



# 2020 National Young Alumni Survey

A study of young alumni philanthropy based on 40,000 graduates from 36 institutions

Sponsored by the Schuler Education Foundation



FUNDRAISING



## FOREWORD

### Jason Patenaude, Executive Director, Schuler Education Foundation

The Schuler Education Foundation believes in the value of a liberal arts education. We are committed to preserving this uniquely American tradition and ensuring that high-achieving, underrepresented students can have access to a top-tier college.

Supporting research on young alumni giving serves both of the Foundation's priorities. America's colleges and universities need philanthropic support to maintain their long-term financial strength, and underrepresented, low-income students need the financial aid generated by this support in order to have access to college.

This report spurs an important rethinking of the philanthropic interest and capacity of younger alumni. Too frequently this generation is dismissed as uninterested, unable, or unwilling to provide philanthropic support. Nothing could be further from the truth.



Young alumni are eager and able to provide both volunteer and financial support, but mainly to causes and organizations that can clearly communicate the impact that their support will generate.

As this research shows, young alumni are eager and able to provide both volunteer and financial support, but mainly to causes and organizations that can clearly communicate the impact that their support will generate. In other words, young alumni are not disengaged, but rather discerning, investing their time and their capital in the causes that earn their support.

While the smaller gifts to the annual fund that young alumni typically contribute don't seem to materially matter now, the vast majority of major donors start as more modest young alumni donors, first participating in the key years after graduation. Early investment will deliver long-term gains.

We hope that the survey findings lead colleges and universities to appreciate the value of engaging their young alumni, as well as appreciate the fact that they need to do things differently to engage this generation. Providing clear benefits will succeed where generic requests for support do not; citing specific programs, initiatives, and populations their gifts will impact will generate engagement, where standard annual fund appeals have not.

Opportunities exist, but only for the institutions willing to engage with young alumni on the terms they demand and deserve.

## INTRODUCTION: THE FUTURE OF PHILANTHROPY LIES IN YOUNG ALUMNI GIVING

**Dr. Sumit Nijhawan, President and CEO, RNL**

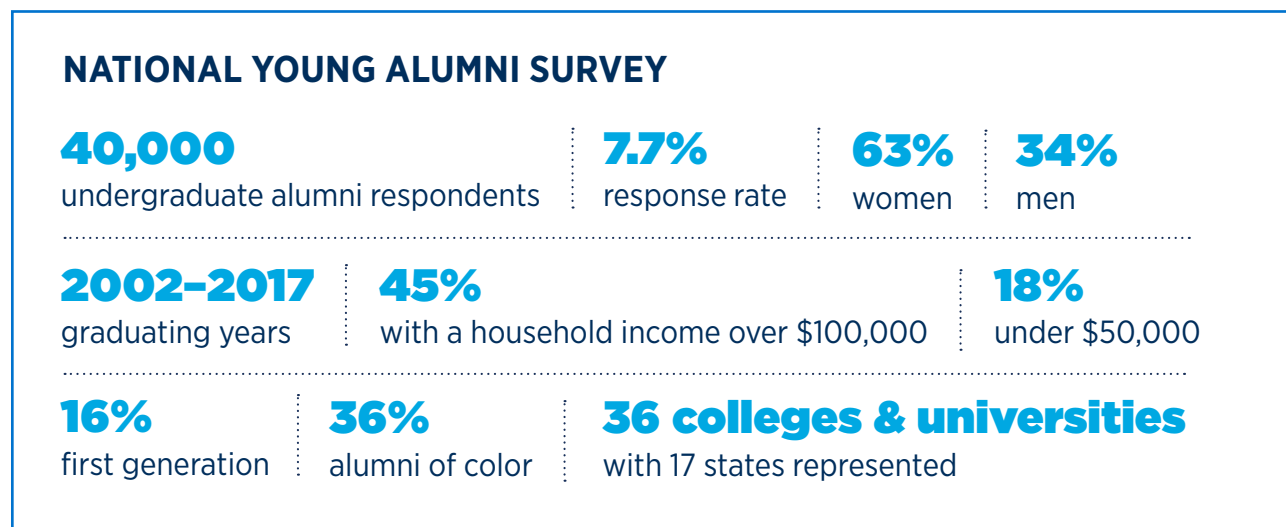
Young alumni account for more than 30 percent of the current alumni base in higher education, yet less than 10 percent of surveyed institutions indicate they’re a top priority.<sup>1</sup> Ignoring this generation doesn’t help build loyalty, long-term relationships, or a sustainable pipeline of donors, all of which are vital to the future of alumni giving. Instead, institutions must increase investment in young alumni to ensure their long-term success.

