

Leadership Thought Piece

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February 2018

I have always been a history buff. Knowing where you've come from, I believe, will help you figure out where you're going. One of my favorite quotes of all time is: *'A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin, and culture is like a tree without roots.'* – Marcus Garvey

I believe this to be true about those of us who work in alumni engagement. Whether your institution is 500 years old or 50 years old... your history is important. It will help what you do today stand-up and plant seeds for the future.

Our profession has its own history as well. Schools, colleges, and universities around the world have been engaging with alumni for over a hundred years. **Or has it been even longer?**

1792 – Yale University devised a system for organizing alumni by class. Biographical summaries were compiled for each member of the Yale Class of 1792. The first “alumni directory”.

1821 – Williams College claims the oldest existing “alumni society” of any academic institution in the United States.

1823 – The Alumni Fund of Brown University was established with a goal to raise \$1000.

1835 – Saw the formation of the first formal “Alumni Association” at Gettysburg College.

1842 – Virginia Military Institute alumni set up the first known independent alumni association.

1852 – Cincinnati Wesleyan Female College establishes the first alumnae association.

1853 – the City of College of New York claims the oldest continuous alumni association in the nation connected to a public college.

1890 – Yale begins the oldest sustained annual giving program.

1891 – Yale Alumni Magazine claims to be the oldest alumni magazine in the United States.

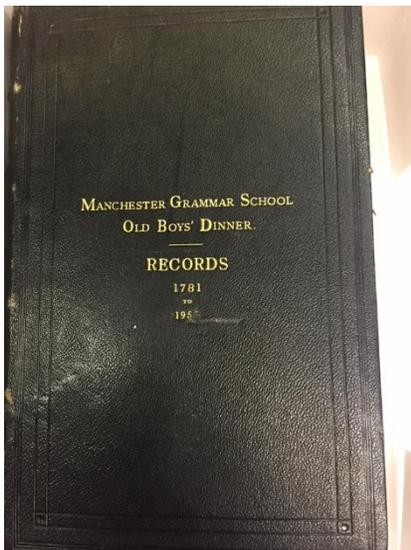
1897 – The first full-time, paid “alumni secretary” is appointed at the University of Michigan.¹

This kind of historical information has always fascinated me. I became deeply interested in the history of schools when I headed up the alumni engagement programmes in Lehigh University and Cornell University. Working with over 100 clients as a consultant, including American colleges and universities, independent (pre-prep, prep and senior) schools, and several schools around the world (in the UK, France, Ireland, Italy, Finland, Australia, and Canada), where part of my work always included researching the story of their founding.

You’ll note that the above historical information is all from the United States. What about elsewhere around the world? Well, that information eluded me until this past fall where I got a full dose of British alumni engagement history.

While giving a talk at the Graduway Leadership Summit in Boston last year, I began proudly spouting off the above facts as the oldest evidence of organized alumni engagement activity. When a gentleman in the front row raised his hand and proudly stated that he had an example that was older than any of those I referenced.

This particular gentleman happened to be Simon Jones, the Director of Development at The Manchester Grammar School in the UK. They know a bit about history there... they were founded in 1515! That is just 23 years after Christopher Columbus “sailed the ocean blue”.



Simon corrected me by sharing that the “Old Boys’ Dinner” at The Manchester Grammar School dates back to 1781!

I responded with something like, “Nonsense. That’s impossible. I don’t believe you!” (I didn’t really say that out loud but I was thinking it!). And then a week later he sent me this.

In his message Simon simply stated, “Proof. But I have no idea what we were doing from 1515-1781!”

A few weeks later, I posted about this exchange on LinkedIn and asked what went on for those first 250+ years, Simon chimed in and responded, “We had a REALLY long quiet period!”

Why does any of this matter?

Again, I think it has to do with understanding your past to inform your future. It doesn’t mean you keep doing everything the same way you have always done them. But the history, traditions, and the unique

¹ http://www.case.org/About_CASE/CASE_History/100AnniversaryAAS/100AnniversaryExplore.html



cultures of your institutions should continually inform what you do going forward. Sometimes, however, in our business we have to stop something – a “tradition” – that is no longer working. Being aware of and sensitive to the history and the story behind it is critical in making these decisions.

Alumni engagement professionals are NOT good at stopping anything. And we are even worse at saying no. But we have to have the courage to do both and do so in a respectful manner.

Know the history of your school, share it with others, leverage what is good and still working, and have the courage to stop what is outdated and past its time.

Finally, please share other examples to add to the timeline above. Can anyone top the 1781 example? Or just help me make the timeline more international. All responses welcome - chris.marshall@graduway.com