



2015 National Research Report

The Correlation Between College Student Satisfaction and Alumni Giving

RUFFALOSM
NOEL LEVITZ

Introduction

Alumni giving plays a crucial role in campus revenue. Yet the majority of alumni do not give back to their alma maters, and the average number of donors per institution has slipped in recent years. This report examines the role student satisfaction plays in alumni giving, featuring an examination of data from 290 institutions and 350,000 students. The findings answer several important questions, including:

- How much does student satisfaction influence whether alumni give back to institutions?
- Which areas of student satisfaction assessment have the most significant correlation with alumni giving?
- Do the student satisfaction variables that affect giving change over the course of a student's college career?
- What can staff and faculty do to maximize both student satisfaction and their potential for future giving?

About this study

The data are from 290 four-year colleges and universities (75 public and 215 private, not-for-profit), reflecting more than 350,000 students who completed the Student Satisfaction Inventory™ (SSI) between 2009 and 2012. There were 82 different items from the SSI, measuring student satisfaction (average satisfaction rating on each item for the students at the school), which were analyzed.

The alumni giving percentages were published by *U.S. News and World Report* in the 2013 data set.

The study tested for correlations between satisfaction items and alumni giving rates at the overall institution level.

The current alumni giving landscape

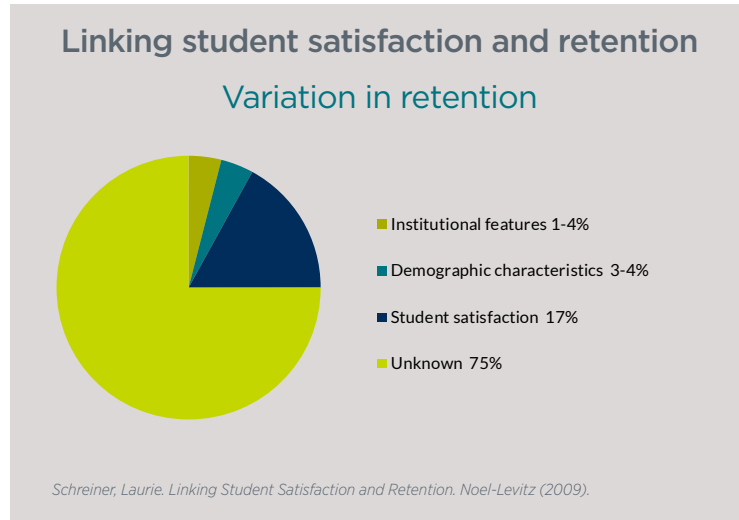
Alumni giving is a major source of revenue for most institutions, but it is also a volatile one that relies on a small segment of alumni. Consider these recent facts from the National Center for Educational Statistics (2014):

- Alumni gave \$9.85 billion to colleges and universities in 2014.
- Individual alumni account for 26 percent of the total support higher education institutions receive.
- Only 8 percent of alumni give each year.
- The average number of annual alumni donors dropped from 6,030 in FY2004 to 5,269 in FY2013, before slightly rebounding to 5,428 in FY2014 (across public and private sectors).

Even as dollars raised from alumni have increased, overall participation rates have stagnated in recent years (Council for Aid to Education, 2015). Many institutions have a growing denominator, due to ever-improving methods of researching contact information for alumni. Some institutions are also seeing larger graduating classes, which contributes to an increasing alumni base. Even so, the decline in the number of alumni donors is an issue that cannot be ignored. This means it is even more critical for campuses to foster the kind of student experience that leads to engaged, active alumni who want to give back to their institutions.

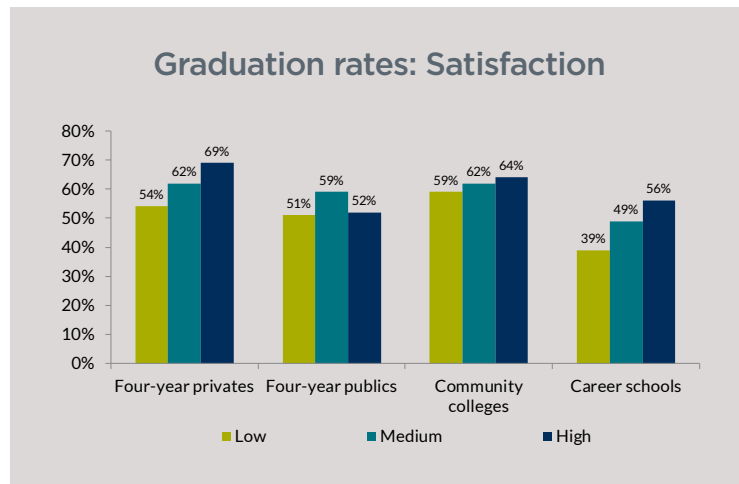
The correlation between student satisfaction, student retention, and college graduation rates

