RNL®

2024 National Alumni Survey

Insights from more than 20,000 alumni on giving preferences and connection.

A Generational Alumni Giving Crisis

Higher education is heading toward a donor cliff created by generational shifts in student enrollment and alumni engagement

Foreword

By Howard Heevner

Annual giving professional for over 25 years

I was a first-generation college graduate when I began my career in higher education fundraising more than 25 years ago. No one in my family ever had a professional career, and we certainly weren't in any position to be philanthropists. We were grateful for every small grace we found.

When I went to college, I did not understand that I was forming a lifelong relationship with an institution, no matter my geographic location, relationship status, or employer. My alma mater will always hold a place in my heart. Even when I don't agree with the decisions or choices made by leadership, I still care deeply about the well-being of my college community.

Here is the unfortunate truth—the feeling isn't mutual. At least that's the conclusion I reach if I only pay attention to how they reciprocate my fond feelings. Early in my career I was focused on learning how to be a professional and how to build a career, while striving to achieve the transformation promised to me because of my education. I had no time or inclination to search the university's website for ways to continue engaging with my alma mater as an alumnus.

I was an annual donor of a nominal amount, which meant the ways I was invited to engage or give were generic and non-specific to me. I was so busy that I did not have time to leverage the very network that was supposedly there to help me. Since those early career days, I have expressed my passions and navigated my way to support funds that speak to my personal interests at both of my alma maters. However, their fundraising systems are not built to acknowledge and integrate my choices.

"We have two major challenges as fundraisers: Our traditional engagement systems don't reflect who our alumni are today, and there is passive resistance to changing the systems to meet these changing alumni needs."

To be clear, my story is not about the humans who work at these specific institutions—how I wish it was. It would be a much simpler question to tackle if that were the case. If I had gone to a dozen different institutions, it would still be the same story, and according to the survey data included in this report, this story has been repeated millions of times with alumni.

We have two major challenges as fundraisers: Our traditional systems don't reflect who our alumni are today, and there is passive resistance to changing the systems to meet changing alumni needs. The dollar amounts for "annual donors" are too low, and the donor value viewed as too minimal by most advancement and institutional leaders. By necessity, these leaders think in terms of raising millions of dollars from "major" givers, which leaves them to invest minimally in innovation at lower donor levels.

I must admit, I have contributed to the system that has failed our alumni (and myself).

Throughout my career as a fundraiser, I have built systems that limit choice, force decision making, and push and pull alumni into giving where and when *I want*.

As we adapt to a rapidly evolving technology landscape, I am concerned that we will be importing the same errors and blind spots into new environments. Today, a donor must pass a certain bar of giving to be presented with choices that are reflective of what they are passionate about. We continue to limit donor choice based on the system we are in, the politics we face, or simply our unwillingness to change.

"We must get better at connecting with the rising generations—and right now. If we do not, when we expect them to become our lead donors, they will have other philanthropic priorities."

In recent years, I have come to some conclusions about the opportunities and costs of continuing our current models. I have ideas about the path forward, but they are by no means absolute. Our conditions have changed, and this is our opportunity to reevaluate the value proposition of our broad-based programs. We are losing an entire generation (and more to follow) of donors, which will negatively impact the donor pipeline of our campaigns for years to come. We must get better at connecting with the rising generations—and right now. If we do not, when we expect them to become our lead donors, they will have other philanthropic priorities.

Thanks to a partnership with the analytics and research team at Ruffalo Noel Levitz, and survey project led by fellow practitioner Sarah Kleeberger, we conducted a large-scale, multi-institutional alumni research study. This survey reveals that alumni across the nation are philanthropic but share similar sentiments about the failure of their alma maters to engage with them in ways that are meaningful and personal.

This is a widespread issue we see reflected in the steady decline of alumni donor counts across most institutions, and it calls for a reevaluation of how universities and colleges connect with alumni. It is time to recognize the individual interests and passions of alumni. I saw my own personal and professional experiences echoed in the sentiment of alumni across the country in these survey results. I imagine you will too.

As we review the survey results, I hope you will see more clearly the challenges we now face and the swift actions needed if we hope to change the advancement landscape from one of an impending donor cliff to one filled with exciting opportunities for new alumni engagement and stronger donor pipelines.

Introduction

By Sarah Kleeberger
Senior Consultant, RNL

Over the last eight decades, educational institutions have witnessed profound changes in the composition of college-bound and enrolled students. If you operate within higher education, it is tough to escape the topic of the impending cliff in traditional student enrollment.

With a steady decline in birth rates since the 2008 recession, the number of 18-year-olds has decreased by 15 percent. Beginning in 2025, enrollment is expected to shrink by an estimated 576,000 students over a span of four years (Grawe, 2018). This was a cause of major concern for higher education even before the second COVID cliff added more complexity and challenge.

