

From the standpoint of the average alumnus the Alumni Association cannot help being a pretty nebulous thing. At this point in time associations throughout the country are doing some pretty heavy soul searching, and the organization is rare that really reaches out and involves its total potential membership.

Part of the problem is the changing face of higher education itself. The concept of associated alumni was born when higher education was a mere child in the United States, when going to college was a prestigious privilege accorded only to a select and wealthy few who could afford to spend years secluded behind ivy walls learning to think.

To those early day alumni organizers it seemed impossible that their schools could change so much and so rapidly, that graduating classes would someday number in the thousands thus effectively eliminating the fraternal chumminess that was the cornerstone of alumni organizations.

In other countries higher education has gotten along quite well without alumni organizations. The association is a structure peculiar to the United States, and it is peculiar too in its reluctance to change. Yet change it must because the very nature of the alumnus and his institution is changing before our eyes — factors which cannot be ignored in operating a meaningful and useful alumni program.

Some are even beginning to doubt whether there is any longer a need for an organized alumni program. The questions they ask are telling ones: You employ people to recruit students, why do you need the alumni for that? You have a campus-wide publications program, why can't that office produce a university magazine that will supplant and be better than the alumni publication? You have professional fund raisers, why bother with the nickel and dime contributions of alumni? We can get fine tours from any travel agency, why do the alumni associations bother? We belong to too many clubs anyway, why should you take up our time with an alumni club? The school keeps records on all students, why can't they take over the business of alumni records as well and thereby save a lot of computer time and money?

The questions are all good ones, but they are based on the premise that things will go on as they always have, that alumni organizations will never change. Those that don't change probably won't exist much longer, but the vast majority will change. The shift may be abrupt in some areas, slow and sometimes balky in others. But those alumni directors and boards who want to perpetuate the alumni organization will be in there fighting to keep the program moving.

For some it will seem that little change has come about. As long as there are some alumni who want to be reunited, there will be reunions. As long as OU fields a respectable football team, there will be wild and wonderful football weekends. And that is as it should be. The early classes at the University were small, and those alumni deserve the honor of a reunion where they can gather and reminisce about the old days. They all knew each other well in school, and they enjoy that kind of activity. No matter what kind of change is effected, those alumni should not be ignored.

Rah!

Rah!

But Where

Do We Go

From Here?

But what can the association offer those who graduated after World War II? Here is a new breed of alumnus. Here are the thousands who returned to school on the GI Bill, swelled enrollments around the country, and made the big universities places of relative anonymity where one could never know all his classmates and didn't even want to.

These big enrollments brought the first big problem to the alumni associations. In a big school where a student could pass through four years virtually unnoticed, how do you sell that student on alumni association membership? How do you get him interested in contributing to the annual giving campaign? How do you instill in him a deep loyalty to the institution that will make him forget his bad experiences, the second-rate professor, the crummy housing, the bureaucracy, the loneliness? What about the fellow who hated every minute of his college life? How can you make him an alma mater supporter?

There are and always will be some who need no recruiting to alumni membership. They were born with a need to be loyal to something. They can hardly wait to send in their money. They believe their school is best, even if it isn't, and they love to support it. They are the very small minority, and most often they are the backbone of any alumni organization because they are so eager.

Most alumni need time to build any fondness for the old school. On graduation they swore they would never return, that they could hardly wait to get out, that they would ceremonially burn any mail from the alumni association, that they paid their money to go to school and that was the last dime the school would get from them.

Some never come around. For them education ended with a diploma, and college was put behind along with rag dolls, toy boats, proms and class rings. By the same token they generally do not see higher education changing. They realize it is bigger, but that's all.

The survival and continued usefulness of the alumni association depends on the association's ability to bring in the holdouts, to interest the non-joiners, to offer the alumni something they need and want and are willing to work for.

Pure school loyalty won't do the job any more. Too many alumni have attended more than one school. Many have attended a fistful of schools, and each one is competing for his loyalty, his alumni membership, his financial support. Too, schools are going out after the non-alumnus, the fellow who is the parent of a student or the guy who happens to live in the state

and shows indications of becoming a friend of education.

The non-alumnus alumni supporter lends a whole new perspective to alumni organizations. Suddenly people are able to pick and choose the schools they wish to support. Just having a degree from a school does not presuppose loyalty. Alumni and friends have every right to support the school that offers the most meaningful programs both on and off the campus.

And so the problem narrows. What do you do to build in support while those future alumni are still students? And once they have left the campus, what do you do to keep them coming back and keep them on your team?

Large chunks of every meeting of alumni directors are devoted to just these problems. At OU, like at other schools, change is in the wind. Last year the groundwork was laid for a Young Alumni Council, a group made up of students who would seek membership among their fellow students and who would serve the Association by going out to alumni club meetings in panels.

