

## Improving Operations in the College of Education

[Report submitted by the Strategic Planning Improving Operations Study Team: Judy Kolb, Craig Eozzo, Judy Leonard, Brian Mauersberg, Judy Nastase, Maria Schmidt, Kep Sones, Suzanne Wayne; March, 2008]

### INTRODUCTION

#### Charge

The charge of the Improving Operations Study Team was to be attentive to operations within the College of Education with a special focus on the functions of offices such as the Advising Center, the College Advancement and Development Office, the Education Technology Center, the Finance Office, and the Office of Multicultural Programs and to identify how these offices can work collectively with each other and with academic departments to achieve common goals. Areas suggested for consideration included best use of technology; information available on the Web; increasing/improving linkages with alumni, communities, and schools; effective ways of disseminating research results; and how surveys of relevant parties might be used. We were encouraged to choose a focus within this larger charge, and we selected an issue that is of interest and importance to everyone: contact with and cultivation of alumni. We anticipate that future efforts to improve operations in the College can use the process we describe in our report as a model to explore other areas and issues.

#### Organization of Report

This report begins with a description of our process and methodology, summarizes data collected on current alumni interaction processes and desired practices/needs, and concludes with an issues and recommendation section.

#### Process and Methodology

The process we used is as follows: 1) gather information on existing programs and efforts concerned with alumni contact and cultivation, 2) identify redundancies, gaps, and opportunities for collaboration, and 3) suggest changes that will allow us to maximize our relationship with alumni. Information about existing and desired programs and efforts was gathered from committee members who represented each office. Similar information was collected from five brief on-line surveys sent to the following groups: professors-in-charge and their support staff, recent alumni (graduation date within two years), seasoned alumni (graduation date > two years), first-year students, and upper-level students (juniors, seniors, graduate students).

The survey was sent to 74 PICs and support staff resulting in 8 responses (10%). Faculty and staff e-mails were pulled from the College directory. Our intent with **recent alumni** was to measure the extent alumni were involved in securing their current job and their experiences with alumni as students. The survey was sent to 303 recent graduates resulting in 24 responses (8%). Our primary objective with **seasoned alumni** was to determine their current level of involvement with the College and their overall satisfaction. The survey was sent to 7413 seasoned alumni resulting in 569 responses (7.6%). Alumni e-mail addresses were obtained from the Penn State Alumni Association

database. Current student populations were targeted to determine their level of involvement with alumni. **First-year students** were of particular interest in determining the impact alumni have on the student recruitment process. The survey was sent to 302 first-year student resulting in 24 responses (7.9%). The next student group consisted of **upper-level students**. The survey was sent to 1797 students resulting in 158 responses (8.8%). Student e-mail addresses were obtained from the University Data Warehouse.

E-mails giving directions and a Survey Monkey site ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)) were distributed to the above groups on February 15. Items included both yes/no and short-answer questions. Responses were anonymous. Data were summarized on February 26. Since our intent with this brief data collection was only to raise issues for our internal report and suggest areas for future data collection, no attempt to improve response rate was undertaken. Although we intended, as mentioned in our two listserv announcements, to include a section on issues raised at the open meeting that might relate to College operations issues other than alumni, the two College people who attended our meeting did so to discuss the alumni issue. Their comments were useful and are included later in our report.

## **CURRENT ALUMNI INTERACTION PRACTICES**

### **Feedback from Offices**

#### **College Advancement and Development Office:**

The Advancement and Development Office is comprised of three areas, Development, Alumni Relations, and College Relations; they devote the majority of their time to working with alumni on a variety of initiatives. Interactions vary from formalized alumni boards and events to a host of informal interactions including dialing e-mail, telephone discussions, and meetings.

- **Development:** The Development Office is responsible for major gifts from individuals to the College to advance the mission of the College of Education. Each major gifts officer has a portfolio of alumni donor prospects and active donors. In addition, they serve as College representation to other fundraising units within the University at large. The College also has an Alumni Development Council that serves as an advisory board to the office and works to further the fundraising initiatives of the College.
- **Alumni Relations:** This arm of the College Advancement Office focuses on providing services to alumni to connect them to the College at a meaningful level.
  - **Alumni Board:** The College of Education Alumni Board has three meetings per year that include a variety of initiatives--Alumni Student Teaching Network, Alumni Awards Program, Book Drive--and also provides advice to the Dean of the College.
  - **EdLion:** Providing ongoing preparation and support throughout alumni teaching professions via real-time free web seminars.
  - **Affiliate Program Groups (APG):** The College has a variety of alumni groups that support specific missions of academic programs or units. Alumni groups serve a variety of functions, similar to those of the general alumni board, but more specific to the needs of the individual academic programs. The College of Education has alumni programs in Higher Education, Workforce Education and

Development, Professional Development School, Educational Leadership, and Multi-cultural Alumni Advancement Council.

