



# 2025 National Alumni Survey

Insights from more than 50,000 alumni on giving preferences and connection



# Foreword



**By Howard Heevner**

**Annual Giving Professional for more than 25 years**

Recently, I have been reflecting on my start in fundraising when I was a substitute student caller at the University of Iowa—not a role you find anymore. As a “sub,” I had to convince other students to take the day off in order to work. I quickly found I truly loved the work—the chance to create opportunities for others. The chance to use my abilities for something more than personal enrichment spoke to me and sparked decades of passion. In those days, we talked about “dialing for dollars” and “smiling and dialing.” Those experiences were formative to my understanding of fundraising. We were mostly tactical in our approach, cycling through records to reach the next prospect as quickly as possible so we could convince them to give. It was the start of giving relationships with minimal emphasis on the relationship. We focused on efficiency and effectiveness. The more people you reached, the better you were—the goal was to move as quickly as possible. It was a necessity due to the medium, and I found a lot of success with that mentality through the years of my career, but there was a cost.

It’s become clear that I was learning the wrong lesson, learning to be in a volume business, which is still the basis of many of our current annual strategies. Today, I feel closer to what fundraising should be, but it’s still a process of leveraging human behavior to generate an outcome in an analytical way instead of a relational one. We have a long way to go with building a relational business model for the many. It will take investments in technology and infrastructure. It will require us to be informed by the needs of our alumni and to act on those needs. These will be important changes as our alumni are telling us what they want—but are we able to hear them?

As part of RNL’s second annual research study, we are again sharing the collective wisdom of 51,000 alumni representing a broad spectrum of higher education. The opportunity to provide a conduit for these voices to be heard is an honor, and along with the team at RNL, we are excited to share the feedback of these alumni from 21 institutions.



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In higher education, we often spend our time looking inward or looking at other institutions instead of turning to those we wish to connect, engage, and inspire to be in a closer relationship with our institutions. For decades, we have been able to rely on an expectation of loyalty from our alumni because that’s how it’s always been. However, so many factors have changed the nature of that relationship and those expectations. Among them are the rising costs of education, the implied and often explicit promise that degree achievement will provide you with a pass to greater opportunity, and the increasing mistrust of institutions and higher education.

There is a growing concern about our donor pipeline. Over the past three decades, we have seen a dramatic decrease in alumni donor counts across the United States. These trends pre-date the pandemic but seem to be exacerbated post-pandemic. Many schools are struggling to acquire new donors and are searching for new methodologies to do so. However, it seems most often that we are taking the fractured giving structures that brought us here and bringing those into these new strategies. Maybe the issue isn’t our tools or strategies but our ability to authentically connect with our alumni.


In reviewing two years of this survey data, I reflected on the fundamental disconnect in our loyalty-based solicitation strategies when compared to alumni saying they want a more values-based relationship. Our go-to strategy has been to send institutional messages signed by institutional leaders asking for general support that requires high trust from a rapidly diversifying alumni population with a lived experience that says they can't trust leadership. When that alumni population doesn't respond, we then ask what is wrong with them. In my career, I have sat in rooms where conversations turn to how "we need to teach these young alumni how to give." However, according to the survey data, those same alumni are giving but not giving to us.

Our approach must change so that instead of thinking about giving to our institutions as the destination, giving is seen as a conduit to impacting the world. That's what alumni want to hear from us. How is their gift going to be leveraged by us to make an impact in the world? Isn't this our promise as institutions of higher education?

We are better at this when we work with larger gifts, but we have to make a commitment to present opportunities for impactful giving and then show how we made that impact to donors at all levels. It's going to take us creating a more authentic and equitable relationship with our non-donor alumni if they're going to consider making that gift.

Unfortunately, we cannot assume our alumni have a "trusting" relationship with their alma mater. We must work every day to build trust in the systems of philanthropy. Traditional marketing too often creates a culture of indifference to our words and their desires. We need to spend our time building a greater belief in our trustworthiness.

It'd be wise to think of a donor's first few gifts as "trust-building" gifts. Let's worry less about how much they are giving and think more about their belief in the process. How do we increase that trust? How do we demonstrate value in a way that builds authentic relationships? Our default has been an assumption they believe in us, as previous generations did, but we have seen that Millennials are turning away from giving to higher education.

 ***Our approach must change so that instead of thinking about giving to our institutions as the destination, we think of giving as a conduit to impacting the world."***

With more AI tools entering our space, it's more important than ever that we reflect on the value of trust in building giving relationships with our constituents. It's important to remind yourself that just because I can doesn't mean I should. Will bringing this technology to bear help resolve the existing fundamental relational issue? The root of the disturbing giving trends in higher education has more to do with the nature of our relationship with our average donors—current and potential. Technology will provide a temporary fix unless we deploy tools in ways that allow us to deepen relationships by listening better and reflecting that listening to them when we engage the rising generation of supporters.

In this data, we see opportunity—the opportunity to create stronger relationships with our alumni and produce greater resources for our institutions. However, those opportunities will only be realized if we spend time understanding their needs and changing our strategies to better align with those needs.