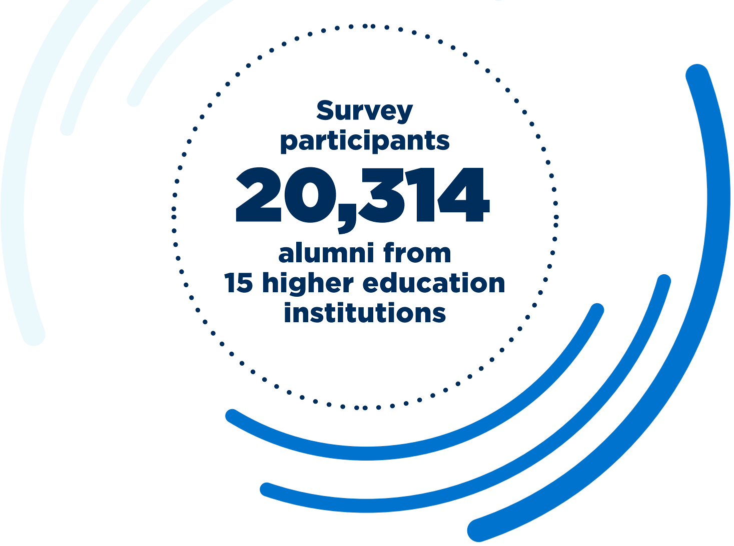
Given the impact of demographic shifts, economic cycles, and cultural factors, we find ourselves at a critical point. This transformation is often less acknowledged but equally reflected—and equally dramatic—within our alumni communities.

Alumni play a vital role in the long-term sustainability of our colleges and universities. They serve as volunteers, mentors, parents and grandparents of future students, business and community leaders, faculty, staff, and brand champions. Alumni donors also represent an important revenue stream. Yet the trend nationally has been a steady decline in alumni participation or a decline in the number of graduates annually supporting their alma maters with a financial donation.

While giving to higher education in total dollars remains strong, institutions are losing alumni donors at an alarming rate. **The 15 percent decline in college-bound students is matched to a 30 percent decline in alumni donor counts during the same period**. It is this different but related part of the "cliff crisis" that prompted our research project.

In collaboration with 15 institutions, we invited alumni to tell us about their volunteer activity, what inspires them to give, satisfaction with their alma mater, and their sense of current connection. We also asked about communication channel preferences and what is likely to motivate future engagement and giving. We have provided more information about survey methodology and respondents at the end of this report. The term "recent graduate" refers to alumni who received undergraduate degrees from 2013 through 2023.

What emerged as most notable? Broader demographic and generational shifts that reflect how alumni are changing—the ways they engage and adopt causes. We have highlighted seven insights drawn from the direct feedback of more than 20,000 survey participants.



Key Survey Findings

1. Alumni are philanthropic, but most are not giving to their alma maters.

More than two-thirds (68 percent) of survey respondents report making charitable donations in 2022 and 51 percent report volunteering their time. But of those who donated, only 27 percent report giving to their alma mater, and this drops to 13 percent among recent graduates. An even smaller subset (20 percent of alumni) rank their alma mater as a top philanthropic priority.

68%
make charitable gifts to any nonprofit

51%
volunteer with any nonprofit

20%
rank their alma mater as a top giving priority

Despite the steady decline in alumni giving participation, overall philanthropic contributions in the United States have been on an upward trajectory. Nearly $500 billion was given to charities in 2022 by individuals, bequests, foundations, and corporations. This reflects a slight dip from the two years prior when giving was especially strong as donors rallied to address needs during the pandemic, economic crisis, and in support of efforts to advance racial justice (The Giving Institute, 2023).

The record giving to nonprofit organizations in 2020 and 2021 confirms that individuals are inspired when presented with opportunities and projects that resonate personally—those that tie to what they care about. **More than half (54 percent) of alumni who report never donating to their alma maters are actively supporting other causes.**

Alumni are giving to their alma maters at lower rates than other charities. The contrasting trends should be a wake-up call and prompt higher education institutions to contemplate why they are being overlooked.

Unfortunately, rather than examining how alumni are engaged and invited to participate, institutional leaders often credit the drop in donor counts to a lack of appreciation or understanding by those who do not give. That approach does not help. Institutions that ask thoughtful questions, listen, and better connect the dots—matching up alumni passions with philanthropic opportunities—will be most successful in addressing the donor crisis.

2. Alumni are generous. Many are giving substantial amounts and giving frequently, but younger donors are choosing other causes.

When asked about their charitable giving last year (sum of all gifts made to any organization or institution), 54 percent of survey respondents indicated donating more than $1,000. Of that group, 40 percent reported donating to their alma mater. This rate varied: a notable 26 points higher at 66 percent among women and a notable 16 points lower at 24 percent among recent graduates.

