

ALUMNI ROLE IDENTITY AMONG RECENT COLLEGE GRADUATES

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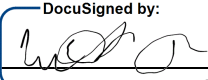
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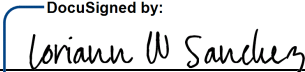
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## DEDICATION

My family knows that I have rarely shied away from hard things. The completion of my doctoral studies has been, in some ways, the result of a daily pursuit of excellence and challenging myself to do the next hard thing. On the StrengthsFinder assessment survey, I consistently have Achiever, Learner, and Input among my top three. Therefore, it should be no surprise to anyone who knows me that I would entertain the idea of pursuing a Ph.D., much less complete one while working full-time and raising four teenagers. In truth, this document serves as a lasting reminder to my brilliant daughters that achievement can never be for others, but rather it must be for oneself. In their own ways, each of my children made sacrifices to accommodate my studies and I am deeply humbled by their endless support and affirmation. My husband, Saxon, was patient and steadfast as he managed demands of the household and parenthood in expanded ways. My colleagues and friends tolerated my divided self as my research was never far from my mind, and they patiently listened as I bemoaned setbacks and celebrated small victories. Summit fever is very real and many people cheered me on during the last stretch of this arduous climb, particularly my dear friend Dr. Victoria Normington Pound, who beat me to the doctoral finish line, and Keith Potter, my boss, mentor, and friend. I am thankful and grateful for everyone who came alongside me on my journey with a word of encouragement, an offer of support, a hot meal, a cup of coffee, a necessary mental break, an idea or resource, or who were simply willing to share in my frustrations or celebrations. It takes a village, and my village is among the best.

## ABSTRACT

Donative revenue to American higher education institutions is essential for their ongoing financial solvency in the existing funding model within the industry. Gifts from alumni comprise a critical portion of this revenue, yet alumni giving participation rates and giving amounts have been in precipitous decline despite ever increasing numbers of college graduates. There is a timely and relevant need to understand the factors impacting the future of alumni giving, especially if existing higher education funding challenges continue on their current course. Alumni who express strong organizational identification with their alma mater and high alumni role identity are more likely to engage in alumni support behaviors, including alumni giving. However, little research exists on whether new graduates have organizational and alumni role identity, whether they understand the support behaviors which have been traditionally associated with the role of alumnus, and whether they intend to engage in those behaviors themselves. The purpose of this research was to understand how new graduates perceive their relationship with their university at the point at which they make the transition from student to alumnus, how these perceptions inform their understanding of their new role as an alumnus, and how this understanding informs their intentions to engage in future alumni support behaviors. College graduates ( $n = 567$ ) from a variety of private, faith-based universities in the West who completed their degrees during the 2020-2021 academic year participated in a mixed-methods online survey measuring organizational identity, alumni role identity, understanding of the alumni role, and the impact of these measures on self-reports of future alumni support behaviors. New graduates expressed above average to above-average organizational identity and average alumni role identity, yet expressed below average understanding of the behaviors

associated with the alumni and distant to very-distant intent to engage in alumni support behaviors.



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## Chapter I

### Introduction

Soon after the cap and gown have been hung in the back of the closet, a new graduate's first initiation into the alumni ranks occurs—the receipt of the first request to make a donation to their college or university. It is a ubiquitous experience for new alumni, and one that typically engenders a mix of both positive and negative emotions for the recent graduate. The moment of celebration has barely passed, and yet this first post-graduation interaction with the university symbolizes the radical transition from student to alumnus. The relationship between the university and its former student has changed forever.

The term *alma mater*, Latin for “nourishing mother,” is commonly used to refer to the university one attended or graduated from (Columbia University Libraries, n. d.). Its first use was in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century as part of the motto of the University of Bologna, the oldest western university on record, and symbolizes the parent-child image of a university preparing a student for life (Columbia University Libraries, n. d.). To this day, alumni frequently refer to their former university with this term of endearment, signifying a life-long, familial relationship with the school they once called home. Colleges and universities have a vested interest in maintaining this long-term relationship for more than sentimental reasons, however. Formal tuition payments may end after graduation, but colleges rely on money from alumni they hope will continue to flow in the form of alumni donations (McDearmon & Shirley, 2009).

Higher education as an industry has consistently relied on multiple funding streams to maintain its financial solvency, but donative revenue continues to be critical to balancing budgets (Brown, et al., 2014; Jung & Lee, 2019). Non-donative revenue to higher education comes in the form of tuition and fees, payments for auxiliary services such as housing and parking, income

from athletics and performing arts, grant and research money from outside entities, interest on endowment funds, and state funding (in the case of public institutions) (Cornell University, n. d.). However, the business model of higher education also relies heavily on outside money in the form of donations, much of which typically comes from alumni giving (Mann, 2007; McDearmon & Shirley, 2009; Wunnava & Okunade, 2013). To understand the scope of the support, in 2019-2020, outside money to all colleges and universities totaled over \$49.6 billion dollars, 22.6% of which (\$11.2 billion) came from alumni (Council for Advancement and Support of Education, 2020). The combination of increased operating expenses and declining state funding means that voluntary support of education has now become an essential part of university operating budgets (Faria et al., 2019; Liu, 2006; Mann, 2007; Marr et al., 2004; Shaker & Nathan, 2017; Wunnava & Okunade, 2013). In a competitive market, colleges and universities are competing for rank in academic prestige, finding ways to lower tuition rates, and seeking to provide a more desirable academic and student experience, all of which have increased the demand for outside financial resources (Lara & Johnson, 2012). In short, donor gifts to universities, once primarily designated for expansion, capital projects, or new programs, are now also used to keep the proverbial lights on.

With over four thousand colleges and universities to choose from in the United States (Moody, 2019), students have become consumers as they make their choice about which college or university to attend. The annual, albeit controversial, *U. S. News & World Report* “Best Colleges Rankings” has become the gold standard by which the quality and value of schools are quantified and compared. The alumni giving participation rates (GPR) of colleges have become a proxy for quality and prestige (Faria et al., 2019) and are therefore a factor in the rankings, contributing to 3% of a school’s overall score in their ratings calculation (Morse & Brooks,

2020). In 2018, alumni giving to higher education comprised 26% of annual philanthropic gifts to colleges and universities (Hazelrigg, 2019); however, the percentage of alumni who give has been in regular decline (Council for Advancement and Support of Education, 2020; Lara & Johnson, 2012). And, while the overall alumni giving totals increased consistently between 1988 and 2018 (Council for Advancement and Support of Education, 2019), many of the annual giving increases were due to gift outliers comprised of extremely large gifts to the wealthiest institutions. For example, in 2017 alone, gifts to less than 1% of institutions comprised over 20% of total alumni giving amounts (Shaker & Nathan, 2017). Despite skyrocketing increases in overall number of people graduating from college, the overall number of givers has remained essentially flat since 1978 (Council for Advancement and Support of Education, 2019).

The majority of colleges and universities across the country are not reaping benefits of the outsized alumni gifts that have kept the overall alumni giving totals high; in fact, most are experiencing both significant year-over-year declines in alumni giving participation rates and in total giving amounts (Blackbaud, 2020). The average alumni giving participation rate has decreased from its peak of over 18% in 1990 to less than 8% in 2018 (Council for Advancement and Support of Education, 2019). The most recent annual giving report by giving analytics industry leader BlackBaud (2020) shows for the 2018-2019 academic year, alumni giving participation was down another 3.1% across all types of institutions and that, for the first time in recent history, overall giving amounts were down as well. In 2019, the Council for Advancement and Support of Education reported in the annual Voluntary Support of Education (VSE) report alumni giving was down another 7.9% from their last survey period (Council for Advancement and Support of Education, 2020). Whether this downward trend will continue is yet to be seen, particularly in light of the 2020 economic downturn and challenges facing the higher education

industry due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Regardless, university advancement teams are tasked with solving the problem of declining alumni giving and responsible for creating a sustainable future of philanthropy.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The ongoing need to develop sustainable and innovative fundraising efforts among alumni is essential to the financial health of colleges and universities (Jung & Lee, 2019; Weerts, 2007). With alumni giving participation in continuous decline, there is a timely and relevant need to understand the existing factors which will impact the future of alumni giving, especially if existing higher education funding challenges continue on the current course. Most research on alumni giving takes place long after graduation and is descriptive rather than predictive. In other words, a majority of the available alumni giving studies describe the characteristics of the alumni who have already made a gift and why they made it (McDearmon, 2011, 2013). Little research has been conducted on the giving attitudes and philanthropic motivations of alumni, and even less research has focused in on young alumni (Freeland et al., 2015; Jung & Lee, 2019). There is a pressing need to understand the attitudes new alumni have towards their alma mater and what they understand about their new role as an alumnus so university fundraisers can more effectively attempt to influence their future support behaviors (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; McDearmon, 2011, 2013).

Higher education is unique among other recipients of charitable aid in that its constituents establish their relationship with the organization first as a student (consumer) and then leave as an alumnus (potential donor) (Wastyn, 2009). The purpose of this research was to understand how new graduates perceive their relationship with the university at the point at which they make the transition from student to alumnus, how these perceptions inform their understanding of their

new role as an alumnus, and how this understanding informs their intentions to engage in future alumni support behaviors. The scope of current research, summarized in the literature review within Chapter 2, looks primarily at donor motivations for giving, donor characteristics, and institutional characteristics which are correlated with alumni giving. This study explored the attitudes of new graduates through the lens of alumni role identity, building upon existing social science research in the area of identity and how identity informs behavior.

The current literature on alumni giving has its history in the study of organizational identification (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987; Mael & Ashforth, 1992), social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 2004), and symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1968, 2002; Stryker & Vryan, 2003). The first meaningful exploration of how identity theories intersect with alumni giving behaviors was accomplished by Fred Mael and Blake Ashforth (1992) in a study of college alumni and how the strength of their organizational identity positively impacted alumni support behaviors. This sentinel work served as a significant cornerstone for subsequent research in the study of alumni giving. Research by Sheldon Stryker (1968, 2002) established that individual identity is expressed through the strength of an individual's perceived role identity and the subsequent behaviors that reinforce that role.

Building upon social identity theory and symbolic interactionism, McDearmon (2011, 2013) wanted to determine whether or not alumni identified with the alumni role, and whether or not this identification influenced their participation in behaviors that supported their university. McDearmon (2011, 2013) created a unique research tool to assess what he coined "alumni role identity" and its impact on institutional support behaviors. The Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire (McDearmon, 2011, 2013) provides a quantitative way to assess how the salience of alumni role identity is correlated with alumni role behaviors. In further application of the



Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire, Dillon (2017) sought to understand the antecedents of alumni role identity. In a third use of the survey instrument, the tool was utilized to look for generational differences in alumni role identity as it relates to institutional support behaviors (Tucker, 2018). In response to the research questions posed, this study was the first to administer the Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire to new alumni to assess their alumni role identity soon after graduation. In addition, by modifying the instrument for this population of new graduates, the tool was used to determine whether or not new graduates understand the alumni role behaviors their colleges expect of them. This new information can help university fundraisers understand the most recent additions to their alumni constituent base.

## **Background**

University fundraising has its roots in the early 1800's and began as an ad hoc effort by college presidents and their agents (trustees, clergy, etc.) in order to realize their visions for their emerging and growing operations (Shaker & Nathan, 2017). Early alumni associations soon followed, particularly in turbulent times when local, state, and federal governments could not fulfill financial commitments (Miller, 1993). The profession has expanded exponentially since its inception. The Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) is the national association of fundraising professionals who are dedicated to the multi-pronged effort to raise money for colleges and universities and currently boasts over 90,000 members (Council for Advancement and Support of Education, n. d.). This figure does not take into consideration the many advancement professionals whose institutions cannot afford expensive association dues. There is a literal army of individuals on college campuses across the United States soliciting donations from individuals, corporations, and foundations on behalf of the schools they serve.

The role of university fundraiser did not become widespread until the 1950's and the

industry did not develop professional networks or standards until much later (Miller, 1993). Even then, most early fundraising efforts were campaign-related and fueled by major philanthropists such as Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, Carnegie, and others (Faria & Mixon, 2018; Miller, 1993). The post-World War II era in America witnessed a great expansion of fundraising efforts as schools sought to accommodate the influx of students seeking to take advantage of their GI Bill benefits (Miller, 1993). Despite this growth in the number of college graduates, alumni relations as a profession did not become fully institutionalized until the mid-1970's when the newly-formed Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) brought smaller grassroots alumni efforts together to collaborate at a national level (Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, n. d.). Within the much longer history of the American higher education system, efforts to engage the masses of alumni are still relatively recent components of university fundraising.

All the while, the number of people attending college and the number of alumni available to solicit has increased rapidly. In 1940, only 3.8% of women and 5.5% of men held a college degree, but that figure increased to a combined 36% in 2019 with nearly 6% of that growth occurring just since 2010 (Statista, 2020; United States Census Bureau, 2020). The past forty years have shown the greatest growth, as the percentage of Americans with four or more years of college has increased from 17% in 1980 to 25% in 2000 to 36% in 2019 (Statista, 2020; United States Census Bureau, 2020), and the linear model shows no sign of future decline. In raw numbers, nearly two million people graduated with a bachelor's degree in 2019 alone in the United States, and nearly four million people are predicted to complete a degree (all levels) by the year 2029 (Educationdata.org, n. d.). With the significant expansion of college fundraising as a profession occurring at the same time as alumni giving rates have decreased (Shaker & Nathan,

2017), there is growing evidence that alumni giving is not predictably tracking with either enrollment growth or expansion of the fundraising industry.

The science of predicting alumni giving is not new. In 1991, Ralph Bristol, an economist, tried to predict future alumni giving rates based on birthrates, college attendance rates, the stock market, and other measurable, external factors such as lifespan, cost of living, and interest rates (Bristol, 1992). He understood forecasting alumni donations would play a major role in financial planning for colleges and universities. His models predicted alumni giving rates would increase at a consistent and predictable rate for the foreseeable future (his model stopped at 2010), and all colleges would be able to count on it (Bristol, 1992). This model has proven to be radically incorrect, despite the fact that Bristol could not have accounted for the monumental shift in education brought by the internet, resulting in even more graduates than he had predicted. However, even accurate economic models can only explain outcomes and describe observed phenomena; they cannot explain behavioral motivation and intent (Ouliaris, 2020). This lies in the realm of social science where the majority of alumni giving research exists.

Efforts to understand the perceptions and behaviors of alumni are the most important way to provide colleges and universities with practical guidance as they seek to influence the behaviors of their alumni (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; McDearmon, 2011, 2013). Most research in alumni giving has been retrospective—who has given and why. Alumni giving databases provide the resources for this type of analysis, yet alumni giving data can neither predict an alumnus' affinity or enthusiasm for their institution, nor their willingness to make a future financial gift (McAlexander & Koenig, 2010). For example, we know even alumni who have strong identification with their alma mater choose not to support through giving or service (Drezner, 2009). In addition, most of the alumni giving research is targeted towards donors, rather than

non-donors. Donors and non-donors share a lot of characteristics—they commonly both report positive feelings, good experiences, and stay connected to the school as alumni (Wastyn, 2009). Even the controversial *U. S. News & World Report* rankings reinforce this, since schools that report high levels of alumni satisfaction concurrently report low levels of alumni giving participation (Pearson, 1999). Early scholarship in alumni giving established the concern that “universities probably know little about their alumni. They presume opinions, beliefs, and preferences, yet they almost never conduct scientific research into the matter” (Frey, 1981 as cited in Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 106). Unfortunately, not much has changed in 40 years of alumni giving research.

There are several theories as to why alumni giving is decreasing, but the current study may help shed light on issue by engaging the population of new graduates as a case study. Young alumni, in particular, represent some of the lowest giving participation numbers among all alumni populations (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2020). There are likely two reasons that young alumni are not giving: they either do not feel they have the financial capacity to give, or they do not know giving is part of what is expected of them as alumni (Stephenson & Bell, 2014). Another possibility lies in the posture alumni may have as former student-consumers. For example, in one study focusing on non-donors, respondents reported they did not believe their relationship with their alma mater was a lifelong association, but instead rather a point in time in which they paid for a service that had been delivered and completed (Wastyn, 2009). Ultimately, the role of student is one which individuals choose, while the role of alumni is one that is assigned by the university at the point of graduation. The premise of this current study is this: whether new graduates choose to embrace the alumni role and whether they understand the behavior expectations associated with the role may determine their future alumni giving participation.

## **Research Questions**

In order to understand the attitudes of new graduates and how their attitudes shape their potential future support behaviors as alumni, four research questions were addressed through quantitative methods:

Research Question 1: How strongly do new alumni identify with their alma mater?

Research Question 2: How strongly do new alumni identify with the alumni role?

Research Question 3: How much do new alumni understand about alumni role behavior expectations?

Research Question 4: Do new alumni express intention to engage in future university support behaviors?

These four quantitative questions provided the backbone of this mixed-methods analysis, however, the study benefitted from including a limited qualitative portion. A modified mixed methods research study provides “greater depth and breadth of information...[and] a greater scope to investigate educational issues using both words and numbers” (Almaki, 2016, p. 288). Consequently, the study included one open-ended question about alumni role identity which was coded and analyzed in order to provide direction for future research about campus experiences that impact alumni role socialization. Respondents could answer the question “What experiences during your time at your university helped you understand or learn what it means to be an alumnus?” any way they chose.

## **Description of Terms**

It is important to define the terms used throughout this study to frame the research and created shared understanding. While many of the terms may be familiar or colloquial to the reader, they are not always interpreted universally. In addition, the use of these terms within

the industry of higher education and context of alumni giving may have some particular nuances that signify importance for the conversation.

**Alma mater.** Latin for “nourishing mother” and refers to the college or university someone attended or graduated from (Columbia University Libraries, n. d.).

**Alumni/Alumnus.** General references to alumnus (singular) and alumni (plural) refer to any former student(s) or graduate of a college or university of any kind (Merriam-Webster, n. d.). The term does not exclusively refer to someone who graduated from the institution, though it most frequently does.

**Alumni associations.** The voluntary membership organizations comprising alumni from the same university, some requiring membership dues, that exist to reinforce alumni loyalty and alumni financial support (Iskhakova et al., 2017).

**Alumni engagement.** A measure of how much alumni are involved with activities involving their alma mater in ways that build loyalty, inspire financial support, and strengthen the university reputation (Council for Advancement and Support of Education, 2018).

**Alumni support behaviors.** Monetary and non-monetary behaviors in support of one’s former college or university (McDearmon, 2011, 2013). Monetary support includes donations of cash, estate and legacy planning commitments, gifts of property or stock, or gifts-in-kind (Iskhakova et al., 2017). Non-monetary support includes volunteering, mentoring, recommending the school, attending an event, etc. (Myers et al., 2016).

**Annual giving/Annual fund.** Gifts to the university which are unrestricted, not designated to a specific purpose, contribute to an organization’s operating expenses, and are solicited on an annual basis (Rosso, 2003). The majority of references to alumni giving in this study are those in the form of annual fund gifts.

**Appeal (or solicitation).** Requests for financial support by the university advancement office to alumni, primarily through mail, email, social media, phone canvassing, or personal meetings (The Modern Nonprofit, 2018).

**Capital campaigns.** Funds that are raised and designated for significant university expansion efforts, including new programs, new buildings, new campuses, or new scholarship and endowment funds (Certified Fund Raising Executive, n. d.).

**Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU).** An association of over 180 institutions of higher education around the globe who share a common mission to promote Christian higher education and share common values and missions (Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, n. d.).

**Endowment.** The university endowment provides the financial security of a college or university, measured by the amount of money in the bank accruing interest (Faculty of the Lilly School of Philanthropy, 2019). Typically, only the interest on the endowment is spent and is usually designated for capital projects, scholarships, academic purposes, or athletics, rather than on annual expenses (Certified Fund Raising Executive, n. d.)

**Giving Participation Rates (GPR).** The percentage of alumni who give an annual gift in a given year (out of the total number of living alumni) which serves measure of university fundraising success an alumni engagement (Gunsalus, 2005)

**Philanthropy.** Voluntary donations at any level for the public good, often misunderstood as only substantial gifts of money or property (Faculty of the Lilly School of Philanthropy, 2019). In higher education settings, philanthropy occurs through centralized university development offices (Jung & Lee, 2019).

**Traditional undergraduate.** Traditional undergraduate students are students ages 18-24 who attend a four-year public or private college within one year of high school graduation and completing their first bachelor's degree (National Center for Education Statistics, n. d.-1).

### **Significance of the Study**

As the need for creative and sustainable sources of fundraising for colleges and university operating costs continues to grow, fundraisers need to identify factors that will lead to future success in the areas of alumni giving (Yung & Lee, 2019). The application of organizational identification theory, social identity theory, and symbolic interactionism to alumni role identity has far-reaching implications for alumni relations and university fundraising efforts. Yung and Lee (2019) hypothesized in a recent small-scale study that “higher levels of stakeholders’ (students and alumni) *knowledge, awareness, involvement, satisfaction, and relationship...are positively associated with fundraising success measured in intention to give and likelihood to recommend others to give*” (p. 235). This premise guides the many ad-hoc efforts around college campuses to socialize students into their future role as alumni, but no meaningful analysis assessing what new graduates believe about alumni giving and their new alumni role has been explored, particularly in relation to giving intention (McDearmon, 2011). This study represents a preemptive strike of sorts. By studying new graduates soon after they have walked across the stage, perhaps before they have even received their first alumni magazine or financial appeal, the industry will be better equipped to know what messages are appropriate to communicate and how much education new alumni require about their new role and relationship with the university. There is no better moment in time than to assess this than right after graduation, an event that potentially symbolizes the peak of their identification with the organization.

In addition, this study provides insight into new graduates’ future support intentions and



their attitudes about alumni giving. To date, only one other peer-reviewed study has looked at giving intention among new graduates (Jung & Lee, 2019), but the study was limited to one academic department on one campus. There are several useful studies about why alumni do not give (McDearmon, 2010; McDearmon & Shirley, 2009; Wastyn, 2009), but in each case the respondents were studied long after their graduation day. This study provided insight for university fundraisers by identifying what new alumni understand and believe about alumni behaviors and by identifying any gaps in how the university has socialized them into their alumni role. Moreover, the qualitative content in this study identified areas of future research inquiry on new graduates and their attitudes about alumni giving.

### **Overview of Research Methods**

The current study assessed organizational identity and alumni role identity among new, first-time graduates of undergraduate bachelor's degree programs from a limited range of private colleges and universities in the West. Thirteen, independent, private faith-based colleges associated with the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and California were invited to participate in the study. Each school's respective alumni office received a detailed email outlining the purpose of the study and how to be included. Eight institutions chose to participate in the study. Seven participating schools provided the researcher access to the email addresses of their 2021 graduates of traditional undergraduate programs and gave permission to the researcher to distribute the survey directly to their graduates. One institution consented to participate but opted to send the survey link to their graduates directly rather than allowing the researcher direct access.

All 2021 traditional graduates from participating schools were invited to participate in the study through a series of email invitations. New alumni who responded to the email to participate

were then surveyed using a tool which included Likert-scale questions, one open-ended question, and demographic questions. Surveys were distributed through an online platform and collected within three months after graduation ceremonies and/or completion of degree requirements.

Using quantitative analysis of the Likert-scale survey sections, this research sought to ascertain whether new graduates of private colleges report strong organizational identity and alumni role identity, and whether or not these graduates express intentions to engage in alumni support behaviors in the future. Additionally, the qualitative portion of the survey provided further insight to the research questions by identifying how students come to understand the alumni role during their undergraduate years.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Introduction**

Academic research in higher education fundraising exists because the state of the American university system has become dependent upon external donative revenue for its survival (Brown et al., 2014; Jung & Lee, 2019). As long as this financial model undergirds the tertiary educational system, there will be an ongoing need to understand the world of academic fundraising from an intellectual, practical, and social lens in order for the professional fundraiser to maximize their efforts (Shaker & Nathan, 2017). While charitable giving to educational causes is only second to religious causes (Shaker & Nathan, 2017), giving to one's alma mater was reported to be ranked 6<sup>th</sup> out of nine among all types of charities to which Americans give (Levine, 2008). In raw numbers, alumni giving rates have been on a consistent decline for many years (Lara & Johnson, 2012). The primary goal of university advancement is to reverse this trend, therefore research on alumni giving is a necessary and critical effort. The purpose of this research was to understand how new graduates perceive their relationship with their university at the point at which they make this transition from student to alumnus, how these perceptions inform their understanding of their new role as an alumnus, and how this understanding informs their intentions to engage in future alumni support behaviors.

Most academic research in giving to higher education focuses on who gives to colleges and universities and why they give (Shaker & Nathan, 2017). The majority of this research focuses on alumni giving specifically, as alumni comprise most of the individual donors to colleges and universities (Council for the Advancement and Support of Education, n. d.). Understanding who gives and why requires a complex approach to research. Charitable giving at

its core has been defined simply as a function of whether one has the capacity and inclination to support a cause (Weerts & Ronca, 2006), but this may be an oversimplification of charitable giving. In reality, charitable giving is a much more dynamic process, influenced by internal and external factors, including donor demographics, economic realities, and social expectations (Lammam & Gabler, 2012). For example, alumni giving happens within the context of life stage, career status, and motivation (McAlexander & Koenig, 2010).

The researcher organized the current scope of existing alumni giving scholarship under four general umbrella categories: institutional characteristics, donor characteristics, external or environmental factors, and fundraising practices. Other advancement research has identified these four categories as key factors predicting alumni giving participation rates (GPR) as defined by *U.S. News & World Report* (Gunsalus, 2005). For the purposes and scope of this literature review and study, fundraising practices and their influence on alumni giving was not explored in-depth. The following literature review includes an examination of why people give (to charity generally and to higher education specifically), the current research on donor characteristics (those who give to charity generally and higher education specifically), institutional characteristics that are correlated with alumni giving, student characteristics that are associated with subsequent alumni giving, alumni characteristics that are associated with alumni giving, financial aid characteristics that impact alumni giving, and characteristics of alumni who choose not to give. Existing research on the first three categories (institutional characteristics, donor characteristics, and external/environmental practices) is synthesized within an expanded theoretical framework of identity. Specifically, this research explores the impact of organizational identification theory, social identity theory, symbolic interactionism, and alumni role identity on alumni giving.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Research in alumni giving to higher education draws primarily from social psychology, however, there are also significant academic contributions from the fields of sociology, economics, and marketing research (Mann, 2007). The research study that follows is based on the juxtaposition of organizational and social identity theories (Mael & Ashforth, 1992) and how they inform a new graduate's alumni role identity (McDearmon, 2011, 2013). It is the first study to integrate these two theories, specifically as a predictor of future alumni support behaviors among new college graduates. In order to understand the current theoretical framework, this literature review focuses on the social psychology of giving as it relates to identity. Research from other academic disciplines is included and referenced within this theoretical framework. This theoretical overview explores critical interactions between organizational identification theory, social identity theory, symbolic interactionism, and alumni role identity. However, two additional theoretical frameworks (giving theories and social exchange theory) will preface the discussion in order to provide a broader context for charitable giving research as a whole.

### ***Giving Theories***

Alumni giving research occurs within the broader context of charitable giving research, therefore, a full discussion of why alumni give is enhanced by a robust understanding of why people give to charitable causes generally (Mann, 2007). Multiple theoretical perspectives explain donor motivation as it relates to alumni giving, giving credence to the necessity of contextualizing advancement research as just one form of giving to charity (Mann, 2007). The most comprehensive work on the social and psychological mechanisms impacting gift giving comes from Bekkers and Wiepking (2011) out of The Netherlands. They have identified eight major theories of why people give: awareness of need, the act of solicitation, the costs and

benefits of making a gift, altruism, the social reputation of the giver, the psychological benefits of donating, the values of the donor, and the perception of the efficacy of the gift (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011). While each of these cannot be addressed in full, several of these theories provide valuable insight to alumni giving research.

Altruism can be simply defined as giving for the sake of giving alone (Ottoni-Wilhelm, 2017). Altruism explains gifts that individuals give purely because of the good the charity provides the world rather than what the giver can get out of it (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011; Mann, 2007; Ottoni-Wilhelm, 2017). When applied to alumni giving, this describes the alumni who have an altruistic bent toward their institution simply because of the good they believe the school provides to society and because they themselves had been a recipient of that good at a prior point in time (Mann, 2007). However, most giving is more complex than pure altruism (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011).

Individuals who give to charity are the recipients of what researchers have identified as public and private benefits of giving (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011; Mann, 2007). Private benefits are defined by the internal and external benefits derived from giving that primarily serve the donor and which are not made public. Internal private benefits of giving include the affective and emotional satisfaction that comes from making the gift (Andreoni, 1989; Ottoni-Wilhem, 2017). For example, nearly 70% of white-collar professionals in the United Kingdom reported feeling a sense of personal pride or satisfaction over their gift giving, and another 50% reported feeling a greater sense of belonging to the society at large (Kottasz, 2004). Other donors have reported gift giving reinforces their self-conceptions as a generous person (Sargeant & Shang, 2012). Gift giving is also a function of how much the individual donor perceives the cost of the donation to be in response to the personal benefits received, and gift giving goes up when the cost of giving

is lower (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011; Vesterlund, 2006).

