni more meaningfully – not simply push more content. Responsible use requires sound governance, human judgment and measures tied to relationship quality.

Mitch Blonde offers the governing principle: “We’re in the relationship business.” Technology earns its place only when it improves service, judgment or connection.

7. Resources are forcing harder choices

Capacity is not keeping pace with expectations. In the 2024 VAESE study, 70% of respondents said staffing had declined or remained flat over the prior three years.[7] Institutions cannot add strategic priorities indefinitely without ending, redesigning or consolidating lower-impact work.

Mitch Blonde offers the necessary discipline: “Have the courage to focus on high-impact activities.” That means examining every recurring event, chapter, communication and board responsibility against a clear outcome. Tradition deserves respect, but continuation should not be its own measure of success.

How institutions can increase alumni impact

Taken together, the evidence and the leaders interviewed for this briefing point to six operating disciplines for responding to these headwinds and moving from engagement to impact:

- **Set the outcomes first.** Define the value for alumni and the institutional outcome. Assign an executive sponsor, operating owner, baseline and 12-month target.
- **Build a listening system.** Pair behavior data with brief questions about belonging, satisfaction, career stage, interests and perceived value. Refresh it after meaningful interactions.[2],[6]
- **Create consequential roles.** Invite alumni to mentor, advise, introduce, recruit, teach, advocate and solve problems. Track hours, completion, repeat service and opportunities produced.[1],[4]
- **Design the path from engagement to impact.** Track movement from initial participation to repeat engagement, contribution, leadership and outcomes. Report volume, progression and where alumni disengage.[1]
- **Govern data and AI.** Define terms, owners, permissions and quality checks before using automation or predictive models. Test whether technology improves relevance, staff capacity or outcomes.[1],[8]
- **Review the portfolio quarterly.** Compare recurring work by cost, reach, relationship quality, contributed value and outcomes. Decide what to expand, redesign or end based on the evidence.[7]

Anita Branch-Brown provides the essential boundary: “Accountability matters, but alumni should never feel valued only for what they can give.” Measurement should strengthen reciprocity, not turn every interaction into a transaction.

A leadership agenda

This is not solely an alumni-relations agenda. It requires shared decisions about institutional outcomes, alumni value, resources, data and accountability. Presidents, advancement leaders and alumni executives should be able to answer five questions:

- Which institutional outcomes should alumni engagement advance?
- What value do alumni receive at each major life stage?
- How does engagement create reciprocal value, contribution, outcomes and lasting impact?
- Which measures show reach and engagement, reciprocal value and relationship depth, contribution, outcomes, sustained impact and the strength of the underlying evidence?
- Which activities should evidence lead us to expand, redesign or end?

The answers belong in institutional strategy and should inform budgets, staffing, volunteer structures, data governance and expectations for campus partners.

Measuring progress from engagement to impact

CASE helps institutions classify where alumni participate. The Lighthouse Counsel Alumni Impact Measurement Framework asks the next question: What did that participation produce? It is a management framework, not a validated scale or universal rating system. Its first five stages trace progress from reach and engagement through reciprocal value and contribution to outcomes and sustained impact. Evidence quality and sustainability are guardrails across every stage. The progression is not a rigid funnel, and no composite score should hide important differences.

Stage or guardrail	Measures	What it reveals
Reach and Engagement	Unduplicated counts and rates; year-over-year movement; comparisons by cohort, geography and affinity	Breadth and equitable access
Reciprocal Value and Relationship Strength	Belonging, perceived value, relationship quality, repeat participation, retention and reactivation	Value alumni receive and strength of the relationship
Contribution	Gifts, volunteer hours, mentoring, expertise, introductions, opportunities offered and advisory service	Value alumni contribute
Outcomes	Student mobility, alumni-supported recruitment, decisions informed by alumni, advocacy and philanthropic growth	What changes for people and the institution
Impact	Sustained change in alumni belonging, student mobility, institutional capacity and broad-based philanthropic support	Long-term strategic significance
Evidence and Sustainability	Data completeness and confidence, cost per engagement or outcome, program yield and alumni per staff member	Whether results can be trusted and the strategy sustained

Track only measures tied to an explicit objective. Each needs a precise definition, numerator and denominator, baseline, 12-month target, owner, data source, confidence rating and reporting cadence. Keep definitions consistent. Label evidence honestly as activity, engagement, reported value, contribution, observed outcome or demonstrated causal effect.