Alumni also give regularly, with 48 percent reporting they donate to charitable organizations once per month or more. The majority give online or via check, but nearly one-third support charities through more complex vehicles such as a will or estate gift, property, stock, a Donor-Advised Fund (DAF), or family foundation.

The capacity is there, along with donor and tax-friendly giving vehicles. Donors are also approaching charitable giving more strategically—like investors who want to stay actively engaged with the causes they support. All of these positives represent opportunities for nonprofit organizations, but taking a closer look at the growing generational gap highlights a big challenge for colleges and universities.

Younger generations are not giving back at the same levels as older alumni. They are philanthropic, with three-quarters giving to some charity, but higher education has not attracted young donors (RNL & The Schuler Education Foundation, 2021).

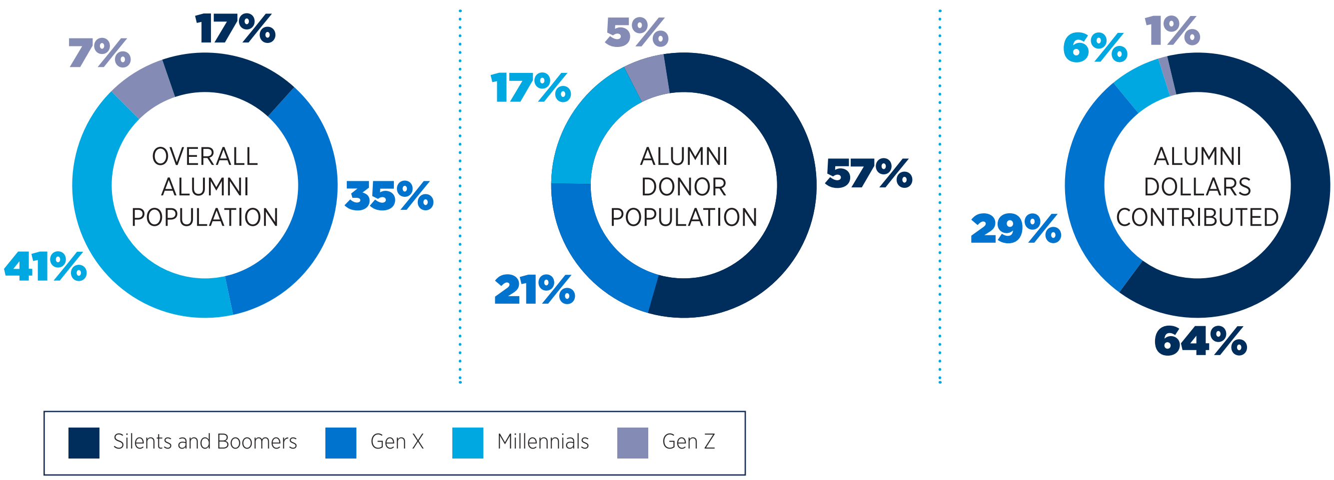
The 2023 Voluntary Support of Education survey (VSE) from the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) includes data on giving to educational institutions by graduation year and confirms this pattern. Across the institutions sharing this enhanced data, alumni who graduated more than 40 years ago represented 31 percent of alumni donors and contributed 59 percent of alumni dollars (CASE, 2024).

RNL has confirmed this trend in analysis of donor giving. In our RNL360 benchmark data (based on 6 million records), the Silent Generation (born 1928-45) and Baby Boomers (born 1946-64) represent an outsized share of donors and dollars relative to their shrinking position—on average 17 percent—of today's living alumni base. In contrast, Millennials (born 1981-96) and Gen Z (born 1997-2012) represent 48 percent of the overall base but gave 6 percent of alumni dollars in fiscal year 2022.

The imbalance does not bode well, especially since Millennial and Gen Z generations, along with 65 million Gen X Americans, will benefit from the tremendous wealth transfer already in motion. Millennials will be the richest generation in our country's history. Institutions cannot afford to lose future generations of philanthropists set to inherit the $84 trillion in assets that Boomers will pass along over the next two decades (Kelly, 2023).

Higher education faces an alumni giving denominator challenge

Millennials and Gen Z grads are a dominant (and growing) percentage of the alumni base but represent a disproportionately low slice of donors and alumni dollars contributed to colleges and universities. In contrast, Silents and Boomers represent an outsized portion—more than half—of donors and dollars, but a shrinking 17 percent of the overall alumni base. The confluence of these trends is concerning for institutions looking to build a healthy, sustainable pipeline of alumni support.



There is a sharp contrast in the 1950s, 1990s, and 2020+ alumni cohorts

Compare the demographics of undergraduates from the 1950s, characterized by predominantly White males unburdened by student loan debt. By the 1990s a shift is evident, with women now in the alumni majority and with diversity still limited. Fast forward to our contemporary landscape and alumni who received their undergraduate degrees in 2020 or after. We see a markedly different profile with more racial and ethnic diversity, a shift in educational experience (more online and hybrid learning), and a steep rise in the weight of student loan debt.