Figure 1



Student satisfaction is positively associated with fall-to-fall retention. A research report by Dr. Laurie Schreiner (2009) documented the link between individual student satisfaction and the likelihood that the student will enroll the following year. Student satisfaction accounts for 17 percent of the variation in retention, which is the largest area that institutions have the opportunity to influence.

Figure 2



Student satisfaction is also positively connected with graduation rates. A 2014 study by Ruffalo Noel Levitz indicated that on an institutional level, colleges, universities, and community colleges with higher student satisfaction scores also have higher institutional graduation rates. There is a linear relationship between student satisfaction and graduation rates at all institution types, except four-year publics (which had a smaller sample size).

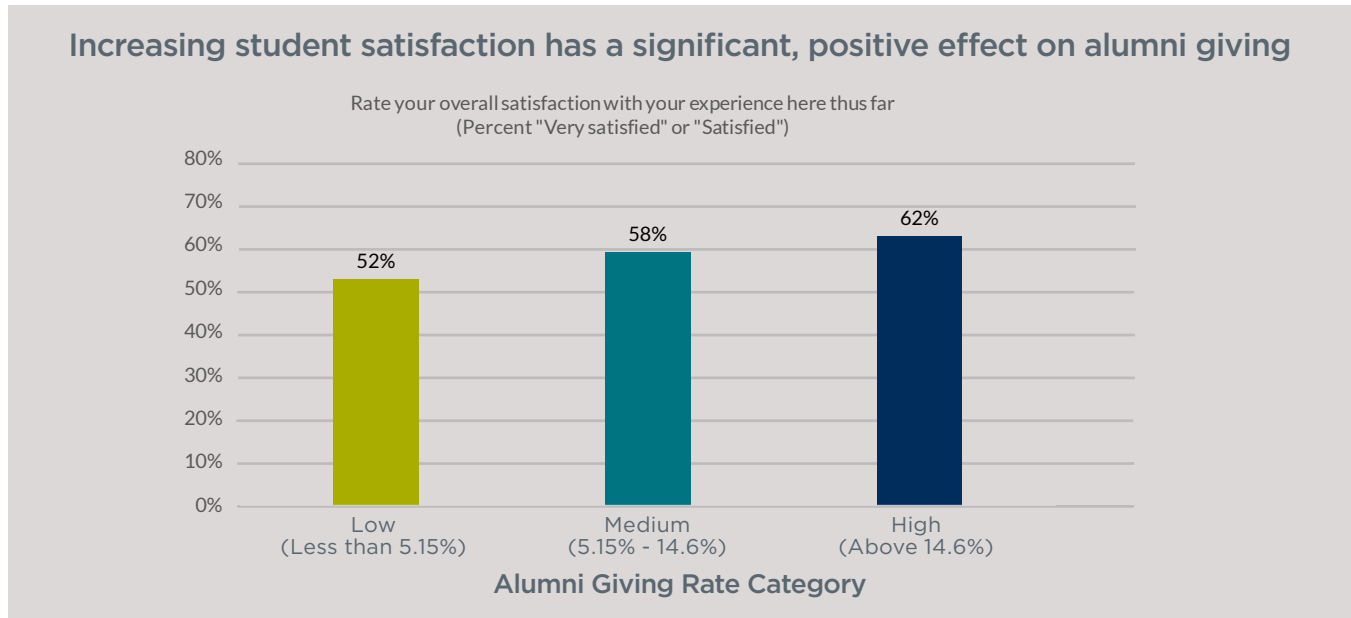
If greater student satisfaction leads to increases in student persistence, does this positive influence extend to alumni engagement after graduation?*

*It should be noted that this study does not measure the influence of the satisfaction of individual students and their giving history as alumni. A study along those lines is planned for the future.

