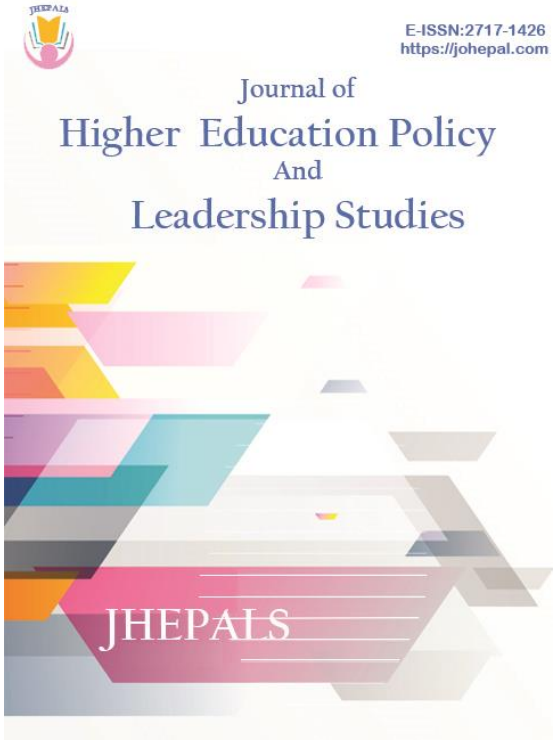
Journal of
Higher Education Policy
And
Leadership Studies

JHEPALS (E-ISSN: 2717-1426)

https://johepal.com



International Alumni Engagement: Operations, Leadership, and Policy at U.S Research Universities

Lisa Unangst

Postdoctoral researcher,
Centre for Higher Education Governance Ghent (CHEGG), Belgium
Email: unangstl@bc.edu
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6478-9333

Article Received **2020/09/03** | Article Accepted **2020/09/30** | Published Online **2020/10/13**

Cite article as:

Unangst, L. (2020). International alumni engagement: Operations, leadership, and policy at U.S research universities. *Journal of Higher Education Policy And Leadership Studies*, *1*(2), 63-77. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.29252/johepal.1.2.63

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.29252/johepal.1.2.63]

International Alumni Engagement: Operations, Leadership, and Policy at U.S Research Universities

Journal of Higher Education Policy And Leadership Studies (JHEPALS)

E-ISSN: 2717-1426
Volume: 1 Issue: 2
pp. 63-77
DOI:
10.29252/johepal.1.2.63

Lisa Unangst *

Abstract

Maintaining and leveraging relationships with alumni has long been a function of higher education institutions worldwide, both for the purposes of 'alumni engagement' but also, and particularly obviously in the U.S. context, to achieve philanthropic goals (Holmes, 2009). This article reviews the scope of international alumni affairs activity among research intensive, doctoral granting institutions in the United States as identified by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. Divergent paradigms and emergent themes are identified, including: definitional inconsistencies across the landscape; inconsistent staff support; variable programmatic functions; lack of data on the diversity of alumni leadership; and the increasingly important roles of digital media and intercultural competence. Findings are discussed in light of new forms of engagement necessitated by the COVID-19 crisis and with a view towards implications for university leadership globally.

Keywords: International alumni affairs; Development; Alumni; Philanthropy; Advancement

Introduction

It has been widely agreed that as higher education institutions (HEIs) operate in increasingly resource constrained environments, engaging alumni and bolstering their role in resource development is ever more important to long term institutional success (Glass & Lee, 2018; McDearmon, 2013; Pedro, Pereira, & Carrasqueira, 2018; Pottick, Giordano, & Chirico, 2015). As the University of Roehampton (United Kingdom) puts it, 'our alumni are important to the continued success of the University and we value your involvement, your support and the real difference this will make to the experience of

* **Corresponding author's email:** unangstl@bc.edu

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.29252/johepal.1.2.63]

our students today – and in the future' (2018). It is not only as a source of financial support that alumni contribute to HEI well-being. Rather, alumni as permanent constituents of an institution are uniquely well positioned to support student learning, the development of student and peer career trajectories, public service, local community relations, and other HEI functions. Given sustained levels of international student enrolment worldwide for several decades (OECD, 2017, p. 287), and in light of unprecedented economic mobility facilitating the dispersion of university graduates, international alumni affairs represents an important and emerging subfield of higher education research (Unangst, 2018).

This paper offers a synthesis of 2018 survey responses and interview data from international alumni affairs administrators at United States (U.S.)-based, Carnegie classified doctoral granting institutions with highest research activity (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2018). While there are somewhat varied definitions of what a contemporary research university does and ought to do in any given national setting, Crow and Dabars' (2015) definition of 'a complex and adaptive comprehensive knowledge enterprise committed to discovery, creativity, and innovation' (p. 19) is a useful frame. The pre-pandemic data gathered from this single national case is explored in a discussion of implications for all-online alumni relations at HEIs worldwide. Six key themes are identified: definitional inconsistencies; inconsistent staff support; variable programmatic functions; a lack of data on diversity of alumni leadership; and the increasingly important roles of digital media and intercultural competence. The paper concludes with indications for future research.