I hope that reviewing these outcomes inspires you to think about our work differently and that you will join us in building a vision of a world where our alumni feel greater connection and agency in their giving experience.

# Introduction


**By Sarah Kleeberger**

Senior Consultant, RNL

We are pleased to share findings from our second annual national research project. In collaboration with 21 institutions, we invited alumni to tell us about their volunteer activity, what inspires them to give, satisfaction with and sense of current connection to their alma mater, communication channel preferences, and what is likely to motivate future engagement.

What emerged as most notable? Responses collected this year once again confirm rather dramatic demographic and generational shifts. We have highlighted eight insights drawn from the direct feedback of more than 50,000 alumni.

We have provided more information about survey methodology at the end of this report. The term “younger generations” or “rising generations” refers to Millennials (born 1981-1996) and Gen Z (born 1997-2012). The term “older generations” refers to the Silent Generation (born 1928-1945) and Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964).



**More than  
50,000**  
alumni participated  
in the survey project  
(more than double  
last year's count of  
responses).



# Survey Findings

## 1 Alumni are philanthropic, but most are not giving to their alma maters and even fewer are volunteering with their alma maters.

Eighty-one percent (81%) of alumni report that being philanthropic (gifts of money or time) is “very” or “somewhat” important to them personally. Seventy-seven percent (77%) of alumni report making charitable donations and 58% report volunteering their time. But of those who donate, only 31% report giving to their alma mater last year; this drops to 19% among Millennials and 10% among Gen Z graduates.

**77%**

make charitable gifts

**58%**

volunteer

**31%**

who donate gave to their alma mater last year

Despite the steady decline in alumni participation, overall philanthropic contributions in the United States have been trending upward. In 2023, \$557 billion was given to charities by individuals, bequests, foundations, and corporations (a slight decline from the year prior when adjusted for inflation).

**81%** of alumni report being philanthropic is important to them

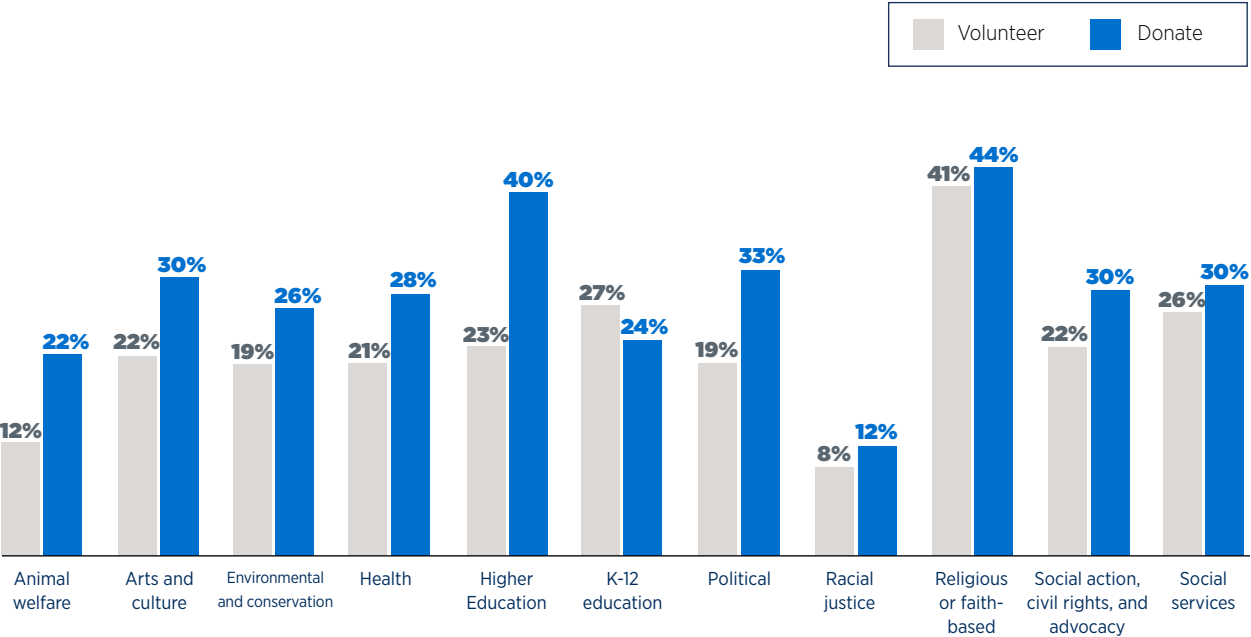


Fifty-nine percent (59%) of alumni who report never donating to their alma maters actively support other causes, and 83% of alumni who report donating at some point since graduation but not in the past year (lapsed donors) actively support other causes. This includes more than 7,000 Millennial and Gen Z alumni who were inspired to donate to other charities or causes when presented with opportunities and projects that resonate—those that tie to what they care about. Fewer than 20% of alumni from these rising generations rank their alma mater as a top philanthropic priority and even fewer believe their alma mater understands their philanthropic priorities.

We see a similar pattern when considering volunteer activity. Of those who report supporting any organization or cause through volunteer activity, 26% report volunteering ever with their alma mater—9% in the past year and 17% at some point since graduation but not in the past year. Gen Z is the only generation volunteering at a higher rate (47%) than they are giving (40%).