Student satisfaction and alumni giving are linked

Our findings show that, as a whole, there is a statistically significant correlation between student satisfaction and alumni giving.

Figure 3



As the average institutional satisfaction score increases, overall alumni giving percentages also increase, reflecting that institutions with higher student satisfaction are also more likely to have higher alumni participation rates.

This raises an additional question: Are particular areas of the student experience more likely to be tied to alumni giving?

Areas with highest alumni giving correlation

The SSI used in this study asks students to rate their satisfaction and importance on a number of items. In analyzing the satisfaction data in conjunction with alumni giving results, these two items from the SSI had the overall highest correlation with higher alumni giving:

- I generally know what's happening on campus.
- I can easily get involved in campus organizations.

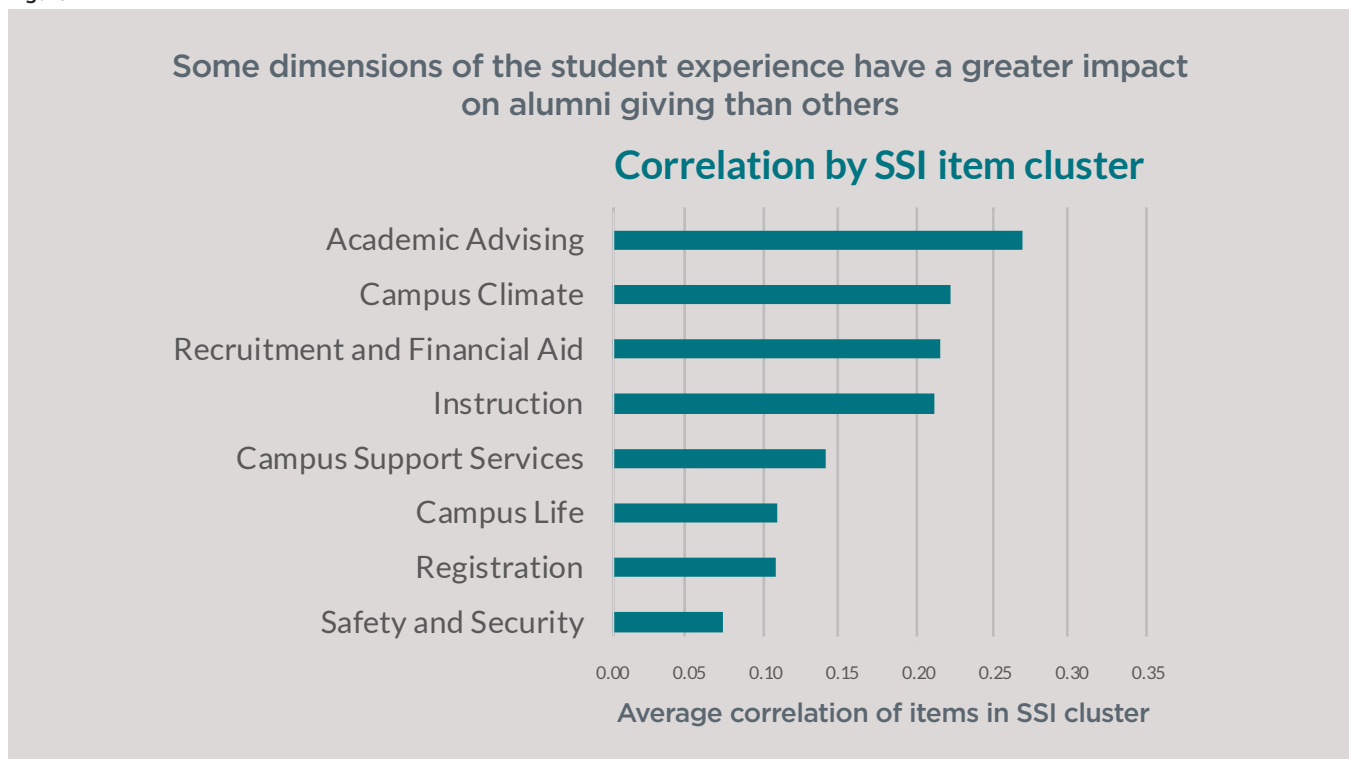
In addition, campuses where students were more satisfied with items reflecting individual attention tended to have higher levels of alumni giving:

- My advisor is concerned about my success as an individual.
- Faculty care about me as an individual.
- Faculty are usually available after class and during office hours.
- This institution shows concern for students as individuals.
- The campus staff are caring and helpful.

