

Organizational Identification and the Voluntary Support of Higher Education

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Introduction

As increases in college and university budgets continue to outpace inflation, the pressure on institutional advancement offices to raise more money to support institutional budgets has grown. This increased pressure has resulted in many universities conducting capital campaigns on a continual basis. This pressure has prompted institutional leaders in the field of development to look for ways to pinpoint potential donors effectively. Although much anecdotal evidence exists to guide development officers in soliciting institutional alumni, little scholarly inquiry has focused on donor intent and the reasons why individuals ultimately give money to institutions of higher education.

One of the challenges facing any researcher in this area is the lack of inquiry into the relationship between donor behavior and motivation. Carbone (1986) proposes an approach to research which will add strength to the body of knowledge, provide necessary information to fundraisers and increase the professionalism in the research. This suggested approach focuses on three distinct areas of fundraising: (1) the philanthropic environment (2) the work and careers of fundraisers, and (3) the management of fundraising. This study addresses the philanthropic environment as it relates to colleges and universities.

This study also adds significantly to the body of research on organizational identification. It focuses on the relationship between involvement, perception of educational effectiveness, perception of organizational prestige and subsequent organizational identification. By examining the relationship between these constructs, we may fully understand how the involvement of undergraduates and alumni influences their connection to their alma maters. By extension, this may help administrators more fully understand how these experiences affect alumni giving. The

specific goals of this study are threefold. First, it addresses specific challenges faced by universities in preparing students for participation as alumni donors. Second, it adds to the body of academic research on the motivation of individuals to make gifts to institutions of higher education. Although a great deal of information exists in the application of specific techniques in the development process, little of the knowledge has been generated through the application of systematic research techniques. Finally, this study suggests possible areas for further inquiry in the areas of higher education and philanthropy.

Leslie and Ramey (1988) note that the descriptive nature of alumni research has neglected the underlying factors of why individuals decide to make gifts. These characteristic descriptions of donors versus nondonors helps to define each group, however, they are of limited use to practitioners who cannot manipulate these variables (Wilmoth, 1987). Harris (1988) points out that these studies do not help to develop models of fund raising behavior, and as such, do not provide a base for subsequent research. This is one of the reasons the knowledge base is so fragmented, with few replications of studies (Brittingham and Pezzulo, 1990).

Conceptual Framework

Involvement

Undergraduate involvement during college has been positively related to a number of constructs including cognitive development, occupational success, job earnings and educational attainment. In his theory of student involvement, Astin (1985, p. 133) posits that "students learn by becoming involved." He describes a process by which students learn not only because of the impact that college has on them, but also because of their relationship with institution. The concept of student involvement in intellectual activities has been shown to be positively related

to cognitive growth during college (Gaff, 1973). Additionally, Pascarella (1989) found that there is a strong correlation between intellectual skill development and the level of student involvement in interpersonal activities.

Graduates tend to perceive their involvement in extracurricular activities in college as being related to gaining the skills necessary for success in their jobs (Bisconti & Kessler, 1980). It is also positively related to assessment of managerial potential (Howard, 1986). By participating in college activities, students develop interpersonal and leadership skills which they perceive as being beneficial in their career and which others view as signs of managerial ability. There is also a correlation between involvement in extracurricular activities and job earnings, particularly when individuals held leadership positions in their respective undergraduate organizations (Calhoun and Reddy, 1968). Kocher and Pascarella (1988), found that any effects of extracurricular involvement on job earnings were negligible when confounding influences such as parental education and academic ability were controlled for.

Educational attainment and undergraduate extracurricular activity have been shown to be positively related. Participation in social activities increases a student's social integration and interpersonal bonds with the institution. This integration increases the likelihood of persistence (Tinto, 1975, 1987). Perhaps the institutional bonds, which are developed through student involvement, continue after individuals graduate from college. Of particular interest is how such connections may influence other behaviors, specifically alumni giving.