How many graduates from this youngest cohort are volunteering with your institution? Are you presenting opportunities to do so? Revisiting the types of volunteer opportunities offered can help bring more alumni into the fold, strengthen their connection, and ideally help support life-long relationships.

**What types of organizations or causes do alumni currently support through volunteering or financial donations?**



Religious or faith-based organizations rank high for both. K-12 education and social services round out the top three for volunteering; higher education and political causes round out the top three for financial donations.

A closer look by generation reveals that Millennials and Gen Z alumni disproportionately support social action, civil rights, and advocacy organizations or causes. Financial support of higher education as a top organization type is lower among these younger generations, dropping from 52% among Silents to 18% among Gen Z graduates.

How are you highlighting the program areas, scholarships, internships, or projects at your institution that align well with social action, civil rights, and advocacy? Finding opportunities to connect the dots and help alumni see ways they can give through their alma mater to support the areas they care about is important as institutions consider donor pipeline, future campaigns, and building sustainable fundraising programs.

## 2 Alumni are generous and many give frequently, but older generations represent an outsized percentage of higher ed donors and dollars.

When asked about their charitable giving last year (sum of all gifts made to any organization or institution), 58% of survey respondents indicated donating more than \$1,000. Of that group, 43% report donating to their alma mater—a notable eight points higher at 51% among older generations and a notable 16 points lower at 27% among younger generations.

Alumni give regularly, with 47% reporting they donate once per month or more. That giving frequency holds among younger cohorts with 48% of Millennials and 45% of Gen Z alumni giving once per month or more to charitable organizations or causes.

### 47% of alumni donate once per month or more

The majority of alumni report giving online or via check, but nearly one-third support charities through more complex vehicles including a will or estate gift, property, stock, through a Donor Advised Fund (DAF), or family foundation.

Many donors are approaching charitable giving in a more strategic way, with increased expectations about transparency, impact, and return on their investment. This represents an opportunity for nonprofit organizations, but the growing generational gap and fewer “new” donors is a 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 is not attracting their support. Leaning on our RNL360 benchmark data, older generations represent an outsized share of donors and dollars relative to their shrinking position—on average 17%—of today’s living alumni base. In contrast, younger generations represent 49% of the overall base but gave 7% of alumni dollars in fiscal year 2024.<sup>1</sup>

The imbalance is concerning, especially as Millennial and Gen Z generations, along with 65 million Gen X Americans, will benefit from the wealth transfer already in motion. Higher education institutions cannot afford to lose future generations of philanthropists set to inherit the \$85 trillion in assets that will be passed along over the next two decades.<sup>2</sup>

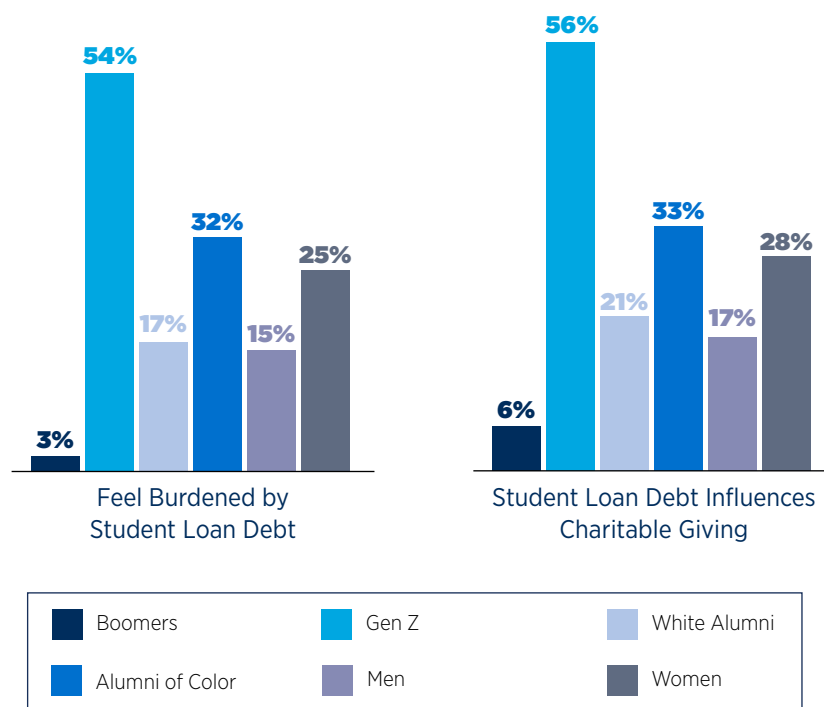
<sup>1</sup> The RNL360 Benchmark Group represents more than 15 institutions and nearly 5 million donor records. The RNL360 analysis highlights historic and recent donor behaviors including retention, median and average gift amounts, max consistency, and path to major giving.

<sup>2</sup> Cerulli Associates. [The Cerulli Report—U.S. High-Net-Worth and Ultra-High-Net-Worth Markets 2024: The Great Wealth Transfer: Capturing Money in Motion](#), December 2024.