Satisfaction clusters with strong correlations to alumni giving

In addition to the specific satisfaction assessment items that correlate with alumni giving on page 4, groups of items on the SSI were clustered into categories. All of the categories had some correlation with alumni giving, but four of the clusters had a greater overall impact: Academic Advising, Campus Climate, Recruitment and Financial Aid, and Instruction.

Figure 4



Let's take a closer look at the individual items within these four clusters that had the strongest correlations with alumni giving:

Academic Advising:

- My advisor is concerned about my success as an individual.
- My academic advisor is approachable.
- My academic advisor helps me set goals to work toward.
- My academic advisor is knowledgeable about requirements in my major.

This cluster had the highest overall correlation with alumni giving. This is encouraging, especially since the items with the highest correlation with alumni giving include a focus on goal-setting and student success and not just knowledge about requirements for a student's major.

Campus Climate:

- I generally know what's happening on campus.
- I can easily get involved with campus organizations.
- There is a commitment to academic excellence on this campus.
- This institution shows concern for students as individuals.
- The campus staff are caring and helpful.
- I seldom get the "run-around" when seeking information on this campus.
- I feel a sense of pride about my campus.

Many of the campus climate items reflect that a sense of connection with the larger campus community is likely to have a significant impact on alumni engagement.

Recruitment and Financial Aid:

- Financial aid awards are announced in time to be helpful in college planning.
- Admissions staff are knowledgeable.
- Admissions counselors respond to prospective students' unique needs and requests.
- Financial aid counselors are helpful.
- Adequate financial aid is available.

The correlation between alumni giving rates and satisfaction with recruitment and financial aid items shows that fostering alumni support begins with some of the very first contacts that a prospective student has with the institution. This broadens the responsibility of the entire campus in helping cultivate future alumni donors.

Instructional:

- Faculty care about me as an individual.
- Faculty are usually available after class and during office hours.
- The quality of instruction I receive in most of my classes is excellent.
- Major requirements are clear and reasonable.
- Nearly all faculty are knowledgeable in their field.
- I am able to experience intellectual growth here.