Involvement in Alumni Activities

The study of alumni involvement and donor behavior has seen some of the most consistent results across those alumni studies which have been conducted. Markoff (1978),

McKee (1975), and Miracle (1977) all found that involvement in alumni activities is a strong predictor of donor status. Korvas (1984) reports that donors are more likely to be involved in alumni activities, and that as their involvement increases, so does their level of financial support. Haddad (1986) and Keller (1982) both found that donors were more likely than nondonors to have participated in one to three alumni activities.

While there is a high level of consistency in these results, one must view interpretation of them with some degree of caution. Because no study dealt with the causal nature of the relationship between alumni giving and participation in alumni activities, the predictive nature of these findings may be suspect. Perhaps those who are donors are more likely to be involved in alumni activities because they have an investment in the institution. Additional study is needed to address the causal underpinnings of this relationship.

Organizational Identification

In an early study of major gift donors, Hunter (1968) interviewed 30 donors who made contributions of \$1 million or more to a college or university. He developed a number of reasons why individuals tend to make large gifts to institutions of higher education. Young synthesized these findings into five primary reasons given by individuals for making their gifts: “(1) self-generated convictions as to the institution’s merits; (2) objectives and plans of the institution; (3) efficiency of the institution; (4) competence of the institution’s leadership; and (5) tax advantages” (Young, 1981, p.81).

As Lindemann (1983) reported, emotional attachment and loyalty emerge as two main characteristics that motivate donors to make gifts to their respective alma maters. This relationship between schools and alumni may be viewed through the construct of organizational identification. Organizational identification is “the perception of oneness with or belongingness

to an organization, where the individual *defines* him or herself in terms of the organization(s) in which he or she is a member” (Mael and Ashforth, 1992). Through this identification, individuals perceive themselves as being linked with the organization. The individual sees the organization’s successes and failures as their own successes and failures. This identification has been recognized as an important factor in the well being of organizational members (Brown, 1969; O’Reilly and Chapman, 1986).

This idea of “the bond of identification with an organization” developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992) was refined by Bhattacharya, Rao and Glynn (1995) to include the development of a “model that relates a member’s identification with the focal organization” to a number of factors. These include “organizational and product factors, members’ affiliation characteristics and members’ activity characteristics” (p. 46). These factors were positively related to membership in the studied organization and included: perception of organizational prestige, identification with the organization, participation in organizational activities, organizational pride and satisfaction with organizational programming (Bhattacharya, et al. 1995).

This identification with an alumnus’s alma mater might explain the connection between institutional loyalty, emotional attachment and alumni giving reported by Lindemann (1983). In their study, which focused on alumni of an all-male religious institution in the northeast, Mael and Ashforth (1992) demonstrate the impact of alumni perceptions of organizational prestige, distinctiveness, and competitive excellence on alumni giving. Those individuals who identified strongly with their alma mater and viewed it as being prestigious, distinctive, and competitive with other higher education institutions were more likely to make gifts to the college.

Summary of Model

This study examines the relationship between involvement (alumni and undergraduate), perceived organizational prestige, perceived educational effectiveness and organizational identification with alumni giving and legacy admissions. The preceding discussion suggests two research questions:

RQ1. What is the relationship between the organizational variables: (a) perceived organizational prestige, (b) perceived educational effectiveness of the institution, (c) involvement in institutional activities, (d) and organizational identification on participating in voluntary support of one's alma mater?

RQ2. What is the relationship between the organizational variables: (a) perceived organizational prestige, (b) perceived educational effectiveness of the institution, (c) involvement in institutional activities, (d) and organizational identification on willingness to send one's child to the institution?

Method

The sample for this study was drawn from the alumni database of a small catholic liberal arts college located in the southeast United States. The institution has an alumni population of 26,000 graduates and enrolls 6,000 students, primarily undergraduates. A sample of 725 university alumni was drawn through a systematic selection with a random start from the alumni population. Of the 725 alumni sampled, 234 were reached by telephone and completed the survey instrument in one week of telephone calling, representing a 32 percent response rate. The

questionnaire was comprised of 31 five item Likert-type questions and three questions requiring categorical type responses. Additionally, the following information was downloaded from the database for each alumnus selected to be contacted: gender, race, marital status, graduation year, undergraduate extra-curricular involvement, fraternity/sorority membership, alumni activity involvement, and giving history.

