



# Alumni Leadership Academy

Accelerating the Self-Identification Process

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Advancement Forum

The New Rules of Engagement: Building the Next  
Generation of Alumni Leaders and Volunteers

# Advancement Forum

## Project Director

John Tannous

## Contributing Consultants

Diana Barnes

## Practice Manager

Katie Stratton Turcotte

## Managing Director

Liz Rothenberg

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# Alumni Leadership Academy

## Accelerating the Self-Identification Process

### Practice in Brief

An alumni leadership academy offers participants a clear and transparent opportunity to self-nominate as an individual willing and interested to become involved with the university. Over monthly sessions that offer networking, introductions to university operations, and an overview of available volunteer roles, alumni come to appreciate the contributions of leaders. Staff then path this vetted and trained cohort of participants to appropriate roles across campus.

### Rationale

Most institutions lack clear mechanisms to develop and nurture a pipeline of involved, high-potential alumni. Existing “open access” volunteer roles without barriers to entry often do not attract prominent or influential individuals, while the process at the top for alumni leadership appointments is political, difficult to navigate, and informal. Alumni leadership academies offer a replicable, low-resource strategy to attract, train, evaluate, and engage a new cohort of potential leaders on an annual basis.

### Implementation Considerations

The University of Nebraska at Omaha’s approach surfaces a few dozen participants, but focuses on high-potential alumni that are likely to volunteer, give, or participate. It is especially effective for institutions where a substantial amount of alumni stay local (i.e., within driving distance of campus) and may not be as applicable for a rural institution where alumni live far away or are nationally distributed. This brief discusses several options to tailor the academy to an institution’s unique needs.

### Resource Considerations

The key cost is staff time, averaging four to six hours a week in the summer and four to six hours a month during the school year. In the summer, the dedicated staff member must generate applications, notify finalists, and book speakers and space. During the year, the staff member will attend and organize the monthly meeting and communicate with participants. Some signature events of the academy have minor costs, like a weekday welcome breakfast with the Chancellor at the start of the program, a cross-campus trivia scavenger hunt with a happy hour at the end, or tickets to a sporting event. However, none of these events are required for program success; institutions can customize events to their available budget.

#### *Profiled Institution:*

University of Nebraska at Omaha in Omaha, NE

# Sourcing Future Alumni Leaders

The University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) has pioneered a more direct method of accelerating the self-identification process for potential alumni leaders by soliciting self-nominations for an alumni leadership academy.

Modeled on the local Chamber of Commerce's "Leadership Omaha" program, the Young Alumni Academy provides distinctive opportunities for young and mid-career professionals to network with like-minded individuals, better understand the operations of the university, and feel as though they are "insiders" of the community through behind-the-scenes tours and meetings with senior administrators.

Staff market the program widely. Applications revealed many potential alumni champions that were not involved or engaged in the university before participating in the academy.

Five years of cohorts (as of 2015) has resulted in over 180 well-placed alumni who are passionate, engaged, and informed advocates of UNO from diverse industries. Staff also identify the most promising four to eight volunteers from each cohort and path them directly to leadership roles. Many former volunteers now sit on deans' advisory councils and the alumni board.

## Discovering High-Potential Volunteers in the Community

### University of Nebraska-Omaha's "Young Alumni Academy"



*Relying on a Proven Model*

- Inspired by U.S. Chamber of Commerce's 10-month leadership programs for emerging professionals
- Young alumni professionals from diverse fields invited to apply for program
- ~40 individuals chosen for each cohort
- First cohort selected in 2010-2011 school year

*Creating a Cohort of Leaders*



*Building Current and Future Leaders*

**4-8**

- Participants attend monthly meetings with built-in time for structured networking
- Eight sessions from September through April include presentations by UNO leaders on topics such as the university's budget, the student experience, or athletics
- Final meeting drills down into volunteer activities at the institution

Graduates in each cohort immediately placed in university volunteer leadership roles

**180+**

Cohort graduates represent bench of future volunteer leaders across key industries in Omaha

#### Next Steps for Program Development

Now that staff have developed a robust cohort of program alumni, they have begun to plan regular happy hours and one-day reunions to assemble the group. They plan to begin holding family programming (e.g., Easter egg hunts, Christmas parties) to bring participants' families closer to the university.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