We’ve seen a steep decline in alumni giving over the past two decades, with a rate of less than 9 percent last year<sup>2</sup> and typically about half that rate among recent graduates. The decline doesn’t mean young alumni are not philanthropic. In fact, the opposite is true. **More than 60 percent of young alumni have reported giving to charities<sup>3</sup> and this report suggests the number could be as high as 76 percent.**

So if they’re charitable, how do we inspire more young alumni to give back their alma maters? This question prompted the Schuler Education Foundation to bring together a group of pilot colleges to collaborate with each other and grow their base of young alumni donors. As part of the Schuler Initiative, the Foundation commissioned RNL to field a survey focused on capturing direct feedback from this generation.

We invited young alumni to share insights about their volunteer and philanthropic activity, communication preferences, and connectedness. **To our knowledge, this is the largest national study of its kind with 40,000 survey respondents from 36 institutions across the country.**

For survey methodology, see page 10.



<sup>1</sup>Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2019). *Advancement leaders speak 2019: Annual giving best practices*. Available at: <https://www.ruffalonl.com/papers-research-higher-education-fundraising/advancement-leaders-speak-2019-annual-giving-best-practices/>

<sup>2</sup>Allenby, D. (2014, October). *Class exodus*. *Case Currents*. Available at: [https://annualgiving.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Class-Exodus\\_Currents\\_October-2014.pdf](https://annualgiving.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Class-Exodus_Currents_October-2014.pdf)

<sup>3</sup>Blackbaud Institute (2018). *The next generation of american giving*.

## WHAT DID WE LEARN ABOUT YOUNG ALUMNI PHILANTHROPY?



**IT'S A MYTH THAT MILLENNIALS ARE NOT PHILANTHROPIC.** Young alumni frequently volunteer and donate (and many give more than “token” gift amounts).

**YOUNG ALUMNI ARE FOCUSED ON MISSION AND IMPACT.** Purpose-driven campaigns that get specific about impact are much more likely to resonate. General “annual fund” appeals fall flat.

**STUDENT SATISFACTION AND CURRENT CONNECTIVITY MATTER.** Young alumni with strong connectivity were 4x more likely to donate to their alma maters when compared to those who do not feel connected at all, yet only one in five survey respondents report feeling very connected. Focusing on meaningful engagement activities (e.g. local alumni chapters, shared identity groups, informal regional events, and mentorship programs) should pay off.

**POTENTIAL PIPELINE PROBLEM.** Higher education is flagged as a top current giving priority, but ranks much lower as young alumni consider future giving—environmental and social justice top the list of aspirational giving priorities.

### Young alumni volunteer and donate ... and do so regularly

Our findings confirm that recent graduates are an engaged generation. Eighty-seven percent volunteer or make financial donations to a cause or organization. Of those 87 percent, 76 percent make charitable donations, while 58 percent volunteer.

Not only do the majority volunteer and/or donate, they do so regularly. Of those who volunteer and donate, 59 percent of donors volunteer more than once a month, whereas 39 percent donate more than once a month. Of those who donate, 64 percent have reported donating to their alma mater. This is supported by donor data at the institutions, which indicate 58 percent of the survey respondents have donated. That number is quite a bit smaller for volunteering with their alma mater, as only 16 percent reported volunteering.

We should celebrate that more than three-fourths of survey participants report making financial contributions and more than half volunteer. As we consider reversing a trend of declining alumni giving rates, this shows great opportunity.