At enrollment time the Association is represented in the registration line up, not to ask for money or solicit membership but to pass out something free, a soft drink, a cookie, and offer a little respite in those harried moments when nothing goes right for the student and he spends all his money in one whack. At the big gatherings on campus the alumni staff is there, walking through the crowds, talking to students, never selling anything, just making the alumni presence known.

The women have become another entity of the Association through the Alumnae Council. Based on the premise that the woman who does not work outside the home is logically a good worker for the Association, these women serve in their local communities as contacts and organizers. They work with school counselors, with recognition programs, with recruiting, and they are effective.

The alumni clubs are getting the treatment too. It is no longer enough to get together once a year to lionize the football program. Now there are regular meetings between club officers and association staff members; there are panel discussions, slide presentations, leadership conferences, newsletters, all a concerted effort to involve the alumni more in the total institution.

And more and more the vital issues of the campus are reaching out to touch the alumni — representation on the committee to select a new president, representa-

tion on the athletic council, representation on various committees that decide the future of the institution. If the institution is going to court alumni support, then it must in fairness give those same alumni a voice in the institution. It should not be a commanding voice, but it should be a voice that can be heard, and alumni have every right to demand it.

Until recently when you talked of the alumnus you were speaking of a rather conservative soul, one that left college in his basic black, blue or gray business suit and rep tie who went off to seek a respectable fortune within the establishment. That has changed too. We now are beginning to produce significant numbers of alumni who have fought for four years against the establishment and who left college prepared to continue the battle.

Some of these are hard core radicals, the kind who in years past didn't go to college at all. The bulk, however, is simply a different breed of person, the kind that sociologists have made their recent livelihoods studying. They come from solid, semi-affluent homes; they are not out to wreck our society, they just aren't satisfied with its standards and goals. They want to work in social issues and are satisfied with fewer creature comforts and more social conscience. What is their relationship to the alumni association?

Looking at it from their point of view, the logical thing would be for them to become deeply involved in alumni work. Here is a program ripe for change. Able to do really very little to change the institution as students, they would have quite a lever as alumni if they worked it right. Yet few of them participate in alumni activities. Those that do in different parts of the country usually form splinter groups working outside the alumni structure rather than from within. This is an important facet of alumni activity that administrators and alumni alike are going to have to face and solve to their mutual satisfaction.

This past year the OU Association conducted a concerted campaign for life members. The result was an increase of some 1,700 new members willing to pay their \$100 or \$150 (the rates went up last spring) to belong to the Alumni Association.

This year there will be a similar all out campaign to recruit annual members. Membership dues are the life blood of the Alumni Association. That is the working capital that pays for the programs and publications.

Even so the Association is not a solvent entity. It takes a healthy subsidy from the University each year to keep the Association going. At some institutions the question has been raised as to whether the alumni pro-

gram is worth subsidizing. In an age of tight money and the necessity for scrimping and saving every educational dollar, that seems like a fair question. Just as the alumni have a right to expect something from the dollars they pay in membership, the universities have a right to expect something in return for their subsidies. Are they getting it?

Probably the answer is that the alumni are getting about as much as the universities are, which sounds all right on the surface but really is not all right at all because two half hearted efforts do not make a whole. For the alumni, they must give at least as much as they demand — if they are going to complain about certain issues, press for certain actions, criticize, they must in turn work for better financial support of the institution, continue to support the school even when they disagree with the policies of its administration, work to bring better students to the campus, learn what is really happening in higher education instead of what they think is happening, lend their financial support without demanding favors in return, vote for the candidates who are going to support better education at all levels, talk to the students instead of about them, participate in activities that will make them better educated alumni.

The universities for their part are going to have to offer more than clubs and tours and publications. They are going to have to go after the alumni in continuing education, convince them that being an alumnus is not an end to education but a continuance, offer them programs that have some meaning and that are worth taking time for, take programs to the alumni as well as bringing the alumni to the campus, solicit alumni advice in important issues and then weigh that advice fairly, quit looking at the alumnus as a walking checkbook.

What it boils down to is that there must be more give and take on both sides. Both the institution and its alumni must experiment with programs that will benefit both. Otherwise there's little point in either side continuing the relationship; it would be a clear case of incompatibility.

More than anything the universities and their alumni administrators need to know that someone is alive out there. They need to know what the alumni want for themselves, what they want for the institution, what they are willing to do to help. The only way they can find these things out is for the alumni to get involved, to attend club meetings, to write letters, to visit the campus. There are thousands of alumni and only a handful of association and university personnel. It's a matter of communication.