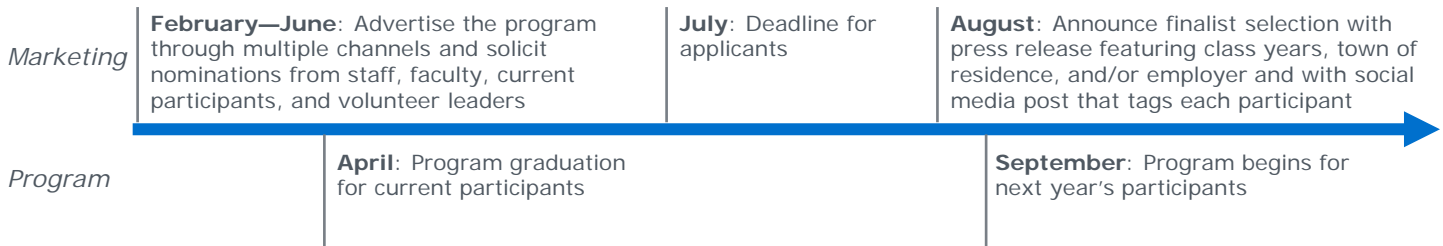
# Considerations for Program Management

## Program Marketing

The program can be advertised through social media, institutional publications (e.g., alumni magazine), mass emails to alumni, and advertisements placed in local newspapers.

Staff, faculty, and current volunteer leaders across campus should also be encouraged to nominate potential participants, whom alumni relations staff will then contact directly to ask to submit an application.

## Program Timeline



## Finalist Selection

While interviewees regret having to decline applicants, they want to preserve the program's brand of being prestigious and exclusive.

Considerations for Finalist Selection	
✓	Institutions vary in requiring that applicants be under 40, under 35, and/or not specifying an age but simply calling it "young alumni" and letting alumni self-filter.
✓	Staff typically accept 70 to 80 percent of applicants to arrive at a cohort of 35 to 50 individuals.
✓	Prioritize applicants who represent colleges and schools that are less likely to engage in alumni leadership. This helps to develop pipelines for academic areas that struggle most to populate volunteer ranks.
✓	Diversify finalists' career paths, going beyond employees of local branches of large companies to include government, media, K-12 education, real estate, nonprofit sectors, health care, etc. UNO even includes a few alumni who work at the institution in junior and mid-level positions.

Source: Adapted from with permission from the University of Nebraska at Omaha; EAB interviews and analysis.

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## Adaption to Larger University Settings

### Potential Adjustments to Selection Process



#### Add more stringent application requirements

Larger universities that have replicated this program have hosted larger cohorts of alumni and/or have imposed more stringent application requirements to increase self-selection (i.e., more essay questions, submission of a resume, a letter of recommendation, an interview).



#### Incorporate fees to encourage commitment and subsidize program

One university also charges a nonrefundable application fee of \$25 and program tuition of \$100, which both subsidizes the program and serves to incentivize participant involvement. Another charges a security deposit refundable to participants who do not miss more than one meeting.



#### Explain selectivity of the program

Institutions also communicate upfront the program's selectivity and competitive nature, to manage expectations in the event of having to decline dozens of applicants.

### Tailoring the Academy to the Institutional Contexts

Larger universities or institutions seeking to capitalize on specific challenges and opportunities could create specialized alumni leadership academies to discover particular alumni segments.

For example:



An institution seeking to grow a women's philanthropy program could create a Mid-Career Alumnae Academy



An academic unit struggling with alumni engagement could create an academy focused on its particular professions or graduates, which act as a feeder to that school's volunteer leadership



An institution seeking to diversify its alumni leader pipeline could create academies for a particular underrepresented demographic.



If the academy is executed by development officers, the university may use capacity to filter applicants or proactively target prospects for their annual giving society or leadership annual giving program.

# Sample Documentation

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The document shown below is an example of a marketing document to explain the purpose of the program. The language emphasizes the value to potential applicants, noting their ability to learn about the university and network with one another, while also underscoring the key qualities that UNO is seeking in applicants.

## Sample Marketing Document

# Application for 2015-2016 THE UNO YOUNG ALUMNI ACADEMY

*A program of the UNO Alumni Association*

**UNO Alumni Association Mission:** We drive alumni engagement and support with distinctive communications and innovative programs, enhancing pride in a UNO degree.

**UNO Young Alumni Mission:** To create opportunities for young alumni to reconnect with UNO through the Alumni Association, and to develop supportive alumni for life by encouraging young alumni involvement in programs and the UNO Annual Fund.