## Young alumni can make significant gifts when inspired to do so

Some may be quick to assume young alumni only make smaller gifts. However, one in four who donated reported making donations of \$1,000 or more in 2018.

### TOTAL AMOUNT GIVEN TO ANY ORGANIZATION OR CAUSE IN 2018



## How does personal student debt influence giving?

While student debt is a consideration when deciding to make a gift, it is not a constraint to giving. Although a majority of respondents reported not feeling burdened by personal student debt (61 percent), it was still a factor in whether alumni decided to contribute.

### IS STUDENT LOAN DEBT A FACTOR IN WHETHER YOUNG ALUMNI DONATE?



Student loan debt was an important factor in the donation decision for:

Non-donors **68%** | First-generation alumni **58%** | Alumni of color **51%**

## What drives alumni passion?

Respondents who indicated they volunteer and/or donate were asked what types of organizations or causes they *currently support* as well as those they *would aspire to support*.

Higher education topped the list for current giving (and by a notable margin), but when asked about the causes they would like to support, young alumni indicated more passion for the environment, social justice, and community development. Institutions need to be more thoughtful about connecting the accomplishments of faculty, students, and alumni to these areas of passion. If colleges and universities fail to do so, it is unlikely alumni giving rates will improve.



### TOP 5 VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES

CURRENTLY VOLUNTEER FOR THESE CAUSES/ORGANIZATIONS		
	K-12 education	35%
	Focused on children or teens	25%
	Religious/faith-based	24%
	Community development	23%
	Social justice	23%

WOULD LIKE TO VOLUNTEER FOR THESE CAUSES/ORGANIZATIONS <sup>4</sup>		
	Environmental	48%
	K-12 education	45%
	Social justice	45%
	Community development	43%
	Women-focused	42%

### TOP 5 RECIPIENTS OF DONATIONS

HAVE DONATED TO THESE CAUSES/ORGANIZATIONS		
	Higher education	37%
	Social justice	32%
	Political-	30%
	Health care	29%
	Women-focused	26%

WOULD LIKE TO DONATE TO THESE CAUSES/ORGANIZATIONS		
	Environmental	56%
	Social justice	53%
	Community development	51%
	Women-focused	51%
	K-12 education	49%

What would motivate the small but important group of respondents who don't currently volunteer or donate to do so in the future? Alumni cited two top reasons: the direct *impact* of the cause on their family, friends, or themselves (44 percent), and if the cause clearly showed the *impact* of their gift (42 percent).

## Young alumni are motivated by impact; purpose-driven asks are critical

The majority of respondents indicated that mission and evidence of impact are “very important” factors when considering whether to donate or volunteer. Despite this, barely one in ten young alumni strongly agreed that their contribution to their alma mater makes a difference. Moreover, about one-third reported feeling “neutral” about the impact of their giving; feeling “neutral” or apathetic is unlikely to inspire action.

<sup>4</sup>The top aspirational donation priority varied some by demographics. First-generation alumni indicated their top cause was community development; social justice was a top priority for alumni of color.

Traditional annual fund appeals for vague causes aren't working. Interest in donating to an institution's annual fund is low—27 percent among donors and only 6 percent among non-donors. What can colleges and universities do to better engage young alumni about donating to their alma mater?

Leaders in the nonprofit space have been working to build impact-driven communications that illustrate compelling causes. Advancement professionals within higher education can learn from these organizations, highlighting giving opportunities anchored on specificity and tangible impact. In particular, the survey indicates a strong and universal interest in financial aid, specific departments or majors, first-generation, and mental health initiatives.

When considering how we engage this generation of alumni, there is little risk in focusing on these areas. Indeed, all or most of these categories are already likely key uses of annual fund revenue. Clearly connecting a donation to these areas of investment can only increase participation and interest.