- **College Relations:** Our current interactions include the production and distribution of various print and electronic communications to College alumni. Print materials include:
  - College Magazine (sent in April to all alumni in Alumni Association database – approx. 49,000)
  - Annual College Report (sent in September to all members of the Penn State Alumni Association – approx. 13,000)
  - Annual Report (sent in December to all members of the Penn State Alumni Association – approx. 13,000)

Electronic materials include:

- Bridges Newsletter (sent 4 times a year (October, December, February, and April) to all alumni who have an e-mail address in the Penn State Alumni Association database – Appx. 16,000)
- College of Education Web Site, which include news articles site, an alumni site, alumni notes, and a professional development web site listing available opportunities for alumni

We also have a number of informal interactions with alumni. These include e-mail, phone, and written correspondence with alumni reacting to the above publications. We also periodically interview alumni and write features on them for award announcements and features. The Coordinator of College Relations sometimes attends alumni board meetings and other events where alumni are present and interacts with them at those times as well.

### **Advising Center:**

Current Alumni Interaction Practices:(1) Career Fair: some of the recruiters who return for the Fall and Spring Career Fairs to recruit teachers are PSU alumni and we have contact then. This past year our office handed out pins that identified the recruiter as a PSU alumni. (2) unofficial visits: Some alumni may return to PSU for a football game or Arts Festival and stop by the office just to say hello. (3) Ed Lion-- We do recommend this page when possible. (4) Our office schedules individual meetings with prospective students and their parents, many will be alumni and want their sons and daughters to visit the alma mater. (5) Certification and verification letters. We handle all of these from students who have graduated from PSU and now need verification for another state or agency of their graduation from a PSU teacher training program. (6) Grad school letters of recommendation. (7) Evaluations for additional certification--many students certified in one area are interested in adding a second certification will contact our office for an evaluation. Programs conducted in conjunction with the PSU admissions office. Our office does the Spend a summer Day and the Offer Follow-Up sessions where many alumni will return to PSU with sons or daughters interested in attending the same university as their parents.

### **Education Technology Center:**

The Education Technology Projects Office provides recommendations to all alumni, who call, in regard to the purchase of computer systems. Many Alumni have their own support systems due to their positions and life-long networking. On occasions Alumni call our office for computer

consultation and arrangements are made, with individual IT staff, to provide support if the requests are reasonable and within travel distance. Otherwise phone support is provided, email and referrals. In the past and in concert with the Alumni office we provide Alumni with an ETC open house. This is always available and a service we offer in the spirit of our open door policy to clients, friends and associates of the College of Education at Penn State.

We provide temporary access under Penn State Policies to Alumni conducting business on behalf of the college. This is not an advertised service but available with consultation and appropriate ID through the ETC office and PSU. Student Teachers in Educate who have graduated still call and receive support from our office. The multicultural office had set up three Elluminate conferences and invited alumni they had identified to choose a session to join and dialog on ways for these alum to be mentors for current PSU students. ETC provided phone support for two weeks prior and during all three sessions so these folks could get connected.

The ETC Office provides web-related information--knowledge-base access and an open-door policy for retired faculty, staff and alumni who need general information, basic technical support, recommendations or would simply like a place to check their e-mail or browse.

### **Office of Multicultural Programs**

Our current interaction practices are facilitated by alumni events, initiatives and collaborations within the College as well as across the University and social networks:

#### **Informal:**

- Regular contact with a small but consistent group of alumni via phone, email, or facebook and casual visits to our office when visiting campus for other events
- Alumni contacting our office seeking continuous guidance and counseling on career/life decisions
- Close interactions with alumni working in schools (as teachers or counselors) and who assist in the identification and referral of prospective SCOPE participants and/or future Education students. They also seek our assistance when their schools aim to hire underrepresented teachers and counselors.
- PSU visitation days, career fairs, collaborations with Undergraduate Admissions office and Graduate School activities among others, and during professional conferences at UP or elsewhere
- Requesting recommendation letters for jobs and/or graduate school
- Undergraduate alumni seeking assistance in applying to our graduate programs
- Occasionally, alumni has contacted the office to promote/sell the product of their business, for example, books or "learning modules" for SCOPE

