

Lessons from the Field: Creating an Impactful Model for Scholarship Alumni Engagement

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At Boettcher, we believe in the promise of Colorado and the potential of Coloradans. Our scholarship program is dedicated to ensuring that Colorado's top students attend the state's colleges and universities, so they can use their immense talents to improve our communities right here at home.

Our staff knew our community of more than 2,500 alumni was our most underutilized resource for positively impacting Colorado. In 2011, we committed to harnessing this resource to amplify the foundation's impact. Seven years later, we are seeing the results and are eager to share our learnings with our fellow scholarship providers.

We realize the issue of alumni engagement is one that many scholarship providers are addressing. We also know the process can be daunting due to the time and resources necessary for success. But having experienced the rewards, we can enthusiastically assure you that the investment can pay off exponentially. For example, in 2018, two alumni board initiatives – our Class Champions and Alumni Ambassadors – updated contact information for 905 alumni in our database and presented to more than 7,000 students about college admissions and scholarships. These contacts far exceeded what our own small staff of three could have accomplished. Our alumni board also hosted a wildly successful three-day summit that connected more than 200 alumni and their families through academic talks and networking. They also create and staff events that provide ongoing opportunities for our alumni to engage with the foundation, one another and opportunities for leadership and service.

This article shares three key lessons we've learned.

Lesson #1 – Invest in the groundwork

We were eager to launch our alumni programming, and it was tempting to jump in as quickly as possible. But one of the best things we did was commit ourselves to carefully and thoughtfully laying the groundwork for long-term success.

In 2012, the Boettcher Foundation began working with a consulting firm led by scholarship alumna Kara Penn. Her firm, [Mission Spark](#), conducted extensive research to determine best practices for alumni engagement. This research determined that an effective alumni board structure would be interdependent and include engagement from both the foundation and alumni. Based on this data, the foundation opted to dedicate more resources toward formalizing what was then a grassroots alumni group. We also hosted our first major alumni gathering in 2013. That event served as a kickoff for our formal alumni efforts.

In 2014, a core and strategically identified group of alumni and staff started developing our alumni board structure by creating the board's vision and mission, guidelines and structure, recruiting members and defining a structure to ensure buy-in from the foundation's staff and trustees as well as sustainability. The Boettcher Scholar Alumni Board officially launched with 16 members in 2015.

Since launch, our relationship with the alumni board has moved from a joint planning model with shared responsibilities toward one driven by alumni leadership with professional staff support. While we hope our timeline of research, structure and implementation will help others expedite their process, we want to emphasize that establishing a truly interdependent model can take years and phases of implementation. It's imperative to invest time on the front end to ensure you are properly laying the groundwork for sustained success.



Lesson #2 – Share leadership and create multiple engagement and leadership pathways

Our alumni board model was designed to support three key factors for our success: integration with foundation staff, shared leadership and a pipeline of future members and leaders.

Our board's organizational structure is as follows: It is anchored by an oversight committee consisting of foundation staff, trustees and an alumni chair team, with each chair position having a three-year term, one year as incoming chair, one as chair and one as past-chair. This ensures that the work of the alumni board is aligned with the foundation's strategy and that we continue to have investment from our trustees and foundation leadership. It also creates a leadership pipeline for the board's chair positions.

The alumni executive committee leads meetings with all board members and sets operational goals, while the implementation teams are where work is delegated and completed. We have leadership opportunities at the executive level and within the implementation committees. This allows us to develop our pipeline of leadership while avoiding burnout of our alumni board.

The final components of our alumni board structure are our implementation committee and ad hoc committees. Our implementation committees are responsible for executing the primary and necessary functions of the alumni board. Our ad hoc event committees are responsible for discrete events or initiatives such as the three-day summit mentioned previously. On each of our implementation committees and ad hoc event committees,

we have participants who are not members of the alumni board. In addition to their implementation and tactical functions, these two components of the alumni board are a key factor in our recruitment and continued engagement with both new and existing alumni. They give alumni a way to engage immediately and in ways that work for them. This allows us to engage more alumni and builds a pipeline for future alumni board participation.



Lesson #3 – Engage staff at every level, especially early on

We are consistently struck by how much this group of volunteers has allowed us to expand our reach and increase our capacity to impact Colorado. For example, the Alumni Ambassador visits completed by our volunteers saved 26 days of staff time and travel. But we must emphasize that this impact would not have been possible without a significant investment of both foundation staff time and resources in the early years.

Structurally, foundation staff should have representation and provide assistance at every level. For example, each committee of the board is staffed by a foundation team member who represents their functional area. This ensures to ensure communication and alignment.

We want to be clear: Building a solid alumni leadership board takes programming dollars and years of committed staff time. The planning, recruitment and launch phases are a far greater lift by the staff than alumni, and it is imperative to communicate to staff and trustees that results will not happen overnight. It wasn't until a few years into our alumni engagement initiative that our staffing load decreased and we started to see the alumni board as an extension to the Boettcher Foundation Staff.

Here to Help

The lessons we have learned and impacts we have experienced go far beyond what we have detailed here, and we are more than happy to share our experience with any organization exploring a similar effort. If you have questions or would like additional details, please contact Tiffany Anderson at Tiffany@Boettcherfoundation.org.