The external private benefits of charitable giving are a critical factor to consider as well. It is common practice in the field of philanthropic giving to reward donors with material gifts, access to otherwise private events, or membership in an exclusive donor association. Young alumni non-donors specifically expressed the desire for a direct benefit when they considered their future gift giving intentions (McDearmon, 2010). Often, premium gifts and benefit levels will determine the success of a financial appeal (Sargeant & Shang, 2012), while other alumni enjoy the personal value in being associated with the brand and reputation of the school (Mann, 2007). Most external benefits of giving, however, are public. For high-level philanthropy, public recognition commonly includes donor recognition on print materials and permanent displays of giving campaigns, access to VIP events, membership in exclusive giving circles, speaking opportunities, and naming rights to buildings and spaces (Mann, 2007; Sargant & Shang, 2012). Vesterlund (2006) calls this type of public giving “wealth signaling” (p. 573), and explains that it is often an outlet to alleviate guilt for the possession of wealth. In a similar vein, some people give when they believe they are either publicly rewarded for giving or publicly punished for not giving (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2007).

The influence of peer solicitation is another broad giving theory that is relevant for university advancement and alumni giving efforts (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2007; Drezner, 2018; Mann, 2007; Meer, 2011; Vesterland, 2006). Most gifts to charity are in response to a direct solicitation of some kind (mail, phone, social media, personal ask, etc.), but different types of solicitations yield different results (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2007). For example, alumni who are solicited for an alumni gift by a peer or classmate are much more likely to give (and to make a larger gift) than if solicited by someone from the school whom they did not know (Meer, 2011).

Alumni who are solicited by a peer with whom they share a demographic trait like race or ethnicity, gender, or some other membership that signals demographic similarity, are also more likely to give or at least be more apt to believe the cause is important (Drezner, 2018; Meer, 2011). In one study, alumni reported a negative response to the pressure they received from being asked by a peer, yet they admitted they would not have given if they had not been asked (Freeman, 2004). The gifts given by peers also motivate additional donors, because people are influenced to give when they see the amounts their peers have given or when they know their gifts will be matched (Vesterlund, 2006).

Giving as habit is also a component of charitable giving research and is the foundation behind efforts to encourage young alumni to make small, frequent gifts to their college or university (McDearmon & Shirley, 2009; Meer, 2013; Meer & Rosen, 2018; Vesterland, 2006). In a large-scale study of alumni, those who gave frequently when they were younger gave over five times the amount of their non-giving peers during their later years (Meer, 2013). A subsequent replication of this study confirmed young alumni giving has a statistically significant impact on giving later in life (Meer & Rosen, 2018). The habit of giving to charities other than one's alma mater also positively impacts alumni giving. In fact, one study found the single strongest predictor of a young alumnus making a gift to their school was whether or not the alumnus gave to other charitable organizations (McDearmon & Shirley, 2009). Finally, people tend to give repeatedly to the same charity (Vesterland, 2006), providing further evidence that giving can be habitual.

Donors also give when they share values with the organizations asking for their gifts (Bennett, 2003; Evers & Gesthuizen, 2011; Iskhakova et al., 2017; Schlesinger et al., 2017). People are more likely to give out of loyalty if they have personal experience with either the



organization or the organization's cause (Bennett, 2003). In addition, when a donor's personal values align with the values of the organization, the donor is more likely to give (or indicate intention to give) in the future (Bennett, 2003). Trust in the organization also encourages giving and attitudes about giving (Drezner et al., 2020; Evers & Gesthuizen, 2011), and specifically when alumni trust their college or university they are more likely to express loyalty (Drezner et al., 2020; Schlesinger et al., 2017). Loyalty and trust are both, therefore, antecedents to charitable giving, because alumni loyalty is built on both attitudinal dimensions (positive feelings and intentions to act in positive ways) and the associated behavioral dimensions of giving, volunteering, recommending, and pursuing additional degrees (Iskhakova et al., 2017).

Giving to charity out of obligation or loyalty is also a function of reciprocity (Drezner, 2008; Emerson, 1976; James & Wiepking, 2008; Mann, 2007; Stephenson & Bell, 2014; Vesterland, 2006). Philanthropic giving has been described as a function of three obligations—to pay, to receive, and to repay (Mann, 2007). This type of giving is primarily explained by Emerson's (1976) definition of social exchange theory which is identified more thoroughly within the literature review below. Generally, such giving occurs in response to a commitment to give back to society by contributing to a philanthropic cause (Vesterland, 2006). In the context of alumni giving, one study found the desire to simply "give back to their University" (Stephenson & Bell, 2014, p. 182) was the second most common reason alumni cited for making a gift. For example, alumni of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) expressed a strong ethic of wanting to give back to the school primarily because the school helped them get ahead (Drezner, 2008). Furthermore, alumni who understood they had received direct benefits from alumni donors when they were students themselves were more likely to give back (James & Wiepking, 2008).

### ***Social Exchange Theory***

Social exchange theory was popularized by Richard Emerson (1976) and emerged out of the field of sociology in the late 1950's. For the sake of this limited summary, a brief review of Emerson's (1976) social exchange theory provides useful context for understanding alumni giving research. Social exchange theory establishes the concept that human behavior is predicated on the rewards and or reactions from others (Emerson, 1976); therefore, all human actions are mutually beneficial if they are to be reinforced and repeated. When applied to alumni giving, social exchange theory posits giving can never be completely altruistic if people give because they receive something in return for giving (Emerson, 1976). A social exchange perspective on alumni giving theorizes that donors experience mixed motives in giving: they feel good about their contribution to the common good, but they also give because they receive (or received in the past) intrinsic and extrinsic rewards in return for giving (Drezner, 2009; James & Wiepking, 2008). Social exchange theory, while not the premise of the research which follows, is a key component of understanding the motives of charitable giving and is a critical frame of reference for alumni giving research.

### ***Organizational Identification Theory***

Giving theories and social exchange theory are useful to provide a foundation for a general understanding about philanthropic giving, but they do not sufficiently explain alumni giving due to the existence of the alma mater relationship between a university and its graduates (Drezner, 2008). Alumni do not only give because they get something in return, but they also give because they develop a strong organizational identification with their school which contributes to their philanthropic participation (Drezner, 2008). Organizational identification (OID) theory is originally credited to Phillip Tompkins (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987) and

essentially describes how individuals identify with an organization and make personal decisions in light of how the organization is affected by their decisions. Key OID theorists Fred Mael and Blake Ashforth define it as an individual's "perceived oneness with an organization and the experiences of the organization's successes and failures as one's own" (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 103). When a person exhibits strong organizational identification, this identity becomes a facet of an individual's understanding of themselves (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Cheney & Tompkins, 1997; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). The antecedents of strong organizational identification include the level of support an individual perceives as receiving from the organization, the prestige of the organization, the distinct characteristics of the organization's identity, and the openness of an organization's communication with its members (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987).

Organizational identification has been applied to alumni giving research specifically, particularly because of its influence on an individual's "willingness to devote effort and commitment to the organization" (Avanzi et al., 2016, p. 678). Alumni who express a stronger level of organizational identification are more likely to hold attitudes and engage in behaviors which contribute to the success of the organization (Mann, 2007). Kim et al. (2010) examined the connection between organizational identification and students' intentions to engage in future support behaviors among Korean college students and confirmed this at an international level as well.

### ***Social Identity Theory***

Organizational identification theory alone is not sufficient to explain how individuals incorporate their affiliation or membership with an organization (in this case, the alma mater) into their sense of personal identity, however. While organizational identification is, perhaps, a first step in how an individual defines their relationship to the organization, social identity theory

claims individuals actually integrate the organization into their personal identity and then choose to act in ways which positively reinforce their identity as a member of the group or organization (Ashforth, 2016; Ashforth et al., 2008; Ashforth & Mael, 1992; Hogg et al., 1995; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Social identity theory emerged from the work of theorists Henry Tajfel and John Turner in the late 1970's and 1980's to describe in-group and out-group behavior (Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Fundamentally, social identity theory describes the tendency of individuals to perceive themselves as a member of a group and then become "psychologically entwined with the fate of [that] group" (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 104). Ashforth et al. (2008) defines it as the spectrum from a narrow formulation of identity to a broad formulation, a transition which moves people from "I am" to "I believe" to "I do" (p. 330) and can be further described as a sense of a "'visceral unity'...or oneness" (Ashforth, 2016, p. 362). Because people have many social identities and many organizations in their lives, only the most salient identities will result in behaviors which will reinforce their organizational commitment (Ashforth et al., 2008). Identity is considered so important to organizations that Ashforth (2016) calls it a "root construct" (p. 362) and a key determinant in how people clarify their own "purpose, values, and beliefs...how to think and even feel about issues and what behaviors to enact" (p. 362). Ashforth and Mael's (1989) sentinel research on social identity (SID) theory as a unique extension of organizational identification theory provides the primary foundation for the integration of identity theories into higher education research about alumni.

The first significant study of social identity as applied to college alumni was completed by Mael and Ashforth (1992) in which they confirmed their hypothesis predicting highly salient social identity with one's alma mater would be associated with certain precursors of organizational identification (such as organizational uniqueness or academic prestige) and how

much an individual defines themselves by the organization. Role identity salience is the strength of an individual's commitment to the identity and the likelihood it will inform their behavior according to the norms of that role (Callero, 1985; Hogg et al., 1995). The salience of social identity among the alumni studied was correlated to how long they had attended the school, how satisfied they were with the school, and how sentimental they felt about their experience (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). They asserted it is easier to solidify social identification while students are still directly connected to their school than after graduation (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), and therefore signaled the need to see the student-alumni relationship as a continuum.

One of the most interesting implications of social identity theory is that, unlike organizational identification, it is not dependent upon place and time, and psychological group membership alone is sufficient to maintain one's social identity with the organization (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Thus, alumni from different graduating years can share group identification, even though their affiliation with the school is not concurrent. It also explains why alumni may feel close to current students, even if their shared group identification is primarily vicarious (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Mael and Ashforth's (1992) study is one of the most oft-cited original studies in alumni identification and serves a premise for this study because it served as both justification and reinforcement for the emerging practice of alumni relations as an extension of university fundraising efforts. If the results could be universally applied, it meant the efforts of alumni offices to engrain the college or university into the identity of every alumnus might lead to positive attitudes and future institutional support behaviors as Yung and Lee (2019) hypothesized it would.

### ***Symbolic Interactionism***

Another key component in the development and reinforcement of social identity within

an individual is through what sociologist Sheldon Stryker (1968) called symbolic interactionism. The premise of symbolic interactionism is that shared expectations, symbols, and experiences within a group increase the salience of one's identity in the group and defines shared behavioral expectations (Stryker, 1968, 2002; Stryker & Vryan, 2003). In the context of the university setting, Mael and Ashforth (1992) explain how the university experience is rife with symbolic interactions which strengthen one's identity with a school, from orientation to graduation, to every tradition and ritual in between. Furthermore, each of these symbolic interactions affects how an individual is socialized into the group, which affects identification, finally strengthening the internalization of the identity and the expression of behaviors which reinforce the identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989):

**Socialization → Identification → Internationalization (p. 27).**

Ultimately, Jiménez-Castillo et al. (2013) clarified the goal of this internalization best by explaining, "...we define graduate-university identification as the degree to which graduates identify themselves and the university as sharing the same attributes and values, in an attempt to satisfy one or more personal definition needs...[and] as being linked with the organization" (p. 139). Since Stephenson and Bell (2014) found the most common reason for donating to their university was simply "Because I am an alumnus" (p. 181), the question for practitioners becomes a matter of how to measure identity and convert it to increased alumni giving. This could be graphically represented by application of a simple algebraic equation: if  $a = b$  and  $b = c$ , therefore  $a = c$ .

"I am an alumnus" ( $a = b$ )

"Alumni give money" ( $b = c$ )

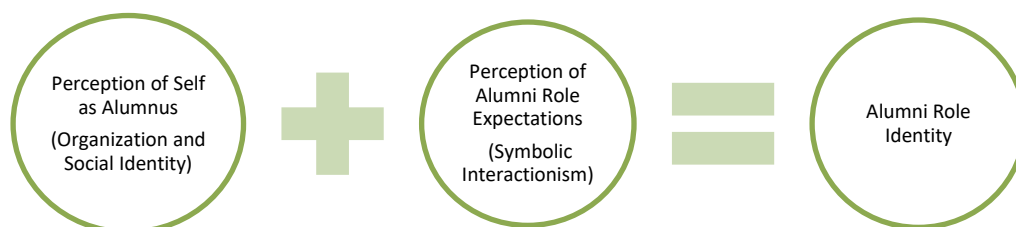
Therefore "I should give money" ( $a = c$ )

There is no question about whether or not new graduates believe they are alumni ( $a = b$ )—this is the given in the equation. But whether new graduates equate giving behavior with the alumni role ( $b = c$ ) and whether or not they personally intend to enact those behaviors ( $b = c$ ) was the question at hand.

### *Alumni Role Identity*

In an effort to integrate identity theory and symbolic interactionism within the framework of alumni relations, McDearmon (2011, 2013) sought to understand the unique nature the alumni role and how it might predict alumni behavior. Building upon a novel study of role identity salience among blood donors (Callero, 1985), McDearmon (2011, 2013) applied the blood donor study to alumni giving, predicting stronger alumni role salience might be predictive of alumni support behaviors. Callero's (1985) study of blood donors provided substantive research linking identity salience to behavior, indicating the stronger the salience the more it defines a person's sense of self. Using this study as a foundation and a theoretical framework of Stryker's (1968, 2001) concept of symbolic interactionism, McDearmon (2011, 2013) created a validated measurement tool (the Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire) to identify the factors which contribute to an alumnus' role identification and how alumni role salience relates to their intention to engage in support behaviors such as volunteering, promoting the school, or making a donation. McDearmon's (2011, 2013) results supported his hypothesis: increased alumni role salience was positively correlated with intentions to support the university. Specifically, McDearmon (2013) found higher alumni role identity among alumni who joined the alumni association, attended an event sponsored by the university, or contributed to the annual fund.

McDearmon's (2011, 2013) construct of the interplay between these theoretical frameworks can be summarized graphically as follows (Figure 1):

**Figure 1**

While it is premature to consider alumni role identity a theory, the concept of alumni role identity and alumni role salience provides a playground for continued alumni research. Dillon (2018) called McDearmon's (2011, 2013) alumni role identity study "sentinel" and believes it "created space for a new narrative in understanding the alumni to alma mater relationship" (para. 1). At its core, symbolic interactionism is the process whereby people look to social cues and expectations as they develop the actions and attitudes associated with the role with which they are assigned (McDearmon, 2011, 2013). The role of alumnus is essentially assigned to a student by their degree-conferring institution, yet we know very little about how alumni make the transition and integrate the new role of alumnus into their identity. This research is predicated upon the theoretical premise that new graduates are more likely to engage in alumni support behaviors when they have integrated their alumni role into their sense of self and they know what is expected of them as alumni. McDearmon's (2011, 2013) premise can be applied to alumni giving behavior in a simpler version of the former algebraic equation (Figure 2):

**Figure 2**

The concept of alumni role identity has been studied in two additional studies: one study sought



to identify the antecedents of alumni role identity by surveying alumni donors (Dillon, 2017) while the other sought to identify generational differences in alumni role identity (Tucker, 2018). The presence and salience of alumni role identity and how it informs alumni role expectations and subsequent alumni behaviors has not been studied among new alumni or recent graduates in the existing literature.

### **Donor Characteristics**

Within the framework of these theories, the current literature on giving creates a picture of alumni giving in context of the American higher education system. The bulk of charitable giving research, and advancement research specifically, is performed as a retrospective analysis of the demographic characteristics of those who give to higher education and those who do not. For the breadth of this literature review, demographic characteristics included are age, income, education, gender and marital status, race/ethnicity and religiosity, and legacy status and the presence (or absence) of minor children in the donor's household.

#### *Age*

The relationship between age and alumni giving is complex. On the surface, research indicates as alumni get older, they are more likely to make larger and more frequent gifts to their college or university (Bae et al., 2016; Stephenson & Yerger, 2014a; Stephenson & Yerger, 2014b; Sun et al., 2007). However, there is evidence this trend drops off in later years (possibly due to loss of wage income in retirement years). For example, in the latter years of the alumni lifespan there is a decrease in total giving amounts (Belfield & Beney, 2000), in giving as a percentage of income (Lo & Tashiro, 2013), and in overall percentage of givers (Clotfelter, 2001). There are also mixed reports of how age relates to giving intention. Gaier (2005) found older alumni more likely to express the intention to give money, yet younger alumni were more

likely to express the intention to volunteer (rather than make a financial gift). Age also impacts intent to consider legacy or estate giving: older alumni expressed a greater likelihood of giving a gift in the subsequent year, yet it was younger alumni who were more likely to be willing to consider including the university in their will (McAlexander & Koenig, 2015). Other research has not found any relationship between age and alumni giving (Baruch & Sang, 2017), confounding the issue. Some consideration has been given in the research to differences between generations and their charitable giving behaviors, with generation designations serving as a proxy for age. Several studies have found that those donors who fell into the category of “Gen X” were significantly less likely to make a charitable gift than “Baby Boomers,” and made smaller donations when they did make a gift (The Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, 2008; Steinburg & Wilhelm, 2003). However, conclusions on generational differences are difficult to make in the absence of a longitudinal study.

### *Income*

The relationship between age and income is an obvious confounding factor, so treating them as separate variables is somewhat problematic. However, income is often studied independently in the giving literature. Among all charitable giving categories, higher income is positively correlated with the probability of making a gift, but not correlated with the overall amount given or the amount given as a percentage of income (Lo & Tashiro, 2013). However, in a study of white-collar professionals in the United Kingdom, income was actually negatively correlated with giving, with respondents citing the preservation of family wealth as a greater priority than charitable giving (Kottasz, 2004). In most alumni giving research, increased income is generally positively correlated with how much an individual gives (Baruch & Sang, 2012; Clotfelter, 2001, 2003; Monks, 2003; Okunade & Berl, 1997; Tsao & Coll, 2005) but not

necessarily the likelihood of giving a gift (Belfield & Beney, 2000; Lara & Johnson, 2012). In a study of alumni with executive jobs, alumni with higher-order titles (a proxy for income) were more charitable (Wunnava & Okunade, 2013). Alumni with higher incomes more often choose to give to higher education over competing non-profit organizations (Clotfelter, 2001, 2003). Conversely, donors to education tend to be wealthier overall than donors to other causes (James & Wiepking, 2008). Lastly, the most common reason alumni report not giving is they do not believe they have the financial ability to contribute, indicating income is a highly relevant factor in alumni giving (Stephenson & Bell, 2014).

### *Education*

While income and educational status are not always correlated, there are reasons to draw a relationship between them. Across all types of charitable giving, those with graduate (or tertiary) degrees are more likely to give more (James & Wiepking, 2008; Lammam & Gabler, 2012), most likely due to a combination of greater salary or heightened sense of social obligation and/or awareness. Further evidence of this is during the 2002 economic downturn, individuals who continued to make charitable gifts were more likely to hold a bachelor's degree and had higher income than those who did not continue to give (Wu & Brown, 2010). However, educational level has been found to be only correlated with the probability of making a gift, not with the actual amount of the gift (Liu, 2006). In a large-scale study of giving in The Netherlands, individuals with educational attainment at the secondary level donated 42% more to charitable causes, and those who had attained advanced degrees donated 77% more (Wiepking, 2009). Alumni who complete further education beyond their undergraduate degree may give more frequently, however, they tend to give less in total amounts, purportedly because their alumni giving was divided between several institutions (Lara & Johnson, 2012).

### *Gender and Marital Status*

The existing research on gender and charitable giving is extremely divided. Several early studies on alumni giving found no gender differences in giving behavior (Lo & Tashiro, 2013; Monks, 2003; Okunade & Berl, 1997), yet other research found male alumni are more likely to give (Bae et al., 2016; Levine, 2008) and to give larger donations (Dvorak & Toubman, 2013). Further research found females are more likely to give (Dvorak & Toubman, 2013; Holmes, 2009), or more likely to give but in smaller amounts (Belfield & Beney, 2000; Dvorak & Toubman, 2013). Other studies reported more nuanced giving behavior based on what has been called the cost (or price) of giving. This term refers to how much it costs the donor to give away an additional dollar based on one's marginal tax rate (Vesterlund, 2006). Research on philanthropy out of The Netherlands indicates men are more generous to charity when the cost to give is low, but when the cost of giving is high, women are more generous (Vesterland, 2006). Women are more likely to give to multiple charities and men to fewer, a phenomenon which might describe the difference in donation amounts between men and women (Andreoni et al., 2003). Female alumni were also reported to be more than twice as likely to volunteer (a non-monetary form of giving) than male alumni (Weerts & Ronca, 2006, 2007), and among non-married individuals women were more likely to donate than men (Clotfelter, 2001, 2003).

Marital status is another critical factor in the donor analysis. Mesch et al. (2011) found households headed by females gave more frequently than households headed by males, a trend that was sustained across all types of charity and for households at all income levels. On the other hand, this may be mitigated by who makes the giving decisions in the household. Who makes the giving decision in a household may depend on whether the husband or the wife is the primary wage earner (Andreoni et al., 2003). When the primary wage earner was the husband, he

was more likely to make the household giving decisions than the wife alone or jointly with the wife (Andreoni et al., 2003). The impact of marriage on the likelihood of giving is mixed. Some research indicates married couples are less likely to give (Belfield & Beney, 2000; Monks, 2003), yet Holmes (2009) found married individuals were 15% more likely to make an alumni gift than their single peers. The presence of mitigating factors such as children, greater household expenses, increased or decreased income, and increased debt shed some doubt on the efficacy of marital status and its correlation with alumni giving.

### ***Race, Ethnicity, and Religiosity***

The relationship between race and ethnicity and alumni giving has not been extensively studied. Some of the research on ethnic differences emerges from the study of trends in philanthropy, not specifically alumni giving. For example, in a large-scale analysis of giving to charity as a function of zip code, greater ethnic diversity in a geographical region is negatively correlated with the amount of charitable donations made in that region, but diversity does not decrease the fraction of households who donate to charity (Andreoni et al., 2016). In a large-scale analysis of national consumer expenditures, race was not found to be an overall factor in charitable giving, however, there were two exceptions: self-reported “Asian” individuals reported giving less and self-reported “Hispanic” individuals reported a greater likelihood of giving (Liu, 2006). In the alumni giving research, the relationship is more nuanced. One study found African American, Hispanic, and multi-racial alumni gave less than their White counterparts (Monks, 2003). Yet Wu and Brown (2010) studied giving during the economic downturn of 2002 and noted African American and White alumni who held bachelor’s degrees gave to educational causes equitably. There is also indication the definition of what it means to be a supportive alumnus may differ between racial and ethnic groups. Alumni from historically

Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), are more likely to view support more broadly than simply giving, since they indicate they view sending their own child or recommending a family member to the school as a form of financial support (Cohen, 2006).

Race, ethnicity, and religiosity are often interrelated, therefore there is some indication of overlap of these demographics in studies of the impact of religiosity on giving. African American alumni typically give most of their charity dollars to religious organizations and churches, posing a particular challenge for HBCUs (Cohen, 2006). In a demographic analysis of charitable giving by race, religious diversity was found to be negatively correlated with overall donations, but did not impact the fraction of households who gave (Andreoni et al., 2016). The only exception was an increase in Catholic households was directly correlated with an increase in giving (Andreoni et al., 2016). In the United Kingdom, religious professionals were more likely to give larger gifts to charity (Kottasz, 2004) and in The Netherlands, church attendance is significantly positively correlated with increases in charitable giving (Wiepking, 2009). Finally, one study found alumni who had never given any gift to any kind of other charity had also never made a gift to their alma mater (Weerts & Ronca, 2009), indicating the possible correlation between personal or religious values and philanthropic intent.

### ***Legacy Status and Children in the Home***

A few outlying donor characteristics are relevant to the alumni giving: the impact of legacy status on alumni giving as well as what economists Meer and Rosen (2009a) have identified as the “child-cycle” of alumni giving. Legacy status refers to the number of family members in one’s immediate and extended family who also attended the college or university of the donor (Meer & Rosen, 2009a). Alumni who are married to other alumni are more likely to give (Holmes, 2009; Lara & Johnson, 2012), and recent graduates with legacy connections are

more likely to make a donation than their young alumni peers who are not legacies (Clotfelter, 2001). This provides some support for the idea that alumni support behaviors are passed down from generation to generation and why future research on alumni giving among first-generation college graduates is critical.

The presence of children in the home is more nuanced in the alumni giving research. There are two factors to consider: the influence of children in the home on charitable giving to education generally, and to specific colleges in the case of children who are close to college attendance age (Okunade & Berl, 1997; Meer & Rosen, 2009a; Wu & Brown, 2010). Households with children still in the home, for example, were more likely to continue to give to education causes throughout economic hard times compared to households without children (Wu & Brown, 2010). On the other hand, MBA alumni who had children in the home were less likely to make an alumni gift (Okunade & Berl, 1997), a trend the authors attributed to increased household expenses. Following a very specific hypothesis, one study reported there was a measurable increase among wealthy alumni in alumni giving the closer their children get to the college application cycle (Meer & Rosen, 2009a). Moreover, they noticed these donations dropped dramatically among those alumni whose children were rejected from the parent's alma mater (Meer & Rosen, 2009a). While this research is narrow, it reiterates the notion of legacy and reciprocity in gift giving motivation.

### **Institutional Characteristics**

Analysis of donor characteristics is only one angle through which to view alumni giving. With over 4,300 degree-granting institutions in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, n. d.-2), there is no single formula by which to understand the relationship between alumni giving and institutional types. However, there are important trends in the literature with

potential to inform advancement research and professional fundraising practices. The institutional giving trends mirror the facets of organization identification, including distinctiveness as it relates to institutional size and prestige.

### ***Institutional Type or Distinctiveness***

Certain types and sizes of institution clearly have some advantages when it comes to alumni giving. Graduates of traditional four-year institutions donate more money on average per alumnus than graduates of all other types of institutions (Cunningham & Cochi-Ficano, 2002), and schools with only undergraduate programs typically have higher alumni participation rates than schools which also offer graduate programs (Levine, 2008). Similarly, graduation rates and the percentage of full-time undergraduates are both correlated with alumni giving rates, with smaller, private institutions reporting greater giving participation rates (Gunsalus, 2005). Those who graduate from the same institution they first attend are also more likely to give, therefore, schools with high retention and freshman-to-senior year completion rates are more likely to report higher alumni giving rates (Clotfelter, 2003). Alumni from smaller schools report more positive connections and opinions about their degree (both considered proxies for satisfaction) than alumni from larger colleges (McAlexander & Koenig, 2010). Satisfaction translates to higher alumni giving participation rates (Levine, 2008) among graduates of smaller colleges. Liberal arts graduates give up to two times the amount as those who attended larger, private universities (Clotfelter, 2003). Doctoral and research universities, including those comprising a single large university system, receive greater total amounts of private funding (Liu, 2006) because of their vast number of graduates, but have lower average alumni giving rates (Cunningham & Cochi-Ficano, 2002).



### *Institutional Prestige*

The relationship between a university's reputation or prestige and alumni support behaviors provides another lens through which to understand alumni giving. Prestige is often determined by proxy measures such as average incoming student SAT scores, acceptance rates, and endowment (Faria et al., 2019). In some studies, increased academic prestige was found to be negatively correlated with alumni giving (Bae et al., 2016; Holmes, 2009), yet most research points to a positive correlation between alumni giving and institutional prestige (Faria et al., 2019). The size of a university endowment is positively correlated with alumni giving (Faria et al., 2019; Faria & Mixon, 2018; Liu, 2006; Terry & Macy, 2007). The *U.S. News & World Report* college rankings have been mined for alumni giving trends, with results indicating that both lower acceptance rates (Terry & Macy, 2007) and higher overall rankings (Liu, 2006) are both correlated with higher alumni giving participation rates. Faria et al. (2019) explain how a snowball effect exists, in that alumni giving raises institutional prestige, which then in turn serves to increase the alumni giving participation rate. Finally, when students perceived their own university as having high external prestige, they reported higher organizational identity (Kim et al., 2010), an antecedent of alumni giving.

Prestige is also measured by alumni perception. Sang and Yang (2009) found Korean university students' perception of their own school's reputation was positively correlated with their self-reports of intending to support the university in the future. When alumni believe their former university is experiencing current success, they were also more likely to give (Baruch & Sang, 2012; Cunningham & Cochi-Ficano, 2002). The average SAT scores of current applicants or incoming students may impact alumni giving because it signals prestige (Cunningham & Cochi-Ficano, 2002), although other research studies did not find this particular relationship

significant (Clotfelter, 2001, 2003). Even athletic prestige can positively impact alumni giving, as alumni have shown a greater propensity to give when their former school experiences current athletic success (Bae et al., 2016; Wunnava & Okunade, 2013). Ultimately, any prestige component which increases brand identification increases alumni giving (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014b), and brand identification reinforces other forms of identification such as alumni identification.