### TOP AREAS OF INTEREST FOR YOUNG ALUMNI

AREA FOR DONATION	DONOR SINCE GRADUATION	NON-DONOR
Scholarship and financial aid budget <sup>5</sup>	66%	54%
Specific department or major	45%	52%
Initiatives to assist first-generation students	44%	37%
Mental health services	43%	48%
Initiatives that build an inclusive campus environment	37%	28%
Programming that supports sustainability/environment	33%	31%
Specific student club/organization	28%	29%
Institution's annual fund	27%	6%

### Satisfaction and connection matter

Perceived satisfaction as a student and current connectedness emerged as important indicators of giving. Almost two-thirds of respondents (64 percent) reported high satisfaction with their student experience. Of those who reported high satisfaction, 72 percent donated to their alma mater. This donation rate drops to 56 percent for those who reported being somewhat satisfied. These findings support earlier RNL research focused on the relationship between student satisfaction and alumni giving.<sup>6</sup>

A sense of connectedness is a core indicator in giving, as 82 percent of those who report feeling very connected also report donating, but only one in five alumni said they felt very connected.

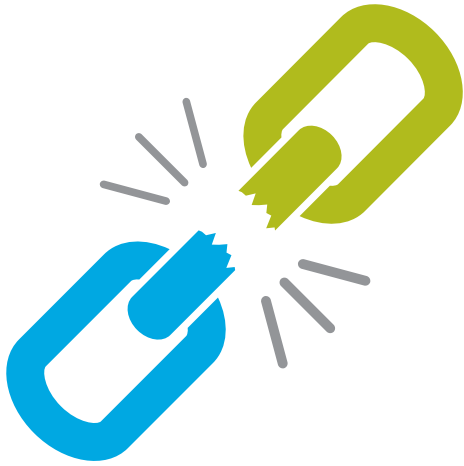
<sup>5</sup>Scholarship and financial aid budget was the top area for young alumni regardless of donation status or demographic.

<sup>6</sup>Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2015). *The correlation between college student satisfaction and alumni giving*. Available at: [https://learn.ruffalonl.com/WEB2015SatisfactionAlumniGivingReport\\_LandingPage.html](https://learn.ruffalonl.com/WEB2015SatisfactionAlumniGivingReport_LandingPage.html)

## IMPORTANT TO CLOSE THE “CONNECTED” GAP

**82%**

of those who give feel very connected to their alma mater



However, only 1 in 5 young alumni report feeling very connected.

**21%**

very connected (slightly lower for first-generation alumni; 18% feel very connected)

**52%**

somewhat connected

**11%**

neutral

**14%**

not very connected

**3%**

not connected at all

## Communicating in an age of connectivity

**Young alumni are social.** More than 88 percent of those who volunteered and 52 percent of those who donated to any organization shared their activity with others—primarily to spread information about the organization, rally additional support, and inspire others. The majority of those who share do so via word of mouth, followed by Facebook, confirming the value of peer-to-peer outreach and empowering social ambassadors and influencers.

**Adopting a fresh approach is required.** In this digital age, relying solely on the same traditional tools and strategies won’t move the needle. The survey suggests young alumni prefer a combination of email, direct mail, social media, and text messaging. An omnichannel approach, leveraging technology that allows for greater personalization, needs to be the new norm for a generation with evolving communication expectations and sophisticated consumer or customer experiences.

## TOP CONTENT YOUNG ALUMNI ARE INTERESTED IN



Campus updates



General news and information



Updates on faculty they had while on campus



Impact of research at the institution



## CONCLUSION

The survey confirms, without any doubt, that young alumni are an engaged generation. However, the decline in giving rates will continue unless we better meet young alumni where they are today. Resting on the tactics used for the last 20 years won't be enough to build loyalty and strengthen connectedness moving forward.

Young alumni indicate they're inspired to give when it matters. Colleges and universities need to better position unrestricted annual funds, not by abandoning that important need for most campuses, but by embracing the opportunity to market differently the funds that often support scholarships and financial aid. Non-donors in particular appear to be focused on effectiveness, so explicitly highlighting issues of importance to this audience and clearly stating the value of the gift is key to improving donor acquisition.