1950s

- **94% White**, 2% Hispanic, 2% African American, 1% Asian American
- **61% men**, 38% women
- **0% feel burdened by student debt**
- **96% in-person classes**

1990s

- 86% White, 4% Hispanic, 5% African American, 3% Asian American
- 49% men, **51% women**
- 6% feel burdened by student debt
- 88% in-person classes

2020+

- 62% White, **22% Hispanic, 8% African American, 7% Asian American**
- 36% men, **61% women**
- **38% feel burdened by student debt**
- 43% in-person classes, **43% hybrid, 14% online**

3. Recent graduates and alumni of color report feeling more burdened by student loans.

Student loan debt in the United States today totals $1.8 trillion. While debt accumulation rates are slowing, approximately 20 percent of American adults with undergraduate degrees and 24 percent of postgraduate degree holders report outstanding student debt (Hanson, 2023).

Alumni participating in our survey fell slightly below national averages, with 17 percent of undergraduates and 15 percent of postgrads reporting they currently carry student loans. Half of the survey responders did not take out loans, 31 percent have paid their loans, and 2 percent had their loans forgiven. The story around student debt is more nuanced when we unpack the numbers by generation, race, and gender.

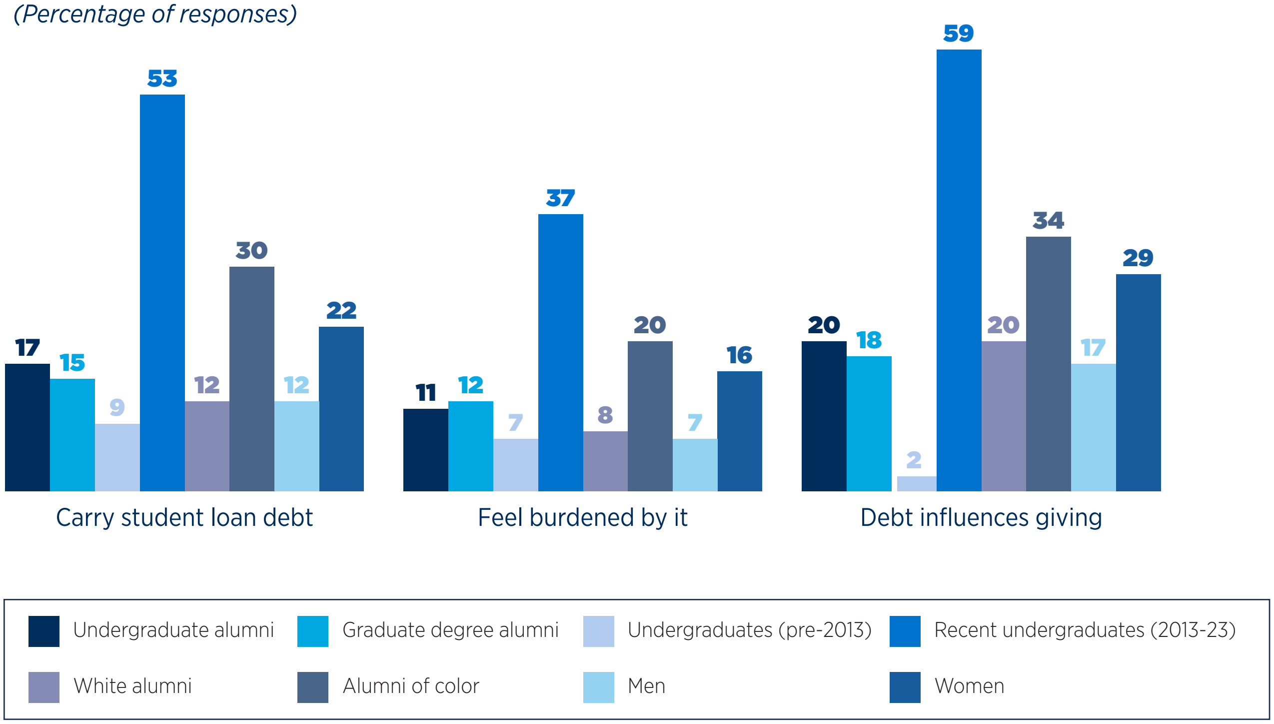
Recent undergraduate alumni report carrying significantly more student loan debt than older alumni—53 percent compared to 9 percent—and feel **5 times more burdened by it**. Alumni of color carry more debt than White alumni—30 percent compared to 12 percent—and feel **2.5 times more burdened by it**. Women responding to the survey carry more student loan debt than men—22 percent compared to 12 percent—**and feel twice as burdened by it**.

How does student loan debt influence charitable giving to institutions?