The UNO Young Alumni Academy is designed to facilitate networking and professional growth while delivering participants an insider's view into what it takes to run one of the nation's premier metropolitan universities. While there is no age requirement, programming is geared toward alumni under 35. The Academy typically meets on Thursday evenings from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. (with two exceptions) once per month from September through April. Meetings are held at unique locations throughout campus and with activities that feature UNO's leaders.

There is no charge to Academy participants. Each session begins with time for networking before moving into the monthly topic. Monthly topics:

- September: Welcome & Orientation
- October: "Mav March" Group Activity
- November: UNO Maverick Hockey & Athletics
- December: Who Pays? Funding UNO Academics & Research
- January: UNO's Community Engagement Emphasis
- February: The UNO Student Experience
- March: Community Service Project
- April: Wrap Up and Academy "Graduation" Activities

UNO Young Alumni social activities may be built into the schedule. While the Academy is exclusive to participants, socials are open to all UNO Young Alumni. Academy participants are encouraged to invite their friends and fellow alumni to attend.

Upon "Graduation" from the UNO Young Alumni Academy, participants will remain connected through the UNO Young Alumni leadership team with opportunities for further involvement and networking.

### QUALITIES OF ACADEMY APPLICANTS

To ensure a meaningful experience for Academy participants it is suggested that applicants consider the qualities that will make UNO Young Alumni Academy members successful.

- Are proud to have earned a degree from UNO.
- Enjoy networking with others who share a connection with UNO.
- Have a desire to learn more about how UNO contributes to the quality of life in Nebraska.
- Will make a commitment to complete all seven sessions of the Academy program.

Source: Adapted from with permission from the University of Nebraska at Omaha; EAB interviews and analysis.

The document shown below is an example of an application document. The short essay requirements create a self-selection effect to weed out uncommitted alumni from applying, while supplying valuable information to staff.

### Sample Application

# Application for 2015-2016 THE UNO YOUNG ALUMNI ACADEMY

*A program of the UNO Alumni Association*

First Name	<input type="text"/>	Last Name	<input type="text"/>
Email Address	<input type="text"/>	Maiden Name	<input type="text"/>
Class Year	<input type="text"/>	Major and Graduating School	<input type="text"/>
Birth Date	<input type="text"/>	Street Address and City	<input type="text"/>
Phone (home)	<input type="text"/>		

Please describe the highlights of your student experience.

Please describe your career following graduation.

In your opinion, what does it mean to be a loyal alumnus/a? How can or should alumni contribute to the success of the university?

How did you find out about the Young Alumni Academy?

If selected, I (name, signed) \_\_\_\_\_ agree to attend and participate in every session of the Young Alumni Academy.

Source: Adapted from with permission from the University of Nebraska at Omaha; EAB interviews and analysis.



# Program Development

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## Recommendations for Curricula Development

### Considerations to Program Development



#### **Incorporate Distinctive Campus Assets**

Customize the program to fit your institution's culture and notable features. For example, take the participants to a sporting event, gallery opening, or guest lecture that your alumni will find exciting and/or give them behind-the-scenes tours of special campus facilities.



#### **Iterate in Program Elements**

Staff should also continually refine program curricula, emailing survey evaluations to participants after each session and using the feedback to shape the next year's schedule or offer constructive advice to returning speakers.



#### **Include References to Philanthropy and Volunteerism**

Where possible, ask session presenters to note the contributions of alumni, donors, and volunteer leaders in the development of their units.



#### **Frame Discussions of Leadership Within Session Content**

Though UNO and other institutions that have replicated this practice unify their curricula around the theme of leadership, they do so differently. UNO focuses each session on a particular division or area of the university, but asks the senior administrator presenting to also reflect on difficult values-based decisions they have had to make or critical moments in their own leadership development. Other institutions might more directly incorporate sessions on topics like personality assessments, personal brand development, work/life balance, mentorship and networking, public speaking, etc.