Conceptual Framework

Previous scholarship on international alumni affairs is quite limited. Most work completed in this area has been conducted by consultants or by professional associations such as the Council for Advancement and Support of Higher Education (CASE) and the European Association for International Education (EAIE). This type of literature tends to focus on improving the operations of alumni affairs practitioners and the work of university development (or 'advancement' as it is frequently referred to in the U.S. context) writ large. It does not emphasize relevant implications for HEIs as individual units or the tertiary sector more broadly. It also rarely attends to issues of equity, access, or internationalization—although Dobson (2015) is an exception with respect to a focus on matters of internationalization. The area of crossover between student outcomes and alumni engagement – mentorship – has received somewhat more attention in the literature (Dollinger et al., 2019; Unangst, 2019). Further, a recent publication by Haupt and Castiello-Gutiérrez (2020) considers Education Abroad (EA) – or student mobility – and larger HEI goals, gesturing towards a pipeline for the development of international alumni.

This paper employs the conceptual framework indicated by Pedro, Pereira, and Carrasqueira (2018), in which universities are seen as the primary constructor of relationship-building activities with institutional alumni. In short, 'HEIs develop relationship programs with the alumni, especially directing resources to motivate their involvement in the activities of the institution' (Pedro et al., 2018, p. 132). This framework does not presuppose particular institutional priorities, allowing for a range of strategic objectives. Further, it allows for the collection of data from a variety of institutional actors – in this case, alumni affairs officers with some engagement in the international sphere, whether in a full-time or part-time capacity.

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.29252/johepal.1.2.63]

Finally, this inquiry allows for a close look at how universities extend the identity paradigms increasingly common in the student sphere to the realm of alumni activity (O'Mochain, 2006). For instance, while it is mandatory for U.S. universities to provide publicly available data on the diversity of their student bodies (U.S. Department of Education, 2008) – and indeed they frequently highlight this information in prominent virtual and print 'fact books' – similar demographics around short and long term alumni engagement are not made available in any cohesive way. In the interest of extending transparency of data to the alumni sphere, this paper probes who among the larger alumni population is engaged by the home university and why, acknowledging that 'diversity' is itself a construct that leans on essentialist identity markers. Moving forward, identity as self-reported, fluid, and intersectional may be seen as a participatory alternative to the static 'diversity' currently captured by most alumni records.

Methodology

As noted previously, it is American doctoral-granting universities with highest research activity that are in focus here. This grouping was selected given that these institutions tend to be among the most well-resourced and largest in terms of student enrolment in the U.S. landscape. These universities, then, might be seen as most likely to display robust international alumni affairs staff units. I acknowledge that staffing itself is not the sole indicator of international alumni affairs activity, which may also be volunteer-driven.

The emphasis in the first phase of this project – given the relative paucity of data centring the experience and perspectives of international alumni affairs practitioners – was on constructing an online survey that would garner descriptive data and allow for in-depth, text entry responses. The survey included 19 questions, among them 'roughly how many living alumni of your institution do you classify as international, and how have you arrived at that number' as well as 'please describe the process of selecting new international alumni leaders'. Survey participants were identified at target institutions based on the titles assigned to alumni affairs staff; individuals responsible for international alumni clubs (or networks, associations, or similar groups) were included. If an 'international' point person was not immediately obvious, the 'regional' alumni affairs staffer was included in outreach. Thus the job titles of targeted survey respondents varied from 'Program Manager for Alumni Clubs, Awards and International Programs' to 'Vice President of International Outreach and Engagement' and reflected senior, mid-, and junior level administrative positions.

The online survey was launched on May 21, 2018 and invitations extended to selected alumni affairs administrators at the 115 doctoral granting institutions identified by the Carnegie classification as having highest research activity. Again, as this project sought to provide a census of international alumni affairs activities, one staff member was contacted at each target university. The survey received 29 valid responses, representing a response rate of approximately 25%, lower than the average online survey response rate of 33% observed by Nulty (2008). In recognition of the fact that the survey response rate was lower than hoped, and cognizant that the summer months in the U.S. are generally a difficult period to generate responses among university affiliates, in a second phase of the project survey data was augmented with semi-structured interviews of selected survey respondents. Interviews probed survey responses, addressed changes at the given institution over time, and allowed for participants to share their thoughts in more depth on strategic goals and obstacles. Six interviews were conducted by telephone or an online meeting platform. These interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes on average, and all interview participants as well as

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.29252/johepal.1.2.63]

survey respondents were guaranteed confidentiality throughout the process. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained for both the survey and subsequent interviews.

Findings

Six Emergent Themes

Definitional Inconsistencies

Inconsistent and overlapping definitions abound in the area of international alumni affairs. How universities define 'international alumni' and how self-identified characteristics of an alumnus/a are reflected in alumni records represent areas where existing definitions and rapidly evolving record-keeping systems may struggle to meet new, tangible realities of internationalized higher education. Among survey respondents, a plurality identified international alumni as 'an alumnus/a holding citizenship of any country, but residing outside of the U.S.', while three university representatives provided other definitions, and six declined to answer. Further, 'alumni' was differently construed: seven respondents indicate that their institution recognized 'degree holders only', while others included program participants, or those who had completed at least one semester or one year of study at the institution.