Debt is a defining factor for recent undergraduate alumni, with 59 percent ranking it as important in their decision to give—a big contrast to just 2 percent among older alumni. When deciding whether to donate to their alma mater, 34 percent of alumni of color rank debt as important (vs. 20 percent of White alumni) and 29 percent of women indicate debt influences their giving (vs. 17 percent of men).

Comparison of student debt by degree level, generation, race, and gender

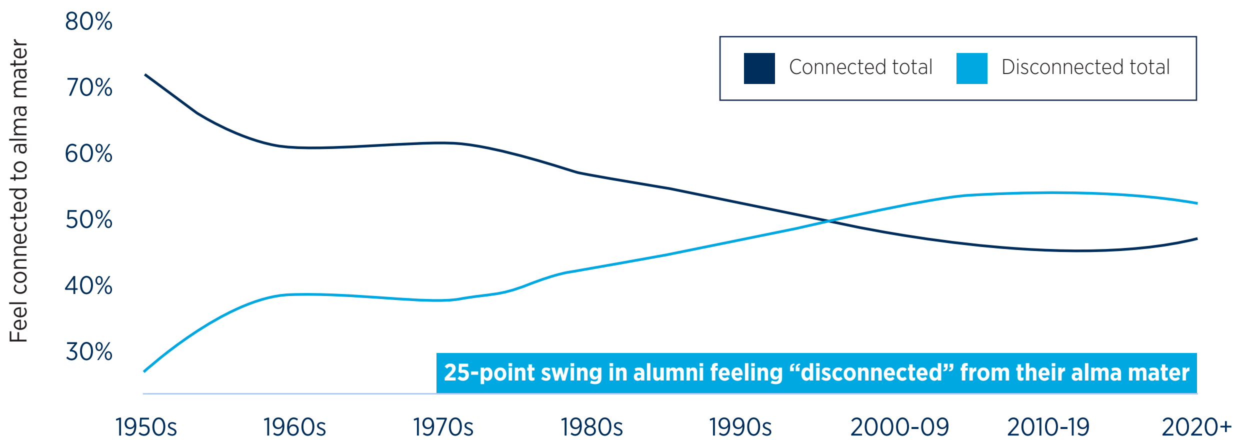
(Percentage of responses)



4. Alumni connection and satisfaction with their alma mater is on the decline.

Nearly three-quarters of alumni from the 1950s expressed a sense of current connection to their alma mater, but we see connection on the decline, with an inflection point after the 1990s when alumni report feeling more disconnected than connected. The gap grows, and for most recent undergraduate alumni, the "disconnected" total reaches 53 percent—a striking 25-point swing that spells trouble for institutions and alumni giving.

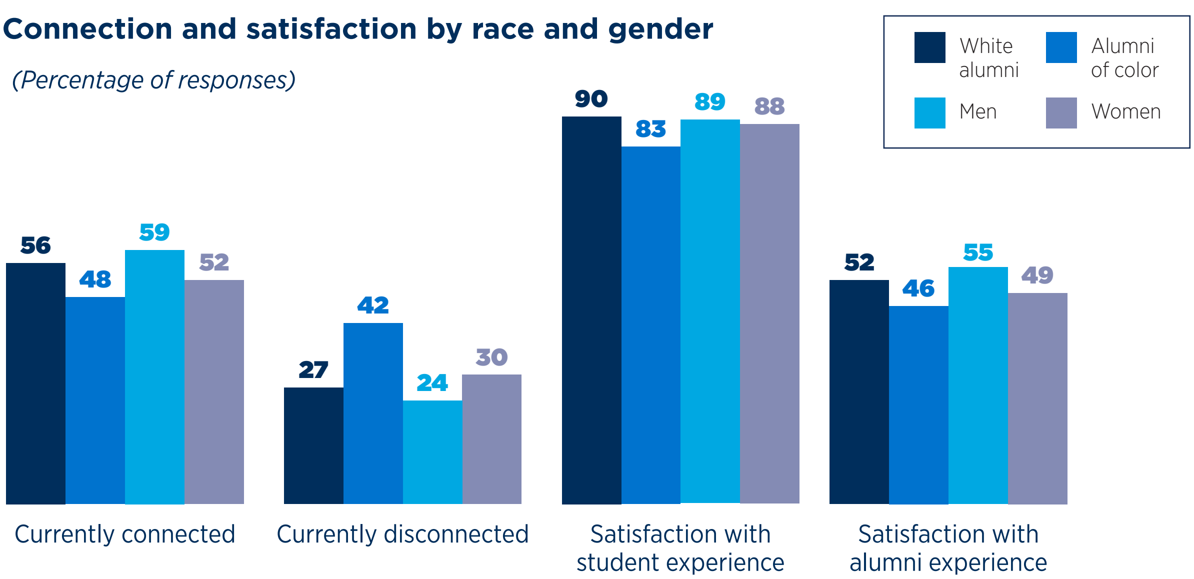
Alumni connection to alma mater by graduation decade.