### 3 Alumni report feeling more burdened by student loan debt this year, with higher rates among recent graduates, alumni of color, and women.

Twenty percent (20%) of alumni report feeling burdened by student loan debt, 10% by undergraduate debt, and 10% by graduate school debt. How does this compare to last year's survey? It's notably higher—the sense of burden is on the rise, up from 11%.

#### Impact of Student Loan Debt on Giving



Younger generations report feeling up to 18x more burdened by debt than older alumni. Alumni of color report feeling nearly 2x more burdened by debt than White alumni. And women responding to the survey report feeling 1.5x more burdened by debt than men.

#### How does student loan debt influence charitable giving to your alma mater?

Debt is a defining factor for Gen Z, with 56% ranking it as important—a big contrast to just 6% among Boomers. When deciding whether to donate to their alma mater, 33% of alumni of color rank debt as important (vs. 21% of White alumni) and 28% of women indicate debt influences their giving (vs. 17% of men).



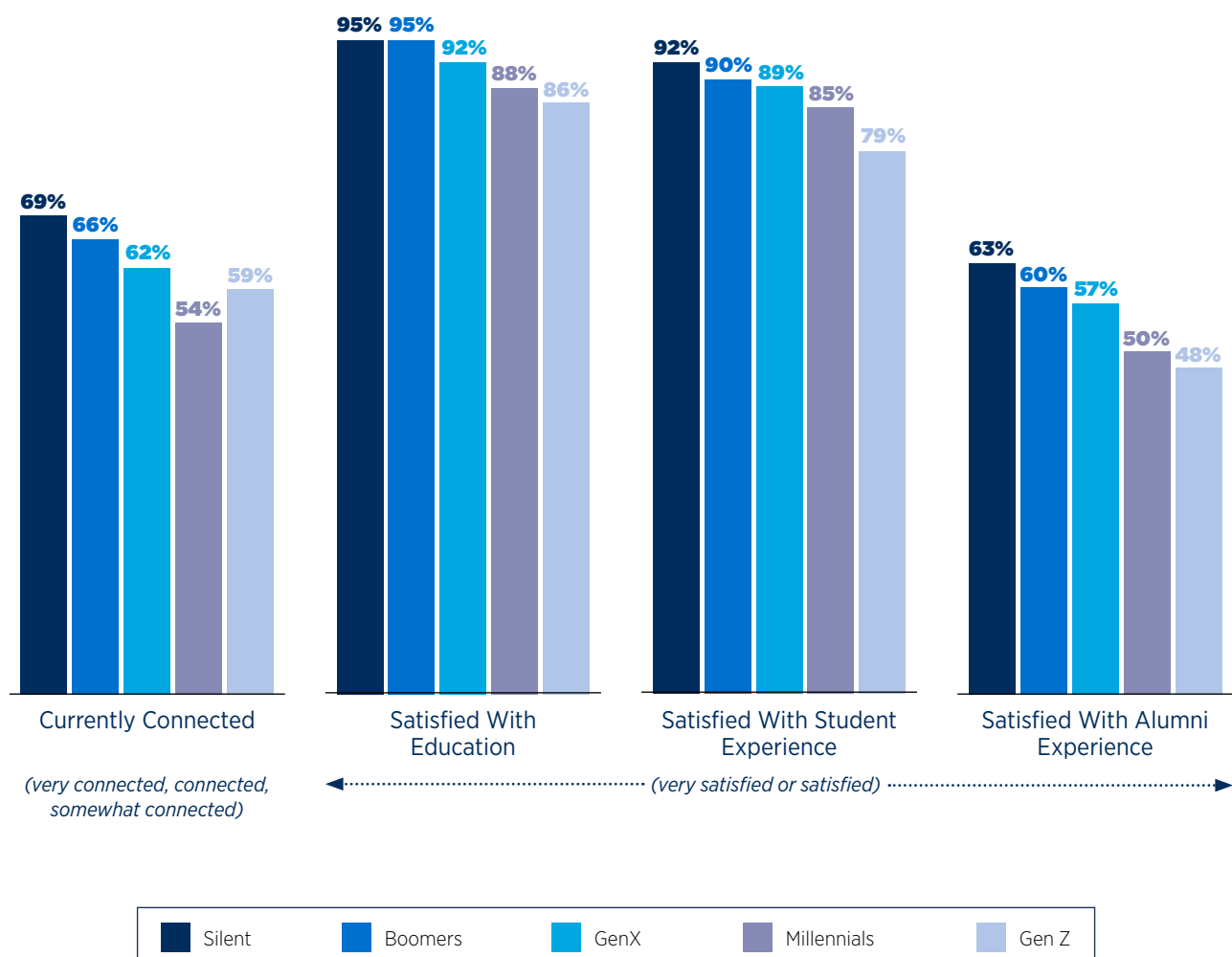
## 4 Alumni sense of current connection to and satisfaction with their alma mater declines across generations.

Studying connection and satisfaction by generations is sobering. Less than one-third of alumni of any generation feel “very connected” or “connected” to their alma mater today; 32% report feeling “somewhat connected.”