Dr. Karen Meshad Baldwin names the risk as “the numbers game and assuming that volume equals value.” Used well, the framework prevents that mistake. For mentoring, leaders might report participation, value to mentors and students, completed matches, hours, repeat service, student outcomes and cost per completed match. Those measures show activity, contribution and observed outcomes. They do not establish causation without a credible comparison or another sound research design.

The bottom line

Engagement is the beginning. Impact is the standard. Alumni are not merely an audience to be reached or a donor pool to be cultivated. They are partners whose knowledge, networks, credibility, time and philanthropy can expand student opportunity and strengthen institutional insight, leadership, reach and resilience.

The institutions that succeed will earn alumni attention by offering value, create consequential ways to contribute and show what changed. Events, communications, traditions, boards and affinity communities are means, not ends. Their value lies in stronger relationships, meaningful contribution and measurable outcomes. Alumni impact is what alumni and the institution make possible together.

Sources

1. Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), CASE Insights on Alumni Engagement: 2025 Key Findings, July 2026.
2. Heevner, H. and Kleeberger, S., 2026 National Alumni Survey Annual Report, 2026.
3. CASE, CASE Insights on Voluntary Support of Education, United States: 2025 Key Findings, April 2026.
4. Heevner, H. and Kleeberger, S., Volunteering Signals Engagement and Giving Potential: A Supplemental Report to the 2026 National Alumni Survey Annual Report, July 2026.
5. Mael, F. and Ashforth, B. E., “Alumni and their alma mater: A partial test of the reformulated model of organizational identification,” Journal of Organizational Behavior 13(2), 1992: 103–123.
6. Baumann, J. K. and Halpern, N., “Drivers of Perceived Value for an Alumni Association, and the Effect of Perceived Value and Satisfaction on Alumni Loyalty,” European Journal of Education 59, 2024: e12760.
7. Access Development, VAESE Alumni Relations Benchmarking Study, 2024.
8. Robert, J., The Impact of AI on Work in Higher Education, EDUCAUSE, January 2026.
9. Independent Sector and Do Good Institute, Value of Volunteer Time, April 2026.

Contributors



Joan Bahner

Senior Advisor, Lighthouse Counsel, Former Vice President for Institutional Advancement, Fisk University



Dr. Karen Meshad Baldwin

Senior Advisor, Lighthouse Counsel, Former Vice President for Advancement, The University of Alabama



Mitch Blonde

CFRE, Vice President for Institutional Advancement and Public Affairs and Chief Advancement Officer, Tiffin University



Anita Branch-Brown

Vice President for Institutional Advancement, Hollins University



Dr. Jay Le Roux Dillon

Chief Alumni Officer, University of California, Berkeley



Dr. Reshunda L. Mahone

Associate Vice Chancellor for Alumni Engagement and Annual Giving, North Carolina State University



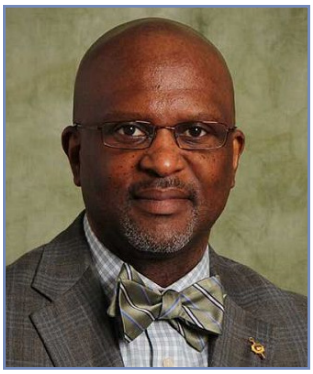
Dr. Perry Moulds

President, Bethel University



Sedrik Newbern

President, NASBA Center for the Public Trust and chief ethics officer, NASBA, immediate past president, Western Kentucky University Alumni Association Board of Directors



Matthew Winston Jr.

Executive Director for Alumni Engagement, Binghamton University



Dale Wright

Vice Chancellor for Advancement and Senior Vice President of the University of Illinois Foundation, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

LIGHTHOUSE
COUNSEL

Expanding the legacy of Jerold Panas, Linzy & Partners

About Lighthouse Counsel

Universities and colleges turn to Lighthouse Counsel when philanthropic ambition requires institutional alignment, sound strategy and disciplined execution.

In 2025, Lighthouse Counsel merged with Jerold Panas, Linzy and Partners, one of the nation's most respected and successful fundraising consulting firms, founded in 1968. Together, the firms have served more than 4,500 mission-driven organizations and helped them raise more than $12 billion. Lighthouse Counsel is a CASE sponsor and a member of The Giving Institute. Our team includes former higher education presidents, chancellors, vice presidents and deans.

Chart your course. Reach your destination.