



## *Engaged Alumni: Networking for Entrepreneurial Attitudes*

### SUMMARY

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Higher education institutions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century face many previously unknown challenges. These include: marketization, massification and accountability. They have become the buzzwords of today's academia. Teaching the entrepreneurial skills, required by the job market, cannot be reduced to traditional in-class lectures and seminars. The necessary interpersonal relations can be facilitated by cooperation with alumni associations, as exemplified the United States. Thus the network of engaged alumni becomes a great asset of every college and university.

→ **KEYWORDS** – ALUMNI, NETWORK, HIGHER EDUCATION, ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS

### STRESZCZENIE

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*Zaangażowani absolwenci: Networking na rzecz postaw przedsiębiorczych*

Uczelnie XXI wieku muszą się zmierzyć z wieloma wcześniej nieznanymi wyzwaniami, takimi jak: urynkowanie, umasowienie czy rozliczalność. Nauczanie przedsiębiorczości, niezbędnej na współczesnym rynku pracy, nie może się ograniczyć jedynie do tradycyjnych wykładów i ćwiczeń. Niezbędne są relacje interpersonalne, dla których doskonałym forum są stowarzyszenia absolwentów, o czym świadczy przykład Stanów Zjednoczonych. I dlatego sieć zaangażowanych absolwentów staje się w dzisiejszych czasach ogromnym atutem uczelni.

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## Functions of Higher Education

In 1977 Howard R. Bowen, the US economist researching higher education, assumed in his book that there are three main functions of higher education institutions (HEIs): education, research, and public service. After almost forty years and many changes and challenges higher education has faced, this assumption is still valid and describes the objectives of any responsive and responsible HEI. Bowen, and many other researchers, claims that the goals of higher education can be achieved only through the combination of mandatory lectures, seminars, and labs and activities organized independently by students. For Bowen education “includes both the curricular and extracurricular influences on students.” Public service also combines a variety of activities; they

include health care, consulting, off-campus lectures and courses, work performed by interns, artistic performances and exhibits, spectator sports, and so on.<sup>1</sup>

According to Bowen, HEIs should focus their activities not only on current students. There is no doubt that public service should also aim at people outside academia, e.g. spectators watching sport events, patients being treated at hospitals, etc. It is also evident that former students represent a special and unique group: the prestige of the school is rather based on the actual achievements of alumni not students.<sup>2</sup> Mitchell L. Stevens, after researching admission policies of a prestigious US college, claims that the alumni “contribute crucially to the stature of their alma mater.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> H.R. Bowen, *Investment in Learning. The Individual and Social Value of American Higher Education*, San Francisco 1977, pp. 7-8. Cf.: C. Kerr, *At Large: Howard R. Bowen (1908-1989): Fiat Lux et Justitio Omnibus*, “Change” vol. 22, no. 2 (March-April 1990), pp. 78-79; W.J. Jacob et al, *Higher Education Reform in Indonesia: University Governance and Autonomy*, in: *University Governance and Reform. Policy, Fads, and Experience in International Perspective*, eds. H.G. Schuetze, W. Bruneau, G. Grosjean, New York 2012, p. 234.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. H.R. Bowen, *Investment in Learning*, op. cit., p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> M.L. Stevens, *Creating a Class. College Admissions and the Education of Elites*, Cambridge 2007, p. 31.

There is a common quest for new type of higher education graduates: active actors in the labor market, able not only to seek for job but also prepared to create new jobs on his/her own. One of the key abilities of 21<sup>st</sup> century graduates is entrepreneurial skills that “involve the ability to explore and develop risk awareness, creativity and innovation in business and employment related activities.”<sup>4</sup> Entrepreneurial skills also mean the ability to turn ideas into actions and run a business. The skills are characterized by: “creativity, analysing, motivating, networking and adaptability.”<sup>5</sup>