The feeling of being disconnected is where we see one of the biggest variances in survey responses by race, with 42 percent of alumni of color feeling disconnected compared to 27 percent of White alumni. This trend requires attention especially as the diversity of student classes continues to grow.

Connection and satisfaction by race and gender

(Percentage of responses)



The survey results underscore a troubling trend of declining satisfaction and an increasing disconnect between alumni and their respective alma maters. Why does it matter? Because when alumni feel strong satisfaction and connection, giving typically follows.

5. There is a strong correlation between student satisfaction, current connection, and giving.

Alumni who report being “very satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied” with their student experience are 4 times more likely to have donated to their alma mater in the past year than their “neutral” counterparts and 5 times more likely than alumni who were “not very” or “not at all satisfied” with their student experience.

Further, alumni who indicate a sense of current connection are 23 times more likely to donate when compared to those who indicate feeling disconnected.

Connected alumni are 23x more likely to give

How can institutions build stronger satisfaction and connection?

A first step is to give more consideration to the contribution of time and talents (not just treasure). Charities that provide meaningful volunteer opportunities build bonds that can strengthen and enrich the donor relationship. Survey participants who report volunteering are most active with religious or faith-based institutions (45 percent), K-12 education (27 percent), social services organizations (27 percent), and higher education (20 percent).

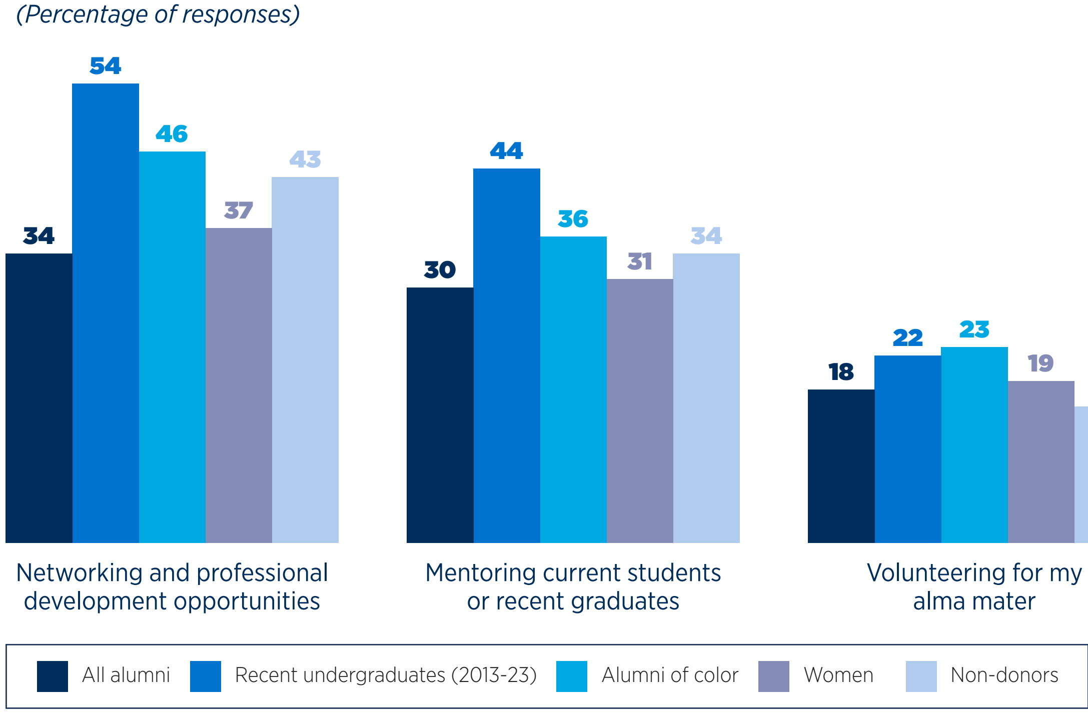
74% of donors making a gift of $10k+ also volunteer

Colleges and universities might not have the more obvious “lend a hand” activities that some charities do. However, higher education institutions can offer opportunities that tap into the creative talents and professional expertise of alumni, connect with their affinity for a particular student club or team, and utilize the social networks that keep classmates connected long after graduation.

Recent graduates, alumni of color, and non-donors (those who report never making a gift to their alma mater) are most interested in professional development and mentoring opportunities. Leaning into these areas and thinking beyond traditional volunteer roles could help create meaningful volunteer experiences that help individual alumni feel more connected, strengthen a sense of community more broadly, and lead to increased alumni giving.

Survey responders who volunteered last year were more likely to make a charitable gift than those who did not. And, while many factors influence giving amounts, 74 percent of alumni who gave between $10,000 and $250,000 also reported volunteer activity.