### **Student Characteristics**

The student experience, which begins from moment a student applies to their college or university, reinforces students' organizational identification and helps them internalize the school into their social identity (Myers et al., 2016). When students express strong organizational and social identification with their school, they are more likely to express intent to engage in future alumni support behaviors, such as being willing to recommend the school to others, donating after graduation, attending alumni and campus events, or serving as a volunteer (Garvey & Drezner, 2016; Myers et al., 2016). The primary student characteristics impacting alumni giving include: the types of degrees earned (Bae et al., 2016; Belfield & Beney, 2000; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Monks, 2003; Skari, 2014; Stephenson & Bell, 2014; Tiger & Preston, 2013); the academic experience (Belfield & Beney, 2000; Gaier, 2005; Garvey & Drezner, 2016; Koenig-Lewis et al., 2016; Nettet & Helgesen, 2009; Snijders et al., 2019; Weerts & Ronca, 2009); relationships with faculty and staff (Clotfelter, 2001, 2003; Frisby et al., 2019; Gaier, 2005; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; McAlexander & Koenig, 2010, 2015; Snijders et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2007; Sung & Yang, 2009); the breadth, depth, and type of student involvement on campus (Clotfelter, 2001; Gaier, 2005; Holmes, 2009; Lara & Johnson, 2012; Myers et al., 2016; Rau & Erwin, 2015; Snijders et al., 2019; Stephenson & Yerger, 2014b, 2015; Sung & Yang, 2009;

Tiger & Preston, 2013; Weerts & Cabrera, 2018); athletic participation (Clotfelter, 2003; Lara & Johnson, 2012; Marr et al., 2005; Meer & Rosen, 2008, 2018; Monks, 2003; O'Neil & Schenke, 2006); participation in Greek Life (Bae et al., 2016; Marr et al., 2005; Monks, 2003); overall student satisfaction (Baruch & Sang, 2012; Clotfelter 2001, 2003; Cohen, 2006; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; McDearmon, 2010; Monks, 2003; Stephenson & Yerger, 2014b; Sun et al., 2007); positive campus climate for LGBTQ identity (Garvey & Drezner, 2016); and the impact of student philanthropy (Drezner, 2009; Holmes, 2009; Chisholm-Burns & Spivey, 2015).

### ***Degree Earned***

The type of degree, the academic program, and the number of degrees a student earns impacts their relationship with their university, yet is only limited available research on how these factors influence alumni giving behaviors. The number of different colleges a student attends was found to be negatively associated with alumni role identity (Mael & Ashforth, 1992) because attending multiple schools can have a diluting effect on any one alumni identity. In the same study, Mael and Ashforth (1992) found alumni had the strongest identification with the school they most recently attended. However, there are conflicting research findings on how graduate school attendance impacts giving to undergraduate institutions. While some research shows alumni of liberal arts colleges give the most (see above), other studies indicate graduate and professional school alumni are more likely to make financial gifts (Bae et al., 2016; Belfield & Beney, 2000). In some cases, for example, alumni who enrolled in further schooling described their relationship with their undergraduate institution as weaker (Koenig-Lewis et al., 2016), and one study reported alumni with advanced degrees were less likely to join their undergraduate alumni association (Newman & Petrosko, 2011).

There is also conflicting research on alumni giving among community college and

transfer students (McDearmon, 2009; Monks, 2003; Skari, 2014; Stephenson & Bell, 2014; Tiger & Preston, 2013). One study found transfer students were less likely to give than students who start and finish at the same school (Stephenson & Bell, 2014). On the other hand, Skari (2014) studied community college graduates who go on to complete a four-year degree. The study reported those who gave to their four-year school were four times more likely to also give to the school which granted them their associate's degree (Skari, 2014). Additionally, among alumni who reported giving to another college or university they had attended, 85% of them also gave to the institution sending the survey (McDearmon, 2009), further confounding this issue. The type of degree earned and relationship to alumni giving may also be purely financial, since undergraduates who proceeded to earn an MBA or law degree gave larger donations to their undergraduate alma mater than those who did not earn advanced degrees (Monks, 2003). The only marked exception to this trend was Ph.D. holders who did not give larger donations (Monks, 2003). The type of academic program or program delivery platform also mitigates alumni giving. There is evidence that online programs and courses are negatively associated with alumni giving, even among students who are traditional undergraduates (Tiger & Preston, 2013). While not covered within the scope of this study, the impact of online and hybrid education programs on identification and alumni giving is an area which merits future exploration.

### *Academic Experience*

The quality of the academic experience has a significant impact on how alumni support their university (Gaier, 2005; Garvey & Drezner, 2016; Koenig-Lewis et al., 2016; Nessel & Helgesen, 2009; Weerts & Ronca, 2009). Alumni who report satisfaction with the academic experience also report more willingness to remain affiliated with their college (Weerts & Ronca, 2009) and exhibit more support behaviors as alumni (Gaier, 2005; Garvey & Drezner, 2016).

Specifically, Koenig-Lewis et al. (2016) used measures of social identity theory to study alumni attitudes and found positive recall of the academic experience was more important than positive recall of the social experience in their self-reported measures of loyalty and their intent to engage in support behaviors. In one study of Norwegian college students, the quality of the academic experience had the strongest impact on general student loyalty (Nesset & Helgesen, 2009), which leads to greater alumni loyalty after graduation. Several studies exploring the impact of education abroad provide evidence students who study abroad self-report higher levels of alumni giving (Haupt & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2020; Mulvaney, 2017), a trend attributed to the impact of international experiences on overall civic engagement.

### ***Relationships with Faculty and Staff***

Across alumni giving and alumni engagement research, there is consistent evidence a positive academic experience depends on the relationships students have with faculty and staff on campus (Clotfelter, 2001, 2003; Frisby et al., 2019; Gaier, 2005; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; McAlexander & Koenig, 2010, 2015; Snijders et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2007; Sung & Yang, 2009). Student engagement and relationships with faculty are more important than academic engagement alone in developing loyalty to the institution (Snijders et al., 2019). Alumni who were mentored by a faculty or staff member are more likely to report satisfaction with their student experience and are also more likely to make a donation (Clotfelter, 2001, 2003) as well as score higher on measure of organizational identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Among Korean university alumni, those who described their relational experiences with university employees were also more likely to have positive opinions and express a willingness to engage in future support behaviors (Sung & Yang, 2009). Similar conclusions were made about American university alumni (Gaier, 2005; Sun et al., 2007). Because smaller schools provide

more opportunities for tighter relationships between faculty and staff, these schools are therefore able to create a stronger brand community which reinforces the positive attitudes that alumni have about their degree, their connection to their peers, and their university overall (McAlexander & Koenig, 2010, 2015). Positive rapport with faculty and staff was found to be correlated with both greater organizational identification and alumni role identity (Frisby et al., 2019). Similarly, alumni who have positive memories of their relationships with faculty and staff are more loyal, measured by their trust of and affective commitment to their alma mater (Snijders et al., 2019).

### ***Level and Type of Student Engagement***

Student engagement in the co-curricular realm refers to breadth and depth of attachment a student has to their school while they are a student, as measured their level of involvement on campus, participation in student and residential life, and clubs and organizations (Kuh et al., 2010). Although it is just one facet of a student's experience, there is reason to believe student engagement is generally associated with alumni engagement and support. In an early study of alumni giving, students who participated in any extracurricular activity were more likely to make higher contributions as alumni (Clotfelter, 2001). Across multiple studies, alumni donations increased for anyone affiliated with any kind of organized campus group (Gaier, 2005; Holmes, 2009; Myers et al., 2016). The reverse has also been found: students who self-reported low levels of student engagement were also less likely to make a gift as alumni (Weerts & Cabrera, 2018). Overall student engagement is correlated with increased alumni loyalty (Snijders et al., 2019), organization identification (Myers et al., 2016), and identity salience (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014b).

The various avenues for student engagement and how they contribute to a student's

overall engagement is also valuable to explore. Students who were involved in volunteer and leadership positions on campus were more likely to make a gift (Weerts & Cabrera, 2018) and give larger gifts when they gave (Clotfelter, 2001). Students who lived in campus housing, especially those who were residential students during their senior year, were more likely to make a donation (Tiger & Preston, 2013). Simply attending social and sporting events while a student has been shown to increase organizational identification, as does participation in campus rituals and traditions (Diaz-Vidal & Pittz, 2019; Myers et al., 2016). In one longitudinal study of alumni, the relationship between student engagement and satisfaction (predicting a future propensity to give) was only moderate, although the particular school in the study reported overall high levels of both (Rau & Erwin, 2015). Only one study found a negative association between participation in student life and alumni giving, however this study did not look at other forms of support behaviors such as attending alumni events, volunteering, or recommending the college (Lara & Johnson, 2012).

The impact of participation in exclusive campus groups also provides insight into giving trends. For example, several studies found former fraternity and sorority members were more likely to give as alumni (Marr et al., 2005; Monks, 2003; Wunnava & Okunade, 2013), while another did not find a positive relationship between participation in Greek life and alumni giving (Bae et al., 2016). This may be due to the influence of Greek organizations soliciting their own donations and therefore alumni gifts to the university get deferred to them (Bae et al., 2016). Athletic participation as an undergraduate has mixed results as well. There is some indication former student athletes are more likely to give (Marr et al., 2005; Monks, 2003; Wunnava & Okunade, 2013), yet other studies found the reverse to be true (Lara & Johnson, 2012). The influence of athletics may be more team specific. Former student athletes who had a negative

experience donated less than their peers who had a positive experience (O'Neil & Schenke, 2006). Meanwhile, among male former student athlete donors, those whose teams were more successful when they were students were more likely to give, and those whose teams were still achieving success were more likely to give (Meer & Rosen, 2009b, 2018). Even academic exclusivity may influence giving, as one study found honors graduates were more likely to give more (Belfield & Beney, 2000).

### ***Student Satisfaction***

Measures of overall student satisfaction, dependent upon the totality of their student experience, may be the best overall predictor of alumni loyalty, organizational and social identification, and ultimately alumni giving (Monks, 2003). Student and alumni who report overall satisfaction with their educational experience are more likely to make an alumni gift (Baruch & Sang, 2012; Clotfelter, 2001, 2003; Sun et al., 2007). In one study, satisfaction with the undergraduate experience was determined as the most significant predictive factor in future alumni giving (Monks, 2003). Some of the earliest research on organizational identification and alumni identified a positive correlation between student satisfaction and organizational identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). More recent research indicates reported satisfaction with both campus resources and student affairs increased both brand identification and alumni giving rates (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014b, 2015). Strong campus culture and student satisfaction with campus culture cultivates alumni giving by instilling a desire to give back or say thanks to the school which shaped them personally (Diaz-Vidal & Pittz, 2019). Among LGBTQ alumni, those who express positive attitudes about the climate on campus were more likely to attend alumni events and make an alumni gift (Garvey & Drezner, 2016). Only HBCU graduates indicated ambivalence about their levels of satisfaction as they relate to their desire to support their school,



though these alumni have been characterized as having unusually high loyalty overall which may mitigate these results (Cohen, 2006).

The only isolated area of the student experience which has been identified as a reason young alumni do not give is dissatisfaction with career services, though this may be mitigated by the alumnus' own perception of their career situation (McDearmon, 2010). Informal research findings by Kelly (2020) reinforce the anecdotal evidence that alumni would like to be served more in the area of career services, and seeking to meet their needs might change their perception of their relationship with the university as merely "transactional" and rather establish it as a long-term affair.

### ***Student Philanthropy***

One final area of the student experience which warrants exploration is the experience a student has with student philanthropy while they are enrolled. The goal of student philanthropy is to encourage the habit of giving and to establish a culture of giving while students are on campus in order to teach them how to support the university as alumni (Coleman, 2011). In principle, student philanthropy should educate students about the role the generosity of others (namely, alumni) played in students' own education (Drezner, 2009). Student philanthropy is, therefore, a prime example of the type of symbolic interactions which help to socialize students into their future alumni role. While not every college or university has active student philanthropy programs, they are key to reinforcing social identity, to normalize and encourage peer solicitation, and to prepare students to give back as alumni (Drezner, 2009). For example, students who contribute to student fundraising campaigns are significantly more likely to make an alumni gift (Freeland et al., 2015; Holmes, 2009). In another study, Chisholm-Burns and Spivey (2015) discovered senior students who gave to their senior class gift were more likely to

give a gift after graduation, and the correlation was stronger the longer the senior class gift program had been in effect. Student philanthropy programs have the potential to significantly impact alumni role identity, something which can be established long before students graduate (Frisby et al., 2019).

Some colleges and universities wrap student philanthropy into service-learning programs as a method of teaching both civic engagement and civic mindedness. Green and Walkuski (2020) state “student philanthropy has demonstrated potential to be a powerful tool for non-profit education by enhancing students’ understanding of the funding landscape of the nonprofit sector...heightening their civic identity and sense of responsibility to be engaged within the nonprofit realm” (p. 181). In a study of the long-term impact of one such program, students who had participated in a philanthropy-based service learning course were more likely to express pro-civic attitudes, yet they did not self-report higher levels of civic behavior such as volunteer hours or money donated (Green & Walkuski, 2020). This area of research remains relatively limited, however, and warrants further exploration.

### **Alumni Characteristics**

Advancement and alumni relations professionals are keenly aware they cannot control much about the student experience, but they can seek to understand and serve the needs of the alumni population under their stewardship so that their relationship does not end on graduation day (Kelly, 2020). Research on alumni characteristics which impact alumni identification, engagement, and giving provides keen insight into best practices for university fundraisers (Council for the Advancement and Support of Education, 2018). Having a strong personal link to an organization is a major antecedent to charitable giving, and the strength of the link is positively correlated with expressed commitment by donors (Sargeant & Woodliffe, 2007). This

means university fundraisers have a distinct advantage which they can leverage—their constituents already share a relationship with the institution, at least up until the point of graduation. But as the research indicates, being an alumnus does not automatically convert to alumni support behaviors. As Pearson (1999) so aptly explains, “Solicitation is the last event in a chain of events, and the decision to give (or not to give) is influenced by many things which occur long before the solicitation arrives” (p. 7).

### *Alumni Engagement*

Alumni engagement is typically defined as any avenue by which an alumnus stays involved with their alma mater, whether attending a university event, paying dues to an alumni association, volunteering on a board, serving as a mentor, or staying connected to peers (Council for Advancement and Support of Education, 2018). There are countless iterations of engagement, but overall alumni engagement is strongly correlated with alumni giving (Baruch & Sang, 2012; Clotfelter, 2001), as is overall alumni satisfaction (Sun et al., 2007). Alumni engagement behaviors often mirror student engagement behaviors (Weerts & Cabrera, 2015), indicating engaged students are the same ones who are engaged alumni. Alumni who attended university-sponsored events (both on- and off-campus) gave more frequently and generously (Lara & Johnson, 2012) than those who did not, and simply being invited to events may predict donor behavior, particularly if those events are related to things the alumnus cared about as a student (Rau & Erwin, 2015). There is some evidence alumni who only attend sporting events do not report strong identification with the university at large, yet such attendance does strengthen the alumnus’ identity as an athletic booster of the school (Porter et al., 2011). Alumni who report a strong sense of belonging (considered a measure of unintentional social interactions) are more likely to be engaged alumni, more prone to make a donation, and more likely to hold positive

attitudes about alumni giving (Drezner & Pizmony-Levy, 2021).

On a practical level, alumni engagement is influenced by proximity to campus as well. Touré-Tillery & Fishbach (2017) posit people are more likely to engage in pro-social behavior when they are closer to the object who will benefit from the action, thereby reinforcing the actors' belief that their action will have a stronger impact. When applied to alumni giving, they found alumni in closer proximity to their former college gave more than those who lived further away (Touré-Tillery & Fishbach, 2017). A study of Middlebury College graduates echoes the role of proximity, as those who lived within 250 miles of their former university were significantly more likely to attend a reunion and also more likely to give (Holmes, 2009). Proximity may be the mitigating factor which differentiates those alumni who are inclined and able to volunteer from those who actually do so (Weerts & Ronca, 2007). This was confirmed by Gaier (2005) who reported alumni who lived in the same state as their former university were more likely to be supportive. It seems absence may also sometimes make the heart grow fonder, however, as Lara and Johnson (2012) found Colorado College alumni were more likely to give the further away they lived. The alumni who are employed by their alma mater maintain the closest ties, both physical and psychological. Alumni who are also employees were more likely to make a financial gift to the school than their non-alumni employee peers (Borden et al., 2014; Knight, 2014), although alumni employees were also less likely to join the alumni association (Newman & Petrosko, 2011). Adding the employee role on top of the alumni role further increases the salience of an alumnus' identification with the university (Borden et al., 2014).

### ***Alumni Communication and Peer Networks***

Communication with alumni is the primary tool which advancement offices use to maintain their connection with their constituents (Levine, 2018). The most common

communication pieces include alumni magazines and newsletters, financial appeals, university news, and social media networks (Levine, 2018). Overall communication with alumni was positively correlated with alumni giving and involvement (Tsao & Coll, 2005), and alumni who stayed current on university news were more likely to have positive opinions about the school and more likely to give (Sun et al., 2007; Weerts & Ronca, 2009). Not all communication tools have the same impact, however. Levine (2008) found the overall number of communication pieces was not significantly correlated with higher alumni giving, but alumni magazines and newsletters were. Ironically, this result infers alumni may actually be less likely to give when directly asked for money via appeals. In the case of HBCU alumni, however, there was no measurable correlation between communication with alumni and alumni giving (Cohen, 2006).

The most common alumni peer networks are alumni associations, alumni professional and social networks, and social media groups (Council for the Advancement and Support of Education, 2018). Membership in alumni associations is a key vehicle to maintain the connection between alumni and their universities (Baruch & Sang, 2012; Farrow & Yuan, 2011; Newman, 2011; Newman & Petrosko, 2001; Porter et al., 2011; Sargeant & Shang, 2012). Membership adds to donor identity (Sargeant & Shang, 2012), and members are more likely to keep their contact information current, stay connected with other alumni, stay more informed about and involved with the university, and report overall positive experiences (Newman, 2011; Newman & Petrosko, 2011). Most importantly, members in dues-paying alumni associations are nearly five times more likely to have given a gift in any given year and over 11 times more likely to have cumulative lifetime donations of over \$10,000 (Porter et al., 2011). Baruch and Sang (2012) found MBA graduates involved in their alumni network (most likely for their own professional goals) were also more likely to make financial donations. Social media platforms are also

proving to be useful, though research is limited to date. Farrow and Yuan (2011) reported alumni who maintain social ties by actively participating in Facebook groups felt more informed about the university and closer to their peers, resulting in a positive correlation with alumni support behaviors.

### ***Alumni Brand Identification***

Alumni brand identification explains continued loyalty, including behaviors such as purchasing or displaying university logos and mascots or making a donation (McAlexander & Koenig, 2006). Brand-building activities can also include a university's athletic success and public prestige (Bae et al., 2016). Even speaking positively about the university or recommending it to others is a form of brand building (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014a). The research on brand identification emerges out of relationship marketing studies and is defined in the context of brand communities (McAlexander & Koenig, 2010, 2012). Universities easily create brand communities in part because of the tight relationships formed among students and alumni, and brand identity converts to alumni support behaviors as alumni get older (McAlexander & Koenig, 2004). There is some evidence smaller schools create stronger brand communities because the relationships are tighter (McAlexander & Koenig, 2010), which may explain graduates of smaller schools more likely to report philanthropic intent (McAlexander & Koenig, 2012).

Brand identification is also a measure of perceived value, therefore when alumni perceive their degree and experience have positive value to them, they are more likely to report strong identification with the university (Jiménez et al., 2013) and more likely to give (Garvey & Drezner, 2016). Since most alumni do not have the opportunity to "re-purchase" (a form of brand loyalty in consumer products), alumni express their brand identification when they recommend

their former school to a prospective student (Cohen, 2006; Okunade & Berl, 1997). In the context of overall organizational identification, relationship marketing research helps explain the attachment students develop with their university (Loh et al., 2012) and how this trust can be leveraged for future alumni support behavior. University brand identification is positively associated with the likelihood of an alumnus making a donation, the total amount the alumnus gives, and the frequency at which they give (Stephenson & Bell, 2014; Stephenson & Yerger, 2013, 2015). In sum, marketing in higher education benefits from an integration of identity theory and identity salience because individuals with strong brand identification place the organization among its highest priorities (Arnett et al., 2003).

### ***Alumni Loyalty and Role Identification***

Alumni loyalty refers to the emotional and psychological commitment an individual has to their university, bonds which form during their student years and can be converted to future intentions of support (Loh et al., 2012). There are several ways to measure and identify alumni loyalty. Iskhahova et al. (2017) identified the four factors in alumni loyalty as behavioral, attitudinal, material, and nonmaterial. Schlesinger et al. (2017) provides more specificity, defining it by the variables of trust, shared values, brand image, and satisfaction. Loyalty can be defined by a willingness to engage in both monetary and nonmonetary support behaviors (Snijders et al., 2019). When alumni self-report positive opinions regarding their student experience, they are more likely to express loyal sentiments and engage in behaviors that support the university (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001). Even the act of gift giving is an emotional expression of loyalty, therefore encouraging young alumni to give will reinforce their brand loyalty and result in ongoing gift giving as they get older (McAlexander & Koenig, 2004). Traditions and rituals also contribute to brand loyalty, leading to alumni to report stronger

identification with the brand community and greater levels of support (Martin et al., 2015).

Alumni role identification is best defined by the salience of the identification an alumnus has with their role as an alumnus (McDearmon, 2011, 2013). Mael and Ashforth (1992) established that strong alumni identification will predict future support intentions and behaviors, and that identification is impacted by organizational identification and social identity. There are social expectations and behavioral expectations of the alumni role, and McDearmon (2010) determined strong alumni role identity is positively correlated with the willingness to act in ways that support the university. Similarly, alumni identification was a mediating factor in alumni giving to both academic areas and the general fund, as well as with willingness to promote the university (Porter et al., 2011). There is evidence this correlation may even become stronger over time (Porter et al., 2011). One study found a positive correlation between elapsed time since graduation and both alumni role identity and loyalty among graduates of one UK university (Koenig-Lewis et al., 2016). This research reinforces the need to understand the lifecycle of alumni role identity, not just in the rearview mirror but from the very point at which the alumni role begins.

### **Financial Aid Characteristics**

Exploration of alumni giving must also include consideration of the financial aid characteristics which impact the financial capacity and inclination to give among alumni (Marr et al., 2004). Outside of income, the most relevant factors under consideration are the presence and amount of student loans as well as the types of scholarships the alumnus received while a student (Marr et al., 2004). Research on the relationship between student loans and scholarships on alumni giving is not robust, but merits discussion in the complex issue of donative behavior.



### ***Student Loans***

The negative impact of student loans on overall spending is well documented in the literature: across all consumer spending categories, the magnitude of student loan debt is affecting borrowers' consumer decisions and even delaying major life milestones such as marriage, children, and buying a house (Cornelius & Frank, 2015). The 2020 Voluntary Alumni Engagement in Support of Education (VAESE) survey reported that the average college student is graduating with \$35,359 in student loan debt and yet 78% of alumni are still solicited for an alumni gift within the first year of graduating (VAESE, 2020). In alumni giving research conducted as early as 2002, Monks (2003) reported loans had a dampening effect on how much alumni gave, and Marr et al. (2005) reported the presence of student loans decreased the probability of a graduate making a gift during the first eight years after graduation. Students with loans and/or grants were also associated with a lower likelihood of a student making a gift in a student philanthropy campaign (Freeland et al., 2015). However, similar research conducted on wide breadth of institutions did not find a significant correlation between student loans and alumni gift giving trends (Cunningham & Cochi-Ficano, 2002). Many of these studies are dated, therefore it is unclear about the current impact of student loans in the present era.

More recent literature on the impact of student loans on subsequent alumni giving indicates the issue of debt remains an important consideration for alumni as they make their giving decisions (Chisholm-Burns & Spivey, 2015; McDearmon & Shirley, 2009; Meer & Rosen, 2012, 2018; Terry & Macy, 2007). Schools with larger average student loan debt per graduate have statistically significant lower alumni giving rates (Terry & Macy, 2007) and alumni who had student loan debt of over \$15,000 were more likely to self-identify as non-donors (McDearmon & Shirley, 2009). The mere presence of a student loan decreased an

alumnus' probability of giving, and among those with debt who do give, their gift amount is conversely related to their debt level (Meer & Rosen, 2012, 2018). Very little research exists on how student debt influences young alumni and their attitudes about alumni giving. However, in a small study of recent graduates, student loan debt was the most-often cited reason for choosing not to contribute to their senior class gift campaign (Chisholm-Burns & Spivey, 2015).

### ***Merit-Based and Need-Based Scholarships***

The types of financial aid a student receives, particularly whether the aid is need-based or merit-based, impacts alumni giving (Freeland et al., 2015). One form of financial aid which has contributed to declining revenue and the need for more outside support from donors is rising institutional scholarships (Cunningham & Cochi-Ficano, 2002). Understanding the impact of financial aid is particularly important in the context of social exchange theory and creating a culture of philanthropy, as reciprocity may influence alumni giving (Freeland et al., 2015). The research results are mixed, however, partly because the research terms are not always consistent (e.g. need- and merit-based aid is sometimes lumped together as simply financial aid). There is evidence that schools which provide large need-based aid receive more donations from alumni (Cunningham & Cochi-Ficano, 2002; Marr et al., 2005). Yet other research shows young alumni who were recipients of need-based financial aid gave smaller gifts than those who did not receive need-based aid (Clotfelter, 2003), and the percentage of Pell Grant recipients at a school was negatively correlated with overall rates of alumni giving at an institution (Terry & Macy, 2007).

The growing phenomenon of merit aid (also called tuition discounting) awarded in the form of academic scholarships is often used to increase the reputation of a school's student body and as a recruitment tool, yet because these funds must be backfilled by a concomitant increase in charitable donations, it may not be a net-positive financial move for colleges (Cunningham &

Cochi-Ficano, 2002). Social exchange theory might lend to the hypothesis that those who receive merit-based scholarships would be more likely to make an alumni gift as a way to give back, but research results are mixed. One study found no positive correlation between receiving merit scholarships and giving (Cunningham & Cochi-Ficano, 2002), while others found being a scholarship recipient increased the likelihood of giving (Freeland et al., 2015; Marr, 2005). Complicating the matter further is some research studies lump together both need-based aid and merit-based aid in the overall category of scholarships, making it difficult to delineate between the two in research. In one study of a large, Midwest university alumni population, McDearmon (2009) found over 50% of students who received financial awards self-identified as alumni donors, reflecting an above-average giving percentage. On the other hand, Meer and Rosen (2012, 2018) found scholarship recipients were no more or less likely to make a gift, but when they did give, their gifts were smaller on average than students who had not received scholarships. Finally, in a small-scale study of recent pharmacy graduates, Chisholm-Burns and Spivey (2015) found those who had received undergraduate scholarships were more likely to contribute to senior class gift. The presence of scholarships did not negatively impact student philanthropy participation in another of giving among young alumni (Freeland et al., 2015). The lack of definitive research in this area indicates it needs further exploration.

### **Non-donor Characteristics**

A discussion of alumni giving would be incomplete without a review of the characteristics common to alumni non-donors. Alumni non-donors are those who choose not to make a financial contribution even though they are asked to contribute annually (through mail, phone campaigns, email campaigns or peers). Alumni non-donors consistently report they do not believe their alma mater needs their contribution (Wastyn, 2009). In one study, the attitude that

the university does not need alumni donations was the most defining characteristic between alumni who chose to give and those who did not (Weerts & Ronca, 2009). Among Stanford alumni, the belief that the school did not need money was the most oft-cited argument against donating given by alumni who chose not to give (Pearson, 1999). In both studies, those same alumni were willing to give to other charities, just not their college. Conversely, alumni who donate or volunteer their time are more likely to believe the university does need their time and money (Weerts & Ronca, 2007).

There is evidence alumni giving offices need to make a better case in their promotional efforts requesting the financial support from their alumni (Cohen, 2006). In addition, the value of small gifts has typically not been communicated clearly by universities is a predictive factor when studying why alumni non-donors do not make a gift (O'Neil & Schenke, 2006). In one study, alumni non-donors did not even believe they could make small gifts (Wastyn, 2009). This phenomenon is not unique to higher education, however, as one study on charitable giving trends showed 33% of those who stop giving to charity reported they stopped giving because they did not feel like their gifts could make, or were making, a difference (Levine, 2008).

Across all types of charitable giving categories, non-donors report they do not give because they either do not get to control how their gift is used or do not believe their gift will be used well (Knight, 2004; Kottasz, 2004; McDearmon, 2010). Among high-income professionals, 80% indicated a preference to know exactly how their donation to a charity was going to be used (Kottasz, 2004). In charitable giving to higher education specifically, young alumni non-donors indicated they might be willing to make a gift if they could control where it would go and how it would be used (McDearmon, 2010). These same individuals expressed concerns about whether their gifts actually helped students (McDearmon, 2010), something about which younger alumni

might be more sensitive. Those closest to the university also express strong sentiments in this vein. In a study of faculty and staff campaigns, Knight (2004) noted individuals had very specific ideas about how their gifts should and could be used, while others expressed uncertainty about how their funds would be used. Across all charitable giving categories, people are more likely to give a gift, and believe their gift can make a difference, when they trust the target organization and believe in its efficacy (Evers & Gesthuizen, 2011). Finally, people are more likely to donate when they believe the organization to which they are giving is financially sound (Bennett, 2003).