## US Higher Education and Alumni

There are two main reasons to use the example of US colleges and universities as the basis for investigating the role of alumni in supporting educational practices. The US higher education system was the first to experience many challenges of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century education, such as: commodification, marketization, student-consumer approach or New Public Management. Moreover, thanks to the experience of US HEIs, international organizations (e.g. OECD, World Bank, UNESCO) very often use the example of the United States in suggesting higher education reforms across the world.<sup>6</sup>

The second, equally important reason is that the US higher education system has the longest tradition of fruitful collaboration with alumni. The very first alumni association in the United States was founded in 1821 by the graduates of Williams College. Very soon the alumni of Brown, Yale, Cornell and Dartmouth

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<sup>4</sup> N. Othman, N.H. Othman, R. Ismail, *Impact of Globalization on Entrepreneurship Education and Entrepreneurial Skills in Higher Education Institutions*, “International Proceedings of Economics Development and Research” vol. 36, p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> *Effects and Impact of Entrepreneurship Programmes in Higher Education*, Brussels 2012, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. P. Santiago, K. Tremblay, E. Basri, E. Arnal, *Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society. Volume 1. Special Features. Governance, Funding, Quality*, Paris 2008; *Higher Education in Latin America: The International Dimension*, eds. H. de Wit, I. Jaramillo, J. Gasel-Ávila, J. Knight, Washington 2005; S. Yusuf, K. Nabeshima, *How Universities Promote Economic Growth*, Washington 2007; J. Salmi, *The Challenge of Establishing World-Class Universities*, Washington 2009.

established similar organizations. However, the first alumni to offer a generous gift to their alma mater were from Harvard. In 1906, the graduates of 1881 collected 113,777 dollars and gave the money to the school. The sum was not impressive but it started a new trend in HEI-alumni relations.<sup>7</sup>

Eventually, alumni became a group of extreme importance for the prosperity of US colleges and universities. In 2007 all US HEIs received 29 billion dollars of private support (excluding tuitions and fees; treated as a regular income) and 8.1 billion dollars, or 28 percent, came from alumni. It is worth noticing that alumni support has remained on the same level since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, although some other sources have shrunk (e.g. support from foundations).<sup>8</sup>

US colleges and universities noticed the potential of alumni giving and since the Reagan-Bush administration HEIs have been more active in managing alumni relations. Even the schools that formerly had almost no visible alumni activity successfully tried to strengthen the ties with former students. Such a change is especially visible among so called Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs; the school founded under the Second Land Grant Act of 1890; providing higher education to the African-Americans). The HBCUs' graduates were not as wealthy as the alumni of Harvard, Yale, Cornell and other prestigious universities; therefore for many years no one expected that they could provide any substantial support. But with the advance of new technologies (social media, texting, new means of communication) the HBCUs noticed that a network of engaged alumni should not be treated only as a source of extra income – only the alumni

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. L.G. Bent, *Young Alumni Giving: An Exploration of Institutional Strategies*, Ph.D. dissertation of Johnson & Wales University 2012, p. 24; S.A. Bourgeois, *The Relationship between Alumni Presence on the Governing Board and Institutional Support*, Ph.D. dissertation of Claremont Graduate University 2013, p. 11; N.D. Drezner, *Philanthropy and Fundraising in American Higher Education*, "ASHE Higher Education Reports" 2011, vol. 37, no. 2, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. D.J. Weerts, A.F. Cabrera, T. Sanford, *Beyond Giving: Public Advocacy and Volunteer Behaviors of Public University Alumni*, "Research in Higher Education" 2010, vol. 51, p. 346; *Alumni Giving in the New Millennium. A Guide to Securing Support*, Washington 2002, p. 1; M. Gasman, *Fundraising at Historically Black Colleges and Universities: An All Campus Approach*, New York 2012, pp. 57-58. It is worth to notice that in 2011 expenditures of all Polish HEIs (public and private) totaled 19,900,714,500 zlotys; that is ca. 6.420 billion dollars – see: *Szkoły wyższe i ich finanse w 2011 r.*, Główny Urząd Statystyczny, Warszawa 2012.



can convince new generations of applicants that the education offered at the HCBUs is not of a lower quality; it is tailored to the needs of this special group of American society, instead.<sup>9</sup>

