

Leadership Learning Community

Learning About Alumni Development

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A meeting was initiated in New York to bring together representatives involved in Alumni efforts from 5 programs to enrich learning about how to do this work and identify effective practices. The meeting was attended by a mix of alumni, alumni consultants and program staff from Coro, Annie E. Casey, Next Generation Leadership Program, Open Society and the National Kellogg Fellows Program. Each program provided a basic description of their approach, successes and challenges.

Major Themes in Alumni Development:

Role/Initiative of Alumni: Coro, Casey and Kellogg all pointed to the strong role and importance of the fellows' initiative in their alumni efforts. Many of these efforts were based on the self-organizing of fellows with programs playing more of an encouraging than initiating role. Both Casey and Kellogg fellows created a fellow's based governing structure and hired fellows to assist with the effort. Other programs describe responding to fellows' interests and needs.

What do alumni want/hope to achieve through organization: Fellows across programs have described the following objectives for efforts including: a desire to connect for purposes of personal support, for rejuvenation, for continuing education/leadership development, to access broader networks, to increase opportunities for effective collaboration within specific fields or communities, to give back to the program in volunteer or consulting capacities, to build and share their skills, to broaden their perspective through deep and authentic exchange characteristic of fellowships and access to new resources.

Challenges of Alumni Organization: Time is a big obstacle in organizing alumni. Even though there is a clear mandate from many fellows and interest in alumni organization, as leaders, alumni are already stretched beyond capacity with demands on their time. Distance and expense becomes an issue for national programs because alumni do not have easy access to each other. Some of these programs use web based communications, national gatherings, and continuing leadership development opportunities available to current/former fellows.

Since regional efforts afford some advantage, some national programs are making an effort to connect their alumni regionally. Some programs also provide subsidization to ensure more equity in access to alumni events when travel is involved. There are challenges associated with regional alumni efforts which bring alumni together across many disciplines. It is sometimes difficult for alumni to find value in time connecting when it is less clear what opportunities exist for work across many different fields. This requires skilled facilitation, creativity and often a leap of faith. In many cases these

groups gel through programs of mutual educational value before discovering collaborative opportunities.

Many programs provide financial support to alumni initiatives. Most provide staffing support, either through their program staff, use of consultants, or hiring alumni themselves to provide leadership. Very few efforts seem to succeed based solely on the initiative of alumni who are extremely busy.

Many programs make mini grants available to fund collaborative projects among the alumni. One foundation has a \$240,000 set aside fund and Technical Assistant grants, another has awards of \$75,000 available for program support at the mezzanine level, another has matching grants available for regionally based collaborative projects among fellows or for one fellow who has involved other leaders from their community. Some programs also continue to underwrite skill building workshops and leadership development seminars for alumni.

Types of Alumni Activities:

One alumni effort emphasizes the organization of alumni for collaborative work around common place, profession and interest. This effort is supported with paid staff, project grants and leadership development grants. Another alumni effort is organized around a series of workshops selected by alumni (and in some cases offered by alumni). Alumni across three different programs in the Mid-south formed a leadership institute to provide technical assistance to non-profit organizations. Alumni in many programs serve as volunteers to their programs helping with things like recruitment, selection, training and mentoring current program participants. Alumni of several programs created directories (online and/or hard copy) to increase their access to each other as resources.

Communications and Use of Technology:

All of the programs involved in the discussion used technology to connect participants active in their programs. Some programs were able to use technology effectively to maintain the connection of fellows to the program, integrate them with current fellows and maintain deep dialogue through listservs. One program had limited success with an online database intended to promote networking among a larger national pool of fellows. (Technology seems more successful as a tool for supporting connections already made than building new connections.) There was agreement that communications is extremely important for the success of alumni initiatives and that technology is important.