The most salient argument alumni use to justify their non-donor status remains steeped in the culture of consumerism which pervades American higher education (Molesworth et al., 2019). Higher education as an industry is unique in that students first interact with the university as a student (consumer), then become alumni (potential donor). A market-driven higher education culture is creating the impression that a degree is something you get or have, therefore there is no implicit obligation to pay any more towards something for which you have already paid (Molesworth et al., 2009). Tomlinson (2017, 2018) has extensively studied consumerist attitudes among university students in the United Kingdom. Through qualitative analysis, he found British students commonly self-identify as consumers and believe the university should therefore respond to them as a customer-supplier (Tomlinson, 2017, 2018). Moreover, these students describe the university experience as something which was sold to them based on education being an investment which should produce a return (Tomlinson, 2017, 2018).

Young alumni have expressed negative views about being asked for money after graduation since they had recently paid so much in the form of tuition (Gaier, 2005), and other recent graduates reported not giving to their senior class gift because they had already paid tuition (Chisholm-Burns & Spivey, 2015). Non-donors are more likely than their donor peers to

consider higher education a commodity rather than a charity, believing they had already contributed by paying tuition (Wastyn, 2009). Students often measure the value of their higher education experience based on their analysis of the sacrifices they made versus the benefits they received (Woodall et al., 2011). Even former college athlete non-donors reported they felt they had already given to their university in the form of their athletic participation and therefore gave less than athletes who did not see their athletic participation as their contribution (O'Neil & Schenke, 2006).

Some consider the student-as-consumer model as antithetical to the core mission and values of higher education and learning (Tomlinson, 2017), however, the growing trend that alumni may perceive no reason to contribute further is problematic for the entire industry of higher education fundraising. Molesworth et al. (2009) calls this the commodification of education, making a degree a consumer product subject to customer service demands. This transactional attitude leads to a "paid in full" mentality (Molesworth, 2009) and may pose challenges for alumni fundraisers going forward.

## **Conclusion**

The breadth of existing research in the areas of alumni giving paints a complex picture of the nature of giving, the characteristics of givers, and the context in which alumni choose to give or not to give. Adding to this body of research in a meaningful way by studying new alumni through the lens of alumni role identity provides the field with a new perspective to inform best educational fundraising practices with the next generation of alumni. Young alumni are an engaged generation who are willing to give of their time and money to causes which have immediate impact (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2020), but directing their engagement and generosity towards their university is the key to ongoing university fundraising success.

## Chapter III

### Design and Methodology

#### Introduction

This study of alumni role identity among recent college graduates bridged the gap in existing research and has the potential to provide insight into future alumni giving trends. The purpose of this research was to understand how new graduates perceive their relationship with their university at the point at which they make the transition from student to alumnus, how these perceptions inform their understanding of their new role as an alumnus, and how this understanding informs their intentions to engage in future alumni support behaviors. Using Mael and Ashforth's (1992) six-item subscale questionnaire of organizational identity and McDearmon's (2011, 2013) Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire, this study assessed the strength of a new graduate's organizational identification, how important their identification as an alumnus is to them, and how much they understand the behaviors associated with their alumni status. Finally, by asking new alumni about their intentions to engage in future support behaviors through five original questions based on McDearmon's (2011, 2013) scale, the results have the potential to impact fundraising and alumni engagement efforts among the next generation of graduates.

#### Research Design

This mixed-methods study employed a primarily quantitative method, with a supplemental qualitative component for exploratory purposes. This study's quantitative design was descriptive and inferential. It investigated how constructs were related to one another and other measured variables. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) define a construct as "an attribute or characteristic expressed in an abstract, general way" while "a variable is an attribute or

characteristic stated in a specific, applied way” (p. 113). An effective way to explore the relationship between constructs and variables is to use quantitative research based in a theoretical framework (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). While this study did not test any hypothesis, it was guided by theoretical frameworks of organizational identification and alumni role identity and their relationship to understanding of the alumni role and intent to engage in alumni support behaviors.

Quantitative research, particularly in the social sciences, is commonly executed using survey tools. A Likert-scale is defined as “a psychometric scale that has multiple categories which respondents choose to indicate their opinions, attitudes, or feelings about a particular issue” (Nemoto & Beglar, 2014, p. 2). Likert-scale data can be gathered and analyzed quickly and easily with high reliability (Nemoto & Beglar, 2014). This research built on prior quantitative research (Dillon, 2017; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; McDearmon, 2011, 2013; Tucker, 2018) and used a similar quantitative approach with a new population to provide a reference point for understanding the results. Because the current research examined a population which had not been studied with the chosen instrumentations, adding a strategic open-ended, exploratory qualitative question provided further insight into this population and can guide future research. In addition, the integration of quantitative and qualitative data collection is beneficial for educational research because the use of both words and numbers provides a depth and breadth of information unlikely to be matched by choosing only one method (Almaki, 2016).

### **Instrument**

The study survey (Appendix A) was created and distributed through Qualtrics, an online research platform. The quantitative portion consisted of four sections of Likert-scale measures of attitudes and one section with Likert-scale measures of self-reported behavioral intentions.



Likert-scales are a form of ordinal measurement which allow participants to rank their responses based on an implied or intrinsic order (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) and are an effective way to measure opinions and attitudes. The qualitative portion consisted of one optional, open-ended question. The demographic and collegiate experience portion comprised both binary questions (yes/no), nominal questions for categorical values, and interval scales to measure discrete values (see Appendix A).

### ***Organizational Identification***

The first part of the survey utilized Mael and Ashforth's (1992) six-item subscale designed to measure organizational identification. Using a 6-point Likert-scale (1= Strongly Disagree; 2= Disagree; 3=Slightly Disagree; 4=Slightly Agree; 5=Agree; 6=Strongly Agree), questions assessing organizational identification (OI) explored how strongly new graduates identify with their alma mater as an organization soon after graduation. Some examples of the questions include "When someone criticizes my university, it feels like a personal insult" and "If a story in the media criticized the school, I would feel embarrassed." The reliability of the six items of the organizational identity subscale ranged from .83 to .89 in previous studies, indicating a high level of internal reliability (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

### ***Alumni Role Identity***

The second part of the survey utilized the Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire (McDearmon, 2011, 2013) which comprised three subsections of five questions each on a 6-point Likert-scale (1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Slightly Disagree; 4=Slightly Agree; 5=Agree; 6=Strongly Agree). The first subsection asked about role salience, the second subsection asked about social expectations, and the third subsection asked about role expectations. Examples of role salience (RS) include "Being an alumnus of this university is

something I will think often about” and “I do not have clear feelings about being an alumnus of this university (reversed coded item).” Examples of social expectations (SE) include “Many people think of me as an alumnus of this university” and “It is important to my friends and family that I am an alumnus of this university.” Social Expectations Item 4 (“It does not matter to most people that I am an alumnus of this university”) and Item 5 (“Many people I know are not aware that I am an alumnus of this university”) were reverse-coded. Examples of role expectations (RE) include “As an alumnus of this university, it is my duty to support the university through volunteering” and “As an alumnus of this university, I am expected to attend alumni events (on- and off-campus).” Previous studies reported Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of .85, .84, and .89 respectively (McDearmon, 2011, 2013).

### ***Behavioral Intentions***

The third part of the survey asked new graduates about their future intent to engage in alumni support behaviors using a 5-point Likert-scale developed by the researcher with five options (1=Never, 2=Within the next 20 years, 3=Within the next 10 years, 4=Within the next 5 years, 5=Within the next year). Behavioral intentions (BI) items were created based on modifications of the role expectation subscale from the Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire (McDearmon, 2011, 2013). The inclusion of attitudes towards future support behaviors is supported by research by Weerts and Ronca (2007) who determined that alumni who perceive that they are expected to participate in supporting the university were more likely to be willing to engage in supportive behaviors. Higher scores indicated that the alumni were more likely to engage in alumni support in a shorter timeframe.

### ***Demographic and Collegiate Experiences***

The last section of the survey comprised close-ended (multiple choice and binary)

demographic questions and questions regarding respondents' collegiate experience and involvement. Studies of identity require additional demographic coding, specifically pre-established codes that relate to inherent attributes (such as age, gender, ethnicity) (Saldaña, 2013). Therefore, alumni were asked about personal traits such as age and gender, as well as race/ethnicity (categories determined by the National Institutes of Health, 2015). New alumni were also asked about their parent's and grandparent's educational status, college attendance among siblings, and legacy status. Participants were asked about their financial aid history, including the presence of both need- and merit-based scholarships, as well as the presence of federal or private student loans, if applicable. Graduates were also asked about involvement in student activities, on- and/or off-campus employment, and their type of housing while a student. Because all these traits were identified in the literature review as potential factors influencing alumni giving, it was critical to include them in this research.

In addition, the survey included one optional, open-ended question about what types of experiences the participant may have had as an undergraduate which shaped their understanding of the alumni role. This question helped the researcher understand what factors contribute to alumni role identification and role socialization.

### ***Content Validity***

Effective research instruments must have both reliability and validity. Reliability is a measure of how consistent the instrument is in measuring a given construct, and validity refers to the accuracy of the tool in measuring that construct (Polit & Beck, 2006). One way to determine instrument content validity is to seek outside feedback from expert reviewers who can assess the content of the tool under consideration prior to administering it to participants. To establish content validity in this study, nine expert reviewers completed a robust questionnaire which

measured the relevance of each survey question to the applicable research question. The reviewers were asked to evaluate if each individual survey question was *Very Relevant – Quite Relevant – Someone Relevant – Not Relevant* in measuring the related research question. Eight of the nine expert reviewers either had completed a doctoral degree in the fields of education or social science at the time of their participation or were in the process of their own doctoral-level research. One of the nine had significant senior-level leadership experience in university administration and alumni giving.

The Content Validity Index (CVI) was calculated for both the item-level (I-CVI) and the scale-level (S-CVI) for the research tool used in this study. With a pool of nine expert reviewers, an item is considered valid if it has an I-CVI of at least .78 (or 78%), meaning at least seven of the nine experts must rate a question as *Very Relevant – Quite Relevant* (Lynn, 1985). The results of both the scale-level and item-level of content validity affirmed the use of each survey question (as written) as an accurate measure of the related research question. Out of 26 independent Likert-scale survey questions, 24 of them had an I-CVI score of 1.0, and the two remaining had an I-CVI score of .98. When broken down by scale-level, three of the five scales had S-CVI scores of 1.0 and the remaining two had S-CVI scores of .98. The sole open-ended question had an I-CVI score of 1.0. It was determined that the instruments used for this study had acceptable content validity and the pilot study was launched.

### ***Pilot Study***

Whenever a researcher is using a new research tool and/or a studying a new population of participants, pilot testing the study adds an additional layer of validity and reliability to a research survey. The pilot process helps the researcher identify any necessary modifications they might need to make to their survey instrument based on the feedback of the individuals who

participate in the pilot study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Although both Mael and Ashforth's (1992) measures of organizational identity and the Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire (McDearmon, 2011, 2013) had been previously published and adopted by multiple studies, they had never been administered to new college graduates (only to established alumni). The researcher also developed five original questions to assess alumni behavioral intentions specifically for this study. Therefore, a pilot study was conducted by surveying 23 college graduates who had completed their first undergraduate degree from a small group of private, Christian colleges during the prior academic year (2019-2020). This group of students was very similar to the target population in the current research. The only significant difference is that this group of graduates had the experience of being an alumnus for one year. Due to national pandemic restrictions, the Class of 2020 pilot study participants had very little opportunity to participate in any alumni events or activities during the year after their graduation, therefore their similarity to the Class of 2021 was higher than it might have been under normal circumstances.

The pilot study did not find any significant red flags. Ninety-one percent of pilot study participants reported that the questions were applicable to them, easy to understand, and administered appropriately. The survey took, on average, 8 minutes to complete (with a range of 4.1-14.8 minutes) and only one of the 23 respondents said they would have opted out of the survey before completing it. The pilot study participants completed 100% of the quantitative and qualitative questions, however 40% of them said they would have skipped the optional, open-ended question if they had not been part of the pilot study. Finally, approximately 22% of the participants said there were questions they did not want to answer but did not identify which specific questions they would have skipped if given a choice.

Pilot study participants were given the opportunity to provide open-ended feedback on their experience completing the survey instrument. The responses confirmed that the survey measured what it intended to measure, the questions were relevant and applicable, and the process was not overly burdensome. Some respondents expressed interest in reading the final study because the survey questions piqued their own interest about the alumni experience. Two respondents had hoped there would have been a place in the survey to express their frustration with their university. Overall, the pilot study results reinforced the research tool and did not raise any significant concerns that would have required modifying any questions or changing the research plan.

### **Data Collection**

In order to recruit participants, the researcher sent the site permission letter (see Appendix C) to the respective alumni officers at each of the eight universities who expressed willingness to participate in the study. The schools were sent written site confirmation letters (see Appendix G). After receiving IRB approval from NNU (Appendix H), schools were contacted to either submit email lists of their recent graduates to the researcher for survey recruitment (Appendix E) or send the survey link to send to their graduates directly. New alumni who responded to the email invitation to participate and who completed the online informed consent (see Appendix D) completed an original, confidential Qualtrics online survey which included Likert-scale questions, one open-ended question, and demographic questions (see Appendix A).

Alumni offices were encouraged, to the extent possible, to only include full-time, traditional-aged undergraduates (18-24 years old) who had completed their first bachelor's degree in person and on campus during the 2020-2021 academic year. However, some alumni

offices did not differentiate between online or non-traditional aged students when submitting their lists of graduates to the researcher. To be eligible to participate in the study, individuals needed to be (1) over the age of 18 at the time of the survey and (2) must have received their first undergraduate degree during the 2020-2021 academic year.

Surveys were distributed in July and August 2021 and prospective participants were incentivized by the option to be entered into a drawing for a \$100 Amazon gift card through an anonymous branch survey in Qualtrics. Reminders to complete the survey were sent after three days, one week, two weeks, and three weeks respectively, until the survey link was received by each prospective respondent at least five times (see Appendix E). The only exception to this distribution schedule was one school requested their alumni receive the survey reminder only two times after the initial invitation. To reduce method bias, survey questions were semi-randomized in Qualtrics within each section of the survey measuring constructs with Likert-scale questions. This method of partially individualized item is a common online research strategy to protect against survey bias, while providing survey coherence that can prevent survey fatigue randomization (Loiacono & Wilson, 2020). Upon the survey closing, data was extracted from Qualtrics for coding and analysis.

## **Participants**

The survey was distributed to traditional undergraduates from the 2021 graduating class of students who attended four-year baccalaureate institutions affiliated with the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) in the Pacific Northwest and California. Thirteen schools across Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and California were invited to participate in the study. Eight schools chose to participate in the study (designated schools “A-H”). Seven schools chose to participate in the study by providing the researcher direct access to the email addresses

of their graduates (schools “A-G”). One school (school “H”) opted to send the survey link to their graduates on behalf of the researcher. Five schools opted to not participate in the study. Schools who opted out were either understaffed, never responded to the email, had policies against sharing email addresses, do not participate in research originating from a third-party, or because they already had plans to survey their own 2021 graduates for other purposes.

Using online survey platforms for educational research is one of the most popular forms of data collection, particularly among doctoral students (Saleh & Bista, 2017). Recruiting study participants via email survey invitations has both its opportunities and challenges, however. On one hand, email recruitment is convenient, inexpensive, and efficient, yet it can also yield low participation rates because of the volume of email messages people receive on a daily basis (Sapleton & Laurenço, 2016). In addition, email addresses can be unreliable and email providers have developed sensitive spam filters that block delivery of messages to intended recipients. Survey response rates are highly variable, but they do increase when email subject lines, email invitations, and survey instruments are personalized (Trespacios & Perkins, 2016). Therefore, email invitations and survey forms were branded for each batch of university graduates by including their respective university names and logos in all communication. Among the eight participating schools, there were collectively 2,035 graduates who received their first bachelor’s degrees during the 2020-2021 academic year and who had an active email address on file with their alumni office and who were sent the invitation to participate. In order to achieve a sampling error of +/- 5% and a 95% confidence interval, the researcher established a target sample size of 333 responses based on a population pool of approximately 2,000 (Israel, 1992).

### **Analytical Methods**

The first level of analysis was to assess the overall organizational identification and



alumni role identity among the respondents. Organizational identification was measured by six questions (OI serving as the score for “organizational identity”) and the average of the responses provided the answer to Research Question 1 (How strongly do new alumni identify with their alma mater?). Research Question 2 (How strongly do new alumni identify with their new alumni role?) was answered by combining two dimensions (five questions each) of McDearmon’s (2011, 2013) alumni role identity tool (role salience, RS, and social expectations, SE) and the average of the 10 responses represent the level of alumni role identification (AR serving as the score for “alumni role”). Research Question 3 (How much do new alumni understand about alumni role behavior expectations?) was answered by McDearmon’s (2011, 2013) third dimension (five questions, averaged) of alumni role identity tool (RE serving as the score for “role expectations”). Finally, Research Question 4 (Do new alumni express intention to engage in future university support behaviors?) was answered by the average scores on five different measures of future behavior intentions (BI serving as the score for “behavioral intentions”). Table 1 (below) outlines the research questions and their perspective instruments.

**Table 1***Summary of Likert-scale Questions*

Research Question	Source	Measurement	Label
RQ 1: How strongly do new alumni identify with their alma mater?	Mael and Ashforth's (1992) measure of organizational identification	Average of 6 Likert-scale questions on a six-item scale	OI ("Organizational Identity")
RQ 2: How strongly do new alumni identify with the alumni role?	McDearmon's (2011, 2013) measures of role salience and social expectations	Average of two sets of 5 Likert-scale questions on a six-item scale	AR ("Alumni Role")
RQ 3: How much do new alumni understand about alumni role behavior expectations	McDearmon's (2011, 2013) measure of role expectations	Average of 5 Likert-scale questions on a six-item scale	RE ("Role Expectations")
RQ 4: Do new alumni express intention to engage in future university support behaviors?	Adapted measure of McDearmon's (2011, 2013) measure of role expectations	Average of 5 Likert-scale questions on a five-item scale	BI ("Behavioral Intentions")

A Pearson-product correlation was conducted to explore the relationships between the measured variables (i.e., organizational identification or OI, alumni role identity or AR, alumni role expectations or RE, and future behavioral intentions or BI) and demographic and background variables, including age, gender, engagement level, etc. The goal of this correlational analysis was to determine "the degree and magnitude of the relationship between two or more variables" (Creswell & Guetterman, 2016, p. 124) which is one of the primary objectives of this study.

***Qualitative Analysis***

The single open-ended survey question was coded via content analysis, an established

and flexible research method often used in the social sciences (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; White & Marsh, 2006). At its core, content analysis uses “rules of inference to move from the text to the answers to the research questions” (White & Marsh, 2006, p. 27). The qualitative data on alumni role socialization was coded first using content analysis to provide some insight into what campus efforts are most useful in educating students on their future role as alumni. Because the open-ended question was primarily included for exploratory purposes, structural coding was also employed to categorize the responses for future study (Saldaña, 2013). Structural coding is appropriate for open-ended survey questions because similarly coded responses can be combined to identify themes and ideas, then further coded for more in-depth review (Saldaña, 2013). In order to align the qualitative responses to the four research questions, the researcher applied an additional level of protocol coding to the content analysis, organizing the results of the content and structural analysis around the predetermined codes (in this case: OI, AR, RE, and BI) derived from the research questions. Protocol coding is appropriate because the codes were previously established as appropriate measurement constructs and applied retrospectively (Miles et al., 2019) for the quantitative analysis, and thus this method of coding provided a way to align the qualitative responses with the research questions.

### **Limitations**

This study, like all research, had limitations. First, the population was limited in scope because the study focused only on recent, first-time graduates of private colleges and universities associated with the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) in the Pacific Northwest and California. This was by design, so the participating schools had similar characteristics, such as average cost, type and size of institution, regional characteristics, campus culture, and the level of academic and social support smaller schools naturally provide. However,

this choice also resulted in the racial homogeneity of the participants (predominately white), and a greater likelihood of coming from an above-average economic background or have parents who were likely to have attended college themselves. In addition, these schools have the advantage of a small community which engenders closer relationships, more contact between students and faculty, and often provide significant financial support through scholarships and grants, all of which contribute to alumni giving, as discussed in Chapter 2. However, the researcher sought to address this limitation by including schools from a breadth of cities and states, across a variety of institution sizes, serving students from diverse backgrounds, and from multiple denominational affiliations.

Participation in the study was also optional. Therefore, there may be a self-selection bias regarding the types of students who chose to complete a survey without any direct incentive. This has the potential of bias, with students on both ends of the satisfaction spectrum being more eager to share their extremely positive or extremely negative opinions. The only way to control for these variables was to make sure the sample size was large enough to mitigate against sampling error and to maintain a small effect size (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Another limitation was the inherent nature of Likert-scale measures of attitude. There was the potential of respondents choosing many answers in the middle (“slightly agree” or “slightly disagree”) if they had no significant opinion or personal preference on any given measure (Johns, 2010). The choice of Likert-scale with six values may have helped control for this (over and above a five-value scale in which the middle value is neutral) because a six-item scale encourages participants to combat ambivalence and decide in one direction or another (Johns, 2010). In addition, the survey was approximately 10 minutes in length, therefore some participants may have quit the survey before completion, decided not to begin the survey at all,

or forgot to return to finish if they were interrupted. The incentivization link did not appear until the survey was completed and may have mitigated against this potentiality. And finally, because the open-ended question was optional, there was a risk of students skipping them altogether. To reduce this liability, the survey did not explicitly identify the question as optional, though completing it was not required to progress through the survey.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As an advancement professional who specializes in alumni engagement and alumni giving, the researcher was careful to look for confirmation bias or underlying assumptions at every point in the research process. Using a research tool with prior validation across multiple uses provided some protection against incorrect interpretation of the survey data. Subjecting the current tool to a pilot study and validity testing by industry experts protected against these limitations. The researcher had intimate knowledge of the giving trends at one of the schools used in the study which could influence the interpretation of results. The researcher also had assumptions related to which demographic factors are anecdotally responsible for low alumni giving rates, especially among the demographic being studied, therefore the researcher must identify any bias and mitigate against them. The primarily quantitative approach and the anonymous data collection method helped protect against these potential biases.

## Chapter IV

### Results

#### Introduction

The ongoing need to develop sustainable and innovative fundraising efforts among alumni is essential to the financial health of colleges and universities (Jung & Lee, 2019; Weerts, 2007). With alumni giving participation in precipitous decline, there is a timely and relevant need to understand the existing factors which will impact the future of alumni giving, especially if higher education funding challenges continue on their current course. Most research on alumni giving takes place long after graduation and is descriptive rather than predictive. In other words, most of the available alumni giving studies describe the characteristics of the alumni who have already made a gift and why they made it (McDearmon, 2011). Little research has been conducted on the giving attitudes and philanthropic motivations of alumni, and even less research has focused on new alumni (Freeland et al., 2015; Jung & Lee, 2019). There is a pressing incentive to understand the attitudes recent graduates have towards their alma mater and what they understand about their new role as an alumnus so university fundraisers can more effectively attempt to influence their future support behaviors (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; McDearmon, 2011, 2013).

The purpose of this study was to understand how new graduates perceive their relationship with the university at the point at which they make the transition from student to alumnus, how these perceptions inform their understanding of their new role as alumni, and how this understanding informs their intentions to engage in future alumni support behaviors. This study, the first of its kind, explored the attitudes of new graduates through the lens of organizational and alumni role identity, building upon existing social science research in the area

of identity and how identity informs behavior. Much of the giving research has focused on internal and external motivation for philanthropic behavior (Andreoni, 1989; Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011; Kottasz, 2004; Mann, 2007; Ottoni-Wilhelm, 2017; Sargeant & Shang, 2012; Vesterlund, 2006). Identity theory, particularly when applied to the field of alumni giving to their alma mater, has several components. Organizational identification theory (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987) suggests individuals make personal decisions based on how the organization to which they belong is affected. Using organizational identity theory as a foundation, Mael and Ashforth (1992) posited that university alumni would act out support behaviors based on the integration of their alumni role into their sense of self and their desire to see their organization achieve success.

However, organizational identity does not account for how alumni determine what behaviors are associated with the social role to which they have been assigned. Tajfel's (1979) theory of social identity extends from this to explain how membership in a group influences behavior, but it does not explain how people come to understand and adopt those behaviors. Stryker's (1968) sociological theory of symbolic interactionism explains how the salience of any given social identity is reinforced by the shared expectations, symbols, and experiences around them. McDearmon (2011, 2013) sought to weave the concepts of identity theory with symbolic interactionism as a way to explain alumni support behaviors. Like most of the existing alumni research, however, McDearmon's (2011, 2013) research was retrospective and descriptive. This current study integrated Mael and Ashforth's (1992) subscale measurement of organizational identity and McDearmon's (2011, 2013) Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire to gain insight into the attitudes and behavioral intentions of individuals whose alumni role was brand new. The results have the potential to inform whether or not new alumni have strong organizational and alumni role identity, whether or not colleges and universities are socializing their graduates into

the alumni role, and whether or not new alumni intend to engage in alumni support behaviors in the future.

In order to understand the attitudes of new graduates and how their attitudes shape their potential future support behaviors as alumni, four research questions were addressed through quantitative methods: 1. How strongly do new alumni identify with their alma mater? (RQ1); 2. How strongly do new alumni identify with the alumni role? (RQ2); 3. How much do new alumni understand about alumni role behavior expectations? (RQ3); and 4. Do new alumni express intention to engage in future university support behaviors? (RQ4). The study also included one optional, open-ended question which was coded and analyzed in order to provide direction for future research about campus experiences which impact alumni role socialization. Respondents could answer the question “What experiences during your time at your university helped you understand or learn what it means to be an alumnus?” any way they chose. This question was used to provide additional insight into each of the four research questions.

Graduates completing their first undergraduate degree from eight private, faith-based colleges in the Pacific Northwest and California in the 2020-2021 academic year were surveyed in the summer of 2021 using a confidential online platform. Participants ( $n = 567$ ) completed 26 Likert-scale questions of attitude and behavior, 18 demographic questions about themselves and their collegiate experiences, and were offered the option to respond to one open-ended question assessing their understanding of the alumni role.

### **Survey Responses**

Response rates are a critical component in the validity and reliability of statistical research (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). A 25-30% response rate is a common response rate for online surveys (Fincham, 2008). Larger response rates mitigate against nonresponse bias and



larger sample sizes ensure the sample is representative of the population at-large (Fincham, 2008). For this study, a total of 580 graduates responded to the survey invitations and opened the Qualtrics survey link resulting an initial response rate of 28.5%. Of the 580 surveys, 13 (2%) were unusable or incomplete. The final sample included 567 respondents who completed all the requisite quantitative and demographic questions, resulting in a final response rate of 27.9% ( $n = 567$ ). The single, open-ended question was not a requirement to complete the survey, and 248 respondents responded with some information (319 respondents left it blank). Among the 248 who did, only 141 of those were usable responses ( $n = 141$ ). The other 107 answered in ways such as “none” or “n/a” or provided responses that were completely irrelevant or unrelated to the question asked. In sum, approximately 25% of participants included in the quantitative analysis were also included in the qualitative analysis. Table 2 (below) summarizes the survey response rate for all schools, including both quantitative and qualitative portions.

**Table 2**

*Survey Responses*

School	Total Sent	Total Quantitative	Total Qualitative	Response Rate (Quant/Qual*)
A	100	23	10	23.0% / 43.5%
B	201	61	19	30.3% / 31.1%
C**	375	81	19	21.6% / 23.5%
D	590	197	46	33.4% / 23.4%
E	80	23	5	28.8% / 21.7%
F	223	93	20	41.7% / 21.5%
G	339	72	20	21.2% / 27.8%
H***	127	17	2	13.4% / 11.8%
Total	2,035	567	141	27.9% / 24.9%

\* Percentage of respondents who also completed the optional qualitative question

\*\*School C only sent two follow-up reminders rather than the standard four

\*\*\*Surveys from School H were sent by the school’s alumni office directly and the researcher could not confirm the numbers of reminder emails sent

***Respondent Demographics***

Among the survey respondents ( $n = 567$ ), 35.4% were female, 62.8% were male, and

1.8% chose not to answer. The age distribution was divided into three categories (under 21, between 21-24, and over 25) with respondents falling into these three age groups at 2.5%, 75.8%, and 21.7% respectively. Although the researcher had attempted to capture the opinions of primarily traditionally aged graduates (21-24 age range), several schools did not have a way to separate out their graduates based on whether they were traditionally-aged or non-traditional students (typically older, adult students who live and work off-campus). This provides an explanation for the 21.7% of respondents who are older than 25. Among the students who responded to the survey, 71.6% reported their race/ethnicity as white, 7.9 % as Latinx, 3.2% as Asian, and 10.9% as bi-racial or multiracial. The remaining categories of Native American, Asian American, African, American, and Pacific Islander all were reported as under 1.5% each. These numbers are reflective of the typical demographic makeup of private Christian colleges in the Pacific Northwest and Northern California, therefore (see Table 3 below for gender, age and race demographics of participating colleges from the Fall 2020 reporting cycle).