## Networks of Engaged Alumni

As Mitchell Stevens observed in his book, the importance of alumni is defined not only by their financial support to the school from which they graduated. The professional success of former students is the best means to promote and advertise HEI. In the time of Facebook, actual face to face meetings remain one of the most powerful tools in reaching the best applicants. Therefore colleges and universities provide the necessary promotional materials (catalogues, leaflets, etc.) and alumni can visit high schools in their region to disseminate information about their alma mater.<sup>10</sup> The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor – one of the best public universities in the United States – launched a special program for alumni: *Adopt a High School*. The mission of an alumnus/alumna who joins the program is to visit a selected school from time to time, organize meetings with prospective students, attend commencement, and “make congratulatory calls to admitted students.”<sup>11</sup>

The early post-World War II higher education policy of the United States was marked by a *structural-rational* model that helped to make HEIs more accessible to new cohorts of student (mostly thanks to the G.I Bill: the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944). With a growing understanding of the importance of higher education and greater competition among applicants,

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. *PVAMU Mission*, Prairie View A&M University, <<http://www.pvamu.edu/discover-pvamu/mission>> (accessed at: 26.05.2014); T.T. Johnson, *My Alma Mater Rings True...*, “The View. Office of Alumni Relations E-Newsletter”, <<http://www.pvamu.edu/pages/8279.asp>> (accessed at: 27.07.2013); R.T. Cohen, *Black College Alumni Giving: A Study of the Perceptions, Attitudes, and Giving Behaviors at Selected Historically Black Colleges and Universities*, Ph.D. dissertation of Vanderbilt University 2006, pp. 13-31; M. Gasman, *Fundraising at Historically Black Colleges and Universities: An All Campus Approach*, op. cit., pp. 57-60.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. D.J. Weerts, J.M. Ronca, *Profiles of Supportive Alumni: Donors, Volunteers, and Those Who “Do It All”*, “International Journal of Educational Advancement” 2007, vol. 7, no. 1, p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> *Adopt a High School*, UMich Alumni Association, <<http://alumni.umich.edu/give/adopt-high-school>> (accessed at: 26.05.2014).

there emerged a new *economic-marketing* model that produced mass higher education.<sup>12</sup>

Since the 1980s, students, alumni, and universities have noticed that the crucial moment for higher education graduates is that of entering the job market. The quality of education provided by HEIs can be measured by applying various criteria, but the majority of measurements are based rather on input (the resourced school provides) than output (the actual results of teaching-learning process). Theoretically, a well-equipped university, with top-class laboratories, hiring most prominent scholars might fail in educating its students. The unquestionable positive outcome of higher education is the successful career of its graduates. Therefore the vast majority of US colleges and universities provide extra services such as: career centers, career development or internship placement. The assistance provided by HEIs prepares the students to face the challenges of their future professional career.<sup>13</sup>

US HEIs noticed that collaboration with the alumni who had already succeeded in their professional life could be of the most importance for those only aspiring to start work. Mentoring, as an effective way of sharing and transferring knowledge and experience, was one of the practices started by alumni organizations. The reunions became occasions for arranging meetings with successful professionals and current students were invited to join workshops and seminars aiming at providing first-hand accounts of starting new business or applying for a job.<sup>14</sup>

The reunions, however, turned out to be too rare to meet the needs of all students interested in participating in mentoring. Therefore the US HEIs started to ask alumni to participate in “a variety of activities, such as pairing incoming classes with alumni classes, facilitating mentoring relationship and integrating alumni via key first-year student ceremonies and touch-point

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. E.P. St. John, N. Daun-Barnett, K.M. Moronski-Chapman, *Public Policy and Higher Education: Reframing Strategies for Preparation, Access, and College Success*, New York 2013, pp. 79-83.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. R. Rybkowski, *Uniwersytety jako element amerykańskiego modelu gospodarczego*, in: *Amerykański model rozwoju gospodarczego*, eds. W. Bieńkowski, M.J. Radło, Warszawa 2006, pp. 62-68.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. J.K. Specter, *Enhancing Alumni Engagement: Tradition-Building at the University of Delaware*, Ph.D. dissertation of the University of Delaware 2012, p. 37.

