An Alumni Futures White Paper

Online Social Networks:
A Developing Tool for
Alumni Associations

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By Andrew Shaindlin
Executive Director, Caltech Alumni Association
and author, Alumni Futures

and Elizabeth Allen
Assistant Director for Communications,
Caltech Alumni Association

http://www.alumnifutures.com

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Background
The following white paper is based on an essay published online on April 18, 2006 as part of the Higher Education Blog Conference (HEBC). HEBC was "a fully web-based event focused on how new online communications technologies and social tools are changing Higher Education."

> *http://www.higheredblogcon.com*

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Contact the authors…
…via email at

> *alumnifutures@gmail.com*

Online Social Networks:
A Developing Tool for Alumni Associations

How third party social and business networking sites benefit alumni associations

By
Andrew Shaindlin, Executive Director
Caltech Alumni Association
and author, Alumni Futures

and

Elizabeth Allen, Assistant Director for Communications
Caltech Alumni Association

Are Third-Party Online Social Networks a Threat to Alumni Online Communities?

Alumni Associations have traditionally thrived by isolating the alumni experience from everyday living. We highlight the traditions and activities unique to our campuses; we invite graduates to reunion with their classmates, to travel with fellow alumni, to form local clubs and chapters centered on their common bond, and our publications and web sites are branded with our campus images and traditions. These practices reinforce the idea that the alumni community is *exclusive*.

Naturally, alumni professionals react defensively toward third-party social and business networking web sites such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Xing, and MySpace. These sites, with their *inclusive* "anyone can join" approach, seem to be co-opting the online activities of our alumni, in spite of our efforts to drive users to our own sites. And some, such as Facebook, even mimicked the exclusivity of alumni sites by requiring a *.edu* email address before a user could affiliate with a particular school.

Meanwhile, alumni community software vendors have warned alumni professionals that third party sites are stealing our alumni, and that we should develop our own tools to keep alumni where they belong – in the alumni-only world of our own electronic communities.

We propose that **third party social and business networking sites are important partners for alumni organizations**. Since our alumni are already using these sites, we have a foothold inside them. Rather than worrying whether social networking sites will co-opt our users, we should adopt an assertive approach that

turns these well-funded sites (with their sophisticated tools) into allies in our effort to provide alumni with relevant and useful services and tools.

We further suggest that these third-party sites, with their millions of members, are a place where the exclusive alumni community interconnects and overlaps with the world outside our campus. This is not a threat to us; these sites simply offer alumni a service we cannot provide because our raison d'etre requires that we restrict our audience.

The Caltech Alumni Group on LinkedIn

We offer first a very brief summary of the practical efforts made at the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) since 2005. The general comments that follow are in the context of our experience.

At Caltech we had always assumed there is such a thing as a "network of alumni" to which all graduates belong. We decided to help alumni "activate" their alumni network by creating an online directory of alumni, searchable by a variety of professional fields such as employer name, job title, industry, and career expertise.

We then decided to help alumni link this alumni network to their existing professional and personal networks. To do this we created one of the first official higher education alumni groups on the LinkedIn web site.

LinkedIn (*http://www.linkedin.com*) is a business networking web site that describes itself as "an online network of more than 17 million experienced professionals from around the world, representing 150 industries."[1] Users join for free and create a profile that summarizes their career accomplishments and expertise. They then seek out formal connections with trusted contacts that they know through work and professional interaction. The user's network includes these connections **and the people to whom they are, in turn, connected**. This network then serves as a source of job candidates, employment leads, introductions to other professionals, clients, deals, investors and so on.

When an alumnus voluntarily joins the Caltech group, an identifying Caltech alumni logo appears in his profile and next to his name in search results or listings on the site. This brand identification allows alumni to identify other Caltech alumni, to "advertise" their own connection to Caltech, and to use specific contact settings to communicate easily with other alumni.

Fig. 1. The Caltech Alumni logo on LinkedIn.

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[1] Source: *http://www.linkedin.com/static?key=company_info&trk=ftr_abt*

Once he establishes his Caltech identity, each user has not only his own alumni network at his disposal, but also the non-alumni networks of all those alumni to whom he is connected. **The link between the alumni and non-alumni networks acts as a multiplier that magnifies the value of each network**.

Between June 1, 2005 and January 1, 2008 1,850 individuals (from a base of 19,000 contactable alumni) have joined the Caltech alumni group on LinkedIn for free, and established their credentials as affiliates of Caltech.[2] Their membership allows them to maintain connections within both the smaller Caltech alumni population and the larger non-Caltech population on LinkedIn. Quantitatively it appears that the effort is succeeding.

Do Alumni Networks Exist?

To answer whether there is such a thing as the alumni network, **we must define what we mean when we talk about a network of alumni.**

For this discussion **we define the "Alumni Network" as**

1. Any group of at least two alumni interacting to the mutual benefit of at least one group member,

where

2. The initial interaction results from a shared characteristic related to Caltech.

For example, the authors know a Caltech Trustee who met two people socially, both of whom turned out to be fellow alumni. After discussions about their interests and plans, she hired them both to work for her technology start-up. This fits our description of an alumni network interaction, because the initial interaction was a discussion about the fact that they all attended Caltech; and that interaction led to mutually beneficial results.