**Table 3**

*Fall 2020 Enrollment\* Demographics of Participating Schools*

School	Men	Women	24 & Under	25 & Over	White	Latinx	Asian	Bi- or Multi- racial	All other races	Un- known
A	38.9%	61.2%	NR	NR	69%	5%	4%	8%	8%	6%
B	42.2%	57.8%	NR	NR	62%	13%	2%	7%	5%	12%
C	27.4%	72.6%	NR	NR	28%	55%	5%	0%	6%	5%
D	39.9%	60.1%	87%	13%	71%	11%	4%	7%	3%	3%
E	54.2%	45.8%	NR	NR	64%	14%	4%	7%	6%	4%
F	42.2%	57.8%	NR	NR	77%	11%	1%	4%	3%	4%
G	40.2%	59.8%	97%	3%	66%	13%	4%	9%	4%	4%
H	38.1%	61.9%	70%	26%	49%	24%	5%	7%	6%	9%
Average	40.4%	59.6%	84.7%	15.3%	60.8%	18.3%	3.6%	6.1%	5.1%	5.9%
Sample	62.8%	35.4%	78.3%	21.7%	71.6%	7.9%	3.2%	10.9%	6.4%	NA

*Note.* Demographic data from Fall 2020 as reported to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of the Department of Education (Department of Education, n.d.)

\*Race/ethnicity of all students reported to NCES, not just undergraduate

Nearly 60% of the respondents were the first child in their immediate family to attend college, and 38.6% did not have a parent with a college degree. Looking back one more generation, nearly 56% did not have a grandparent on either side who had graduated from college. Only 17.6% of students were legacy graduates from their university. Over 81% of all respondents had received scholarships based on their academic merit, and 63.5% had received scholarships based on financial need. Approximately 40% were recipients of federal Pell Grants, and 67.5% had also taken out federal student loans. Only 27.5% of graduates had taken out private student loans.

Student engagement was assessed by the number of campus activities graduates reported participating in while they were students. Other background information measured included how many years they lived on- and off-campus and whether or not they lived at home during their undergraduate years. Campus activities included options such as music, leadership, athletics, campus ministry, and clubs or organizations. While 20.5% of students reported no campus involvement, 38.4% reported being involved in 1-2 activities (low), 26.6% in 3-4 activities (medium), and 14.5% in over 5 activities (high). Over 67% of graduates who responded to the survey lived on campus at least one year (with 86% over of those living on campus at least 2 years). Only 36.2% reported living at home or with their family at least one year during their undergraduate experience.

### **Instrument Reliability**

Cronbach's alpha coefficient is the most commonly reported statistic used in the social sciences to evaluate and report internal consistency between multiple items on an instrument, particularly when multiple items form subscale measurements (Bonnett & Wright, 2015; Tabor, 2018). It is often used in the creation of new social science measurement tools as well (Bonnet &

Wright, 2015; Tabor, 2018). Bonnet and Wright (2015) argue that “there is no universal minimally accepted reliability value” (p. 4), however they explain that values under .70 would not typically be considered acceptable. Cronbach’s alpha coefficients above .70 are considered acceptable (Bonnet & Wright, 2015; Tabor, 2018). The organizational identity subscale has been previously used in multiple studies and had Cronbach’s alpha ranging from .83 to .89, indicating acceptable levels of internal reliability (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). In the current study, organizational identity (OI) had a similar level of internal reliability with a Cronbach’s alpha of .85 (see Table 4). McDearmon (2011, 2013) reported a Cronbach’s alpha of .85 for the subscale of role salience (RS), .84 for the subscale of social expectations (SE), and .89 for the subscale of role expectations (RE). In another application of the Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire, Dillon (2017) reported the same subscales with Cronbach’s alpha of .80, .83, and .87 respectively. In this study, the reliability coefficients were .81, .80, and .88 respectively. For the newly created subscale of behavioral intentions, Cronbach’s alpha was .77. While lower than the already established subscales, the cut-off of .70 of acceptable reliability was still attained. Research indicates lower reliability measures are appropriate for developing new scales in exploratory studies (Cho & Kim, 2015). Table 4 (below) reports all instrument reliability measures.

**Table 4**

*Reliabilities for All Measures in the Study*

Subscales Measured	Cronbach’s alpha
Organizational Identification (OI)	.85
Role Salience (RS)	.81
Social Expectations (SE)	.80
Alumni Role (AR = RS + SE)	.87
Alumni Role Behavior Expectations (RE)	.88
Behavioral Intentions (BI)	.77
All Alumni Roles Subscales Combined (RS+SE+RE)	.91
All Subscales Combined (OI+RS+SE+RE+BI)	.94

## Correlations

The study at hand is exploratory rather than predictive. As a result, it is critical to explore what factors contribute to organizational and alumni role identity. Therefore, the most appropriate tool to deploy is correlational analysis. Only one predictor variable was studied at a time, therefore the Pearson correlation coefficient served as a useful measure to determine meaningful relationships (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Significance levels of  $p < .05$  or less indicate that the null hypothesis can be rejected (in which the null hypothesis is there is no relationship between two variables) (Grabowski, 2016). In the case of a significant relationship, there is a 95% likelihood that the observed effect is due to the predictor variable (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). *P*-values greater than .05 mean that no effect was observed (Grabowski, 2016). This section discusses the results of the Pearson-product correlation analysis of the quantitative data. The means and standard deviations of all the measured variables are presented in Table 5 (below).

**Table 5***Descriptive Statistics*

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	<i>n</i>
Organizational Identity (OI)	3.62	1.07	567
Role Salience (RS)	3.34	1.04	567
Social Expectations (SE)	3.22	1.00	567
Alumni Role (RS + SE)	3.28	0.93	567
Alumni Role Behavior Expectations (RE)	2.35	1.01	567
Behavioral Intentions (BI)	2.09	0.92	567
Alumni Role Identity (RS + SE +RE)	2.97	0.86	567
ALL subscales combined	2.92	0.82	567
Age	2.19	0.45	567
Gender*	1.64	0.48	557
First sibling in family to graduate	0.59	0.49	567
Parent who graduated from college	0.61	0.49	567
Grandparent who graduated from college	0.44	0.50	567
Legacy student	0.18	0.38	567
Received merit-based scholarship	0.91	0.39	567
Received need-based scholarship	0.63	0.48	567
Pell Grant recipient	0.40	0.49	567
Federal loan taken out	0.68	0.47	567
Private loan taken out	0.28	0.45	567
Average number of campus activities	2.31	1.88	567
Level of student engagement	1.35	0.96	567
Worked on campus	0.59	0.49	567
Worked off-campus	0.72	0.45	567
Number of years in campus housing	1.81	1.53	567
Number of years in off-campus housing	1.30	1.35	567
Number of years lived at home	0.95	1.48	567

\*Ten respondents selected the option “choose not to answer”

The full correlations table with statistical significance can be found below in Table 7 (see pages 87-88). Gender was not related to any of the measured variables relating to alumni identifications or behavioral intentions. Age was only related to role expectations ( $r = .08, p < .05$ ). This suggests that recent alumni who are older tend to have better understanding of expectations of the alumni role. Age had an inverse relationship with parents' ( $r = -.23, p < .001$ ) and grandparents' college education level ( $r = -.27, p < .001$ ), legacy status ( $r = -.16, p < .001$ ), merit scholarship status ( $r = -.54, p < .001$ ), the amount of campus activity participations ( $r = -$

.37,  $p < .001$ ), levels of student engagement ( $r = -.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ), on-campus job experience ( $r = -.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and living on campus ( $r = -.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Age was positively associated with Pell Grant status ( $r = .15$ ,  $p < .001$ ), being a federal loan recipient ( $r = .10$ ,  $p < .05$ ), having an off-campus job ( $r = .21$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and living at home or with family ( $r = .28$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In other words, the alumni in this study who are older were less likely to have parents or grandparents with a college degree and less likely to be a legacy student. They were less likely to be recipients of merit-based scholarship but more likely to receive Pell Grants or have federal student loans. Finally, recent alumni who are older were less likely to participate in less campus activity, reported lower levels of student engagement, less likely to live on campus or have an on-campus job, and more likely to live at home or with family.

Student engagement (i.e., the number of activities students participated in on campus) was significantly and positively associated (at the  $p < .01$  level) with *all* subscale measures of organizational identification, alumni role identification, alumni role behavior expectations, and behavioral intentions. In other words, the more students participate on campus (e.g., athletics, performing arts, student leaderships, clubs, etc.), the greater likelihood they will self-report: higher levels of organizational identity, stronger and more positive feelings about being an alumnus, better understanding of the behaviors expected of them as alumni, and intentions to engage sooner in future university support behaviors. Statistical relationships between student engagement and all key measures of organizational and alumni role identity can be found in Table 6 below.

Living on campus was significantly and positively correlated with higher levels of alumni role social expectations ( $r = .11$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Working on campus was significantly and positively associated with both higher levels of alumni role social expectation ( $r = .11$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and overall

identification with the alumni role ( $r = .09, p < .05$ ). Conversely, living off-campus was significantly and negatively associated with role salience ( $r = -.09, p < .05$ ), social expectations ( $r = -.11, p < .01$ ), overall alumni role identification ( $r = -.11, p < .01$ ), and behavioral intentions ( $r = -.09, p < .05$ ). Working off-campus was significantly and negatively correlated with role salience ( $r = -.10, p < .01$ ), overall alumni role identification ( $r = -.10, p < .05$ ), and role expectations ( $r = -.09, p < .05$ ). Receiving a merit scholarship was significantly and positively associated with social expectations ( $r = .10, p < .05$ ), while taking out a federal loan was significantly and negatively associated with organizational identity ( $r = -.10, p < .05$ ). See correlations chart in Table 6 on for a summary listing of additional significant correlations,  $r$ -squared values, and  $p$ -values related to the key measures.



**Table 6***Summary of Significant Correlations Within Key Measures*

	Variable	Correlation	<i>r</i> -squared	<i>p</i> -value
Organizational Identification (OI)	Student engagement	Positive	<i>r</i> = .13	<i>p</i> < .01
	Federal loans	Negative	<i>r</i> = -.10	<i>p</i> < .05
Alumni Role Identification (AR)	Student engagement	Positive	<i>r</i> = .18	<i>p</i> < .01
	Working on campus	Positive	<i>r</i> = .09	<i>p</i> < .05
	Working off-campus	Negative	<i>r</i> = -.11	<i>p</i> < .01
Role Salience (RS) Subscale	Student engagement	Positive	<i>r</i> = .15	<i>p</i> < .01
	Living off-campus	Negative	<i>r</i> = -.09	<i>p</i> < .05
	Working off-campus	Negative	<i>r</i> = -.10	<i>p</i> < .05
Social Expectations (SE) Subscale	Student engagement	Positive	<i>r</i> = .17	<i>p</i> < .01
	Living on campus	Positive	<i>r</i> = .11	<i>p</i> < .01
	Working on campus	Positive	<i>r</i> = .11	<i>p</i> < .01
	Living off-campus	Negative	<i>r</i> = -.11	<i>p</i> < .01
	Merit aid	Positive	<i>r</i> = .10	<i>p</i> < .05
Alumni Role Behavior Expectations (RE)	Student engagement	Positive	<i>r</i> = .14	<i>p</i> < .01
	Working off-campus	Negative	<i>r</i> = -.09	<i>p</i> < .05
Behavioral Intentions (BI)	Student engagement	Positive	<i>r</i> = .21	<i>p</i> < .01
	Living off-campus	Negative	<i>r</i> = -.09	<i>p</i> < .05

Table 7

Full Correlations Table (page 1 of 2)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
OI	-	.67**	.55**	.67**	.59**	.52**	.72**	.83**	.04	.02	-.01	.02	.03	.04
RS		-	.66**	.92**	.61**	.57**	.90**	.87**	.07	0	.06	-.02	.03	.06
SE			-	.91**	.46**	.43**	.83**	.77**	-.05	.06	.06	0	.06	.05
AR (RS + SE)				-	.59**	.55**	.95**	.90**	.01	.03	.07	-.01	.05	.06
RE					-	.66**	.81**	.82**	.08*	-.05	-.03	-.04	-.07	.04
BI						-	.65**	.77**	.02	.01	.01	.01	.03	.07
ARI (RS + SE + RE)							-	.97**	.04	0	.04	-.02	.01	.06
ALL								-	.04	.01	.02	-.01	.02	.06
age									-	0	-.02	-.23**	-.27**	-.16**
gender***											.03	-.05	-.08	-.03
first_sib_grad											-	-.19**	-.13**	-.17**
parent_grad													.45**	.19**
gpparent_grad													-	.20**
legacy														-
merit														
need														
Pellgrant														
fed_loan														
priv_loan														
stu_engagement														
stu_eng_level														
onecampusjob														
offcampusjob														
onecampushousing_yr														
offcampushousing_yr														

Note. All scores are scaled scores. 1: OI = Organizational Identity; 2: RS = Role Salience; 3: SE = Social Expectations; 4: AR (RS + RE) = Alumni Role Identification; 5: RE = Role Expectations; 6: BI = Behavioral Intentions; 7: ARI (RS + SE + RE) = Alumni Role Identity Score; 8: ALL = All Subcales Combined; 9: Age (1 = Under 21, 2 = 21-24, 3 = 25+); 10: Gender (1 = Male, 2 = Female); 11: first\_sib\_grad = Is first among siblings to graduate from college (1 = no, 2 = yes); 12: parent\_grad = Has a parent who graduate from college (0 = no, 1 = yes); 13: gpparent\_grad = Has a grandparent who graduated from college (0 = no, 1 = yes); 14: legacy = Is a legacy graduate (0 = no, 1 = yes); 15: merit = Received merit scholarship (0 = no, 1 = yes); 16: need = Received need-based aid (0 = no, 1 = yes); 17: Pellgrant = Received Pell Grant (0 = no, 1 = yes); 18: fed\_loan = Took out federal student loans (0 = no, 1 = yes); 19: priv\_loan = Took out private student loans (0 = no, 1 = yes); 20: stu\_engagement = Number of campus activities (0-8); 21: stu\_eng\_level = Level of student engagement based on number of student activities (0 = none, 1 = low, 2 = medium, 3 = high); 22: onecampusjob = Worked on campus (0 = no, 1 = yes); 23: offcampusjob = Worked off campus (0 = no, 1 = yes); 24: onecampushousing\_yr = Number of years lived on campus (0-5); 25: offcampushousing\_yr = Number of years lived off campus (0-5); 26: liveathome\_yr = Number of years lived at home (0-5)

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \*\*\* $r = .567$  for all variables except sex, in which  $n = 557$  (10 chose not to answer)

**Table 7 (continued)**

Full Correlations Table (page 2 of 2)

Variables	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
OI	.04	-.03	-.01	-.10*	-.08	.13**	.12**	.01	-.07	0	-.05	.01
RS	-.04	0	.03	-.02	-.04	.15**	.14**	.06	-.10*	.02	-.09*	.03
SE	.10*	.06	.01	-.02	.03	.17**	.18**	.11*	-.07	.11**	-.11**	-.05
AR (RS + SE)	.03	.04	.02	-.03	0	.18**	.17**	.09*	-.10*	.07	-.11*	-.01
RE	-.04	.05	.03	-.06	-.01	.14**	.12**	.03	-.09*	.03	-.05	.03
BI	.06	0	.04	-.05	.03	.21**	.20**	.07	-.05	.08	-.09*	-.02
ARI (RS + SE + RE)	.01	.04	.03	-.04	-.01	.18**	.17**	.08	-.10*	.07	-.10*	0
ALL	.03	.02	.02	-.07	-.02	.20**	.18**	.07	-.10*	.06	-.10*	0
age	-.54**	-.03	.15**	.10*	.02	-.37**	-.39**	-.34**	.04	-.43**	.21**	.28**
gender***	-.07	.03	0	.06	.07	-.07	-.05	0	.03	-.04	.02	.04
first_sib_grad	.02	.09*	.08	.11**	.06	-.09*	-.07	-.01	.09*	-.04	.02	.02
parent_grad	.16**	-.19**	-.24**	-.18**	-.06	.22**	.21**	.10*	-.04	.25**	-.14**	-.17**
gpparent_grad	.17**	-.04	-.13**	-.06	-.05	.18**	.20**	.12**	.04	.18**	-.03	-.13**
legacy	.07	-.05	-.07	-.02	.01	.13**	.13**	.08	.04	.11**	-.07	-.04
merit	-	.07	-.05	-.04	-.03	.33**	.37**	.32**	-.09*	.36**	-.12**	-.24**
need	-	-	.54**	.39**	.16**	-.02	-.01	.08*	-.09*	.01	-.02	.02
Pellgrant	-	-	-	.27**	.06	-.05	-.05	-.02	.02	-.09*	.01	.09*
18_fed_loan	-	-	-	-	.33**	-.08*	-.08	.04	.12**	-.07	.09*	.10*
priv_loan	-	-	-	-	-	-.02	-.02	-.05	.01	.02	.07	-.04
stu_engagement	-	-	-	-	-	-	.96**	.47**	-.14**	.56**	-.18**	-.38**
stu_eng_level	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.49**	-.15**	.55**	-.18**	-.38**
oncampusjob	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-.20**	.43**	-.08	-.30**
offcampusjob	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-.23**	.18**	.17**
oncampushousing_yr	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-.48**	-.62**
offcampushousing_yr	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.20**

Note. All scores are scaled scores. 1: OI = Organizational Identity; 2: RS = Role Salience; 3: SE = Social Expectations; 4: AR (RS + RE) = Alumni Role Identification; 5: RE = Role Expectations; 6: BI = Behavioral Intentions; 7: ARI (RS + SE + RE) = Alumni Role Identity Score; 8: ALL = All Subscales Combined; 9: Age (1 = Under 21, 2 = 21-24, 3 = 25+); 10: Gender (1 = Male, 2 = Female); 11: first\_sib\_grad = Is first among siblings to graduate from college (0 = no, 1 = yes); 12: parent\_grad = Has a parent who graduate from college (0 = no, 1 = yes); 13: gpparent\_grad = Has a grandparent who graduated from college (0 = no, 1 = yes); 14: legacy = Is a legacy graduate (0 = no, 1 = yes); 15: merit = Received merit scholarship (0 = no, 1 = yes); 16: need = Received need-based aid (0 = no, 1 = yes); 17: Pellgrant = Received Pell Grant (0 = no, 1 = yes); 18: fed\_loan = Took out federal student loans (0 = no, 1 = yes); 19: priv\_loan = Took out private student loans (0 = no, 1 = yes); 20: stu\_engagement = Number of campus activities (0-8); 21: stu\_eng\_level = Level of student engagement based on number of student activities (0 = none, 1 = low, 2 = medium, 3 = high); 22: oncampusjob = Worked on campus (0 = no, 1 = yes); 23: offcampusjob = Worked off campus (0 = no, 1 = yes); 24: oncampushousing\_yr = Number of years lived on campus (0-5); 25: offcampushousing\_yr = Number of years lived off campus (0-5); 26: liveathome\_yr = Number of years lived at home (0-5)

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \*\*\* $n = 567$  for all variables except sex, in which  $n = 557$  (10 chose not to answer)

### ***Subscale Correlations***

This study was the first to utilize the Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire (McDearmon, 2011, 2013) in combination with other established identity measures, in this case Mael and Ashforth's (1992) subscale of organizational identity. This was also the first use of the subscale measuring alumni behavior intentions created for this study. In analysis of the correlations, it is important to note that all five subscales (OI, RS, SE, RE and BI) were all positively and significantly correlated to one another at the  $p < .01$  level. This indicates that it is appropriate to use the subscales in combination with one another to support the theoretical framework.

### ***Qualitative Coding Process***

In order to align the qualitative responses to the four research questions, the researcher applied protocol coding to the results of an initial content and structural analysis of all qualitative responses. Protocol coding is appropriate because the codes were previously established as appropriate measurement constructs and applied retrospectively (Miles et al., 2019) for the quantitative analysis, and thus this method of coding provided a way to align the qualitative responses with the research questions. The predetermined codes (in this case: OI, AR, RE, and BI) were derived from the research questions and the concomitant quantitative research measures. A summary of all qualitative coding is represented by Table 8 (below).

**Table 8**

#### *Summary of Qualitative Protocol Coding*

Total Coded Responses	<i>n</i>	%
Organizational Identification (OI)	25	18%
Alumni Role Identification (AR)	38	27%
Alumni Role Behavior Expectations (RE)	76	54%
Behavioral Intentions (BI)	9	6%
Total "none", "n/a", or "nothing"	107	43%

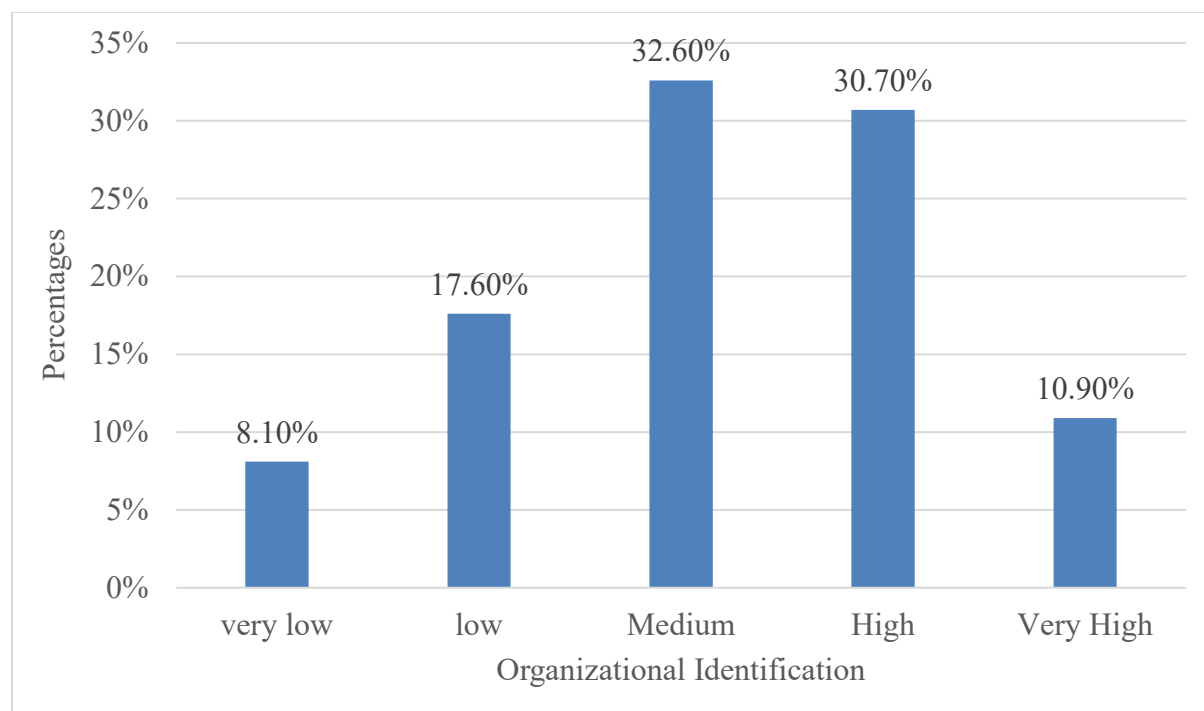
*Note.* Some responses were coded multiple times

### Research Question One: Organizational Identification

Research Question One asks how strongly new alumni identify with their alma mater and it was answered by the six-item subscale of organizational identity created by Mael and Ashforth (1992). This was assessed by statements such as “when someone criticizes my university, it feels like a personal insult,” “the school’s success are my successes,” and “when someone praises this school it feels like a personal compliment” (see Appendix A for all six items). In this subscale, strong agreement with each item suggests high organizational identification. Figure 3 (below) illustrates the degree of identification by all the participants. Approximately 8 % indicate very low identification, 17.6% low, 32.6% medium, 30.7% high, and 10.9% very high identification.

**Figure 3**

#### *Organizational Identification*



#### ***Qualitative Results***

Among the qualitative responses of the 141 individuals who chose to answer the open-

ended question, 25 responses (18%) included answers that were coded with OI (organizational identification). Examples of OI-coded responses included comments such as “I take pride in who I am a part of,” “my school has a reputation I could help uphold,” “it is an honor and privilege to be an alum,” “my values align with the school,” and “we are a community.” Some respondents reported that their cohort or their campus groups (such as an athletic team) made them feel a particular connection to the organization, while others pointed to their educational experience or their professors as the source of pride.

### **Research Question Two: Identification with the Alumni Role**

Research Question Two asks how strongly new alumni identify with the alumni role, specifically how saliently new alumni identify with alumni role and the perceived social expectations of their alumni role. This was answered by two five-item subscales from McDearmon’s (2011, 2013) Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire. These two subscales measured role salience (RS) and social expectations (SE). In both of these subscales, strong agreement with each positively worded item suggests high identification with the alumni role, and strong disagreement with each negatively worded item suggests high identification with the alumni role. In other words, as long as the individual felt strongly, this indicated high identification. Figures 4, 5, and 6 (below) illustrates the degree of identification by all the participants subscales of role salience (RS), social expectations (SE), and their combined measurement of identification with the alumni role (AR).

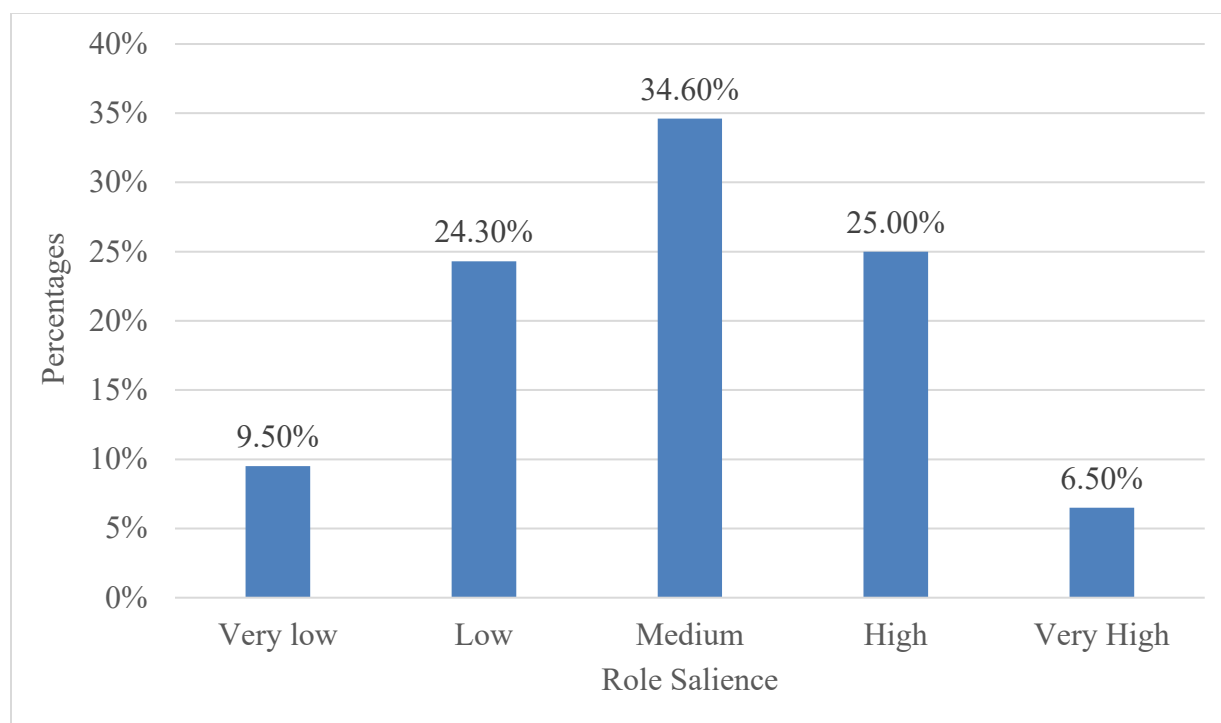
#### ***Role Salience***

Role salience was measured by statements such as “being an alumnus of this university is something I will think often about” and “being an alumnus of this university is an important part of who I am” (see Appendix A for a full list of the original five items). About 9.5 % indicate

their alumni role as having very low salience (average mean scores from 1 - 1.99), 24.3% low (average mean scores from 2 - 2.99), 34.6% medium (average mean scores from 3 - 3.99), 25% high (average mean scores from 4 - 4.99), and 6.5% very high salience (average mean scores from 5 - 6). Role salience results are represented in Figure 4 below.