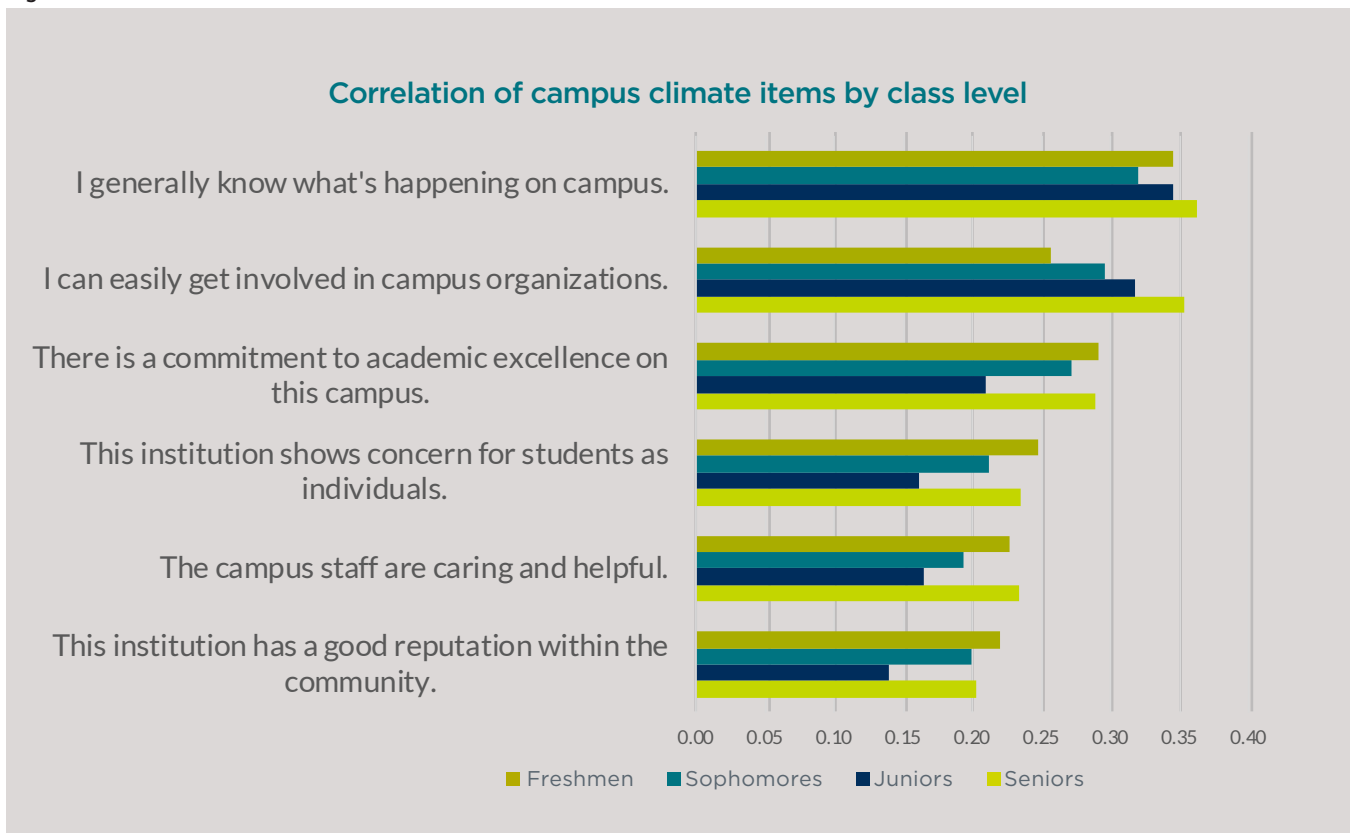
Faculty relationships also are significant in building a foundation for alumni support. Individual attention and accessibility are instrumental in helping current students make the connections that keep them engaged long after they have graduated.

Results by class level

Do any of these items become more influential as students progress through their academic experience? Looking at the data by class level reveals three findings:

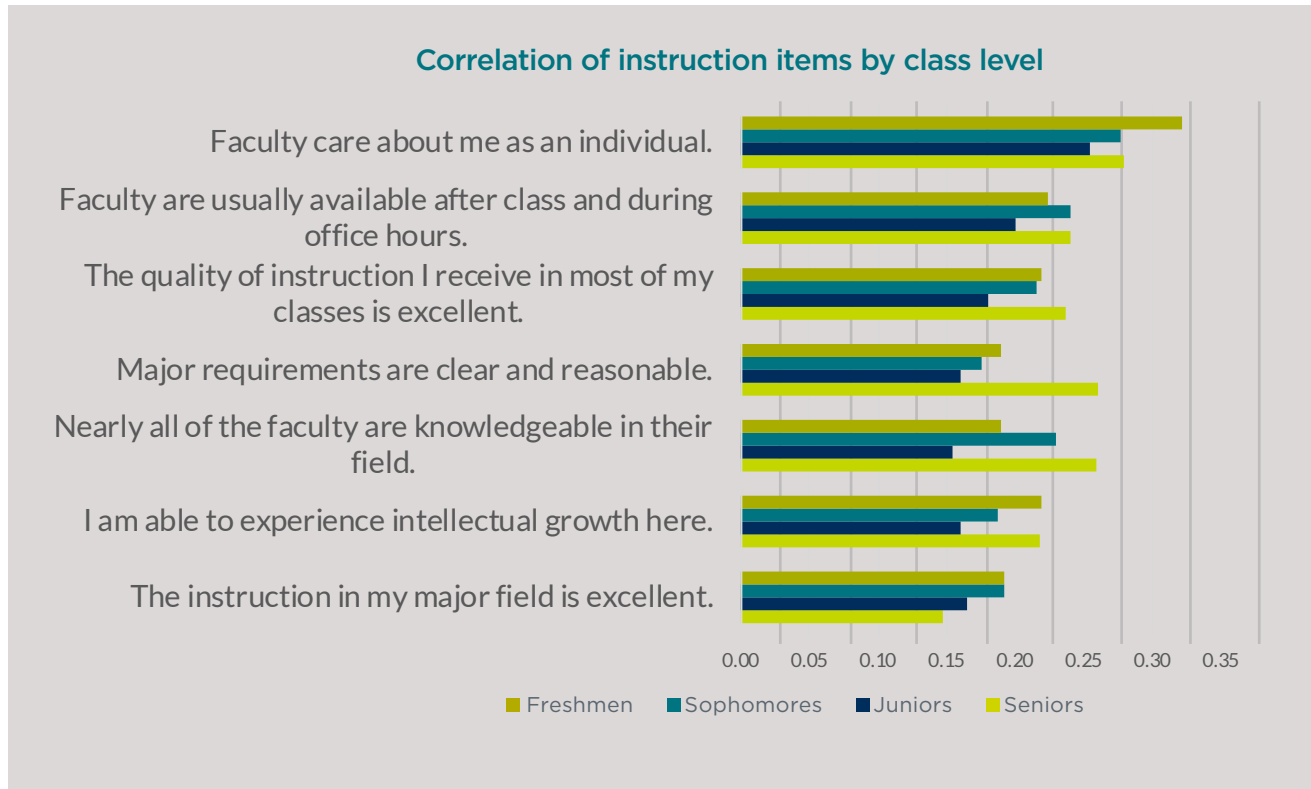
1. Student involvement becomes increasingly influential as students progress from freshman to senior year.