Our research reveals a high correlation between satisfaction, connectedness, and giving. Efforts to enhance the student experience and nurture relationships beyond graduation will set the course for more sustainable philanthropy. The survey also confirms that young alumni are social and will spread the word when they're passionate about a cause or project. This generation has potential to expand reach, using new channels and technology to open doors for meaningful peer-to-peer interaction, regardless of where alumni find themselves in the world.

RNL is honored to partner with the Schuler Education Foundation in publishing this research as we work to better understand young alumni engagement and giving. It has been especially powerful to hear from the 40,000 alumni who shared their feedback—we are grateful for their participation.





## METHODOLOGY

In the fall of 2019 more than 518,000 alumni (graduates between 2001-17) representing 36 institutions were invited to participate in a 10-15 minute online survey. With 40,000 respondents, individual institutional response rates varied from 2 to 22 percent with an average response rate of 7.7 percent.

Please note: Multiple participants reached out to express that the terms “young” and “alumni” (the masculine plural of the noun) did not resonate. Our intention is to be inclusive and represent all voices, regardless of identification. Throughout the paper the phrase “young alumni” is used for consistency to align with the language respondents were exposed to.

### Special thank you to the 36 participating institutions

Bates College	Haverford College	The College of the Holy Cross
Bowdoin College	Hobart and William Smith Colleges	Tufts University
Bryn Mawr College	Illinois State University	Union College
California Polytechnic State University	Kenyon College	University of Maryland, Baltimore County
Carleton College	Louisiana Tech University	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Carnegie Mellon University	Lycoming College	University of Northern Iowa
Case Western Reserve University	Macalester College	University of San Francisco
Coe College	Middlebury College	Washington University in St. Louis
Davidson College	Mount Holyoke College	Wellesley College
Denison University	North Dakota State University	United States Military Academy West Point
Florida Atlantic University	Santa Clara University	Western Colorado University
Fordham University	St. Olaf College	Williams College



To receive notices of this and other research from RNL, visit [RuffaloNL.com/Subscribe](https://RuffaloNL.com/Subscribe)

## MORE RESEARCH TO COME FROM THIS STUDY

Additional research reports are forthcoming and will focus on variations of subpopulations such as first-generation alumni and alumni of color, women, and institutional characteristics including school type and size.

## ABOUT THE SURVEY SPONSORS



### About RNL

RNL is the leading provider of higher education enrollment, student success, and fundraising solutions. The firm serves more than 1,900 colleges and universities through data-driven solutions focused on the entire lifecycle of enrollment and fundraising, assuring students find the right program, graduate on time, secure their first job in their chosen field, and give back to support the next generation. With a deep knowledge of the industry, RNL provides institutions the ability to scale their efforts by tapping into a community of support and resources.

Visit [RuffaloNL.com](http://RuffaloNL.com)



### About the Schuler Education Foundation

The Schuler Education Foundation seeks to further the success of individuals and communities by investing in high-achieving underrepresented students and top-tier liberal arts colleges. The Schuler Education Foundation currently supports the Schuler Scholar Program and the Schuler Initiative.

Visit [SchulerEducationFoundation.org](http://SchulerEducationFoundation.org)

## ASK FOR A DONOR ENGAGEMENT ASSESSMENT FROM RNL

RNL partners with hundreds of colleges and universities every year. We can help you create greater connections with your young alumni through:

- Market research
- Giving Day optimization
- Persona profiles
- Program assessment designed to leave your team with actionable recommendations



Request your assessment now:  
[RuffaloNL.com/YoungAlumni](http://RuffaloNL.com/YoungAlumni)



Visit [RuffaloNL.com/Fundraising](http://RuffaloNL.com/Fundraising)  
Email [ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com](mailto:ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com)  
Call **800.876.1117**

### How to cite this report

Ruffalo Noel Levitz & The Schuler Education Foundation (2020). *2020 national young alumni survey*. Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Ruffalo Noel Levitz. Retrieved from [RuffaloNL.com/Schuler](http://RuffaloNL.com/Schuler).

All material in this document is copyright © 2020 by Ruffalo Noel Levitz. Permission is required to redistribute information from Ruffalo Noel Levitz either in print or electronically.

FEBRUARY 2020