These varying definitions seem to contribute to the wide range of international alumni reported by the institutions surveyed here. Indeed, these figures varied between 2-25% of the total alumni base, notable given that the universities surveyed are of similar type. Further, interview data indicated that as institutions experience progressively higher international student enrolment, they reconsider their definitions. One participant reflected that

> *"the definition of international alumni has been loosened over time at [our university]; it used to be 'you're from a country other than the U.S. and you're going back to that country when you graduate', but now it also includes expats … You didn't used to hear much about international aside from the student recruitment side. But now we've had our [European] campus for almost 25 years, we have other established outposts, and we're also building [an Asian] campus. Now we wonder, if you're an American on the campus in [Asia], are you international? Is it about where you are or where you're from?"*

Though not the primary focus of this study, survey respondents were asked to indicate how alumni could self-identify in terms of gender – this question related to an interest in considering diversity (or lack thereof) among international alumni leadership, to be discussed further along in this article. One of the responding administrators indicated that alumni could select from among the categories 'male', 'female', 'non-binary', 'transgender' or 'prefer not to state'. However, seven universities indicated that male and female were the only two options provided in this category, and eight respondents did not reply to this question, with one noting that they were not certain of the options available. While it may be that the databases in use at responding institutions pose some technological challenges in updating the 'gender' field, failing to track the self-reported gender identity of international alumni – or all alumni, for that matter – limits the degree to which relevant outreach may be conducted or programming created, particularly in a context of expanding sensitivity to this identity indicator in the United States. As Garvey has noted, "identity-based philanthropy in higher education is gaining prominence in both practice and scholarship, recognizing that social identities are strong influences on alumni engagement and giving" (Garvey, 2016, p. 748). Some interviewees also indicated difficulty in tracking, for example, shifting professional affiliations

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.29252/johepal.1.2.63]

over time, or linguistic preferences or skills. These are clear areas for improvement in the iteration of alumni platforms.

Inconsistent staff support

Staffing levels for international alumni affairs activities vary widely among the institutions included in this analysis. Three survey respondents reported that no staff member at their institution was tasked with managing this area; another reported that 'five different full-time staff have a slice of international engagement', and still another that the given university assigned twenty positions in this area. Whether these roles were centralized or spread across schools or units also varied; the potential complexity of these arrangements was exemplified by the response 'the staff member in the central alumni relations office works with three full time employees in Global Development [alumni focused] and four full time employees in the Center for International Affairs'. There was also uncertainty about staffing in the future, and how this might impact programming; one interview participant imagined two paths forward for the institution, asking 'do we work to engage a broad set of alumni first and see ourselves as driven by alumni relations, or instead is engagement driven by development officers, identifying lead donors who would also be lead volunteers, and then broaden to wider engagement model'?

Predictably, administrators also indicated an awareness of the limitations indicated by low or inconsistent staffing levels. One interview participant noted that

> *"I've been advocating that it [international alumni engagement] needs to be its own full time position if we want to be strategic and move in a more robust manner, especially given that our enrolment continues to increase internationally and our MA and PhD students are going out in the world as well."*

Another staffer referred to the historical lack of staffing as an explanation for current, limited activities in the alumni sphere, saying 'we've only been in existence about two years, and are the new kids on the block while the schools have been doing this [engaging international alumni] for many years"'. Lastly, one interview participant noted a certain level of staff innovation in response to fewer resources: they outlined that the administrator responsible for the university alumni travel program would frequently organize events for international alumni to come together with members of an alumni tour for social events in any number of locations worldwide.

Variable Programmatic Functions

While a few 'core' functions of international alumni affairs practitioners were identified in the course of this analysis, the overall impression was of a wide menu of programmatic foci. This reflects not only distinct staffing levels and institutional contexts, but also the degree to which alumni club or shared interest group activity is centrally managed. For example, 14 reporting institutions formalized alumni clubs, networks or chapters, though indeed the number of those clubs ranged from 1 to 60 per institution. Further, there was substantial variation among this subset of institutions with respect to whether and how club leaders were selected, ranging from 'any eager volunteer' to formal elections, and including 'we don't have a process at this time'. As observed by one interview participant

> *"Engagement of alumni living internationally is very different than for those alumni living in the U.S. With factors like budgetary constraints, geographic distance and limited staff resources, international engagement thus far has been simply the annual gatherings of the self-developed groups and a few dinners and receptions when the*

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.29252/johepal.1.2.63]

International Alumni Engagement

Chancellor is traveling internationally. Each culture is so unique that a general model applied to all won't work."

Across institutions with and without recognized international alumni clubs, a majority of survey respondents indicated that the university provided a newsletter or other communications vehicle for international alumni groups. Given that the primary resource an alumni office can provide is contact information of university graduates, taking this common role of information distributor makes a certain amount of sense. As Gallo has written, 'alumni–university interaction is based on two passive interactions: the institution to alumni base through communications, and, the individual reading and reacting to the communications materials' (Gallo, 2013, p. 1155).