Seventy-two percent (72%) of Silents report feeling “very satisfied” with their student experience, dropping to 53% among Millennials and even further, to 42% among Gen Z—**less than half of Gen Z alumni report feeling very satisfied with their student experience**. The 30-point downward swing for graduates closest to their college experience is troubling.

We see a similar decline regarding education received and alumni experience. Fifty-one percent (51%) of Gen Z grads report feeling “very satisfied” with the education they received, 19% “very satisfied” with their alumni experience.

### Alumni connection and satisfaction by generation



## 5 Volunteerism is an important measure of engagement and strengthens relationships. Are institutions investing enough in this area?

As already noted, a small percentage of alumni report volunteering with their alma maters. But of those who are, 36% report feeling “very connected” to the institution, compared to 5% of those who report never volunteering. And 81% of volunteers have also donated compared to 50% of non-volunteers.

Charities that provide meaningful volunteer opportunities build stronger bonds with their supporters, and this often leads to increased giving. Seventy-two percent (72%) of alumni who gave more than \$10,000 last year were active volunteers. This reinforces the value of creating opportunities for alumni and other constituents to share their time and talents as well as their treasure.



**72%** of alumni who gave more than \$10,000 last year were active volunteers

A new question added to the survey instrument this year provides greater insight about volunteer engagement. When asked, “Are there examples of volunteer activities that you’d be interested in participating in at your alma mater?” more than 10,000 alumni shared feedback.

### Key takeaways from their responses

- Many expressed a willingness to help or be involved but were uncertain about available opportunities. The desire for more information was a recurring theme.
- Preferences often leaned toward flexible, episodic opportunities vs. ongoing commitments.
- Alumni are interested in mentorship, particularly for first-generation students, and in sharing career advice through panels or networking events.
- There is interest in volunteering for university-specific events such as homecomings, student outreach, and supporting athletics.
- There was a call for more family-friendly and diverse events that extend beyond traditional alumni activities such as happy hours, to include cultural outings, sports events, and hands-on environmental clean-ups or community service projects.
- Given geographic constraints, many expressed a desire to participate in virtual or regional events such as service days and social gatherings, with an emphasis on supporting students, recent graduates and specific alumni groups in their areas.
- Many actively volunteer elsewhere and indicated their capacity is already full.
- Distance from campus, age/health limitations, technology challenges, and family responsibilities restrict involvement.

As institutions consider how to best measure or score engagement, a growing number have adopted four areas introduced nearly a decade ago as part of the CASE Commission on Alumni Relations initiative. These “modes” include philanthropic, volunteer, experiential, and communications.<sup>3</sup>

Taking a broader perspective and tracking behavior beyond giving history—including volunteer activity—can help institutions see who is raising their hands. But institutions need to offer and promote volunteer opportunities that resonate. Those that lean into alumni talents and interests can strengthen sense of community, help build enduring relationships, and advance the institutional mission.

## What alumni said about volunteering

**“ I’d be interested in opportunities that support disadvantaged students who tangibly need help that I can provide. Career counseling is a great area where I believe I have expertise that does apply to many students.”**

**- Dishita ’24**

**“ Always happy to provide mentoring, especially to first-generation students. Not sure what other ways a person could volunteer remotely.”**

**- David ’11**

**“ Until this survey I was not aware that volunteer opportunities were available.”**

**- Eric ’20**

**“ I’m not really sure what’s available. I should try and find out, but where?”**

**- David ’11**

**“ As someone who struggled with food insecurity when I lived on campus, I’d love to come out and help folks get food in the main quad.”**

**- Patrick ’22**

**“ It isn’t convenient for me to come to campus. Make it easier to volunteer where I live.”**

**- Annie ’18**

**“ Happy to be paired with underrepresented/first-gen/transfer students (i.e. any undergrads who might need/benefit from extra one on one support) in my undergrad major to help advise based on my class/extracurricular experiences.”**

**- Ananya ’23**

**“ Serving as a mentor to students from underrepresented backgrounds, I could offer guidance on navigating challenges in both academic and personal life, drawing from my own experiences.”**

**- Taheerah ’16**

<sup>3</sup> Alumni Engagement Metrics. Alumni Engagement Metrics Task Force, Council for Advancement and Support of Education. August 2018.

## 6 Strong correlation between satisfaction and giving confirms importance of campuswide efforts (and ownership).

Alumni who report being “very satisfied” with their student experience are 18x more likely to have donated to their alma mater in the past year than their “neutral” counterparts and 73x more likely than alumni who are “not very satisfied” or “not at all satisfied.” Alumni who report being “very satisfied” with the education they received are 40x more likely to have donated to their alma mater in the past year than their “neutral” counterparts and 80x more likely than alumni who are “not very” or “not at all” satisfied.