# Program Curricula Development

## Sample Curricula

Topic Description	Presenter	Potential Highlights
Welcome or "State of the University"	University president or chancellor	A morning breakfast or evening "fireside chat" conversation with the president, either at the official university residence, alumni house, or an intimate environment. The president introduces him or herself, discusses the university's challenges and opportunities, and thanks them for engaging, explaining the critical role that alumni play in the university's success.
Student experience	Senior student affairs officer	Presenters discuss the array of student services and departments available to students, focusing on particularly interesting or trend-setting programs that might not have existed when the participants were students. Often takes place in a building that is new or renovated since alumni graduated, such as a recreation center, residence hall, or student union.
University budgeting and finance, including role of philanthropy	Senior financial officer and senior foundation/development officer	Presenters discuss various public, private, restricted, and unrestricted sources of capital and operating funds. In particular, they explain tuition and cost of attendance as well as scholarships and financial aid, topics that most intrigue participants. They also discuss the role that the university's philanthropic foundation plays in sustaining its viability, holding the session in a building on campus that was financed entirely or substantially with private funds. Participants might play a game that simulates the budgeting process and the trade-offs that leaders make. After this session, staff at UNO will assemble a one-off focus group of five to ten participants that appeared most interested and comfortable with the topic to discuss an upcoming appeal, fundraising event, etc. This begins to winnow which of the cohort leaders might make key volunteer leaders in the future.
Government and public policy	Senior government relations officer	Presenters explain how the university interfaces with federal, state, and local governments on regular issues, and offer deep-dives or case-studies of a few issues the university is actively lobbying on. Participants may be trained on talking points regarding major issues, or even asked to write letters or make calls to local representatives on behalf of the university.
Enrollment and admissions	Senior admissions or enrollment director	Presenters discuss the strategies they leverage to assemble a diverse class and outreach they conduct to various high schools and demographic goals to reach their goals. They may discuss the legacy preference policy for alumni where one exists. Participants may conduct a mock exercise where they are asked to evaluate fictional applicant files and determine which to admit.
Research and economic development	Senior research administrator or 2-3 star research faculty	Presenters discuss the roles of research on campus, including various funding sources under threat such as federally-funded research agencies, industry-sponsored research, etc. They also discuss the concepts of technology transfer and research commercialization. Participants can listen to two or three professors across various disciplines discuss their research and understand how it applies to real-world problems. The presentation can take place in an interesting research lab or institute on campus.
Athletics operations and management	Athletics director or popular coach	Presenters focus on the tangible and intangible contributions that athletics makes to campus life and the behind-the-scenes "business" of athletics, including all the departments and teams that make it run. Could include tours of prominent facilities or stadiums. Participants receive one complimentary ticket to a high-profile game on their campus (typically football or hockey) and attend together.
Community engagement	Senior community liaison	Presenters discuss how the university is involved in the off-campus area and community, including specific ongoing outreach initiatives that participants might find interesting. Participants could also take part in a local community service project as part of this session.

## Sample Curricula (cont'd)

Topic Description	Presenter	Potential Highlights
University history session	University archivist	Presenters can discuss the history of the university, from its founding through to current times, and how it has evolved through certain historical milestones. Alumni may find it interesting to hear about odd traditions of the past or the stories behind how beloved buildings or programs came to be. The presentation can take place at the library or where the university's special collections are held.
Shared governance and volunteer leadership	Senior alumni relations leader and university secretary	<p>Usually as a final session, presenters discuss the concept of shared governance on campus, and in particular discuss the important contributions that alumni make to campus across governing and advisory roles. They also highlight a slew of common alumni volunteer opportunities across campus, explaining their importance. The goal is to share with participants an array of potential next-steps for continuing their involvement.</p> <p>After a similar session at UNO, staff email each dean a list of all the alumni who graduated from their academic units or who work in professions related to their academic unit and encourage the deans to have their staff contact them and see how they might become more involved. Many participants have gone on to join school advisory councils and volunteer committees, to become class speakers, and to help with one-off projects.</p>



“The goal was to create V.I.P. experience for alumni to experience the university in a completely new way and come to appreciate all its complexities.”

*Elizabeth Kraemer  
Director of Alumni Programming*



### Want to Learn More?

This practice brief is part of the EAB Advancement Forum's research initiative, entitled: *The New Rules of Engagement: Building the Next Generation of Alumni Leaders and Volunteers*.

To learn more about this research and to find other resources, access the [Alumni Leadership and Volunteerism Resource Center](#). If you have any trouble accessing this page, please consult your Dedicated Advisor.



EAB

Education Advisory Board

2445 M Street NW, Washington DC 20037

P 202.266.6400 | F 202.266.5700 | [eab.com](http://eab.com)