#### **Formal:**

- The Multicultural Advancement Alumni Council (MAAC) a formal Affiliate Program Group (APG) of the College of Education.
- Collaborations with College Advancement and Development Office in activities related to donors and contributions to multicultural initiatives
- Black Alumni Reunion

## Survey Responses

### **PIC and support staff:**

- 37% noted that they have an organized alumni group
- It's evident that many programs have informal communication with alumni who notify departments of job opportunities for upcoming graduates and also provide information on trends, legislation, and other areas of interest.
- Modes of contact include:
  - Blogs
  - Newsletters
  - Grant requires tracking of alumni employment
  - Websites
  - Alumni receptions at regional and national conferences
- Informal contact with alumni include:
  - Cards
  - E-mail contact
  - Phone calls
  - Visits to campus
  - Letters of recommendations from previous students for jobs or graduate school
- When asked "How are alumni currently helping you recruit students?" responses noted individual contacts for students, the importance of school counselors, and former doctoral alumni recommending our programs. Most of this appears to take place by word of mouth.
- When asked "How are alumni currently helping you educate students?" responses included alumni guest speakers in class, internships, adjunct faculty.
- When asked "How are alumni currently helping your students find employment after graduation?" response note informal networking, excellent reputations of programs encourages employers to seek our graduates. Also, some programs have an informal process of notifying if graduates receive jobs.
- When asked "Do you or other members of your program have research partnerships with alumni?" responses noted faculty ties with former advisees and specific projects.

### **Recent alumni :**

- 56.7% noted that they would like to have had more interactions with alumni while attending Penn State.
- When asked "How were alumni involved in recruiting you to attend Penn State?" family members were the primary factor.
- When asked to "Please describe any contact you have had with alumni during your education at Penn State," responses noted the alumni student teaching networks, brown bag luncheons, football games, mentors. Several responded "no contact at all."
- When asked to "Describe how alumni have been involved in your student teaching and/or internship experience," PDS students had a greater level of involvement than many other students.

- When asked “If you completed research while attending Penn State,” one person responded she mailed over 4000 surveys for her dissertation and was amazed at the alumni across the country that were so supportive and cooperative.

**Seasoned alumni :**

- 73% of respondents were alumni association members.
- 22% responded that they are currently involved with Penn state and/or the College of Education.
  - Follow College of Education news
  - Annual financial contributions
  - EdLion
  - Mentoring
  - Participation of one of our alumni groups
- 37% responded that they have had contact with faculty and/or students from the College in the last year.
  - Informal interactions
  - Mentoring opportunities
  - Alumni awards program
  - Huddle with the Faculty
  - Fundraising contacts
- 36% responded that they would like to be more involved with faculty and student projects.
- 72% noted that they receive the College of Education Annual Alumni Magazine. An overwhelming positive response to receiving the College magazine and Bridges newsletter.
  - Helps alumni feel connected to the College.
  - Informative
- 51% receive Bridges: Research into Practice.
  - Alumni find articles related to their practice and springboard to other information
  - Want useful tools to be provided that focus on classroom applications
- 90% are satisfied with their current level of contact from the College of Education.

**First-year students:**

- When asked “How influential alumni were in recruiting you to attend Penn State?” there was minimal influence unless they had a parent or family member who attended Penn State.
- When asked to “Describe any contact with alumni during your education at Penn State.” friends were most often identified as their primary source of alumni contact.

**Upper-level students:**

- When asked “How were alumni involved in recruiting you to attend Penn State?” graduate students were more likely to have contact with alumni and alumni played a greater role in their decision to attend Penn State.
- When asked to “Describe contact with alumni while attending Penn State,” most responses were specific to the individual and not to organized events or activities.

- When asked to “Describe how alumni have been involved in your student teaching and/or internship experiences,” students noted the importance of faculty relationships with alumni in their individual profession.

### **DESIRED PRACTICES/NEEDS**

#### **Advising Center:**

Consensus seems to be “yes it would be nice” to have additional contact with alumni, but no one seemed to have any specific suggestions. Our office does have a fair number of contacts with alumni because of the recruiting of new students through Admissions Office programs and visits by parents wanting their children to consider PSU for the undergraduate degree, but this seems to be more oriented to them coming to us rather than designed programs reaching out to them.