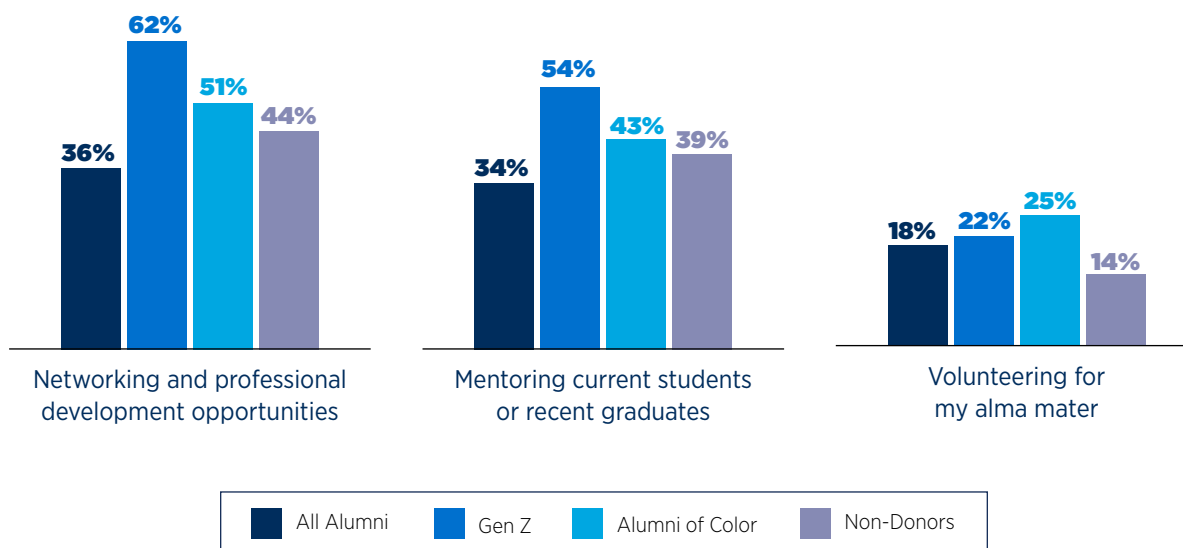
The interactions students have with faculty, staff, advisors, coaches, and administration sets the groundwork for satisfaction, affinity, and the philanthropic relationship post-graduation. The responsibility of improved alumni engagement and giving cannot rest on the shoulders of the advancement team alone.

### How can institutions build stronger satisfaction and connection?

Gen Z, alumni of color, and non-donors (those who report never making a gift to their alma mater) are most interested in networking and professional development opportunities as well as mentoring current students or recent graduates. A higher percentage of Gen Z and alumni of color expressed interest in volunteering for their alma mater.

With respect to communication, when asked which channels are valuable when alumni are trying to stay informed and connected to their alma mater, email was the strong leader across all generations (69%), followed by personal relationships (45%) and print materials in the mail (44%). Direct mail is less valuable for younger generations (31% for Millennials and 15% for Gen Z). Social media ranks higher for younger generations, with Facebook the top platform among Gen X and Instagram among Millennials and Gen Z alumni.