Measures

A six-item scale measured organizational identification. In a sample of business and psychology students employed in off-campus jobs, Mael (1988) reports a coefficient alpha of 0.81 for this measure. Ashforth (1990) reports a coefficient alpha of 0.83 for this construct in a separate study. Finally, an alpha coefficient of 0.87 is reported by Mael and Ashforth in their 1992 study of college alumni.

Perceived organizational prestige, which Mael and Ashforth define as "the degree to which the institution is regarded both in absolute and comparative terms," (1992, p.111) was assessed by a four-item scale (which is a revision of their eight-item scale). The construct was revised to reflect the nature of the institution being studied. Coefficient alphas reported for this scale are 0.79 (Mael, 1988) and 0.77 (Mael and Ashforth, 1992). A three-item scale measured perception of educational effectiveness and involvement was measured by a four-item scale. Both of these measures were constructed for this study. A single item assessed the number of years since respondent's graduation.

Hypothesized Consequences

Respondents were asked to respond to the item "Do you participate in giving to the university?" Results were coded into a binary choice (1=yes, 0=no) variable (giving).

Additionally, participants willingness to send their child to the university was measured using a five-item Likert-type scale.

Data Analysis and Findings

Descriptive Statistics

Data were initially analyzed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies for each questionnaire item and downloaded variable were calculated, including measures of central tendency. Of those sampled, 5.8 percent were active as alumni and 94.2 percent were not. Active was defined as participation in at least one alumni activity since graduation, excluding events. These primarily consisted of members of alumni boards, committees, visiting committees and the President's Council. Twenty percent were active in extracurricular activities while students at the university and 80 percent were not. Active was defined as participation in at least one extracurricular activity during the respondent's time on campus. A total of 8.3 percent were members of a Greek letter society.

The breakdown according to the college from which each alumnus graduated was as follows: Arts and Sciences - 33.9 percent, College of Business Administration - 17.7 percent, School of Law - 17 percent, City College - 9.4 percent, special programs - 5.8 percent, School of Dentistry - 4.5 percent, college of Music - 3.7 percent, and the School of Pharmacy - 1.9 percent. These numbers parallel the percentage of the alumni population as a whole suggesting that the selected sample was representative of the overall alumni population.

Of those alumni selected, 28.8 percent graduated in the 1990's, 21 percent graduated in the 1980's, 12.8 percent graduated in the 1960's, 7.8 percent graduated in the 1950's and 7.3 percent graduated in the 1940's and earlier. As the alumni get older, there are fewer because of natural attrition through death.

For those records on which we had information on marital status, 52.7 percent were married, 41.4 percent were single, 1.6 percent were divorced, 1.1 percent were widowed and 2.4 percent were clergy or members of a religious order. Of those alumni for whom we had information concerning race, 79.8 percent were white, 12.4 percent were African American, five percent were Hispanic and 2.2 percent were Asian. 46.8 percent of alumni were female and 53.2 percent were male.

Reliability of Scales

Cronbach alphas were calculated for each of the scales created for the study (Table 1). Each of the scales reaches an alpha level of .70 or greater, except the scale measuring respondent involvement, which scored a .60. An acceptable alpha value is 0.7 or greater but 0.6 is occasionally acceptable especially for an exploratory study (Nunnally 1978). As such, each of the measure variables is included in the regression analyses.