Figure 5



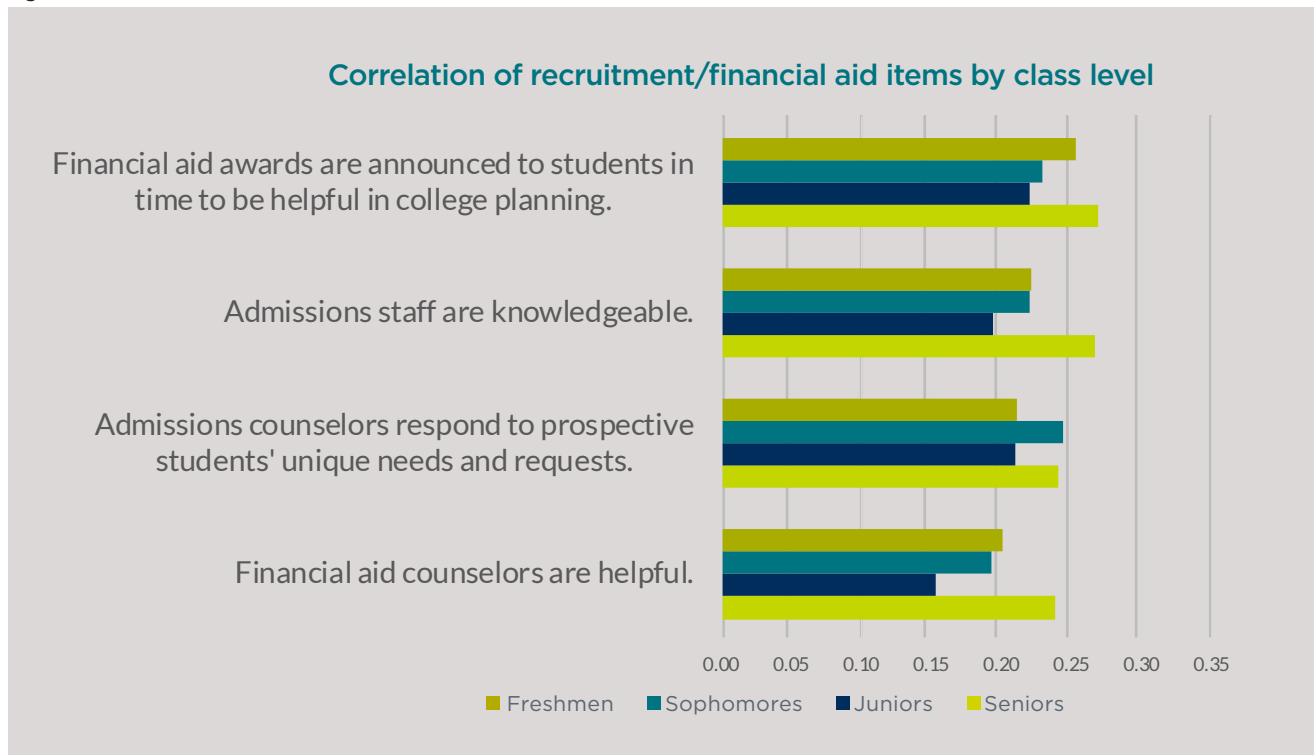
2. Individual attention from faculty is most influential during a student’s freshman year.