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

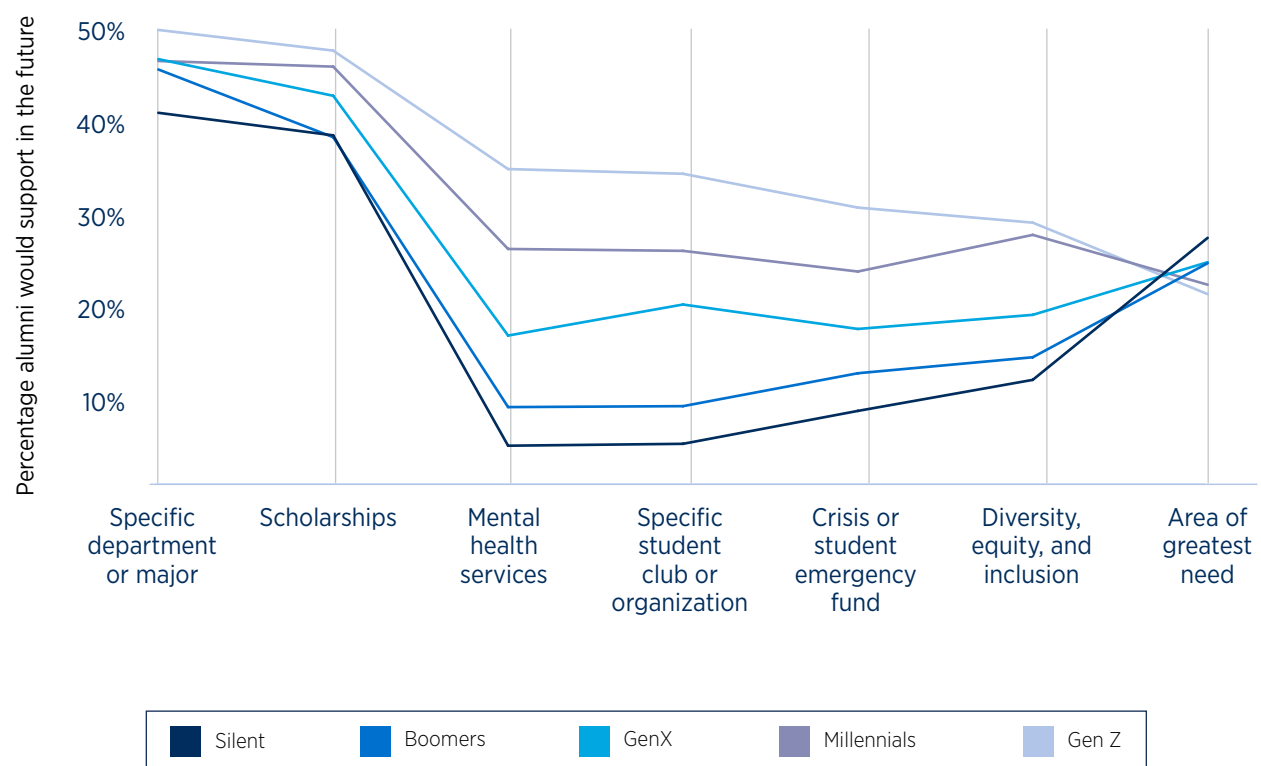


## 7 Younger generations are more inspired by purpose-driven campaigns than “area of greatest need” or the annual fund.

Appeals for specific academic departments and student scholarships resonate with alumni of all ages, but Millennials and Gen Z alumni are more likely to get behind mental health services, a specific student club or organization, student emergency funds, and DEI initiatives than their older counterparts.

What’s not as motivating? “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 younger generations.

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



## 8 Philanthropy is influenced by impact *and* passion.

When alumni give, they want to make a difference and seek transparency about impact. Seventy percent (70%) need to believe their gift amount matters and 66% rate the ability of their alma mater to demonstrate how their gift is used as critical. As investors to the organization they are asking, *What’s the return on my donation? What did it accomplish?*



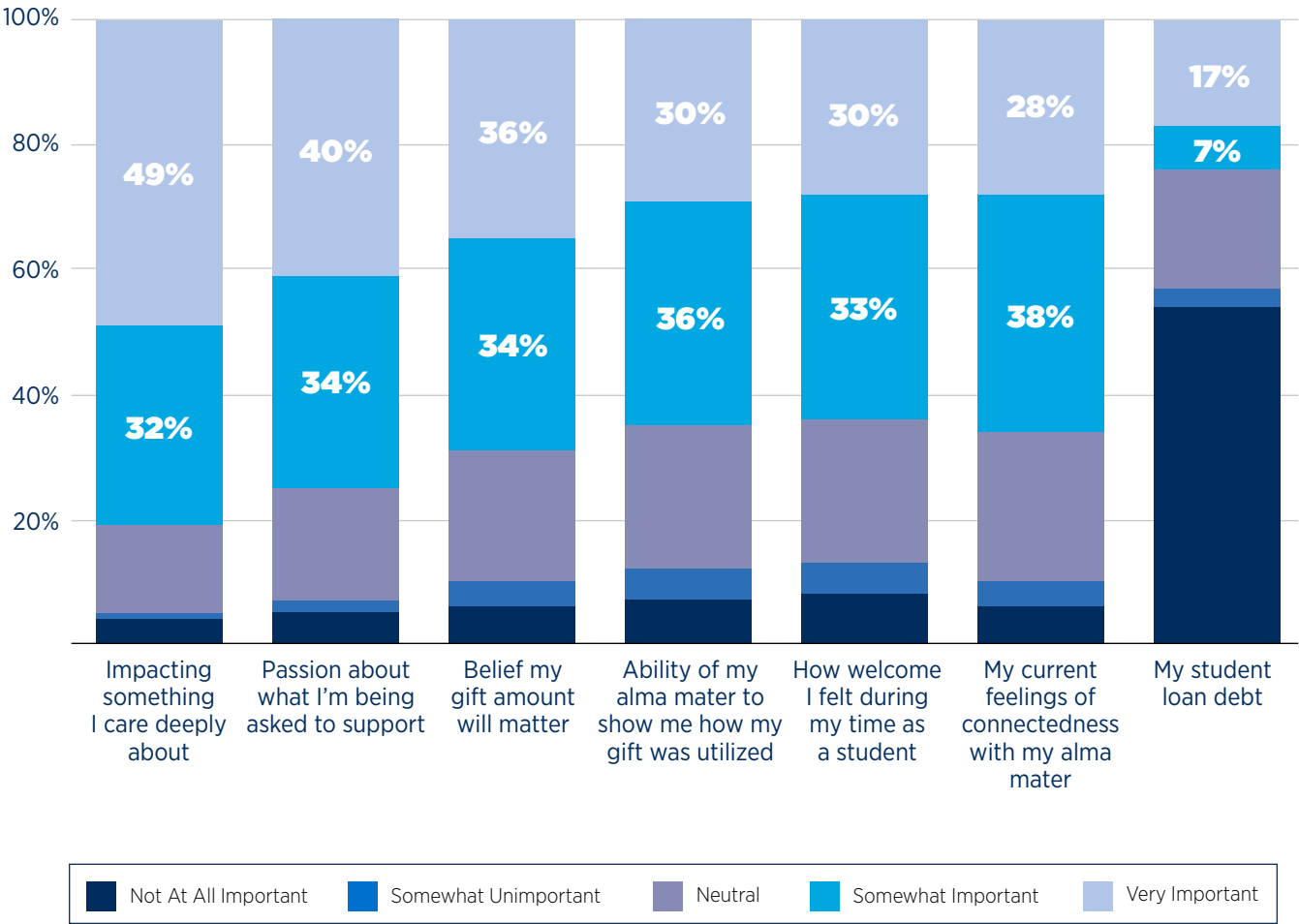
Impact matters, but passion is even more important. Eighty-one percent (81%) of alumni donate because they care deeply about the cause and 74% because they are passionate about what they’re being asked to support—an emotional connection to people, an experience, or an issue drives them to act. Passion ranks even higher among younger generations.