Table 1 - Alpha Reliabilities for Scaled Measures

Organizational Identification (Alpha = .79)

When somebody criticizes University X, it feels like a personal insult
 I am very interested in what others think about University X
 When I talk about University X, I usually say we rather than they
 University X's successes are my successes
 When someone praises University X, it feels like a personal compliment
 If a story in the media criticized University X, I would feel embarrassed

Perceived Institutional Prestige (Alpha = .71)

University X is well-known in my community.
 People in my community think highly of University X graduates
 It is considered prestigious in my community to be a graduate of University X
 University X does not have an outstanding reputation in my community

Perceived Educational Effectiveness (Alpha = .70)

How effective were your teachers while you attended University X?
 How would you rate your University X experience?
 How effective was University X in preparing you for employment?

Involvement (Alpha = .60)

How actively do you participate in University X's alumni activities?
 How strong is your connection to University X today?
 How would you rate your level of involvement as a University X student?
 About How often do you return to campus?

Alumni Giving and Hypothesized Antecedents

Attention is now turned to the influence of the independent variables on alumni giving. A logistic regression equation was estimated for the dependent variable GIVING “Has respondent made a gift to the University?”

To assess the influence of each independent variable on alumni giving, a binary logistic regression was estimated on the binary choice dependent variable giving which was coded 1=individual made a gift, 0 = individual did not make a gift. As shown in Table 2, three of the five hypothesized antecedents have a significant influence on making a gift to the university. The three significant antecedents are: perceived organizational prestige ($B=0.55$, $\text{Exp}(B)=1.74$,

$p \leq 0.01$), involvement ($B = -0.46$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.63$, $p \leq 0.01$), and years since graduation ($B = 0.05$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.05$, $p \leq 0.001$). The Nagelkerke R square, which is a goodness of fit measure, is 0.26.

Table 2 – Results of Logistic Regression of Antecedents on Making Gift

Hypothesized Antecedents	B	SE	Wald	Exp(B)
Organizational Identification	0.49	0.22	0.05	1.05
Organizational Prestige	0.55**	0.21	6.71	1.74
Educational Effectiveness	-0.11	0.25	0.00	0.97
Involvement	-0.46**	0.17	7.38	0.63
Years Since Graduation	0.05***	0.01	28.39	1.05
Constant	1.167	0.75	2.45	0.31
<i>Nagelkerke R Square</i>	.26*			

* $p \leq 0.05$

** $p \leq 0.01$

*** $p \leq 0.001$

Sending a Child to the University and Hypothesized Antecedents

To assess the contribution of each independent variable on the hypothesized consequence sending a child to the university, an OLS regression was estimated on the dependent variable sending child to the university (Table 3). Condition indices were examined to diagnose any potential multicollinearity problems. A condition index over 20 would indicate that multicollinearity issues were present in the analyses; however, no scores reached that level.

The dependent variable used in the analysis was SENDCHILD “I would send my child to attend University X” which was coded on a five point likert scale. Organizational identification, perceived organizational prestige, perceived educational effectiveness, involvement, and number of years since graduation served as independent variables. Four hypothesized antecedent are significantly related to an individual sending his or her child to the university (Table 3):

Organizational identification ($\beta=0.37, p\leq 0.001$), perceived organizational prestige ($\beta=0.20, p\leq 0.001$), involvement ($\beta=0.15, p\leq 0.01$), and number of years since graduation ($\beta=0.12, p\leq 0.05$) are positively related to a willingness to send a child to the institution). The model as estimated explains 35 percent of the variance in the dependent variable (R Square = .35). It is also interesting to note that perception of educational effectiveness was *not* significantly related to sending one's child to the institution.

Table 3 – Results of OLS Regression of Antecedents on Sending a Child to the University

Hypothesized Antecedents	β	SE
Organizational Identification	0.37***	0.09
Organizational Prestige	0.20***	0.08
Educational Effectiveness	0.09	0.11
Involvement	0.15**	0.07
Years Since Graduation	0.12*	0.07
Constant		0.30
<i>R Squared</i>	.35***	