events.”<sup>15</sup> The results of alumni-student cooperation resulted in a new perception of the importance of facilitating and strengthening the relationship from the earliest stages of the college experience. Therefore now even first-year students are asked to volunteer to help alumni association in their activities. One of the most common tasks of freshmen is to carry out the annual drive: a young generation of students makes telephone calls to older colleagues, tracking down address changes and keeping them in touch with their alma mater. Such volunteering not only educates a new generation of students how important is to take an active part in the alumni network; it also helps to establish new personal alumni-student relations.<sup>16</sup>

## Alumni and Entrepreneurial Attitudes

The economic paradigm of the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires the constant improvement of skills and the ability to acquire new knowledge. The concept known in Europe as *lifelong learning* (LLL) is also present in the United States. The example of New York University shows that offers of professional training are not limited to current students.<sup>17</sup> The NYU alumni are allowed to use the resources of Wasserman Center for Career Development (which resembles Career Services Centers of Polish HEIs). The Center offers practical training, preparing alumni to gain as much as possible from present job opportunities. The graduates are

eligible for free career counseling mini-appointments with Wasserman’s seasoned experts. In these 15-minute discussions, alumni can address whatever topics best suit their needs, from the most effective way to conduct an online job search to how to transition to a new industry or graduate school program.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, pp. 65-66.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. N.D. Drezner, *Cultivating a Culture of Giving: An Exploration of Institutional Strategies to Enhance African American Young Alumni Giving*, Ph.D. dissertation of the University of Pennsylvania 2008, pp. 32-34.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Alumni Benefits Overview*, New York University, <<http://alumni.nyu.edu/s/1068/2col.aspx?sid=1068&gid=1&pgid=1893>> (accessed at: 24.04.2013).

<sup>18</sup> *Career Resources for Alumni*, New York University, Alumni/Resources, <<http://alumni.nyu.edu/s/1068/index.aspx?sid=1068&gid=1&pgid=386>> (accessed at: 28.05.2014).

At the extra cost of 75 dollars the alumni can access the NYU CareerNet for three months (The CareerNet is a comprehensive database enabling specific job search).

Alumni are not only the customers who use HEI resources to find new job. They become a valuable resource, too. The majority of US alumni associations ask for greater activity of the members enjoying well-established professional careers to help their younger colleagues (both alumni and students) to launch their own careers. This is especially important because graduates of prestigious schools are often presidents of boards or CEOs and they have immense knowledge of available jobs. Sharing this information with students just about to complete higher education is an invaluable resource.<sup>19</sup>

The emergence of new technologies has also had an impact on the job market. Previous job stability was replaced by job mobility and active self-placement. This requires new skills, especially these connected with entrepreneurship. The new generation of graduates must be not only well educated but also active. And once again the achievements of former students turn out to be a great possible asset of US HEIs. Workshops with successful entrepreneurs, organized in less formal environment, targeted as smaller groups of students of a particular institution, are an effective way of teaching entrepreneurial skills. Students and other alumni can learn about the obstacles on the road to success and how to take care of one's own professional career. These are not just typical one-time; the participants could remain in touch through the alumni network and can use the expertise of successful entrepreneurs even long after the workshop was over.<sup>20</sup>

The informal meetings with older colleagues offered the chance to learn practical skills, applicable in business environment. The US HEIs learned that out-of-class activities develop the skills needed to teach socially responsible citizenship. Entrepreneurship employed in civic activity secures the stability of democratic society and its political institutions. In the United States, with the tradition of limited government interventions in

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. K. Leja, *Zarządzanie uczelnią. Koncepcje i współczesne wyzwania*, Warszawa 2013, p. 244.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. D.J. Weerts et al., *Beyond Giving*, op. cit., pp. 350-352; D.J. Weerts, J.M. Ronca, *Profiles of Supportive Alumni: Donors*, op. cit., p. 22.