A shift from the traditional “give back because it’s the right thing to do” or loyalty framework, to an emphasis on both impact and passion will likely inspire more alumni to engage as volunteers and donors.

Also noteworthy, student loan debt is not a determining factor for many alumni, with more than half (57%) indicating it’s not important. Debt is a bigger influence for younger generations. Thirty-five percent (35%) of Millennials and 44% of Gen Z grads rank debt as very important (vs. 17% overall). But still, even among the youngest cohorts, passion and impact about the project or cause inspires action. If the giving opportunity matches up with what alumni care about, debt is a roadblock that can be navigated.

**81%**  
**of alumni donate**  
**because they**  
**care deeply**  
**about the cause**

**What is important when deciding whether to donate to their alma mater in the future?**



# Conclusion

By Howard Heevner

This survey has provided us with deeper data about the experiences and desires of alumni across all generations. It's time to take action, but these problems weren't created in a day and the solutions will take time to realize success. We must quickly reflect on our strategies and align them with the changing needs of our alumni population. Without this opportunity to reflect, we risk the collapse of our donor pipeline. When you look at the trajectory of donor counts, we will continue to see diminishing numbers of donors without our intervention. It's only by acting now that we can meet the moment and the needs of our alumni. Here are a few next steps you should consider:

- Leverage technology to better listen to alumni and reflect that listening back to them.
- Instead of touting institutional loyalty to inspire financial support, let's shift our conversation to a values-based relationship.
- When we talk about the impact of giving, it's important to shift from talking about giving to our institutions and instead talk about how we are conduits to impact.
- It is time to redefine philanthropy so that it is broader and more inclusive, recognizing gifts of service similarly to financial gifts.
- Instead of focusing on how we teach alumni to give, let's listen to them to learn what will help them feel we are a viable home for their philanthropic support.

As we consider strategies to connect with our alumni, it's also a time to reflect on how we define and measure success. What experience do we want our alumni to have? How will we know our alumni are having the experience they're looking for? Answering these questions help keep us donor focused and connected to their perspective.

I hope fellow practitioners and leaders will use this as a moment to reflect on what we can learn from graduates of our institutions and find new ways to listen more closely to better understand 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 and take time to listen, reflect, pilot, and pivot, we will avoid the donor cliff we currently face and begin building a new landscape that will engage more alumni and donors for generations to come.



***When we discuss the impact of giving, it's important to shift from talking about giving to our institutions to how we are conduits to impact."***

## About the Authors

With more than 20 years of higher education fundraising experience, **Howard Heevner** has held several roles. Howard is the current executive director of annual programs at the University of California, Berkeley. He was the assistant vice chancellor of university development programs at the University of California, Santa Cruz, the director of annual giving at Penn State University, the director of annual and special giving at DePaul University, and the associate director of annual giving at the University of Michigan. He began his career in development at the University of Iowa. Howard has been a regular speaker at CASE conferences throughout his career and serves on the CASE Commission on Philanthropy. He works with Chris Marshall Advancement Consulting for consulting opportunities. Howard holds degrees from the University of Iowa and Penn State University plus a DEI certificate from Cornell University.

**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.

## Notes on Survey Methodology and Responses

- The survey was live September-October 2024, with a total base size of 1,684,127 and 50,956 responses for a 3% response rate. All questions were optional, resulting in variable denominators. Survey participants were able to decline to respond or “select all that apply” to several survey questions.
- Assumptions about generation were based on age shared by alumni who participated.
- The term “younger generations” or “rising generations” refers to Millennials (born 1981-1996) and Gen Z (born 1997-2012). The term “older generations” refers to the Silent Generation (born 1928-1945) and Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964).
- A large portion of survey responders self-identified as White (82%). A smaller portion self-identified as belonging to races / ethnicities including Asian (8%), Black or African American (5%), Hispanic or Latino (4%), preferred to self-describe (4%), Middle Eastern or North African (1%), American Indian or Alaska Native (1%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (<1%).
- Because of the sample size, we grouped responses from underrepresented or racially minoritized participants in this report. However, we acknowledge the need to review results by each race and ethnicity.
- Fifty-two percent (52%) of survey responders self-identified as women; 46% as men, 2% preferred to self-describe, 1% nonbinary, <1% transgender woman, and <1% transgender man.

## 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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## WHAT IS YOUR LIFETIME ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY?

RNL works with advancement offices to engage an inclusive, purposeful alumni donor base with services and platforms including:

- Fundraising strategy
- Omnichannel outreach
- Major and planned giving support
- Giving days and cause-driven engagement
- Market research and surveys
- Donor pipeline data analysis

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