Other activities mentioned in the context of the survey included: social events (thirteen universities), networking activities (eight universities), student-related activities including either admissions interviewing or student send-offs for those newly admitted (nine universities), lectures (two universities), and an annual meeting or community service event(s) (one each). Further, one senior-level alumni administrator shared during an interview that they personally engaged in career development activities, based largely on their close familiarity with the alumni population. They reported, 'I might connect people around job opportunities, for example someone who's looking for consulting opportunities in Brussels with an alum who works in the industry there'.

Lacking Data on Diversity of Alumni Leadership and Leadership Development Initiatives

Broadly, data on international alumni leader profiles are unavailable. I refer here not only to demographic information on leadership—age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.—but also course of study, length of service, and other factors. For instance, are most alumni leaders remaining in their positions for five or more years? Ten or more years? Or is there succession planning in place that allows for a diversity of leadership perspectives? In addition, relevant data ought to be considered in conjunction with the student body profile of the home institutions. If, for instance, 60 percent of the alma mater's student base identify as women, but 10 percent of international alumni affairs leaders do so, what does this tell us about international alumni dynamics?

In this mode, survey participants were prompted to provide any relevant data on the diversity of international alumni leadership, but none of the respondents chose or were able to do so. As a result, interview sessions probed this topic, and gleaned interesting, region-specific insights regarding leadership and gender. Three participants characterized 'Asia' as having various, particularly hierarchical systems, one observing that instead of 'worker bees' taking on the role of president of the alumni club it tended to be 'well-heeled individuals serving as chair of their volunteer board… they've given themselves those titles. The role comes with prestige, and leaders have business cards printed'. Further, two university representatives asserted that alumni clubs in Korea were not welcoming to women as leaders. One noted that 'there have also been conflicts or friction: in our Korean club, we had a fantastic alumna decline to be president, because she said "Korea is a male dominated model"'.

The Increasingly Important Role of Digital Media

Utilizing digital media to communicate with and drive new, innovative forms of cooperation with institutional alumni is a fundamentally international practice (Domanski & Sedkowski, 2015; Ribelles, 2001). The role of social media in promoting diverse participation in alumni activities has also been explored in the literature (Makrez, 2011), and in the context of COVID-19 is more relevant than ever.

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.29252/johepal.1.2.63]

In fact, the results of this 2018 interview series and survey also reflect deep commitment to – and concern with – technology and social media. A majority of survey respondents indicated that their institutions maintained websites for international alumni groups, and also that event registration platforms were operated on their behalf. Two interview participants mentioned the relevance of the Chinese social media platform We Chat, a medium that they were trying to master as quickly as possible, for more effective engagement with alumni in China. One survey respondent noted a sense of urgency around continued connection with a 'large number of non-traditional alumni who live internationally and want to be engaged with the Alumni Association and university'; this refers to alumni of the institution's Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). These international alumni of MOOCs represent a potentially new type of university-alumni relationship based on engaging individuals who have likely never visited the home institution's brick and mortar campus in person. Finally, one administrator created physical signs in eight different languages to be held up as props during photos at graduation and reunion that indicated the alumnus/a in question was a 'proud graduate' of the home university – these photos were meant to be posted to social media and thereby engage both alumni and student populations, in the U.S. and internationally.

A Vital Need for Intercultural Competence

The intercultural competence (also described as intercultural sensibility or skills) of individual university stakeholders is associated with the internationalization of higher education, and has been evaluated with respect to faculty and staff proficiency (Hunter, 2018; Jones, 2013; Leask, 2015). However, given the sparse literature on the practice of international alumni affairs, the intercultural skills of this specific practitioner group are under-researched.

The need for improved intercultural skills were highlighted by several interview responses, and largely fell into two categories: fear of engagement in a particular world region, and conflation of the terms 'multicultural' and 'international'. In the first category, we place the response of one administrator who, in describing the international engagement of her colleagues throughout university advancement operations, said 'Asia still scares people…. They're afraid to go…. We have this huge cohort and we're trying to wrap our heads around it… [we have] a lot of cultural learning to do'. There may be several factors at play here, including language barriers (real or perceived) as well as distinct business and cultural norms. In any case, the need for HEIs and very likely professional associations to support the ongoing development of intercultural skills among alumni affairs staff is in evidence.

Another administrator noted in their interview that at their HEI, *'we use both the terms "multicultural" and "international" and that was confusing when I first came here… what's the difference?*' The administrator continued that in the context of international alumni affairs,

> *"this philanthropy mindset is not beneficial. It's the same as in the multicultural space… it reflects differently. I'm a part of a black sorority, and when I get a call [from my own alma mater] to donate, they'll say "ooh what was that like"? It's not my job to educate you about the experience, it's your job to know it and do your research."*

This latter point reflects earlier scholarship from Holmes (2009), which pointed to experiences of exclusion among affinity group members. Further, it is consonant with the indication that 'alumni associations should adopt more segmentation and targeting in their approaches to alumni' (Koenig-Lewis, Asaad, Palmer, & Petersone, 2016, p. 73), acknowledging that marginalized communities may have differently experienced student life and very likely seen systemic oppressors including racism

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.29252/johepal.1.2.63]

play out on their given campus. These individuals may therefore seek to be engaged as an alumna/us with the affinity groups with which they most closely identify. As primary constructor of the HEI-alumnus/a relationship, colleges and universities are called to examine and deconstruct divides between 'diversity' or 'multicultural' initiatives and 'international' initiatives that play out in the alumni affairs realm as elsewhere at HEIs (Moon, 2016).