#### **PICS/support staff:**

- When asked “How can more alumni involvement aid your program/department mission/goals?” responses noted that their network of alums keeps them informed on trends, legislations, jobs, etc. Others noted that they would like to connect alumni teaching in urban setting with students currently in our programs. Others:
  - Employment opportunities
  - Career development
  - Recruitment
  - Research
  - Program development
- Programs also noted areas of growth: a mechanism for having alums post their areas of interest to assess alumni involvement in research projects with faculty and students. One program noted that they would love to have alumni more involved in their program but do not have the capacity to manage the additional workload.
- Other specific comments:
  - A mechanism for having alums post their areas of interest would be useful. This data base could be assessed to increase alum involvement in research projects with faculty and students.
  - more activity
  - We just cannot handle all the potential time, expertise, and expenses that go with working with alumni in a more thorough way. We have our hands more than full right now. It would be wonderful to have a graduate assistant that we could assign to these types of tasks.

#### **Recent alumni:**

- When asked “In what ways could alumni have enhanced your educational experience at Penn State?” response noted the need for mentoring from alumni.

#### **Seasoned alumni:**

- Comments:
  - Would like to hear more about their individual departments
  - Creation of blogs for sharing useful information and to connect alumni

- Concerns when alumni lose their only contact at the college (which may be a result of a faculty members retiring or relocating)
- Programs that are no longer a part of the College of Education have displaced alumni
- *Alumni Magazine*: A disproportionate focus on teacher preparation and public school administration. Need to focus on: Higher education, adult ed, and other disciplines
- *Bridges*: Prefer print publications. Would like more short e-mails with bits of information

### **First-year students:**

- 80% agreed that they would like additional interactions with alumni.
- When asked “What ways alumni could enhance your educational experience at Penn State?” responses ranged from financial support to providing professional and career guidance.

### **Upper-level students:**

- 69% agreed that they would like additional interactions with alumni.
- When asked “What ways alumni could enhance their education,” responses focused on mentoring opportunities.

## **ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This section includes information collected from office reports and surveys, discussions among team members, and points raised at the open team meeting. We describe five issues; each issue is followed by recommendation(s). We note again that the response rate for surveys was low.

**Sharing of contact information:** Programs and individual faculty appear to have substantial formal and informal contact with alumni, some of which is not being tracked by the College. Programs do not have the time and resources to keep accurate alumni records, however, they may hesitate to contact the College or share lists because of a concern that this information will then be used in myriad ways that goes beyond the intent of the programs. This concern was mostly about what happens when names are entered into the larger system. Some issues concerning multiple solicitations were mentioned, although the other side of the coin is that having all official contact stem from one source was designed to keep this from happening. Issues such as contact being lost when a faculty member leaves the university were raised.

Recommendation:     •Open discussion of ways in which alumni contact information might be shared for mutual benefit

**Increased involvement of alumni with freshmen:** 80% of freshmen who responded would like greater interaction with alumni.

Recommendations:     •Include alumni as part of the freshman seminar experience—ask graduates to talk about experiences in school systems and also other fields that are relevant for students.

- Invite recent alumni to present EdLion sessions
- Have first-year seminar students interview alumni and write a report. This can be an easy way for alumni with little time to be involved, as it would entail a short phone interview.

**Increased involvement of alumni with upper-level students:** 70% of those who responded would like greater interaction.

- Recommendations:
- Invite alumni as speakers and panelists in classes, again to discuss traditional and non-traditional career paths
  - Develop a process that will match students with interested alumni for purposes of internships, projects, mentoring
  - Find ways to provide expenses for invited speakers

**Development of a two-way interaction process with alumni:** 90% of respondents were satisfied with their current level of contact from the College. Slightly over 1/3 indicated that they had contact with faculty and/or students over the past year. The same number indicated that they would like to be more involved with faculty and student projects. Most who responded receive the formal publications.

- Recommendations:
- Develop ways in which alumni can initiate interaction. Perhaps include a click on the College web site that allows alumni to enter their interest in working on a specific type of project. There was substantial discussion of some of the privacy concerns involved with this, but also the benefit to alums and the College.
  - Consider other tools that might encourage research/project collaboration. The point stressed by the team is that this contact and participation should be at the discretion of the alum. Alumni often have closer ties with small groups (programs, faculty, students) than with College, and contact should be at this level when possible.

**Use of emerging technology to reach recent alumni:** Contact with alumni is now mostly via traditional mail. Recent graduates often do not have addresses on file and also might be more responsive to electronic means of communication.

- Recommendations:
- Develop facebook networks for specific alumni-student groups. This would also increase interaction between current students and recent graduates.
  - Pursue other ideas—streaming video, wikis, blogs

In summary, the College and its offices and departments are currently quite active in maintaining ties with alumni. Most alumni are satisfied with these efforts. Suggestions in this report relate to increasing these ties in ways that will encourage greater involvement of alumni with students, faculty, and other individuals within the College and ways in which information can be shared for the mutual benefit of all parties.