Activities that would make alumni more likely to engage with their alma maters

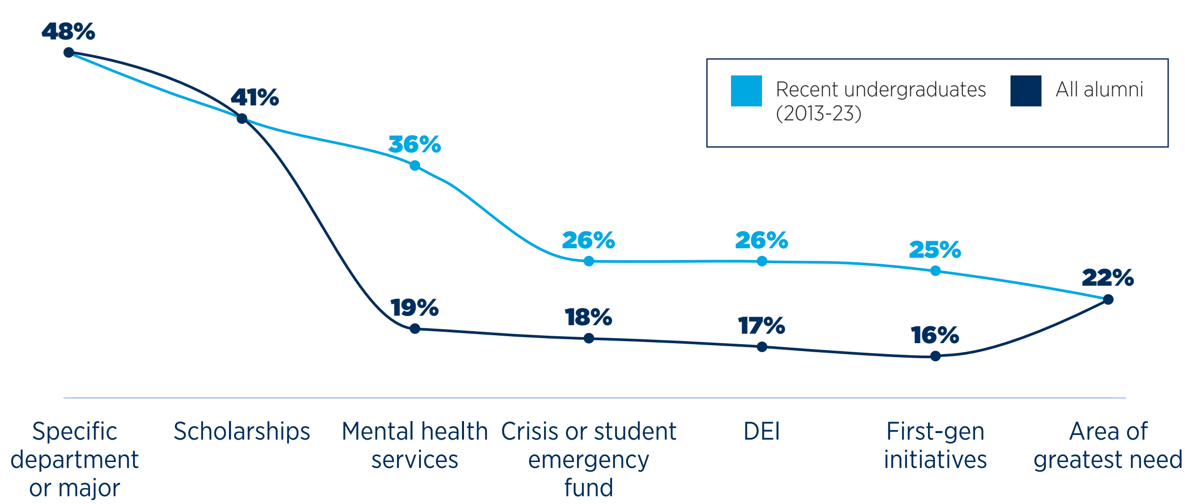


6. Younger generations are more inspired by purpose-driven campaigns than “area of greatest need” or the annual fund.

Appeals for specific academic departments and student scholarships resonate with alumni of all ages, but recent undergraduate alumni are more likely to get behind mental health initiatives, student emergency funds, DEI campaigns, and first-generation initiatives than their older counterparts.

What is not motivating for younger alumni? “Area of greatest need’ or the more generic annual fund. It ranks third for all alumni but lands near the bottom of the list for recent undergraduates.

Top areas alumni would be most likely to support in the future



7. Philanthropy is influenced by impact *and* passion.

When donors give, they want to understand the impact. When deciding to donate, 64 percent of alumni rate the ability of their alma mater to demonstrate how their gift is used as critical. As investors to the organization they are increasingly asking, *What's the return on my donation? What did it accomplish?*

Impact matters, but passion is even more important. Nearly eight of 10 (77 percent) of alumni donate because they care deeply about the cause—an emotional connection to people, an experience, or an issue drives them to act. This jumps to 81 percent for younger generations.

Passion is the piece often missing from institutional marketing and appeals. A pivot from the traditional "give back because it's the right thing to do" or loyalty framework to an emphasis on *both* impact and giving passion will likely inspire more alumni to engage as volunteers and donors.

77%
of alumni donate because they care deeply about the cause

How can you better understand and engage donors?

RNL's fundraising experts can help you identify which donors are more likely to give and create experiences that will engage them. Hundreds of campuses and nonprofit organizations partner with us each year for:

- Alumni and donor surveys
- RNL360 donor analysis
- Omnichannel outreach
- Giving days and cause-based crowdfunding
- Leadership giving and major giving

Ask for a complimentary consultation at RNL.com/Fundraising

Conclusion and Call to Action

By Howard Heevner

This survey has provided us with deeper data about the experiences and desires of alumni across all generations. We have been stymied by changes in our alumni populations and are unsure how to adapt our strategies to meet the changing needs of our constituents. It's time to take action.

We have continued to use institutional voices to send institutional messages asking alumni for support based on assumed high levels of trust. We seem to have missed that our ever-diversifying alumni populations have lived experiences that have led to low institutional trust. They are non-responsive to our traditional institutionalized messaging. Our reactions to this problem have been to shift our focus to other populations or attempt to "teach" them how to give. Neither of these strategies are working. It is time to change our messaging, but how?

"In this moment of great change in our industry, it is critical to take a step back from our daily operations and ask ourselves, what is our purpose?"

It is time for us to learn to listen better and reflect to these populations our understanding of their priorities and needs. This issue gained urgency as Millennials have become the majority cohort of our living alumni base. Our inaction is amplifying the same issues with the rising Gen Z generation. We have turned these generations off by continuing to act as if they need to meet us where we are instead of us meeting them at their point of greatest engagement, passion, and excitement. This survey shows us they have embraced other causes.