Discussion

Databases: the alumni affairs lifeline

The role of international alumni record keeping – indeed a longstanding alumni relations challenge that is now in the domain of database products – is clearly a key issue for the international alumni relations community. The indication for new criteria to be included in alumni databases, as suggested by several of the participants in this study, echoes earlier research in this area, which had primarily focused on criteria relevant for fundraising activity (Drezner, 2018; Newman & Petrosko, 2011). Of particular interest, based on survey results related to alumni diversity and gender identity, is how self-described, fluid identities can be reflected in (near) real time by alumni database records, which might provide a basis for intersectional alumni programming. Here, I refer to intersectionality as proposed by Crenshaw (1991): as the ongoing, complex interactions and dialectics of gender, race, and class in particular, which offer a lens through which to view the experiences of, for example, women of color (as distinct from white women).

Further, there are ongoing challenges associated with translating personal networks established by senior administrators or faculty into effective database information and, perhaps more importantly, dynamic communities that can continue beyond an individual's tenure at the institution. Similarly, participants discussed the parallel structures of social media platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn, which may host vibrant international alumni groups and databases that reflect up-to-date personal information not present in an official university database.

Institutional leadership

Responses to the online survey as well as data collected from the semi-structured interviews reflect a concern regarding lack of engagement of university leadership with strategic planning in the area of international alumni engagement. This is notable given that the survey and interview series did include the perspectives of some senior level administrators, who seemed to look to the presidential or senior vice presidential level for guidance. One participant indicated, when responding to a query regarding future unit goals, that *'that is not clear and perhaps that is why we haven't made much progress in this area yet. We are looking for direction and resources from our university leadership'.* Turnover at the senior leadership level was also discussed as being detrimental to the effective function of these institutional units: as observed by Birnbaum, 'social trust' held by leadership is essential to organizational efficacy (Birnbaum, 2004).

Another interview participant synthesized a lack of 'clarity of purpose' regarding international alumni affairs strategy, and expanded on this idea to note that international alumni affairs *'is so pervasive and involves so many people… but there's no single leader. The Vice Provost for International Outreach doesn't even know everything that's going on, and there's no way he could. We're evolving as it evolves'*. This seems to refer to the diffusion of 'official' alumni affairs support staff through the institution, as well as the tendency for staff and faculty in various units to maintain relationships with alumni of their respective department or office, but failing to formalise these

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.29252/johepal.1.2.63]

relationships from an institutional perspective. This begs the question: how can a centralized feedback loop for alumni affairs be normalized when alumni affairs itself is diffused?

Focus on China

It was evident across several 2018 interviews that many research institutions were particularly focused on their presence in China. This is not surprising, given William Kirby's assertion earlier in the decade that 'nearly every leading American university believes that it needs to have a "China strategy"'(2012). Staff members reported uncertainty regarding 'new fundraising rules in place' in that country, making it 'harder to export funds from alumni to our university', as well as sustained, close attention to parents as affinity group in China. In two cases, parents were the core audience of large scale China-based conferences partially sponsored by the university, with the presumption that they would continue to be involved in some capacity following the student's graduation. Indeed, these conferences had been initiated by the parents rather than the university, and the university was, at least in one case, struggling to catch up with relevant needs, including the use of the appropriate institutional logo on advertisements and collateral.

There has been much commentary in recent years of the danger in U.S. higher education institutions – as well as those in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and elsewhere – developing a financial over-dependence on a continued inflow of Chinese students ("China's college-aged population to decline through 2025," 2017; Ziguras & McBurnie, 2015). In contrast, it appears that despite several decades of substantial Chinese student enrolment, the international alumni affairs operations at research institutions surveyed are still struggling to catch up with that growth.

Considerations for universities worldwide

In situating a case study of Stockholm University, Ebert et al. (2015) observe that 'alumni constitute an important, large, but often underused resource for universities in countries that do not have a long tradition of developing and maintaining alumni relations' (Ebert, Axelsson, & Harbor, 2015, p. 252). Higher education institutions and systems in such settings may find useful insights in the reflections offered here by international alumni affairs staff in the U.S., at least in terms of categories of activity to consider in relation to this field of work—ranging from the structuring of staff support for alumni outreach, to ensuring the intercultural competency of those staff members, streamlining data collection and the leveraging of critical demographic information, and considering how alumni identity might be best reflected in relevant institutional initiatives. As Drezner has written, 'questions remain as to how identity might matter in alumni engagement with their alma mater' (Drezner, 2018, p. 262), and of course the nationally-specific ecosystems of privilege related to class, race/ethnicity, migrant status, gender, sexual orientation and other factors will play a critical role in determining any institutional response.

Ultimately, universities around the world are called upon to respond to a generalized decrease in public support for higher education in many, if not most, national contexts (Johnson, 2012; Klemenčič, 2014; OECD, 2017, p. 194); increased degrees of global competition in the higher education sector; new opportunities to leverage far-reaching international networks in order to enhance university efforts to teach, research, and serve stakeholders; and a general call to operate more strategically in a 'globally networked' society. Leveraging international alumni is therefore something that may be of interest to universities in a wide range of national contexts, which means that mutual learning among universities in different countries, with respect to international alumni relations, may be quite valuable.