**Figure 4**

*Role Salience*



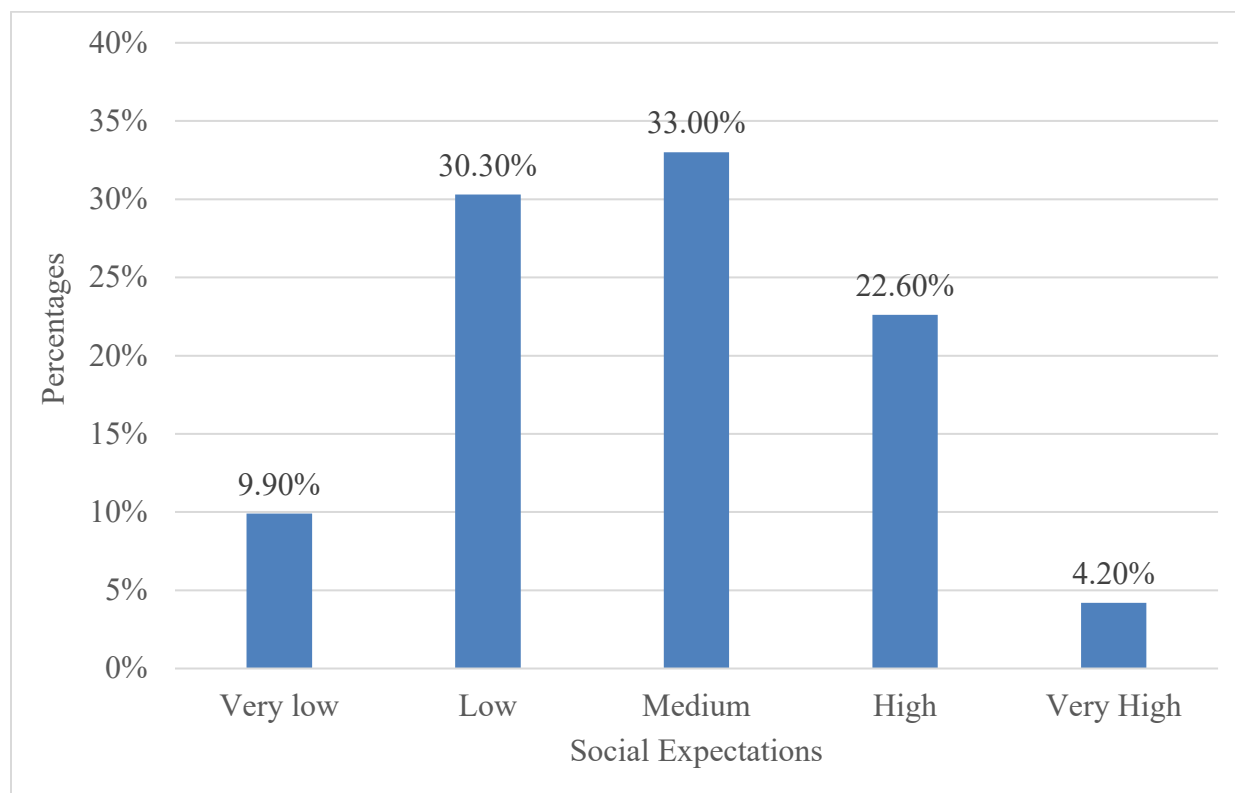
***Social Expectations***

Social expectations were measured by statements such as “many people think of me as an alumnus of this university” and “it is important to my friends and family that I am an alumnus of this university” (see Appendix A for a full list of the original five items). About 9.9 % reported a very low level of social expectations regarding alumni role (average mean scores from 1 - 1.99), 30.3% reported a low level (average mean scores from 2 - 2.99), 33% a medium level (average mean scores from 3 - 3.99), 22.6% a high level (average mean scores from 4 - 4.99), and 4.2 % a

very high level (average mean scores from 5 - 6) of social expectations when it comes to their alumni role. Social expectations results are represented in Figure 5 below.

**Figure 5**

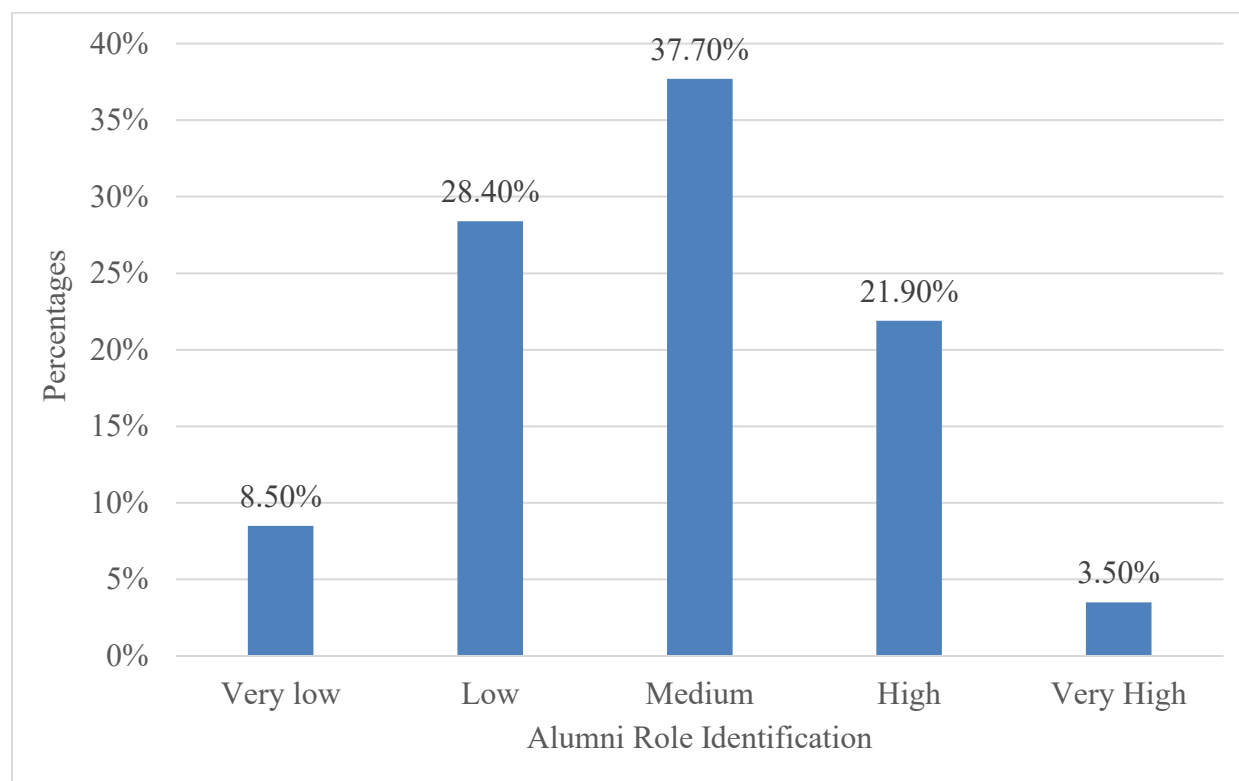
*Social Expectations*



***Combined Alumni Role Identification***

The final measurement of identification with the alumni role (AR) reflects a combination of the two subscales (role salience and social expectations). About 8.5 % reported a very low level of alumni role identifications (average mean scores from 1 - 1.99), 28.4% reported a low level (average mean scores from 2 - 2.99), 37.7% a medium level (average mean scores from 3 - 3.99), 21.9% a high level (average mean scores from 4 - 4.99), and 3.5 % a very high level (average mean scores from 5 - 6) of alumni role identification. The combine measures of alumni role identification results are represented in Figure 6 below.

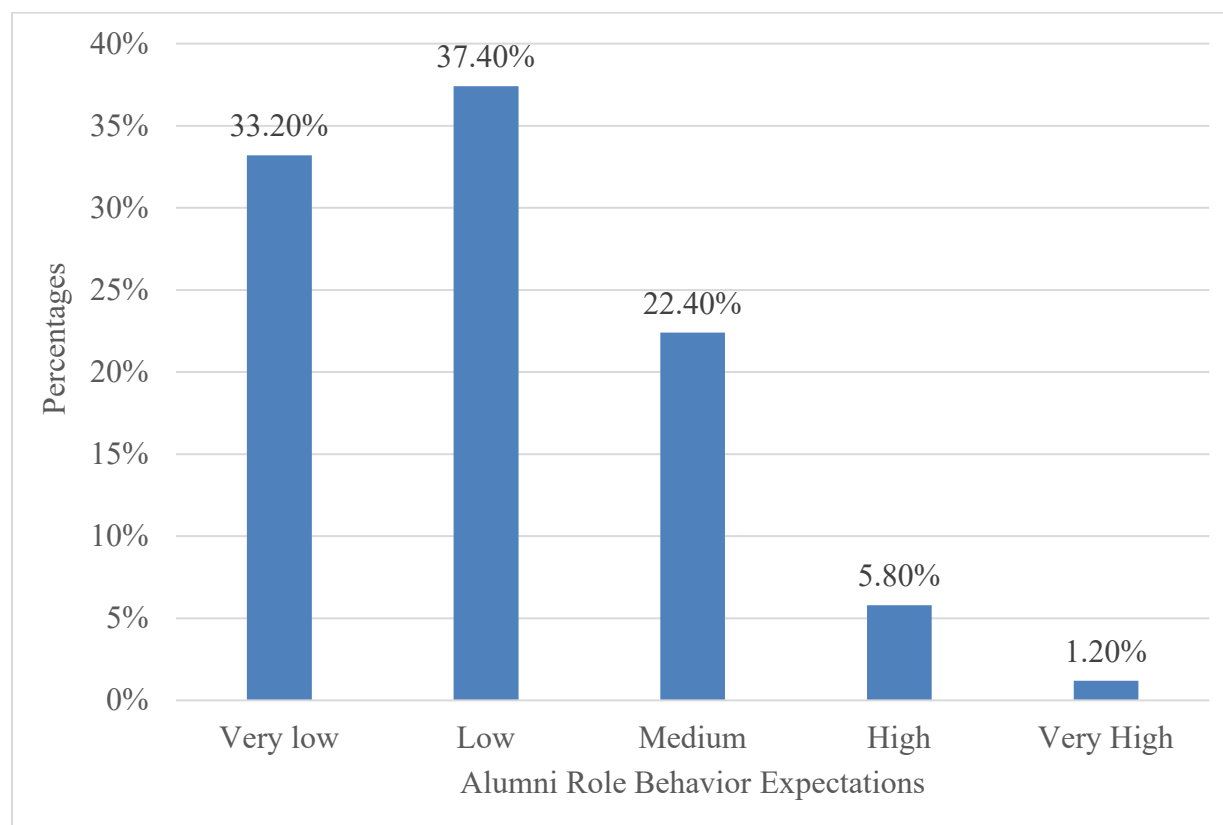


**Figure 6***Combined Alumni Role Identification****Qualitative Results***

Among the qualitative responses of the 141 individuals who chose to answer the open-ended question, 38 responses (27%) included answers that were coded with AR (alumni role identification). Examples of AR-coded responses that reflected identification with the alumni role (measures of role salience and social expectations combined) were “seeing the pride of alumni,” “family members are alumni,” “alumni celebrated us,” “community spans throughout all generations,” “sense of belonging,” and “inclusiveness of the experience.” Some respondents pointed to relationships on campus that shaped their alumni role identification, such as faculty, staff, and alumni while others pointed to experiences such as extra-curricular activities or the opportunities available to them while a student.

### **Research Question Three: Alumni Role Behavior Expectations**

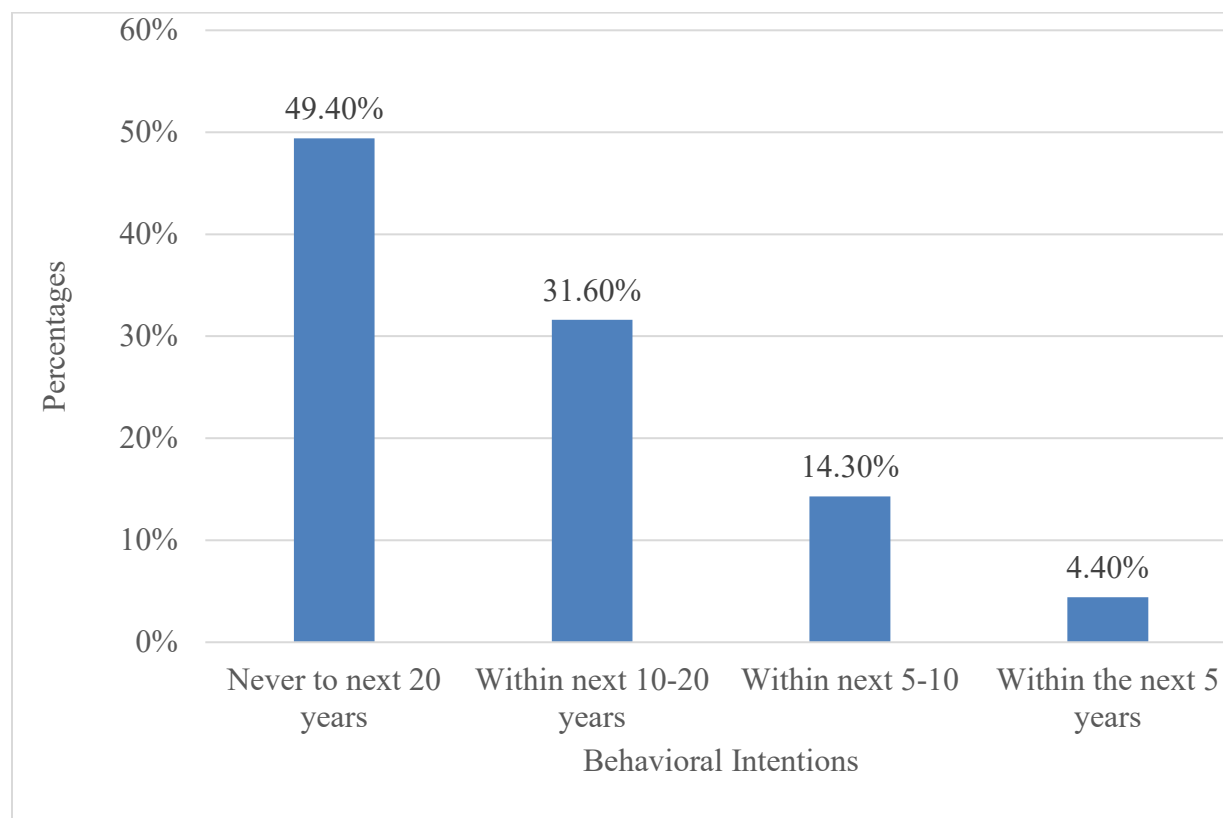
Research Question Three asks how much new alumni understand about the alumni role behavior expectations, and it was answered by the five-item subscale of role expectations from McDearmon's (2011, 2013) Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire. This was assessed by statements such as "as alumnus of this university, it is my duty to support the university through financial contributions (donations or gifts)," "as alumnus of this university, it is my duty to support the university through volunteering," and "as alumnus of this university, I am expected to attend alumni events (on- or off-campus)" (see Appendix A for all five items). In this subscale, strong agreement with each item suggests high understanding of alumni role behavior expectations. Figure 7 (below) illustrates the degree of identification by all the participants. Different from organizational identification and alumni role identification (role salience + social expectations) where most of the participants were somewhere in the middle, more than half of the new alumni reported very low (33.2%) and low (37.4%) levels of understanding of alumni role behavioral expectations. Only a quarter of the new alumni reported medium (22.4%), high (5.8%), and very high (1.2%) levels of understanding of alumni role behavioral expectations.

**Figure 7***Alumni Role Behavior Expectations****Qualitative Results***

Among the qualitative responses of the 141 individuals who chose to answer the open-ended question, 76 responses (54%) included answers coded with RE (alumni role behavior expectations). Examples of RE-coded responses that reflected an understanding of alumni support behaviors included “listening to recent graduates,” “seeing the participation of other alumni,” “attending events with alumni,” “things professors would say,” or “being asked for money.” Other sources of information mentioned included university events (such as athletics, homecoming, and graduation), university advancement and alumni offices, professors and staff who are alumni, and events on campus hosted for and by alumni.

#### **Research Question Four: Future Behavioral Intentions**

Research Question Four asks new graduates' intention to engage in future university support behavior, and it was answered by a five-item subscale adapted by the researcher from McDearmon's (2011, 2013) subscale of role expectations in the Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire. Behavioral intentions were assessed by statements such as "I plan to support the university through financial contributions (donations or gifts)," "I plan to support the university through volunteering," and "I plan to attend alumni events (on- or off-campus)" (see Appendix A for all five items). In this subscale, behavioral intention was measured by immediacy of intent, from "never" to "within the next year." Figure 8 (below) illustrates the immediacy of behavioral intentions by all the participants. Most new alumni reported very distant (49.4%, never to next 20 years) and distant (31.6%, within next 10-20 years) levels of intention to engage. Less than one fifth of the new alumni reported intention to engage in the next 5-10 years (14.3%) and within the next 5 years (4.4%).

**Figure 8***Behavioral Intentions**Qualitative Results*

Among the qualitative responses of the 141 individuals who chose to answer the open-ended question, only nine responses (approximately 6%) included answers that were coded with BI (behavioral intentions). Examples of BI-coded responses were “I’m excited to be involved,” “I want to come back and serve,” “I will support the professors,” “I’m inspired to give back,” and “I am expected to donate and attend some athletic and student events.” Several respondents indicated that they planned to take advantage of the alumni benefits, while others expressed the intention to simply “pay back their student loans” or “go their separate ways.”

### **Additional Qualitative Observations**

In addition to protocol coding, a round of additional coding using content analysis revealed themes which provide valuable information about how and where students learn what it means to be an alumnus. Students learn a significant amount through observation and/or interaction with alumni through campus events in which alumni return to campus. One respondent wrote: “I would see other alumnis [*sic*] at the school or events and I would hear their testimonies about the school and it would give me hope that eventually I will be in a good place in my life like they are and that my university will help me get there.” Another wrote: “Alumni would come and speak at the event. This showed that it's possible to still be connected with the school.”

They also learn from interacting with professors and staff who are alumni. These interactions most commonly take place on campus and in person, making it more difficult for online or non-traditional students to participate in these interactions or observe these alumni in action. One respondent wrote: “Seeing how many of my professors were alumni. They wanted to come back and teach because they believed in the mission of the university.” One learned about what alumnihood means from the way the staff spoke about their former graduates: “The university is super proud of its alumnus [*sic*] and talk about them often, so probably things that professors or faculty would say about them is what I took it to mean.”

Other individuals indicated that being a student gave them a sense of community and belonging. One person wrote: “The sense of belonging I gained while in school. I felt very invested in, which inspires me to want to repay that investment.” Another explained: “Being a part of this community I think is what has inspired me to want to continue to be involved in the university. It was my positive experiences that makes me want to be an involved and active

alumni [*sic*]. I'd like to give back to a school that provided me with amazing experiences. No program or alumni 'teaching' will make people want to be an active alumni [*sic*]. It's the people that make up the universities and it's continued values that cause me to want to come back and serve." While this is primarily something that traditional and residential students experience, some students expressed that their online cohort provided a similar sense of community: "I associate strongly with the fellow cohorts in my program, but not as much with the university in the traditional sense. I never set foot on the actual campus."

Many new graduates noted that their understanding of the alumni role came through a transaction such as university communication or the graduation ceremony itself. Some examples of communication mentioned were receiving information from campus figures, getting emails from the alumni office, hearing alumni success stories, and seeing donor/alumni recognition on campus. Others understood through communication that being an alumnus comes with certain benefits while others communicated they knew they would be asked for money after they became an alumnus. This theme came with conflicted, and often negative, emotion. One graduate wrote: "I don't care at all about being an alumnus, it's really some nonsense to get more of my money." Another explained that nothing taught them about being an alumnus "aside from the constant emails and letters to my family asking for money." Some reinforced the transactional nature of their college experience: "The only thing that made me feel like an alumni [*sic*] is the fact that after graduation, [my university] will reimburse money for loans if I do not get a 40k a year paying job. Other than that, I feel as though I've done my part and they've done theirs and now we can go our separate ways."

A particularly salient observation among the qualitative responses was the number of individuals who could not identify an experience that helped them understand or learn what it

means to be an alumnus. Of the 567 surveys completed, a total of 248 chose to fill in the open-ended text box, yet 107 (43%) of them answered the question with one of the following responses: none, n/a, or nothing (or something similar). Some examples include:

“The university didn’t talk about being an alumni very much or their contributions to the university, therefore, being an alumni [*sic*] and supporting the university doesn’t seem to be very important.”

“There doesn’t seem to be a real emphasis on being an alumnus.”

“There hasn’t been any events or speeches about what what it means to be an alumn [*sic*] at my university.”

“There have not been many experiences that I can think of.”

“There was nothing in my time at [my university] that helped with this.”

Several respondents actually used the open-ended question text box to express an unrelated, negative comment or reflection about their university experience. These were often very specific comments or opinions about a controversial topic or the graduate’s overall dissatisfaction with their choice in college, their personal educational journey, or the campus climate/culture.



## **Chapter V**

### **Discussion**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this research was to understand how new graduates perceive their relationship with their university at the point at which they make the transition from student to alumnus, how these perceptions inform their feelings about and understanding of their new role as an alumnus, and whether they intend to engage in future alumni support behaviors. This mixed methods study explored the attitudes of new graduates through the lens of alumni role identity, building upon existing social science research in the area of how identity informs behavior. The current research utilized Mael and Ashforth's (1992) six-item subscale of organizational identity and McDearmon's (2011, 2013) Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire to assess the attitudes of recent college graduates. The researcher also developed an additional subscale measuring graduates' future behavioral intentions to determine how identity informs the ways graduates intend to live out their new alumni role.

#### ***Research Questions***

In order to understand the attitudes of recent graduates and how their attitudes shape their potential future support behaviors as alumni, four research questions were addressed through primarily quantitative methods. Research Question 1 (How strongly do new alumni identify with their alma mater?) was answered by a six-item subscale measuring organizational identity developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992). Research Question 2 (How strongly do new alumni identify with their new alumni role?) was answered by two dimensions of McDearmon's (2011, 2013) alumni role identity tool (role salience and social expectations). Research Question 3 (How much do new alumni understand about alumni role behavior expectations?) was answered

by McDearmon's (2011, 2013) third dimension of alumni role identity tool (role expectations). Finally, Research Question 4 (Do new alumni express intention to engage in future university support behaviors?) was answered by self-reports of five related types of future behavioral intentions using a scale created for this study. While primarily quantitative, the study benefitted from including a limited qualitative portion. The survey included one optional, open-ended question which was coded and analyzed to provide additional insight into each of the four research questions. The responses were also useful in identifying areas for future research about campus experiences which impact alumni role socialization.

### ***Methodology and Instrument***

Graduates of eight private, faith-based universities in the West who completed their first undergraduate degree in 2021 were surveyed (using a confidential online platform) regarding their attitudes and behavioral intentions related to the alumni role. In total, 2,035 graduates were invited to participate, and the study yielded a 27.9% response rate ( $n = 567$ ). The survey tool included 26 Likert-scale questions about the alumnus' relationship to their alma mater, how important the alumni role is to them, how much they understand about the behaviors associated with being an alumnus, and whether they intend to engage in future alumni support behaviors. One optional, open-ended question was included for qualitative analysis coding. This question was "What experiences during your time at your university helped you understand or learn what it means to be an alumnus?" and a total of 141 respondents (24.9% of those who completed the survey) chose to answer this question in a usable way. The qualitative questions were subject to protocol coding by applying four pre-determined codes (OI, AR, RE, and BI) aligned with the four quantitative research measures. Finally, respondents were asked 18 demographic questions about themselves, their family, their financial aid, and their collegiate experience.

Prior to deployment, the instrument was subject to both content validity analysis by a panel of experts and a pilot study. The survey was peer reviewed and evaluated at both the item-level and scale-level for content validity. Following peer review, the survey was piloted and deployed among a sample population similar to the participant pool. The peer review and pilot study supported the utility of the instrument as a valid tool to assess the research questions. In addition, the instrument proved to be highly reliable. All five subscales had Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients that passed thresholds for reliability and were consistent with prior uses of the tools. The subscales also had high levels of internal reliability, indicating they were reliable measures of the related constructs in support of the theoretical framework.

The results of this exploratory study were analyzed using descriptive statistics, means and frequencies, and correlational analysis. For correlational analysis, the Pearson-product correlation coefficient serves as a useful measurement tool to discover meaningful relationships (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). In order to make inferences about a population based on a population sample, the *p*-value helps determine if the underlying assumption (or null hypothesis) is true (Dahiru, 2008). In this case, the researcher was looking for significant relationships using one predictor variable at a time, therefore the *p*-value provides insight into whether or not an effect was observed (Grabowski, 2016). The full correlational analysis can be found in Chapter 4 (pgs. 86-87).

## **Conclusions**

Alumni giving participation rates have been decreasing for years (Blackbaud, 2020; CASE, 2019, 2020), yet universities continue to base their operating budgets on the expectation of significant, and even increasing, revenue from alumni donors (Jung & Lee, 2019; Weerts & Ronca, 2007). New graduates are in the process of transitioning from their temporary role as a

student (consumer), into their lifelong role as an alumnus (potential donor), yet it is unknown whether this transition is made in such a way to ensure the alumni giving pipeline necessary to provide necessary funding to colleges and universities (Wastyn, 2009). In fact, both donors and non-donors alike share positive feelings, report good experiences, and stay connected to their university after graduation at similar rates (Wastyn, 2009). However, young alumni are the least likely to give (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2020), and very little previous research has explored the reasons behind this (Freeland et al., 2015; Jung & Lee, 2019).

This research study was based on the juxtaposition of organizational and social identity theories (Mael & Ashforth, 1992) with symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1968), and how these constructs work together to shape alumni role identity (McDearmon, 2011, 2013). Mael and Ashforth (1992) determined that highly salient social identity with one's alma mater was associated with measures of organizational identification. They found how long a student attended a school, how satisfied they were, and how sentimental they were about their experience impacted how much the alumnus defined themselves by the organization (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Callero's (1985) exploration of symbolic interactionism provided evidence linking identity salience to role behavior and how individuals perceive themselves as a member of an in-group. Building upon these two theoretical bases, McDearmon's (2011, 2013) pivotal study on alumni role identity confirmed the positive relationship between alumni role salience and the alumnus' intent to engage in alumni support behaviors.

This research study provided the first examination of the presence and salience of organizational and alumni role identity among new graduates within the existing literature. This research was also the first study to integrate organizational identity with alumni role identity to understand whether young alumni understand alumni role expectations and intend to engage in

alumni support behaviors. This study advances McDearmon's (2011, 2013) work on alumni role identity by applying it to new graduates and using it as a predictive measure of future alumni support behavior. As a result, this research provided a snapshot of how young alumni feel about their university at the point of graduation and what they believe about their new alumni role. This picture is not promising. While new graduates in this study reported average to above-average levels of both organizational identity and average alumni role identity, they did not report commensurate levels of alumni role expectations or behavioral intentions. These graduates did not express agreement with or understanding of typical alumni role behavior expectations, nor did they indicate intentions to engage in those behaviors in the near or mid-range future. Full analysis of the research questions follows in the analysis below.

***Research Question 1: How strongly do new alumni identify with their alma mater?***

Research Question 1 was answered by a six-item subscale measuring organizational identity developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992). Questions about organizational identity assessed how much an individual identifies with the successes and failures of the organization (see Appendix A for all six items, scored on a scale of 0-5). New graduates in this study expressed organizational identity that was normally distributed across the sample population ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ). Over 74% of respondents in this study expressed organizational identity considered medium to very high, and the mean subscale score for this population was higher than organizational identity scores measured by Mael and Ashforth (1992) in the original use of the measurement tool among alumni ( $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = .82$ ). Mael and Ashforth (1992) determined that organizational identity and social identity were positively correlated, and both measures increased positive alumni sentiment and satisfaction. High organizational identity correlates to favorable attitudes and behaviors toward an organization (Garvey & Drezner, 2016; Kim et al.,

2010; Mann, 2007; Myers et al., 2016). It is not surprising that the new graduates studied here expressed higher organizational identity than prior application of this tool among alumni. Since graduation represents a positive and memorable interaction with the organization (Myers et al., 2016) and participants in this study were surveyed soon after graduation, above average organizational identification was anticipated.

The qualitative responses to the open-ended question supported the quantitative results, with nearly one-fifth of individuals expressing positive sentiments towards their university. Typical themes among the responses included expressing pride in one's university, feeling part of a community, identifying particular subgroups on campus which made them feel connected, sharing values with their alma mater, believing in the merit of their educational experience, having pride in their professors, and wanting to uphold their university's reputation. The strong number of responses coded for organizational identity (OI) indicates new graduates have internalized their relationship with their university into their sense of self which is a key marker of organizational identity (Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

The level of organizational identification among these new graduates should serve as an antecedent for their attitudes towards their beliefs about the behaviors associated with the alumni role and their feelings about their own future alumni behaviors (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Cheney & Tompkins, 1997; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). According to past research, individuals with strong organizational identity, such as the new graduates in this study, are more likely to engage in behaviors which contribute to the success of the organization (Avanzi et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2010; Mann, 2007). However, both the quantitative and qualitative data indicate this was not true for the new graduates in this study, as the discussion for Research Question 4 (below) explains.

***Research Question 2: How strongly do new alumni identify with the alumni role?***

Research Question 2 was answered by two dimensions of McDearmon's (2011, 2013) alumni role identity tool (role salience and social expectations). Questions about alumni role identification assessed how much a graduate has integrated the alumni role into their sense of self based on their own attitudes and the attitudes of others (see Appendix A for all ten items, scored on a scale of 0-5). New graduates in this study expressed alumni role identity that was normally distributed across the population sample ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ). Two-thirds (66.5%) of survey participants reported medium to very high alumni role salience, another 60% reported medium to very high alumni social expectations, and over 60% reported medium to very high overall alumni role identification. McDearmon's (2011, 2013) original research on alumni role identity used all three subscales of alumni role identity (role salience, social expectations, and role expectations), while this research question was answered using only the two subscales of role salience and social expectations. The normal distribution of new graduates' identification with the alumni role (as determined by their personal beliefs about being an alumnus plus their beliefs about what others think of their alumni status) indicates that alumni role identification among this population reflects the population at-large. Because securing alumni role identification is easier to do when people still feel connected to their school (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), the fact that over 60% reported medium to very high overall alumni role identification indicates a sizeable majority of new graduates have internalized the alumni role at the point of graduation.