Non-alumni audiences will not solve this fundamental issue. As the children of Millennials begin school, we will have the same problem. If we are not listening and reflecting what we heard back to alumni—or any other potential donor—we will continue to be stuck. Our donor base will not grow.

It is time to chart new paths to engage alumni. It is time for this industry to reframe our relationship with every level of donor. If we continue to push alumni who graduated in the last 20 years to make gifts through our traditional, institutionalized annual fund approach, our challenges will only get worse.

Key steps to transform donor outreach to meet our goals while aligning with the meaning and purpose of alumni givers include:

- Instead of focusing on how we teach alumni to give, let's listen to them in order to learn what will make them feel that we are a viable home for their philanthropic support.
- Instead of touting institutional loyalty to inspire financial support, let's build relationships that provide mutual value to both the individual and the institution.
- Let's find new ways to support donor choice and self-determination in giving at all levels. We will attract a broader and more diverse set of donors.
- It is time to redefine philanthropy so that it is broader and more inclusive, recognizing gifts of service similarly to financial gifts.
- We must do the work to learn about the cultural context of philanthropy for those of differing backgrounds, including diversity in gender, race, ethnicity, and generation.

In this moment of great change in our industry, it is critical to take a step back from our daily operations and ask ourselves: **What is our purpose**? What is the value we add to the institution, the advancement strategy, and to our donors and alumni?

You will see these points reinforced and highlighted based on the direct alumni feedback we collected. I hope you will use this as a moment to reflect on what you can learn from your own alumni and find new ways to listen more closely to learn what they need to feel connected and engaged.

The opportunity to reflect on this data has been a privilege. These trends raise as many questions as answers, and we offer these observations as a starting point for your own reflections. I challenge all of us to ask more questions and be willing to rethink our purpose and strategies.

There are no quick fixes, but if we act with intention, take time to listen, reflect, pilot, and pivot, we will avoid the cliff we currently face and instead begin building a new landscape that will engage more alumni and donors for generations to come.

About the Authors

Howard Heevner has been a fundraising leader for over two decades, serving in key giving roles at institutions including the University of Iowa, Penn State, The University of Michigan, DePaul University, and the University of California, Santa Cruz. He has also worked with numerous institutions as an independent consultant, providing data-driven benchmarking and strategy guidance. A respected thought leader, he has chaired CASE conferences and presents regularly. Howard currently serves as executive director of annual programs at the University of California, Berkeley, a leadership role he has held since 2019.

Sarah Kleeberger has spent 25 years focused on philanthropy and the nonprofit sector. She has served as a practitioner and frontline fundraiser, and during her tenure with RNL has supported hundreds of institutions and organizations across the country. Sarah was lead consultant for the recent Young Alumni Initiative funded by The Schuler Education Foundation, working closely with Bates College, Carleton College, Middlebury College, Wellesley College, and Williams College over the course of the three-year project. Sarah currently delivers consulting and analytics services at RNL, with a commitment to providing actionable data and insights to client partners.

About the Survey and Respondents

- The national survey was launched in three waves beginning October 2023, with each wave in field for ≈14 days). Total base size was 1,250,956 with 20,314 responses for a 2 percent response rate. All questions were optional, resulting in variable denominators.
- Assumptions about age and generation were made based on undergraduate class year.
- The term “recent graduate” refers to alumni who received undergraduate degrees from 2013 through 2023.
- A large portion of survey responders self-identified as White (80 percent). A smaller portion (20 percent) self-identified as belonging to races/ethnicities including Black or African American (6 percent), Hispanic or Latino (6 percent), Asian (4 percent), biracial or multiracial (2 percent), Native American or Alaskan Native (1 percent), Middle Eastern or North African (<1 percent), Native Hawaiian, Samoan, Chamorro, or other Pacific Islander (<1 percent).
- Because of the sample size, we grouped responses from underrepresented backgrounds in this report. However, we acknowledge the need to review results by each race and ethnicity.
- Fifty percent of survey responders self-identified as women; 48 percent as men, 2 percent preferred to self-describe, <1 percent transgender woman, <1 percent transgender man, and <1 percent nonbinary.

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About RNL

RNL (Ruffalo Noel Levitz) is the leading provider of solutions for higher education and nonprofit fundraising, traditional college enrollment, graduate and online enrollment, and college student success. The firm serves more than 1,500 institutions through data-driven solutions focused on helping them meet their donor engagement and enrollment goals, guide more students toward completing their degrees, and increase giving back to those institutions. With a deep knowledge of the industry and a large roster of experienced experts, RNL provides institutions the ability to scale their efforts by tapping into a community of support and resources.

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