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.29252/johepal.1.2.63]

Implications in the Nascent, All-Online Environment

COVID-19 has, since winter 2020, dramatically shifted alumni relations at the U.S. universities studied in 2018. Alumni associations have surveyed their constituents to ask what types of online events they might be interested in (at one religiously affiliated institution, probing: athletics, class/learning, current event topics, networking & career development, social, spirituality, service, or other). Others have, in response to the urgent Black Lives Matter movement, initiated discussions of various manifestations of systemic oppression. New mentorship programs and virtual, international public service activities have also been widely publicized. It seems clear that the plethora of activities in online alumni affairs offer opportunities for HEIs: detailed participation data that is not always available at in person events, and which can be synched with alumni databases. Further, the number and type of activities may increase and become more varied with little to no additional cost using existing HEI platforms for online activity. This expanded menu of offerings has the potential to better engage the full diversity of institutional alumni and their lived experiences.

Clear consideration must be paid to how community building can best be achieved in an online environment. Breakout rooms and creative 'icebreakers' are some of the recommendations made, as well as invitations to explore existing on-campus resources through, for example, virtual art museum tours. Long-term leadership development may pose more of a challenge, and creative thought needs to be given to how alumni leaders can be identified and scaffolded in the coming COVID years.

Limitations

As noted, a major limitation of this exploratory study is its relatively narrow scope. Though 115 universities were targeted, our survey garnered 29 valid responses, and so survey findings cannot be seen as representative of the field of doctoral universities with highest research activity as a whole. Rather, survey responses in combination with interview data are best seen as an indication for research trajectories moving forward.

Additionally, the elite grouping of universities reflected here does not represent international alumni affairs activity that is taking place at teaching colleges and open access institutions. Indeed, many American community colleges enrol a high proportion of international students from varying world regions (Campus Internationalization Leadership Team (CILT) Shoreline Community College, 2012); while staffing of alumni affairs units may be limited in this context, other faculty, staff or alumni are taking on leadership roles in convening groups and managing communications.

Finally, this paper's focus on the U.S. setting clearly constrains discussion of international alumni affairs operations and institutional aims in Germany, Canada, and other countries with strong activity in this area. How, for instance, do questions about data privacy in light of the European General Data Protection Regulation translate into alumni records and engagement? What does 'minimal data' mean in that sphere? These and other regionally and nationally specific questions merit further inquiry.

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.29252/johepal.1.2.63]

Future Research

In addition to the areas outlined previously, several subjects for future study are indicated by findings elucidated here. First, who are international alumni affairs administrators themselves? Are they alumni of the institutions in question (36% of survey respondents confirmed their alumni status)? Have they received training on intercultural skills and do they draw from that knowledge to share best practices with colleagues at their own university as well as across institutions? While advancement as a whole has quite a strong tradition of professional development in the U.S., scant international alumni-focused resources exist. A lack of training and associated information-sharing would explain in part the broad range of strategic objectives outlined by our study participants; when asked about institutional goals in the next decade, they focused variously on acquiring better contact information, putting more international alumni on boards of trustees, 'making [international alumni] feel like connected stakeholders', and expanding the number of formal alumni clubs in the top ten international markets.

Second, institutional case studies on international alumni leadership seem urgently called for. Neither survey, interview, nor publicly available data make clear how international alumni leadership reflect the diversity of a home university's student body or its equity or diversity statements. A diverse alumni leadership might support the creation of a heterogeneous range of programs serving alumni, students, and their institutions as a whole; however it is difficult to ascertain if and to what extent this is happening at present.

Third, the role of digital media and associated platforms represent a pressing area for inquiry. As many international alumni will find it impossible to return to the home campus with any regularity in the near and medium term, online interaction sponsored by the university (and contracted private providers) may offer, for example, career networking and mentorship opportunities for alumni (perhaps in conjunction with students). Are these providers establishing measures for 'successful engagement' that universities are then adopting? Are they collecting data on informal alumni interactions around affinity that might inform the work of student support staff?

All of these points echo Pedro et al.'s (2018) emphasis on university-driven alumni engagement, but pose questions for the institutions themselves to answer. In short, the findings presented here begin to answer the who, what, when, where, and how of international alumni affairs. Who is conducting alumni engagement activity on the university's behalf, and how are they prepared to do so, iterating as strategic objectives and demographic realities shift? Who and where are the key partners – international alumni leaders – and what activity are they asked and able to foster? What university services offer 24-hour engagement, and do those online channels serve (for example) MOOC, undergraduate, and graduate alumni equally well?

Conclusion

This paper presents a collation of online survey and interview data collected in an effort to examine the current international alumni affairs landscape at U.S. universities with highest research activity. This study was meant to be exploratory, given the scarce literature on the topic. Perhaps the main contribution of this effort is to highlight areas for future research, which include mechanisms for supporting diverse international alumni leadership; the structure of staff and faculty support for international alumni engagement; the role of digital media, databases, and other technologies; and the intercultural competence of university constituents engaged in this work.