* $p\leq 0.05$
 ** $p\leq 0.01$
 *** $p\leq 0.001$

Limitations

Before discussing the results of this study, its limitations must be addressed. First, the study was conducted at a single educational institution. While this facilitated the collection of data, the findings may not be generalizable to different types and sizes of educational institutions. Second, the study was cross-sectional. To understand better how organizational identification and alumni perceptions change over time, a longitudinal study should be

conducted. Finally, there is the potential that individuals who self-select into completion of the survey may have characteristics different from those of the entire alumni population

Discussion

This study set out to answer two research questions which serve as markers for this discussion. The first question posed was:

What is the relationship between the organizational variables: (a) perceived organizational prestige, (b) perceived educational effectiveness of the institution, (c) involvement in institutional activities, (d) and organizational identification on participating in voluntary support of one's alma mater?

The results listed above demonstrate that at this institution, perceived organizational prestige and number of years since graduation both have a positive influence on alumni gift giving. This is in keeping with earlier research on this topic which suggest that there is a strong connection between how alumni view their alma maters and decision to give (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Bhattacharya, et. al, 1995). While there is a significant relationship between number of years since graduation, and making a gift, it exerts little influence. The connection, however, is not surprising, considering the lifetime trajectory of income.

No significant relationship between organizational identification, educational effectiveness was found at this institution. This is interesting, because it conflicts with previous research which suggests that organizational identification is a significant factor in alumni giving. This points to the need for additional replication of these analyses to establish a pattern of results. This also highlights the weakness in the advancement literature, in which few studies build upon earlier theoretical work.

Finally, there is a significant *negative* relationship between involvement and giving. This contradicts what is accepted practice in higher education. That is, to get alumni to support an institution financially, they must be involved in the life of the institution. There may be several explanations for this finding. First, individuals who are active in alumni activities may perceive their involvement a gift. In other words, alumni may think “I provide support to the university by attending functions, or paying entrance fees at events, so why should I also make a gift?” Second, For many years the institution had a large commuter population which tended to remain in the city upon graduation. Perhaps those individuals remain involved because their alma mater is near, but have other giving priorities. Third, a criticism of the institution’s alumni programming has been that it did not attract high status individuals or those who could make gifts to participate. Perhaps this is borne out in the data, because the individuals who self-select into participating in alumni activities do not have the resources to make gifts to the institution.

The second question research posed was:

What is the relationship between the organizational variables: (a) perceived organizational prestige, (b) perceived educational effectiveness of the institution, (c) involvement in institutional activities, (d) and organizational identification on willingness to send one’s child to the institution?

The results demonstrate that organizational identification, perceived organizational prestige, involvement and years since graduation all have a positive significant influence on sending one’s child to the institution. This replicates the findings by Mael and Ashforth (1992) and adds support to the notion that each of these variables is an important influence in legacy application decisions. As a proxy measure for willingness to support the institution this

demonstrates the influence of variables which were not significant in the earlier logistic regression analysis.

The most startling finding is that in neither of these regression equation is there a connection between the independent variable perceived educational effectiveness and the respective dependent variable. This suggests that institutions which may not have provided what alumni perceive as effective educational experiences may still be able to raise money from graduates, and may be able to attract legacy applications from that pool.

Implications for Practice

These findings offer some promise for administrators of college and university institutional advancement programs. They suggest that individuals who are identified with an organization are more likely to send their children to attend college at that institution. Additionally, by implementing programs which bolster the perception of institutional prestige, administrators may be able to increase the ability to raise funds from alumni. This provides support for those who argue for the use of effective promotional materials, including alumni magazines and newsletters. It also demonstrates the importance of both alumni relations and the communications functions in fund raising.

Future Research

Several possible avenues exist for extending this line of inquiry. First, as the discussion above suggests, this study supports some of the previous work which has been done to analyze the relationship between organizational variables and alumni giving. In future studies, an

analysis of propensity would make a valuable addition to the questionnaire. Second, instead of measuring only whether an individual made a gift, a likert scaled question could be added to measure likelihood of giving. Third, this study needs to be replicated at multiple institutions of various size and carnegie classification to determine if these organizational and perceptual variables fluctuate across institutions.

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