Figure 6



3. Perceptions of admissions and financial aid staff influence giving rates, especially in the senior year. It appears that as students come to the culmination of their education, they reflect on how the institution was presented to them as prospective students. The more satisfied that upperclass students are with the way their college or university was presented before they enrolled, the more likely they are to support the institution as alumni.

Figure 7



Strategies to improve student satisfaction and future alumni giving

Enrollment management

- Emphasize to your admissions counselors the importance of the relationships they are building and how those positive connections can have long lasting impacts.
- Establish smooth financial aid processes with a customer-service focus in order to best to retain students and also to set the stage for future giving.
- Communicate with prospective students and their families about the ongoing commitment of the college's alumni to financially contribute to the institution and how new students are joining that legacy.
- Build campus loyalty with your student admissions team—tour guides, phone team, and overnight hosts—to lay the groundwork for future commitment to the institution.

Institutional advancement

- Introduce students to the history and traditions of the institution, which will help them to increase their connection and knowledge.
- Connect students with alumni during homecoming and reunions as student hosts. Encourage students to look for opportunities to network through these interactions.
- Train student phonathon callers to be ambassadors of college pride. Help them to learn about all facets of campus life and connect their role to the big picture of the success of the college.
- Create activities for students to learn about philanthropy on campus, such as tag days and thank you note writing, which encourage them to thank and recognize the donors who have made their experience possible.
- Make campus crowdfunding campaigns a learning experience that connects student project leaders with alumni, faculty, staff, and peers. This allows them to see the fundraising process and gain appreciation for the generosity of donors.
- Build a student giving program to begin a habit of giving, and follow that with recognition for those who give annually in the first five years after graduation.
- Invite alumni back to campus to talk with students about their educational and career paths and why they think it is important to maintain a relationship with the college after graduation.

Academic affairs

- Remind faculty of the value of connecting with students outside of the classroom.
- Recognize faculty members who are creative in their approaches for expanding learning opportunities.
- Encourage faculty to invite students to their homes for meals, or have faculty meet with students in residence halls or the student center to further build relationships.
- Track student satisfaction by major/program/department to identify areas that may need further improvement.

Student affairs

- Encourage students to get involved with the college in the areas that they are passionate about and give them opportunities to join clubs and organizations through annual fairs and sign-up days.
- Promote campus pride through various year-long activities and communication campaigns.
- Use social media and posters on campus to keep the campus community aware of activities, organizations, and positive messages from fellow students.
- Introduce students to campus traditions, inviting them to take part in the community and to build awareness of opportunities on campus.
- Commit to regularly assessing student satisfaction and to creating a culture of continuous quality improvement so students know you care about their experience.

Next steps

Ruffalo Noel Levitz will continue to explore the connection between student satisfaction and alumni giving with a future study on individual student satisfaction and the graduates' willingness to contribute financially as well as to engage with the college as alumni. The focus of this study will be on activity within the first 10 years of graduation. If you have administered the Student Satisfaction Inventory between 2004 and 2014 and are interested in participating in this study, please contact Ruffalo Noel Levitz at ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com.

About the authors

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Questions about this paper?

Please email ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com. We can discuss the findings, as well as ways you can assess your current students and engage your alumni.

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How to cite this report:

Bryant, J., Bodfish, S., & Stever, D. (2015).

The correlation between college student satisfaction and alumni giving. Cedar Rapids: Ruffalo Noel Levitz.



About the survey instrument

For more information and to see samples of the instrument used in this report, the Student Satisfaction Inventory, please visit www.RuffaloNL.com/SSI.