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.29252/johepal.1.2.63]

International Alumni Engagement

However, several themes anticipated to emerge from this inquiry did not present themselves. One of these was the volatility of the current political climate, imbued with xenophobia and racism. In response to the Trump travel ban (2017), which in its several forms has sought to prohibit entry to the U.S. by citizens of primarily Muslim-majority countries, 'many U.S. university presidents quickly issued official statements to position themselves not necessarily in direct opposition to the ban, but in public support of their international students, faculty, and staff' (Stein, 2018, p. 895). Surely, international alumni work is impacted by these developments and other administration initiatives. However, respondents did not raise this issue. Even still, this topic merits a future line of research.

This paper's findings indicate a spectrum of international alumni models across the American research universities surveyed. These dynamic and differentiated models seem very likely to impact international alumni 'engagement' or, in the language of Pedro et al, the relationship programs connecting institutions with alumni (Pedro et al., 2018). That same diversity of models seems to indicate that the 'why' of international alumni activity is answered in distinct ways on each campus. By extension, it seems possible that significant resources expended by some universities in the international alumni sphere may support the internationalization of the institution as a whole, as engaged alumni, per Weerts and Ronca (2008), participate in what may be considered mutually beneficial activities such as international student recruitment, hosting summer interns from the home university, and so forth (Weerts & Ronca, 2008). Notably, I also highlight how siloed these institutions appear: survey and interview data collected does not reference the work of other universities or best practices in the field. Additionally, many interviewees were openly enthusiastic to learn that this research was being undertaken and looked forward to learning more about what their peers are doing in this area.

Clark Kerr, among others, has referred to alumni as one of the key constituencies of any modern university (Kerr, 1963), and indeed in many cases they represent an increasingly international pool. Given pre-COVID projections for increased student mobility worldwide (Bhandari & Robles, 2018), and the current expansion of online learning opportunities that may well result in more 'all online' international alumni, close consideration of what engagement with this base looks like is urgently called for.

References

Bhandari, R., & Robles, C. (2018). *Paper commissioned for the 2019 Global Education Monitoring Report, Migration, displacement and education: Building bridges, not walls*. UNESCO.

Birnbaum, R. (2004). The end of shared governance: Looking ahead or looking back. *New Directions for Higher Education*, *2004*(127), 5–22. https://doi.org/10.1002/he.152

Campus Internationalization Leadership Team (CILT) Shoreline Community College. (2012). *Advancing Campus Internationalization: Report to the President's Senior Executive Team*. Shoreline.

China's college-aged population to decline through 2025. (2017, September 6). *ICEF Monitor*. Bonn. http://monitor.icef.com/2017/09/chinas-college-aged-population-decline-2025/

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, *43*(6), 1241–1299. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1229039

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.29252/johepal.1.2.63]

Crow, M. M., & Dabars, W. B. (2015). Designing the new American university. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Dobson, G. (2015). *Staying global: how international alumni relations advances the agenda*. EAIE.

Dollinger, M., Arkoudis, S., & Marangell, S. (2019). University alumni mentoring programs: A win-win?, *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 41*(4), 375-389. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2019.1617657

Domanski, T., & Sedkowski, M. (2014). The use of social media in the networking strategy of higher education institutions: The Polish experience. In V. Benson, & S. Morgan (Eds.), *Cutting-Edge Technologies and Social Media Use in Higher Education* (pp. 103-130). Information Science Reference (an Imprint of IGI Global).

Drezner, N. D. (2018). Philanthropic mirroring: Exploring identity-based fundraising in higher education. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *89*(3), 261–293. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2017.1368818

Ebert, K., Axelsson, L., & Harbor, J. (2015). Opportunities and challenges for building alumni networks in Sweden: A case study of Stockholm university. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, *37*(2), 252–262. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2015.1019117

Gallo, M. L. (2013). Higher education over a lifespan: A gown to grave assessment of a lifelong relationship between universities and their graduates. *Studies in Higher Education*, *38*(8), 1150–1161. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2013.833029

Garvey, J. C. (2016). Conceptualization and validation of factors for LGBTQ alumni philanthropy. *Journal of College Student Development*, *57*(6), 748–754. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2016.0073

Glass, C. R., & Lee, J. J. (2018). When internationalization funding feels tight: Satisfaction with funding and campus internationalization strategies. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 22*(4), 302-316. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315318773146

Haupt, J.P., & and Castiello-Gutiérrez, S. (2021). Institutional impact: Degree completion, alumni giving, quality, and reputation. In A.C. Ogden, B. Streitwieser, & C. Van Mol (Eds.), *Education abroad: Bridging scholarship and practice* (pp. 155-168). Routledge.

Holmes, J. (2009). Prestige, charitable deductions and other determinants of alumni giving: Evidence from a highly selective liberal arts college. *Economics of Education Review*, *28*(1), 18–28. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2007.10.008

Hunter, F. (2018). Training administrative staff to become key players in the internationalization of higher education. *International Higher Education*, *92*, 16–17. https://doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2018.92.10280

Johnson, H. (2012). *Defunding Higher Education: What Are the Effects on College Enrollment?* San Francisco, CA: Public Policy Institute of California. https://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R_512HJR.pdf

Jones, E. (2013). The global reach of universities: leading and engaging academic and support staff in the internationalization of higher education. In R. Sugden (Ed.), *Leadership and Cooperation in Academia: Reflecting on the Roles and Responsibilities of University Faculty and Management* (pp. 161–183). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Kerr, C. (1963). *The Uses of the University* (5th ed.). Harvard University Press.