The qualitative analysis of the open-ended question provided additional support for alumni role identification as an antecedent to positive personal feelings about the alumni role and intention to engage in alumni support behaviors. Over one-quarter of responses were coded in

alignment with this research question. Typical themes among the responses included witnessing pride and engagement in other alumni, feeling celebrated by older alumni, understanding they are part of a greater alumni community, and knowing they are included in a legacy of alumni spanning generations. Many respondents recognized the shared experience of being an alumnus crossed generational boundaries, a concept identified by Mael and Ashforth (1992) in their sentinel alumni identity research. In other words, the new graduates studied seemed to share psychological group membership with older alumni even though they did not attend school at the same time. The responses coded for alumni role identification supported the concept that these new graduates view their alumni status as a lifelong role, bringing them into a fellowship with other alumni who have shared their experiences. For some, this was witnessed first-hand through having family members who attended the university before them, but for others this concept was shaped by alumni events and interactions with alumni who contributed to their sense of belonging to the alumni community.

The presence of alumni role identification among new graduates, confirmed by both the quantitative and qualitative data, supports the premise that there is potential for these individuals to engage in the behaviors typically associated with being an alumnus. McDearmon's (2011, 2013) alumni role identity research linked stronger alumni role salience to alumni support behaviors such as joining the alumni association, attending a university event, and making a donation. Despite the high alumni role identification among these new graduates, the quantitative and qualitative data for Research Question 4 (below) indicate this was not true for the young alumni who participated in this study.

***Research Question 3: How much do new alumni understand about alumni role behavior expectations?***



Research Question 3 was answered by McDearmon's (2011, 2013) third dimension of alumni role identity tool (role expectations). Questions about alumni role behavior expectations assessed a new graduate's understanding of the behaviors typically associated with the alumni role (see Appendix A for all five items, scored on a scale of 0-5). This survey was distributed soon after graduation, prior to these graduates receiving a significant number of communication pieces from their respective alumni offices. This was by design, as it allowed the researcher to identify if the college experience itself provides socialization into the alumni role. However, among new graduates studied here, over 70% reported either very low or low understanding of the alumni role. More importantly, the results of this research question were not normally distributed among the population sample ( $M = 2.35$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ), and do not mirror the normal distributions observed in the results for organizational identity and alumni role identity. In other words, despite the normal distribution in these respondents' measures of organizational identification and alumni role identification, they were much more inclined to report very low or low understanding of the alumni role behavior expectations.

This subscale had its theoretical base in Stryker's (1968) symbolic interactionism concept which posited role salience and identity are defined by shared behavioral expectations within an in-group. Colleges and universities are replete with experiences and traditions designed to reinforce the in-group behavior expectations while students are enrolled (Diaz-Vidal & Pittz, 2019; Myers et al., 2016). These shared experiences should define shared behavioral expectations (Stryker, 1968, 2002; Stryker & Vryan, 2003), and yet the results of this study indicate new graduates do not share an understanding of what behaviors are expected of them by the university after graduation. This research also supports prior research by Stephenson and Bell (2014) who also determined alumni do not know what behaviors are expected of them. Among

new graduates studied here, there was a mismatch between their attitudes about their alumni role and their knowledge of the role expectations associated with it. The quantitative results confirmed that new graduates have not been well-socialized into the alumni role during their time as undergraduates.

Despite below average quantitative scores on this subscale, over half of the respondents who chose to answer the open-ended question in a meaningful way pointed to specific understanding of alumni support behaviors. Typical themes among the responses included observing how other alumni stayed involved, hearing professors discuss alumni life, attending events alongside alumni, receiving information from the university, and being asked for money. Responses included references to experiences with alumni on campus, interactions with faculty and staff, and events and communications from the alumni office as markers of alumni support behaviors. The open-ended question was worded in direct alignment with this research question, therefore it is not surprising that individuals who had experiences with alumni would answer accordingly. In addition, individuals who expressed fundamental understanding of alumni role expectations may have been those more inclined to answer this question in a meaningful way.

***Research Question 4: Do new alumni express intention to engage in future university support behaviors?***

Research Question 4 was answered by self-reports of five related types of future behavioral intentions in a scale created for this study. Questions about future behavioral intentions assessed the timeline in which new graduates intend to engage in alumni support behaviors such as volunteering, attending a university event, or making a financial donation (see Appendix A for all five items, scored on a scale of 0-4). The majority of new graduates (82%) did not express intent to engage in alumni support behaviors for at least ten years, and nearly half

(49%) exhibit little indication they plan to engage in support behaviors for at least 20 years (if ever). The results of this subscale measure were comparable to the results of the subscale measure of alumni role behavior expectations in that they were not normally distributed across the population sample ( $M = 2.09$ ,  $SD = .086$ ). In other words, despite the normal distribution in these respondents' measures of organizational identification and alumni role identification, their intentions to engage in future alumni support behaviors were skewed. This indicates not only do new graduates not know what is expected of them as alumni, they do not express intention to engage in these alumni behaviors in the near to mid-range future. These results are in alignment with Drezner (2009) who found alumni can have strong university identification and yet still express low intent to support the university in practical ways such as giving back. This study supports prior research that new graduates can concomitantly feel positive about their university and alumni status, yet not understand how those attitudes should translate into behavior (Drezner, 2009; Stephenson & Bell, 2014). This provides further evidence of the significant disconnect that occurs among individuals in the transition from the student experience to the alumni role.

The limited number of open-ended responses pointing to behavioral intentions supports this conclusion. Just six percent of individuals indicated any intention to engage in alumni support behaviors such as serving, giving, or returning to campus. Typical themes among the responses coded for behavioral intentions (BI) included expressing a desire to come back and serve, be involved, support the professors, attend events, take advantage of alumni benefits, or generally give back. While the qualitative question did not specifically ask graduates if they intended to give back as alumni, the lack of enthusiasm regarding intent to engage in alumni support behaviors was implied.

### *Additional Quantitative Observations*

Previous research in alumni giving supports the positive relationship between the breadth, depth, and type of student involvement on campus and future alumni engagement and support (Clotfelter, 2001; Gaier, 2005; Holmes, 2009; Lara & Johnson, 2012; Myers et al., 2016; Rau & Erwin, 2015; Snijders et al., 2019; Stephenson & Yerger, 2014b, 2015; Sung & Yang, 2009; Tiger & Preston, 2013; Weerts & Cabrera, 2018). Student engagement is correlated with increased alumni loyalty (Snijders et al., 2019), organization identification (Myers et al., 2016), and identity salience (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014b). Clotfelter (2001) reported students who participated in any extracurricular activity were more likely to make higher contributions as alumni. Other research has indicated alumni who had been affiliated with any kind of organized campus group as student were more likely to donate (Gaier, 2005; Holmes, 2009; Myers et al., 2016), particularly those who held volunteer or leadership positions (Weerts & Cabrera, 2018). The reverse has also been found: students who self-reported low levels of student engagement were also less likely to make a gift as alumni (Weerts & Cabrera, 2018).

The results of this study specifically affirm findings by Clotfelter (2001), Gaier (2005), Holmes (2009), Myers et al. (2016), and Weerts and Cabrera (2018), providing new evidence of how student engagement positively impact measures of organizational identity, identification with the alumni role, understanding of the behaviors associated with the alumni role, and intent to engage in those behaviors. Among the new graduates in this study, student engagement (i.e., the number of activities students participated in on campus) was significantly and positively correlated (at the  $p < .01$  level) with *all* subscale measures of organizational identification, alumni role identification, alumni role behavior expectations, and behavioral intentions. In other

words, the more students participate on campus (e.g., athletics, performing arts, student leadership, clubs, etc.), the greater likelihood they will self-report: higher levels of organizational identity, stronger and more positive feelings about being an alumnus, better understanding of the behaviors expected of them as alumni, and intentions to engage sooner in future university support behaviors.

Furthermore, the results of this study indicate living on campus and working on campus were also positively correlated with various measures of identification and behavioral intentions. Where students worked and lived had an impact on self-reports of organizational and alumni role identity among these recent graduates. Living on campus was significantly and positively correlated with higher levels of alumni role social expectations ( $r = .11, p < .01$ ). Working on campus was significantly and positively associated with both higher levels of alumni role social expectations ( $r = .11, p < .01$ ) and overall identification with the alumni role ( $r = .09, p < .05$ ). This supports prior research by Tiger and Preston (2013) who found a positive relationship between living on campus and alumni giving, as well as Frisby et al. (2019), who concluded interactions with staff and faculty are positively correlated with organizational and alumni role identity.

There were several negative correlations which supported the important function of student engagement. Where students work and live serve as proxies for student engagement because the more time a student spends away from campus the less likely they are to participate in activities and interact with other students, staff, and faculty. Living off-campus was significantly and negatively associated with role salience ( $r = -.09, p < .05$ ), social expectations ( $r = -.11, p < .01$ ), overall alumni role identification ( $r = -.11, p < .01$ ), and behavioral intentions ( $r = -.09, p < .05$ ). Working off-campus was significantly and negatively correlated with role

saliency ( $r = -.10, p < .01$ ), overall alumni role identification ( $r = -.10, p < .05$ ), and role expectations ( $r = -.09, p < .05$ ). In other words, when students spend less of their non-academic time on or near campus, they are less likely to report measures of identification with the university and the alumni role.

The type of financial aid these students received also had an impact on measures of organizational and alumni role identity. In this study, those who received merit-based scholarships were more likely to report feeling positive feelings about the opinions of others regarding their alumni status. Specifically, receiving a merit scholarship was significantly and positively associated with social expectations ( $r = .10, p < .05$ ). These results are in agreement with prior research (Freeland et al., 2015; Marr, 2005) that identified a positive relationship between merit-aid and the likelihood of making a gift. Conversely, new graduates who took out federal student loans reported lower levels of organizational identity ( $r = -.10, p < .05$ ). This adds to the limited body of research linking student debt to lower alumni giving rates (Marr et al., 2005; Meer & Rosen, 2012, 2018; Monks, 2003; Terry & Macy, 2007) and positively correlated with alumni self-identifying as a non-donor (McDearmon & Shirley, 2009). However, because there is some research contradicting the negative relationship between student loans and alumni giving (Cunningham & Cochi-Ficano, 2002; Meer & Rosen, 2011, 2018), this area deserves additional study. Details of all the significant correlations (including  $r$ -squared values and  $p$ -values) are listed in Table 6 (p. 85) and the full results of the correlational analysis can be found in Table 7 (pgs. 87-88).

### ***Additional Qualitative Observations***

Among the 141 meaningful qualitative responses regarding experiences that helped socialize new graduates into the alumni role, there were several additional themes that emerged

beyond the four categories used for protocol coding. First, the qualitative data indicate students are socialized into the alumni role primarily through observation and interaction with alumni through campus events, implying that being physically on campus for these types of opportunities is a prerequisite for socialization. Many students specifically noted their experiences with alumni were around athletic events like alumni games, musical events such as alumni choirs, homecoming activities, scholarship luncheons, and mentorship or career development programs that included alumni volunteers. Several individuals noted that they appreciated how their university continued to include alumni in the campus community, while others appreciated the fact that alumni chose to stay involved. These experiences gave alumni insight into the benefits of alumnihood and provided a model of alumni role behaviors for students to observe.

Students in this study were also socialized into the alumni role by professors and staff members who are alumni, implying that hiring alumni can be a powerful way to perpetuate a strong alumni legacy of service. Graduates could identify specific conversations with professors and staff about what it means to stay connected after graduation, and others made comments indicating that being an alumnus is a source of pride. Others identified observing professors who continued to care for, support, and engage alumni as an example of the benefits of staying connected to the campus community after graduation.

Other responses reiterated how a sense of belonging and community as a student served as a precursor to want to give back. Graduates identified very specific examples of student groups or campus involvements which reinforced their relationship with their university. Some examples including participation in athletics, honors programs, choirs or musical groups, academic departments, and even work-study positions in campus offices. Some qualitative

responses included specific “shout-outs” to the campus mascot and other similar expressions of university brand loyalty. This feeling of belonging and community was expressed among both traditional onsite students as well as online students. Although the survey demographics did not delineate between those who completed their degree in person or online, some of the qualitative responses affirmed that online students find a sense of community within their academic cohort.

Other respondents found that university communications were a catalyst for understanding what it means to be an alumnus, though this source only seemed to inform, not shape sentiment. Several individuals cited receiving communication from the alumni office, specifically regarding their upcoming graduation and transition into alumni life. Some shared how they expected to be asked for money, or that they had heard messages about the expectation to give back after graduation. Respondents who had alumni family members also referenced the alumni magazine because they had seen or read it in their home.

Finally, the ceremonial act of graduation (and the surrounding events and communications) was identified as a catalyst of alumni role identification and alumni role behavior expectations. One respondent explained that they did not know what it meant to be an alumnus until graduation itself, but others understood the moment was a form of induction into the alumni community. For some, the physical diploma was its own form of role reinforcement, while one person connected their alumni status with the reality of having to pay back their student loans.

The other salient finding from the qualitative portion of the study was the frequency of responses in which the individual could not identify any experiences which helped them understand what it means to be an alumnus. While a total of 319 survey participants skipped the qualitative question altogether, another 107 participants opted to respond with some version of



“nothing,” “n/a,” “none,” or some other phrase with similar meaning. Nearly half (43%) of the 248 individuals who filled in the open-ended question with text indicated they had no experiences during their student years that taught them what it means to be an alumnus. These answers were coded as non-meaningful in response to the four research questions, yet still provide significant insight into the population of new graduates at-large. These responses confirm the quantitative data indicating students do not express agreement with the questions in the subscale measuring alumni role behavior expectations. The finding is even more important when you consider the open-ended question was worded in the affirmative (“What experiences during your time at your university helped you understand what it means to be an alumnus?”) and was essentially a leading question. For over 40% of those who did not simply skip the question, the act of initiating a negative answer implies these graduates could not immediately answer the question in the affirmative. Considering how much effort and money is expended on alumni relations work on campus, and may be one of the most meaningful results of this study.

Finally, some graduates leveraged the open-ended text box to share their unfiltered opinions about their collegiate experience. Some responses reinforced extremely negative sentiments about what it means to be an alumnus or about the university itself. Several individuals expressed strong resentment that they would be asked for donations, while other resented that their family members or parents had already been asked for money. In several instances, the respondent chose to communicate their strong opinions regarding something negative about their collegiate experience overall. While these responses were ultimately coded as non-meaningful in light of the research questions, they provided insight to the researcher that some alumni are looking for any opportunity to voice their concerns and may not have another appropriate avenue by which to do so.

## **Recommendations for Further Research**

This research was completed using a very distinct population of new alumni from a small subset of private colleges with very similar characteristics. Despite a robust sample size and a strong response rate, the study would benefit from replication using different populations of new graduates among different types of institutions, as institution type can impact alumni giving rates (Clotfelter, 2003; Cunningham & Cochi-Ficano, 2002; Gunsalus, 2005; Levine, 2008; McAlexander & Koenig, 2010). For example, the study could be replicated among alumni from different types of graduate programs to determine the impact of multiple alma maters or the influence of different academic and professional disciplines. The study could also be replicated among alumni who obtained their degree through alternative course delivery methods such as online or hybrid programs, perhaps differentiating between programs utilizing a cohort model. The study would benefit from replication among private colleges with no shared faith commitment, among public 4-year colleges, and community colleges. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to further explore the differences between adult learners and traditional-aged students across all types of programs, delivery methods, and institution types.

Additional research in this area would benefit from adding specific questions about student participation in alumni programs such as mentoring, scholarship luncheons, and alumni events. Very little to no research currently exists on the impact of these types of alumni interactions on alumni giving. Additionally, the study would benefit from a question about participation in student philanthropy programs (such as senior class gifts, since debt load is also negatively correlated to the likelihood of making a gift to a student philanthropy campaign (Chisholm-Burns & Spivey, 2015). Future research on young alumni could also include questions about whether they intend to make a financial gift to other non-profit organizations or

causes. Finally, the large percentage of individuals who could not identify an experience during their student years which taught them what it means to be an alumnus also merits future exploration. A deep qualitative dive into the lived experiences of these students would shed light on this phenomenon in a way that this limited question could not. Since this study is the first in the body of alumni giving literature to explore whether new graduates understand the behaviors typically associated with the alumni role, this finding merits future research.

The results of this study prompted other follow-up research questions which could be answered using the existing quantitative data set and qualitative responses. It would be valuable to repeat the correlational analysis using only the respondents who answered “no, n/a, none, or nothing” for the qualitative question to see how his smaller sample of 107 compares to both the overall sample population, as well as how it compares to the 141 who answered the question in a meaningful way. Furthermore, it could be valuable to analyze the correlations by controlling for certain variables, specifically age bracket. The survey instrument, if used again, would benefit from including specific questions regarding the format of undergraduate program the student completed (online, hybrid, cohort, etc.) and/or the percentage of the degree completed in-person or on campus.

### **Implications for Professional Practice**

Graduation ostensibly breaks the relationship between a student and their university, one reinforced by the many structures in place both inside and outside the classroom. While the student role may only last four years, graduates carry their alumni role for their rest of their lives. Therefore, the relationship between student and school should be carefully and strategically rebirthed into one between alumnus and alma mater. This research supports the premise that new graduates feel positively toward their university and their alumni role at the point of graduation,

but that they simply do not understand the alumni role and how the university hopes they will act it out. It is not a stretch to assume graduation day represents a new and exciting stage of life engendering strong, positive emotions and attitudes for most graduates. However, this study provides convincing evidence that the transition to the alumni role must be better reinforced if the strong organizational and alumni identification are to positively influence future alumni behaviors. The qualitative research implies colleges are not doing a sufficient job of teaching their students about the ways alumni can continue to stay engaged and serve their university. The results speak strongly to the need to educate new alumni on the alumni role and the behaviors the university hopes to instill, rather than assuming they already know what being an alumnus means.

The quantitative results of this study provide convincing evidence that most new graduates do not intend to engage in alumni support behaviors for at least ten years. This information alone supports a change in existing alumni communication strategies. While some alumni offices (usually those with significant staff and resources) are already segmenting their alumni communication, this data affirms the need to create a separate strategy for engaging young alumni. For the first ten years after graduation, less effort should be spent on fundraising appeals to this crowd, and more effort spent on reinforcing the benefits of being an alumnus and staying connected to the university. In addition, outreach from the university should provide examples of how alumni choose to engage with the university, the benefit they receive from engagement, and the direct impact this engagement has on the lives of current students.

Determining whether alumni role identity can serve a predictor for future alumni engagement among new alumni was the original impetus for this research. Universities can no longer count on alumni making donations simply because they are alumni (Stephenson & Bell,

2014). With limited staff and operational expenses, university fundraisers and alumni relations officers need to make strategic choices regarding programming and outreach. This research provides statistical confirmation of what many development professionals already know from their professional practice. That is, graduates of traditional, on-campus, undergraduate programs who engage in campus life are also the alumni who are most likely to stay engaged after graduation. Larger graduating classes do not necessarily compute to more engagement and more alumni donations, particularly if the increase in student population is in the areas of online and graduate programs. Strong consideration will need to be given to the efficacy and efficiency of alumni outreach and fundraising efforts targeting individuals who primarily view their education as a transactional, consumer choice.

Additionally, the qualitative responses reinforced the importance of creating opportunities for alumni to interact with students. Existing alumni relations efforts on most university campuses are framed as opportunities to increase alumni engagement, with the secondary impact of increasing alumni giving. However, the greater benefit of alumni relations may, in fact, be the role of these efforts in socializing current students into their future alumni role. Inviting alumni to return to campus, hiring alumni to work on campus, and including alumni in the student experience could all make a long-term impact on the attitudes of future alumni. This reaffirms the ongoing work of, and investment of resources in, alumni relations staff and programs.

In light of the rapid growth of online and graduate programs, this study highlights potential best practices which may serve to encourage organizational and alumni role identity among these non-traditional student populations. The qualitative data, albeit limited, indicate the most engaged alumni of online and graduate programs are those whose education was structured

around cohort models. These students reported stronger relational connections with online faculty and experienced a sense of community, both of which serve as precursors to positive attitudes about the school and being an alumnus. However, there is evidence that the majority of online and non-traditional students are not currently being well-informed or well-socialized to the expectations associated with alumni status, particularly since these students are less likely to ever step foot on campus and engage with or observe alumni in action.

This research also has implications for how other campus divisions can positively impact alumni giving efforts over the long term. The results reinforce the positive relationship between engagement in campus life (student activities, campus housing, and campus jobs) and measures of organizational identity, alumni role identity, knowledge of the alumni role, and behavioral intentions. Providing broad opportunities for student engagement, encouraging students to live on campus (and for longer), and creating work opportunities on campus all have the potential to impact future alumni engagement. The financial investment in campus programs, housing, and student jobs could have long-term benefits for alumni giving. This is good news for those advocating for the departments of residential life, student programs, and student employment. Furthermore, these results imply finding ways to bring online and graduate students onto campus for more than graduation day may have long-term positive results regarding alumni engagement among populations who have been typically less likely to stay involved and give.

The relationship between types of financial aid and alumni giving also impacts professional practice. Merit-based aid remains a motivator for alumni engagement, but universities would benefit from reinforcing the philanthropic efforts undergirding such scholarships. For example, the qualitative data from this study suggest providing merit-aid scholarship recipients the opportunity to meet their donor or benefactor remains key to

reinforcing alumni giving behaviors in the future. It is important to note that the presence of student loans was not a significant negative factor in alumni role identification or intent to engage in alumni behaviors within the quantitative results. Even more notable is that none of the qualitative responses specifically referred to student loans in a negative way. However, efforts to reign in the growing student debt load will still benefit the alumni giving pipeline. Schools with the resources to offer grants rather than loans would benefit from this the most long-term.

Both the quantitative and qualitative results of this study make a case for alumni role education and socialization during the undergraduate experience. New graduates identify strongly with their university at the point of graduation, as they have both role salience and pride in their alumni status. Some have interacted with or observed alumni on campus which has provided a model to for them follow. Many, however, cannot identify any experience which taught them what it means to take on the alumni role after graduation. Concurrently, new graduates do not intend to engage in the very alumni behaviors the university is attempting to cultivate, at least not for the first ten years after graduation.

Universities must become much more intentional if they are to capitalize on the positive organizational and alumni role identification among new alumni and convert it to attitudes and behaviors which will feed the alumni giving pipeline. Part of reinforcing the return on the tuition investment should include the benefits of being an alumnus and how the university can serve and support their alumni long after graduation. Alumni efforts should include bold initiatives in educating and socializing students into what behaviors the university hopes for. Significant efforts should be made to educate students on the direct impact of alumni giving on current tuition rates, creating a culture of gratitude and a reason for students to pay it forward.

There is little evidence indicating any change of course from the continued reliance on

donations from alumni to balance university budgets. This practice is tenuous and possibly unsustainable. Rick Beyer, senior fellow at the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges explains, “The fundamental business model for delivering education is broken” (Schwartz, 2021, para. 3). If the broken delivery model for higher education relies on external donations to balance university budgets, development professionals must strive to understand the future giving intentions of young alumni if they are to ensure a revenue pipeline. This research was the first of its kind to explore whether new graduates identify with their alma mater and the alumni role, understand the alumni support behaviors expected of them, and intend to engage in those behaviors in the future. The results indicate what many alumni giving officers in the field have experienced first-hand—that is, even young alumni who feel great about their alma mater do not seem know what it means to be an alumnus and do not intend to engage in alumni behaviors in the near future.

This research argues for the need to expand efforts at educating students on the alumni role, segmenting and differentiating alumni outreach based on years from graduation, encouraging alumni to return to campus, and expanding student engagement opportunities on campus. Increasing organizational identity, alumni role identity, and knowledge of alumni role expectations will encourage and reinforce alumni support behaviors in the future. These recent graduates likely benefited from the financial support of alumni who came before them, but without intervention and implementation of new practices, future students may not be able to depend on the same level of alumni support.



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## Appendix A

### Survey Instrument

#### **Instructions:**

Please answer all questions to the best of your ability. All references to “school” or “university” refer to the college or university from which you recently graduated. At the completion of the survey, you will have the chance to share your email address in a secondary survey link if you would like to be included in the drawing for the \$100 Amazon Gift Card.

#### **Measure of Organizational Identification**

Source: Mael and Ashforth (1992)

#### **Measurement Tool: Six item Likert-Scale**

*(Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Slightly Disagree – Slightly Agree – Agree – Strongly Agree)*

- When someone criticizes my university, it feels like a personal insult
- I am very interested in what others think about my university
- When I talk about this school, I usually say “we” rather than “they”
- This school’s successes are my successes
- When someone praises this school, it feels like a personal compliment
- If a story in the media criticized the school, I would feel embarrassed

#### **Measures of Alumni Role Identity**

Source: McDearmon (2011, 2013)

**Measurement Tool: Six item Likert-Scale** *(Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Slightly Disagree – Slightly Agree – Agree – Strongly Agree)*

#### **Role Salience**

- Being an alumnus of this university is something I will think often about
- I do not have clear feelings about being an alumnus of this university
- For me, being an alumnus of this university means more than contributing money or time
- Being an alumnus of this university is an important part of who I am
- I would feel lost if I were not an alumnus of this university

#### **Social Expectations**

- Many people think of me as an alumnus of this university
- Other people think that being an alumnus of this university is important to me
- It is important to my friends and family that I am an alumnus of this university
- It does not matter to most people that I am an alumnus of this university
- Many people I know are not aware that I am an alumnus of this university



**Role Expectations**

- As an alumnus of this university, it is my duty to support the university through financial contributions (donations or gifts)
- As an alumnus of this university, it is my duty to support the university through volunteering
- As an alumnus of this university, I am expected to attend alumni events (on- and off-campus)
- As an alumnus of this university, it is my duty to serve on a university board or committee
- As an alumnus of this university, I am expected to attend athletic events

**Behavioral Intentions**

Source: Additional questions developed by Corynn Gilbert based on Role Expectations dimensions of Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire (McDearmon, 2011, 2013)

**Measurement Tool: Five item Likert-Scale**

*(Never, Within the next 20 years, Within the next 10 years, Within the next 5 years, Within the next year)*

- I plan to support the university through financial contributions (donations or gifts)
- I plan to support the university through volunteering
- I plan to attend alumni events (on- or off-campus)
- I plan to serve on a university board or committee
- I plan to attend athletic events

**Open-Ended Question (optional)**

What experiences during your time at your university helped you understand or learn what it means to be an alumnus?

**Demographic Questions**

**What is your current age?** Under 21, 21-24, 25 or older

**What is your gender?** M/F/Choose not to answer

**With what race/ethnicity do you identify? (Choose all that apply)** American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Hispanic or Latino, White, Choose not to answer

**Are you the first among your siblings to graduate from a 4-year college or university?** y/n

**Did either/any of your parents/guardians graduate from a 4-year college or university?** y/n

**Did any of your grandparents graduate from a 4-year college or university? y/n**

**Are you a legacy graduate (did any of your parents, grandparents, or older siblings either attend or graduate from your university)? y/n**

**Did you receive any scholarships from your university based on merit or achievement? y/n**

**Did you receive any grants/scholarships from your university based on financial need? y/n**

**Did you take out any Federal Student Loans? y/n**

**Did you take out any private student loans? y/n**

**Did you receive a Pell Grant? y/n**

**Did you participate in any of the following campus activities? (Choose all that apply)**

- Athletics
- Intramurals
- Performing Arts
- Student Leadership
- Volunteer activities
- Clubs or organizations
- Mentorship/Tutoring
- Religious Life/Campus Ministry

**Did you have an on-campus job at any point during college? y/n**

**Did you have an off-campus job at any point during college? y/n**

**How many years did you live in on-campus housing? 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5**

**How many years did you live in off-campus housing? 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5**

**How many years did you live at home or with a family member? 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5**

**Would you like to share your email address in order to participate in the drawing for a \$100 Amazon Gift Card? y/n (a 'yes' answer sends participant to a secondary, branch survey with a single field to submit their email address).**

## Appendix B

### Requests for Permission

Date: December 5, 2020  
To: tmcdearmon@butler.edu  
From: corynngilbert@nnu.edu

Dear Dr. McDearmon,

I am a doctoral student at Northwest Nazarene University (Nampa, ID) in the Ph.D. program in Educational Leadership with an emphasis in Higher Education. I am about to finish my Ph.D. coursework and am currently drafting my chapters 1, 2 and 3 of my dissertation. My working title is “Alumni Role Identity Among Recent College Graduates” under the direction of my Faculty Advisor, Dr. Heidi Curtis.

I am requesting your permission to reproduce your Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire survey instrument as a methodological component of my research study. I will use the survey only for educational purposes in my research study and will not sell or use it for any compensation activities. I will include a copyright statement on all copies of the instrument and cite you as the author of the survey. I will send you my research study and copy of any reports, articles, that make use of my survey data promptly upon completion of my studies.

Should you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me by email or phone.

If these terms and conditions are acceptable, please send me a follow-up email with your permission.

Thank you so much!

Corynn M. Gilbert, M.Ed.