the field of public policy, preparing socially engaged graduates is of the greatest importance.<sup>21</sup>

The activities of alumni associations, strengthening the ties among former students and establishing networks of people, are also important for individual development. Thanks to participation in the abovementioned workshops, students and alumni can describe themselves as belonging to a larger group. This is a necessary part of the process of self-determination that defines who a person is. The feeling of belonging to a group that represents shared values and that can help in everyday life creates a stronger commitment to their alma mater.<sup>22</sup> However, it is not only for the benefit of particular students and alumni that they feel proud of their school. The HEI profits as well, because the student who was given (by the school) becomes as *alumnus/alumna* who will give back (to the school).<sup>23</sup>

Although networking among students and alumni is mainly the result of personal relations, the 21<sup>st</sup> century university or college has a great number of options for facilitating and assisting this process. Especially that, according to US research, the new alumni are more open to new forms of communication. Alumni under 35 positively respond to Facebook, twitter, or sms. Short information does not bore the alumni and they are more eager to join “small projects” with clear goals and understandable reasons for recent students.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. S.A. Bourgeois, *The Relationship between Alumni Presence on the Governing Board and Institutional Support*, op. cit., p. 84.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. C.J. Galligan, *Alumni of Varying Eras: an Examination of the Differences in Factors that Influence Feelings of Connectivity and Reasons for Giving*, Ph.D. dissertation of the University of Hartford 2012, pp. 190-193.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. L. Bent, *Young Alumni Giving: An Exploration of Institutional Strategies*, op. cit., pp. 28-30.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. E. Kowalik, *Engaging Alumni and Prospective Students through Social Media*, in: *Cutting-edge Technologies in Higher Education, Volume 2: Higher Education Administration with Social Media: Including Applications in Student Affairs, Enrollment Management, Alumni Relations, and Career Centers*, ed. L. Wankel, Bradford 2011, p. 225.

## Conclusions

Teaching entrepreneurial skills is a complex process, as K. Wach rightly points out,<sup>25</sup> and this is why it should be taught with the use of curricular and extracurricular activities. The combination of these two paths can result in a generation of more entrepreneurial and active graduates. The network of engaged alumni, eager to share their knowledge and entrepreneurial skills with new cohorts of students, is a vital asset of any HEI. The institution has to invest in building and managing alumni relations. The example of the United States proves that it is more a question of organization than money.<sup>26</sup> As Krzysztof Leja observes in his recent publication on higher education management, US “institutions of higher education were in touch with alumni for the benefits of both HEIs and alumni themselves; and student felt responsible for building prestige of the institution.”<sup>27</sup>

21<sup>st</sup> century Polish universities are complex organizations: educating many students, offering many different programs of studies, interacting with many external and internal stakeholders. There is no possibility of micromanaging every activity of such complicated organizations. Neither rector, nor dean has the power to oversee and control everything. The university is no longer responsible for arranging and organizing everything. The collaboration of students with graduates (mature on the job market) should not be overregulated; it has to be similar to a natural friendship. The responsive HEI can only facilitate their interactions but should not take responsibility for all aspects of alumni-students relations: without some eagerness from both sides, there will be no fruitful collaboration at all. In the times when the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education looks for

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. K. Wach, *Kształtowanie postaw przedsiębiorczych w programach nauczania: Stan obecny i proponowane kierunki zmian*, in: *Kształtowanie postaw przedsiębiorczych a edukacja ekonomiczna*, eds. P. Wachowiak, M. Dąbrowski, B. Majewski, Warszawa 2007, pp. 120-127.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *The University of Michigan 2012-2013 Budget Detail*, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor 2012; *Fiscal Year 2012 Board Approved Operating Budget by System Member*, Texas A&M University System, Austin 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. K. Leja, *Zarządzanie uczelniami. Koncepcje i współczesne wyzwania*, op. cit., p. 244.

quick results, some patience on the part of universities is highly recommended.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Strategia rozwoju szkolnictwa wyższego w Polsce do 2020 roku*, Warszawa 2010.

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