Kirby, W. C. (2012). The World of Universities in Modern China. *China: Emerging Opportunities and Challenges for Higher Education Cooperation*, pp. 4–5. Center for International Higher Education (CIHE).

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.29252/johepal.1.2.63]

Klemenčič, M. (2014). Student power in a global perspective and contemporary trends in student organising. *Studies in Higher Education*, *39*(3), 396–411. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.896177

Koenig-Lewis, N., Asaad, Y., Palmer, A., & Petersone, E. (2016). The Effects of Passage of Time on Alumni Recall of "Student Experience." *Higher Education Quarterly*, *70*(1), 59–80. https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12063

Leask, B. (2015). A conceptual framework for internationalisation of the curriculum. In *Internationalizing the Curriculum* (pp. 26–40). Routledge.

Makrez, H. M. (2011). Am I Invited? Social media and alumni relations. In L. A. Wankel & C. Wankel (Eds.), *Higher Education Administration with Social Media (Cutting-Edge Technologies in Higher Education, Vol. 2)* (pp. 229–248). Emerald Group Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1108/S2044-9968(2011)0000002015

McDearmon, J. T. (2013). Hail to thee, our alma mater: Alumni role identity and the relationship to institutional support behaviors. *Research in Higher Education*, *54*(3), 283–302. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-012-9271-6

Moon, R. J. (2016). Internationalisation without cultural diversity? Higher education in Korea. *Comparative Education, 52*(1), 91–108. https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2015.1125679

Newman, M. D., & Petrosko, J. M. (2011). Predictors of alumni association membership. *Research in Higher Education*, *52*(7), 738–759. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-011-9213-8

Nulty, D. D. (2008). The adequacy of response rates to online and paper surveys: What can be done? *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, *33*(3), 301–314. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602930701293231

O'Mochain, R. (2006). Discussing gender and sexuality in a context-appropriate way: Queer narratives in an EFL college classroom in Japan. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, *5*(1), 51–66. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327701jlie0501_4

OECD. (2017). *Education at a Glance 2017: OECD Indicators*. Paris: OECD Publishing. http://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2017-en

Pedro, I. M., Pereira, L. N., & Carrasqueira, H. B. (2018). Determinants for the commitment relationship maintenance between the alumni and the alma mater. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, *28*(1), 128–152. https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2017.1314402

Pottick, K. J., Giordano, S., & Chirico, D. E. (2015). Creating a culture of student philanthropy to address financial challenges in universities. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *51*(2), 207–221. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2015.1012921

Ribelles, J.-M. M. i. (2001). Alumni Associations in Spain. In D. Richardson (Ed.), *International alumni relations* (pp. 9–15). EAIE.

Stein, S. (2018). Racialized frames of value in U.S. university responses to the travel ban. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Georgraphies*, *17*(4), 893–919. https://www.acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1705

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. (2018). *Doctoral Universities: Highest Research Activity*. Indiana University. Retrieved from http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/lookup/srp.php?clq=%7B%22basic2005_ids%22%3A%2215%22%7D&start_page=standard.php&backurl=standard.php&limit=0,50

Trump, D. J. (2017). Executive Order Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States. Retrieved February 20, 2018, from https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-protecting-nation-foreign-terrorist-entry-united-states/

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.29252/johepal.1.2.63]

U.S. Department of Education. (2008). Letter from Bill Evers, Assistant Secretary for Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development. Retrieved December 15, 2018, from https://www2.ed.gov/print/policy/rschstat/guid/raceethnicity/letter.html

Unangst, L. (2018). International alumni affairs: An emerging trans-national public service landscape. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 40*(6), 648-660. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2018.1529144

Unangst, L. (2019). International alumni affairs and student mentorship: Surveying the U.S. public research university landscape. *NAFSA Research Symposium Series*, Vol. III. NAFSA.

University of Roehampton. (2018). Alumni. Retrieved October 12, 2018, from https://www.roehampton.ac.uk/alumni/

Weerts, D. J., & Ronca, J. M. (2008). Characteristics of alumni donors who volunteer at their alma mater. *Research in Higher Education*, *49*(3), 274–292. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-007-9077-0

Ziguras, C., & McBurnie, G. (2015). *Governing Cross-Border Higher Education*. *Internationalization in Higher Education Series*. Routledge.

Dr. Lisa Unangst is a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for Higher Education Governance Ghent (CHEGG). Her research interests include how displaced groups access and experience higher education; international alumni affairs; cross-national constructions of "diversity"; and quantitative textual analysis. She earned her Ph.D. from Boston College's Higher Education program and has published in *Comparative Education Review*, *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, and the *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, among other outlets. A co-edited volume titled *Refugees and higher education: Trans-national perspectives on access, equity, and internationalization* has recently been published by Brill-Sense. Lisa worked previously at Cal State East Bay, Caltech, and Harvard University.

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.29252/johepal.1.2.63]