Corynn Gilbert &lt;corynngilbert@nnu.edu&gt;

---

**Fw: Alumni Role Identity Permission**

1 message

Corynn M. Gilbert <cgilbert@bushnell.edu>  
 To: Corynn Gilbert <corynngilbert@nnu.edu>

Sat, Jan 16, 2021 at 5:17 PM

**From:** McDearmon, Travis <tmcdearmon@butler.edu>  
**Sent:** Monday, December 7, 2020 12:26 PM  
**To:** Corynn M. Gilbert <cgilbert@bushnell.edu>  
**Subject:** Alumni Role Identity Permission

[EXTERNAL] This message is from outside our University. Please inspect links carefully before clicking and use caution with attachments.

Corynn,

This email serves as my official permission for you to use my Alumni Role Identity questionnaire for your upcoming dissertation with the working title, "Alumni Role Identity Among Recent College Graduates." Best of luck on your endeavor and thank you for continuing this work!

Best,

Travis

**J. Travis McDearmon, Ph.D.**  
 Development Officer  
 University Advancement  
 Butler University  
 [REDACTED]  
[tmcdearmon@butler.edu](mailto:tmcdearmon@butler.edu)

---

Date: December 5, 2020  
 To: Blake.Ashforth@asu.edu  
 From: corynngilbert@nnu.edu

Dear Dr. Ashforth,  
 Greetings from Eugene, Oregon. I'm reaching out to you as a current doctoral student at Northwest Nazarene University (Nampa, ID) as I am seeking permission to use a portion of one of your research surveys in my dissertation study. I am currently serving as the Director of University Relations at a small liberal arts college, Bushnell University (renamed from Northwest Christian University in July 2020) here in Eugene. We are next door to the much larger flagship school, the University of Oregon. I have worked in higher education for over 25 years in a variety of roles (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/corynn-gilbert-m-ed-782191aa/>) and am choosing to integrate my professional work in alumni affairs and fundraising with my doctoral studies.

I am about to finish my Ph.D. coursework and am currently drafting my chapters 1, 2 and 3 of my dissertation. My working title is “Alumni Role Identity Among Recent College Graduates.” My research is an extension of Dr. J. Travis McDearmon’s work on alumni role identity (2011, 2013). However, Dr. McDearmon’s work was based primarily in symbolic interactionism. I’m looking at including social and organizational identity theory in my study as well. The purpose statement in my dissertation reads as follows: “The purpose of this research is to understand how new graduates perceive their relationship with their university at the point at which they make this transition from student to alumnus, how these perceptions inform their understanding of their new role as an alumnus, and how this understanding informs their intentions to engage in future alumni support behaviors.” I will be surveying all 2021 graduates of traditional undergraduate programs from participating private universities in the Pacific Northwest and California who are members of the Council of Christian Colleges & Universities (cccu.org).

I know that I’m digging far back in your academic career, but I’m interested in using your six Organizational Identification questions from your 1992 research with Fred Mael, “Alumni and Their Alma Mater: A Partial Test of the Reformulated Model of Organizational Identification” (*Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 13, 103-123). I am hoping to establish the presence of organizational identification at the point of graduation along with administering McDearmon’s (2011, 2013) Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire. I already have permission from Dr. McDearmon to use his tool and he is also serving as my outside committee member.

I’m happy to send along any more information that you need as you consider my request. Your research in the field has been significant in my studies and I would be honored to integrate your past research tool into my current study.

I look forward to hearing from you!

Corynn Gilbert

---

**From:** Blake Ashforth <[blake.ashforth@asu.edu](mailto:blake.ashforth@asu.edu)>  
**Sent:** Saturday, December 5, 2020 5:25 PM  
**To:** Corynn M. Gilbert <[cgilbert@bushnell.edu](mailto:cgilbert@bushnell.edu)>  
**Subject:** Re: Permission Requested

[EXTERNAL] This message is from outside our University. Please inspect links carefully before clicking and use caution with attachments.

Hi Corynn:

That sounds like a very cool and worthwhile study! I'm glad you found our research useful.

Yes, of course, please feel free to use our scale.

All the best with your dissertation!

Blake

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/1?ik=006e859d95&view=pt&search=all&permthid=thread-f%3A1689094656566379275&simpl=msg-f%3A16890946565...> 1/3

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1/16/2021

Northwest Nazarene University Mail - Fw: Permission Requested

**Blake Ashforth**

Regents Professor and Horace Steele Arizona Heritage Chair

Department of Management & Entrepreneurship

**W. P. Carey School of Business | Arizona State University**

Tempe, AZ 85287 (Ph: [REDACTED])

U.S.A.

## Appendix C

### Site Permission Letter

{Date}

Name

Title

Address Line 1

Address Line 2

City, ST ZIP

Dear \_\_\_\_\_.

I am the Director of University Relations at Bushnell University, a fellow member institution of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). I am also a current doctoral candidate at Northwest Nazarene University (NNU) pursuing a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership with a focus on higher education. I am in the process of developing my dissertation, with a working title of “Alumni Role Identity Among Recent College Graduates” under the direction of my faculty advisor, Dr. Heidi Curtis. I am in the process of obtaining approval from the NNU the Institutional Review Board (IRB) which includes receiving advanced written permission from collaborating institutions to proceed with the research. This is what I am reaching out to you about today.

I am writing to ask for your participation in my dissertation research by sharing the email addresses of your 2021 graduates of your traditional undergraduate programs for a one-time use online research survey that I plan to conduct during the Summer of 2021. I will be using an online Qualtrics survey to be distributed through email. The survey utilizes a modified version of McDearmon’s Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire (2011) and six of Mael and Ashforth’s (1992) survey questions to determine organizational identification.

The purpose of my research is to determine what recent, first-time alumni of undergraduate programs understand about alumni role identity, how their understanding of this role informs their attitudes about future support behaviors, and their attitudes about alumni giving in general. In addition, I will also be asking for demographic information related to financial aid, first-generation status, gender, age, etc. I will not require any effort on your behalf to distribute the survey to your graduates, however I would like to use your university logo on the survey to encourage participation from your graduates.

My use of alumni email addresses and responses would be under the following conditions **only**:

- I will use this alumni information only to distribute the questionnaire and only for educational purposes related to this study.
- All email addresses will be maintained in a locked, secure, and password-protected location and will only be used for this single study (and subsequently deleted).

- All participants will remain anonymous and no names will be attached to their responses. Participants will have the option to provide their email address for incentivization purposes.
- I will send my research study results and copy of any reports or publications that make use of this alumni information to your attention in a timely fashion.
- Should I receive enough respondents to aggregate my results by institution, I will make your individual data available to you as well.

I have attached the following documentation for your review:

1. A copy of the survey questions which will be included in the online instrument
2. Text of all email communication to participants for purposes of recruitment
3. A copy of the Electronic Informed Consent I will be providing all participants
4. A sample of the text for your permission letter to personalize on your university letterhead if you so choose.

Once I have received written permission from you, I will submit all documentation to the IRB and will provide you with my IRB approval number. I will not proceed with any research until July 1, 2021 and only after such approval.

Should you have any questions or concerns, or if there are other individuals whom I may need to consult concerning the use of the requested information, please feel free to contact me by email at [CorynnGilbert@nnu.edu](mailto:CorynnGilbert@nnu.edu) or by phone at [REDACTED]. If possible, I am hoping to receive written permission from you by **April 1, 2021**.

Thank you for your consideration,

Corynn Gilbert, M.Ed.



## Appendix D

### Informed Consent

#### A. Purpose and Background

I am currently a doctorate student at Northwest Nazarene University, and I am conducting a research study on alumni role identity among recent college graduates. The purpose of this research is to understand how new graduates perceive their relationship with their university at the point at which they make this transition from student to alumnus, how these perceptions inform their understanding of their new role as an alumnus, and how this understanding informs their intentions to engage in future alumni support behaviors.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a 2021 graduate of a traditional undergraduate program from \_\_\_\_\_ (insert name of university here). Your university has granted permission for you to receive this request for participation.

#### B. Procedures

If you agree to be in the study, the following will occur:

You will be asked to complete a **10-minute questionnaire** on your attitudes about your university, your understanding of what it means to be an alumnus, and your future intentions to support your university as an alumnus. You will also be asked a series of demographic questions. Most of the opinion questions will be Likert-style, closed-ended questions, however one question will be opened-ended and allows you to respond freely. Several questions are yes/no questions.

#### C. Risks/Discomforts

There is minimal risk involved if you volunteer for this research. You will not be identified in the research; all interviews and responses will be kept anonymous with all data remaining secure under password protected files and servers. Some of the questions in the survey may make you uncomfortable, but you are free to decline or skip any questions you do not wish to answer or to stop participation at any time.

#### D. Benefits

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information you provide may provide valuable information to your college or university.

#### E. Payments

There are no payments or other compensation for participating in this study. If you choose to share your email address with the researcher (optional), you will be included in a drawing for a \$100 Amazon gift card.

#### F. Questions

If you have any questions or concerns about participation in this study, please feel free to contact the research investigator, Corynn Gilbert at [corynngilbert@nnu.edu](mailto:corynngilbert@nnu.edu). You may also contact her Faculty Advisor, Dr. Heidi Curtis, via e-mail at [hcurtis@nnu.edu](mailto:hcurtis@nnu.edu).

**G. Consent**

Participation in research is voluntary. You are free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point. This research study has been approved by the Northwest Nazarene University Institutional Review Board (#05022021) on May 19, 2021.

**Options:**

*I certify that I am at least 18 years of age and I give my electronic consent to participate in this study.*

*I decline to participate and will not proceed with the survey.*

---

**Corynn Gilbert, Doctoral Student**

---

**Date**

## Appendix E

### Text for Email Survey Invitation and Reminders

The following is the email invitation to participate in the survey sent to all prospective respondents, the three day follow-up email, the one week follow-up email, the two week follow-up email, and the final email.

#### **Initial Invitation**

**Subject Line: Your Feedback as a Recent (insert name of college here) Graduate is Needed**

Greetings and congratulations on your recent college graduation from \_\_\_\_\_! My name is Corynn Gilbert and I am a doctoral student at Northwest Nazarene University. As a recent college graduate of \_\_\_\_\_, you have been chosen to participate in a research study on alumni role identity. I am writing to ask your permission to complete a survey on your undergraduate experience and your attitudes about what it means to be an alumnus of your university. *Your feedback is incredibly valuable and will inform future best practices for alumni affairs.*

**Take the 10-Minute Survey Here** (hyperlink)

If you choose to proceed, you will be asked questions about how you feel about your college, how strongly you identify as an alumnus, and what you understand about the alumni role. You will also be asked demographic questions and questions about your college experience. You may omit or skip any questions. You will also have the option to complete three open-ended questions about your college experience and about supporting your university in the future.

Participation in this survey is completely voluntary and your personal information will be protected. You can choose to complete the survey anonymously. ***However, if you complete the survey and are willing to share your email address, you will be included in a drawing for a \$100 Amazon Gift Card.*** Your individual responses will NOT be shared with your institution, but rather all responses will be aggregated and available by request.

**Take the 10-Minute Survey Here** (hyperlink)

Thank you for taking the time to support academic research in alumni affairs. Your willingness to participate in this survey is greatly appreciated.

With gratitude,

Corynn Gilbert  
 Doctoral Candidate, Northwest Nazarene University  
 CorynnGilbert@nnu.edu

#### **Second Invitation (sent after 3 days)**

**Subject Line: Class of 2021: Please Share Your Experience With Us**

Hello! My name is Corynn Gilbert and I am a doctoral student at Northwest Nazarene University. A few days ago, you received an invitation from me to participate in a research study on alumni role identity. You have been chosen to participate in this study as a recent college graduate of \_\_\_\_\_. I am writing to ask your permission to complete a survey on your undergraduate experience and your attitudes about what it means to be an alumnus of your university. *Your feedback is incredibly valuable and will inform future best practices for alumni affairs.*

**[Take the 10-Minute Survey Here](#)** (hyperlink)

If you choose to proceed, you will be asked questions about how you feel about your college, how strongly you identify as an alumnus, and what you understand about the alumni role. You will also be asked demographic questions and questions about your college experience. You may omit or skip any questions. You will also have the option to complete three open-ended questions about your college experience and about supporting your university in the future.

Participation in this survey is completely voluntary and your personal information will be protected. You can choose to complete the survey anonymously. ***However, if you complete the survey and are willing to share your email address, you will be included in a drawing for a \$100 Amazon Gift Card.*** Your individual responses will NOT be shared with your institution, but rather all responses will be aggregated and available by request.

**[Take the 10-Minute Survey Here](#)** (hyperlink)

Thank you for taking the time to support academic research in alumni affairs. Your willingness to participate in this survey is greatly appreciated.

With gratitude,

Corynn Gilbert  
 Doctoral Candidate, Northwest Nazarene University  
 CorynnGilbert@nnu.edu

**Reminder 1 (sent at 1 week)**

**Subject Line: Can You Help? Seeking Feedback from the Class of 2021**

Hello there! I'm continuing my research efforts to gather survey feedback from 2021 graduates of \_\_\_\_\_. Your input on your recent college experience is incredibly valuable and we are hoping you will take 10 minutes to complete a survey that will help your university serve you better as an alumnus. *Can you help us learn more about you and your fellow graduates?*

**[Take the 10-Minute Survey Here](#)** (hyperlink)

If you choose to proceed, you will be asked questions about how you feel about your college, how strongly you identify as an alumnus, and what you understand about the alumni role. You will also be asked demographic questions and questions about your college experience. You may

omit or skip any questions. You will also have the option to complete three open-ended questions about your college experience and about supporting your university in the future.

Participation in this survey is completely voluntary and your personal information will be protected. You can choose to complete the survey anonymously. ***However, if you complete the survey and are willing to share your email address, you will be included in a drawing for a \$100 Amazon Gift Card.*** Your individual responses will NOT be shared with your institution, but rather all responses will be aggregated and available by request.

**[Take the 10-Minute Survey Here](#)** (hyperlink)

Thank you for taking the time to support academic research in alumni affairs. Your willingness to participate in this survey is greatly appreciated.

With gratitude,

Corynn Gilbert  
 Doctoral Candidate, Northwest Nazarene University  
 CorynnGilbert@nnu.edu

**Reminder 2 (sent at 2 weeks)**

**Subject Line: Congratulations on Your Recent Graduation!**

Hello 2021 graduate! A few weeks ago I sent you an email invitation to participate in a short research study on alumni role identity. I would really love your feedback as a recent college graduate of \_\_\_\_\_. Survey responses will be included in my dissertation research study and the results will help your alumni affairs office to serve you better as a new graduate. *Would you take 10 minutes of your day to complete the survey?*

**[Take the 10-Minute Survey Here](#)** (hyperlink)

If you choose to proceed, you will be asked questions about how you feel about your college, how strongly you identify as an alumnus, and what you understand about the alumni role. You will also be asked demographic questions and questions about your college experience. You may omit or skip any questions. You will also have the option to complete three open-ended questions about your college experience and about supporting your university in the future.

Participation in this survey is completely voluntary and your personal information will be protected. You can choose to complete the survey anonymously. ***However, if you complete the survey and are willing to share your email address, you will be included in a drawing for a \$100 Amazon Gift Card.*** Your individual responses will NOT be shared with your institution, but rather all responses will be aggregated and available by request.

**[Take the 10-Minute Survey Here](#)** (hyperlink)

Thank you for taking the time to support academic research in alumni affairs. Your willingness to participate in this survey is greatly appreciated.

With gratitude,

Corynn Gilbert  
Doctoral Candidate, Northwest Nazarene University  
CorynnGilbert@nnu.edu

**Final Reminder (sent at 3 weeks)**

**Subject Line: \$100 Amazon Gift Card Drawing: Final Request to Participate**

As a recent 2021 graduate of a \_\_\_\_\_, we are seeking your feedback on your college experience. You have received several invitations and we are still hoping to include your responses to the survey questions in this study. We understand you have many things competing for your time and are hoping you will consider contributing to this important research. However, we honor your time and therefore this will be our final request to participate. **The survey will close one week after this invitation.** *Would you give it one last consideration?*

**Take the 10-Minute Survey Here** (hyperlink)

If you choose to proceed, you will be asked questions about how you feel about your college, how strongly you identify as an alumnus, and what you understand about the alumni role. You will also be asked demographic questions and questions about your college experience. You may omit or skip any questions. You will also have the option to complete three open-ended questions about your college experience and about supporting your university in the future.

Participation in this survey is completely voluntary and your personal information will be protected. You can choose to complete the survey anonymously. ***However, if you complete the survey and are willing to share your email address, you will be included in a drawing for a \$100 Amazon Gift Card.*** Your individual responses will NOT be shared with your institution, but rather all responses will be aggregated and available by request.

**Take the 10-Minute Survey Here** (hyperlink)

Thank you for taking the time to support academic research in alumni affairs. Your willingness to participate in this survey is greatly appreciated.

With gratitude,

Corynn Gilbert  
Doctoral Candidate, Northwest Nazarene University  
CorynnGilbert@nnu.edu

## Appendix F

### Certificate of Completion: Ethics and Human Subjects Protection



■ FOR LEARNING ■ FOR LISTENING ■ FOR LIFE

## Certificate of Completion

*Association of Clinical Research Professionals certifies that*

# Corynn Gilbert

*has successfully completed*

**Ethics and Human Subject Protection: A Comprehensive  
Introduction**

Version: Jan 2020

Date of completion: Jan 17, 2021

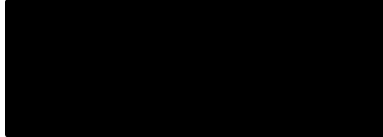
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "JK Kremidas". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Jim Kremidas – Executive Director



## Appendix G

### Site Confirmation Letters



April 1, 2021

Institutional Review Board  
Northwest Nazarene University  
623 S. University Blvd.  
Nampa, ID 83686

Dear colleagues,


I am writing to provide my written consent for Corynn Gilbert, a doctoral candidate in your Ph.D. program in Educational Leadership, to use email addresses of our university's 2021 graduates of our traditional undergraduate programs for her dissertation survey research entitled "Alumni Role Identity Among Recent College Graduates" under the supervision of Dr. Heidi Curtis.



I am willing to provide the email addresses of select alumni for this one-time purpose under the following circumstances:

- This information will be used only to distribute the questionnaire and only for educational purposes related to this study.
- All email addresses will be maintained in a locked, secure, and password-protected location and will only be used for this single study (and subsequently deleted).
- All participants will remain anonymous and no names will be attached to their responses. Participants will have the option to provide their email address for incentivization purposes.
- Research study results and copy of any reports or publications that make use of this alumni information will be shared in a timely fashion.
- Should enough respondents from my institution participate in the study, aggregated results will be provided to my institution for our own knowledge.

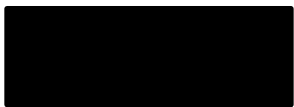
I understand that distribution of the survey will not happen until full IRB approval has been secured and confirmation of IRB approval has been provided to me.

Finally, I give permission for Corynn Gilbert to use our university logo (which I will provide) on the survey distributed to our graduates to encourage participation in the research.

Thank you, 





March 19, 2021

Institutional Review Board  
Northwest Nazarene University  
623 S. University Blvd.  
Nampa, ID 83686

Dear colleagues,

I am writing to provide my written consent for Corynn Gilbert, a doctoral candidate in your Ph.D. program in Educational Leadership, to use email addresses of our university's 2021 graduates of our traditional undergraduate programs for her dissertation survey research entitled "Alumni Role Identity Among Recent College Graduates" under the supervision of Dr. Heidi Curtis.

I am willing to provide the email addresses of select alumni for this one-time purpose under the following circumstances:

- This information will be used only to distribute the questionnaire and only for educational purposes related to this study.
- All email addresses will be maintained in a locked, secure, and password-protected location and will only be used for this single study (and subsequently deleted).
- All participants will remain anonymous and no names will be attached to their responses. Participants will have the option to provide their email address for incentivization purposes.
- Research study results and copy of any reports or publications that make use of this alumni information will be shared in a timely fashion.
- Should enough respondents from my institution participate in the study, aggregated results will be provided to my institution for our own knowledge.

I understand that distribution of the survey will not happen until full IRB approval has been secured and confirmation of IRB approval has been provided to me.

Finally, I give permission for Corynn Gilbert to use our university logo (which I will provide) on the survey distributed to our graduates to encourage participation in the research.

Thank you,



July 29, 2021

Institutional Review Board  
Northwest Nazarene University  
623 S. University Blvd.  
Nampa, ID 83686

Dear colleagues,

I am writing to provide my written consent for Corynn Gilbert, a doctoral candidate in your Ph.D. program in Educational Leadership, to use email addresses of our university's 2021 graduates of our traditional undergraduate programs for her dissertation survey research entitled "Alumni Role Identity Among Recent College Graduates" under the supervision of Dr. Heidi Curtis.

I am willing to provide the email addresses of select alumni for this one-time purpose under the following circumstances:

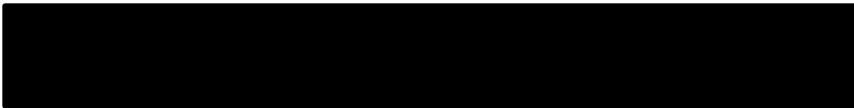
- This information will be used only to distribute the questionnaire and only for educational purposes related to this study.
- **[REDACTED] alumni will only receive two invitation emails and one reminder email.**
- All email addresses will be maintained in a locked, secure, and password-protected location and will only be used for this single study (and subsequently deleted).
- All participants will remain anonymous and no names will be attached to their responses. Participants will have the option to provide their email address for incentivization purposes.
- Research study results and copy of any reports or publications that make use of this alumni information will be shared in a timely fashion.
- Should enough respondents from my institution participate in the study, aggregated results will be provided to my institution for our own knowledge.

I understand that distribution of the survey will not happen until full IRB approval has been secured and confirmation of IRB approval has been provided to me.

Finally, I give permission for Corynn Gilbert to use our university logo (which I will provide) on the survey distributed to our graduates to encourage participation in the research.

Thank you,

[REDACTED]



March 1, 2021

Institutional Review Board  
Northwest Nazarene University  
623 S. University Blvd.  
Nampa, ID 83686

Dear Colleagues,

I am writing to provide my written consent for Corynn Gilbert, a doctoral candidate in your Ph.D. program in Educational Leadership, to use email addresses of our university's 2021 graduates of our traditional undergraduate programs for her dissertation survey research entitled "Alumni Role Identity Among Recent College Graduates" under the supervision of Dr. Heidi Curtis.

I am willing to provide the email addresses of select alumni for this one-time purpose under the following circumstances:

- This information will be used only to distribute the questionnaire and only for educational purposes related to this study.
- All email addresses will be maintained in a locked, secure, and password-protected location and will only be used for this single study (and subsequently deleted).
- All participants will remain anonymous and no names will be attached to their responses. Participants will have the option to provide their email address for incentivization purposes.
- Research study results and copy of any reports or publications that make use of this alumni information will be shared in a timely fashion.
- Should enough respondents from my institution participate in the study, aggregated results will be provided to my institution for our own knowledge.

I understand that distribution of the survey will not happen until full IRB approval has been secured and confirmation of IRB approval has been provided to me.

Finally, I give permission for Corynn Gilbert to use our university logo (which I will provide) on the survey distributed to our graduates to encourage participation in the research.

Thank you, 



March 8, 2021

Institutional Review Board  
Northwest Nazarene University  
623 S. University Blvd.  
Nampa, ID 83686

Dear colleagues,

I am writing to provide my written consent for Corynn Gilbert, a doctoral candidate in your Ph.D. program in Educational Leadership, to use email addresses of our university's 2021 graduates of our traditional undergraduate programs for her dissertation survey research entitled "Alumni Role Identity Among Recent College Graduates" under the supervision of Dr. Heidi Curtis.

I am willing to provide the email addresses of select alumni for this one-time purpose under the following circumstances:

- This information will be used only to distribute the questionnaire and only for educational purposes related to this study.
- All email addresses will be maintained in a locked, secure, and password-protected location and will only be used for this single study (and subsequently deleted).
- All participants will remain anonymous and no names will be attached to their responses. Participants will have the option to provide their email address for incentivization purposes.
- Research study results and copy of any reports or publications that make use of this alumni information will be shared in a timely fashion.
- Should enough respondents from my institution participate in the study, aggregated results will be provided to my institution for our own knowledge.

I understand that distribution of the survey will not happen until full IRB approval has been secured and confirmation of IRB approval has been provided to me.

Finally, I give permission for Corynn Gilbert to use our university logo (which I will provide) on the survey distributed to our graduates to encourage participation in the research.

Thank you.

[Redacted signature]

[Redacted footer]

April 1, 2021

Institutional Review Board  
Northwest Nazarene University  
623 S. University Blvd.  
Nampa, ID 83686

Dear colleagues,

I am writing to provide my written consent for Corynn Gilbert, a doctoral candidate in your Ph.D. program in Educational Leadership, to use email addresses of our university's 2021 graduates of our traditional undergraduate programs for her dissertation survey research entitled "Alumni Role Identity Among Recent College Graduates" under the supervision of Dr. Heidi Curtis.

I am willing to provide the email addresses of select alumni for this one-time purpose under the following circumstances:

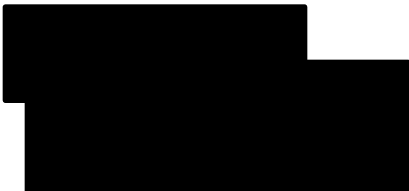
- This information will be used only to distribute the questionnaire and only for educational purposes related to this study.
- All email addresses will be maintained in a locked, secure, and password-protected location and will only be used for this single study (and subsequently deleted).
- All participants will remain anonymous and no names will be attached to their responses. Participants will have the option to provide their email address for incentivization purposes.
- Research study results and copy of any reports or publications that make use of this alumni information will be shared in a timely fashion.
- Should enough respondents from my institution participate in the study, aggregated results will be provided to my institution for our own knowledge.

I understand that distribution of the survey will not happen until full IRB approval has been secured and confirmation of IRB approval has been provided to me.

Finally, I give permission for Corynn Gilbert to use our university logo (which I will provide) on the survey distributed to our graduates to encourage participation in the research.

Thank you,





April 14, 2021

Institutional Review Board  
Northwest Nazarene University  
623 S. University Blvd.  
Nampa, ID 83686


Dear colleagues,

I am writing to provide my written consent for Corynn Gilbert, a doctoral candidate in your Ph.D. program in Educational Leadership, to use email addresses of our university's 2021 graduates of our traditional undergraduate programs for her dissertation survey research entitled "Alumni Role Identity Among Recent College Graduates" under the supervision of Dr. Heidi Curtis.


I am willing to provide the email addresses of select alumni for this one-time purpose under the following circumstances:

- This information will be used only to distribute the questionnaire and only for educational purposes related to this study.
- All email addresses will be maintained in a locked, secure, and password-protected location and will only be used for this single study (and subsequently deleted).
- All participants will remain anonymous and no names will be attached to their responses. Participants will have the option to provide their email address for incentivization purposes.
- Research study results and copy of any reports or publications that make use of this alumni information will be shared in a timely fashion.
- Should enough respondents from my institution participate in the study, aggregated results will be provided to my institution for our own knowledge.

I understand that distribution of the survey will not happen until full IRB approval has been secured and confirmation of IRB approval has been provided to me.





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Finally, I give permission for Corynn Gilbert to use our university logo (which I will provide) on the survey distributed to our graduates to encourage participation in the research.

Thank you,





April 22, 2021

Institutional Review Board  
Northwest Nazarene University  
623 S. University Blvd.  
Nampa, ID 83686

Dear colleagues,

I am writing to provide my written consent for Corynn Gilbert, a doctoral candidate in your Ph.D. program in Educational Leadership, to include our university's 2021 graduates of our traditional undergraduate programs for her dissertation survey research entitled "Alumni Role Identity Among Recent College Graduates" under the supervision of Dr. Heidi Curtis.

I am willing to distribute her dissertation survey to select alumni for this one-time purpose under the following circumstances:

- The [REDACTED] alumni office will send the survey link (and subsequent reminders) via email directly to our 2021 graduates sometime after July 1, 2021.
- The survey will be slightly modified according to our constituent demographic.
- All participants will remain anonymous and no names will be attached to their responses. Participants will have the option to provide their email address for incentivization purposes.
- Research study results and copy of any reports or publications that make use of this alumni information will be shared in a timely fashion.
- Should enough respondents from my institution participate in the study, aggregated results will be provided to my institution for our own knowledge.

I understand that distribution of the survey will not happen until full IRB approval has been secured and confirmation of IRB approval has been provided to me.

Finally, I give permission for Corynn Gilbert to use our university logo (which I will provide) on the survey link distributed to our graduates to encourage participation in the research.

Thank you,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

## Appendix H

### IRB Approval Letter



Corynn Gilbert <corynngilbert@nnu.edu>

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#### Status update from Northwest Nazarene University

1 message

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Northwest Nazarene University <reply-to+651b22e1-1299-4873-8f55-360ac734c7d2@email.submittable.com>  
To: CorynnGilbert@nnu.edu

Wed, May 19, 2021 at 9:20 AM

Submittable 

Dear Corynn,

The IRB has reviewed your protocol: 05022021--ALUMNI ROLE IDENTITY AMONG RECENT COLLEGE GRADUATES. You received "Full Approval". Congratulations, you may begin your research. If you have any questions, let me know.

Northwest Nazarene University  
Rick Boyes  
IRB Member  
623 S University Blvd  
Nampa, ID 83686