Participation in an alumni network increases in value as the network expands because with more potential connections there is greater access to resources, contacts, and support from fellow alumni. For professional and educational networking, this has obvious benefits.

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[2] This group is 98% alumni, and constitutes 9.4% of all Caltech alumni. It includes a small number of Caltech faculty, staff and postdoctoral fellows. Source: Caltech Alumni Association and LinkedIn.

Dynamics in the Network

Before trying to measure the presence or utility of alumni interaction, we should review briefly the concepts governing interactions between individual alumni and between groups of alumni. This simple summary should provide additional context for readers unfamiliar with network dynamics.

The value of some networks, such as the phone system, is based heavily on the effects described by **Metcalfe's Law**. One person with a telephone couldn't use it unless someone else also had a phone. Once most people had phones the network of phone users became quite powerful. Metcalfe says that **the utility of the network increases as the square of the number of members of the network**.

Reed's Law builds on this and makes it relevant to alumni associations by accounting for the fact that **in social networks groups can form**. This is critical because taking groups into consideration means that **members who self-identify and affiliate by interest or other affinity are dramatically increasing the volume of possible interaction within the network**. According to David Reed, the presence of groups in social networks leads not to Metcalfe's growth in utility, but to *exponential* growth (i.e., growth proportional to the number of possible groups). In other words, **the larger the network, the faster its value increases.**

Providing for Network Growth

By merely allowing alumni to connect in a single mass (e.g., being individually listed in a typical online alumni directory) **we are neutralizing the potential of the network to grow proportionally to its scale**. Instead we should enable alumni to label or tag themselves with characteristics they find relevant and persistent to their networking needs. This has the effect of allowing alumni to self-identify as members of sub-groups within the alumni body. Many of these affinities are familiar to us and we already account for them in our existing online directories: class year, house, Greek affiliation, collegiate athletic teams, local alumni club or chapter.

But many other characteristics exist independently of the college experience and we need to weave those labels, or tags, together with those associated with alma mater. This group of non-school identifying features includes professional activity such as job titles and responsibilities, professional memberships and groups, expertise, employers, industry or other professional sectors and professional credentials or certifications.

Balancing Closed and Open Networks

We now see that by enabling our alumni to self-identify we enable them to seek out and connect with those whose identity meets a need or goal of each person. What next?

Next we should find places where the alumni community connects with the outside world, and then use those intersections to:

1. Drive structured data into our databases;

2. Make alumni "discoverable" to one another outside of closed alumni-only communities;

3. Show alumni how their exclusive (but **limited**) alumni network overlaps with their inclusive (but potentially **unlimited**) non-alumni network

We should provide every graduate with ways to identify two kinds of networks to which she belongs:

1. The closed "Alumni Network," the universe of graduates of a specific institution; and

2. The open "Public Network" of professional and personal contacts.

The alumni network is generally already accessible via alumni directories; the open Public Network lives mostly on third-party social or business networking web sites. For every graduate, these two kinds of networks overlap partially. They intersect where the alumni network includes individuals the alumnus knows as part of his professional network too.

An individual's participation in multiple networks has a cumulative effect that extends the value of all networks. The addition of external networks does not detract from the value of the alumni network; it increases that value.

Social networking sites that allow alumni 1) to self-identify as alumni and 2) to aggregate non-alumni into a trusted professional network provide a systematic means for connecting the two networks. To whatever extent the user's Alumni Network and Public Network don't yet overlap, we are creating opportunities for alumni to connect networks that previously were isolated from one another.

The Alumni Network must by definition be a closed one, or alumni status loses its unique networking value. The alumni organization must maintain the integrity, privacy and exclusivity of the alumni network; but it must also provide access to largely public networks via third party sites so alumni can connect their Alumni Network to their Public Network.

Tags

A useful concept for helping alumni make relevant connections is the use of labels or "tags." These characteristics are part of the person's profile on a social networking site, or in an online directory. They identify features that the person himself thinks are important or meaningful and that he wishes others to identify with him.

The idea of "labels" which exhibit our affinities and affiliations is embedded in a variety of applications under the umbrella of "Web 2.0." On sites such as the photo publishing service Flickr (*http://www.flickr.com*), tags are used to create a useful set of "metadata" that provides a way to combine human-powered and automated searches. This makes the site more usable because the tags and their meanings are conceived, compiled and contributed by people using plain English to describe the features of their photos that **they themselves** find relevant.

In alumni networks, allowing alumni to "tag" pieces of data ("fields") in their profiles will increase the number of connections with other alumni; and it will simultaneously create an everyday human language way of communicating with other alumni those characteristics that are important, personally and professionally. Further, standardization of these tags can make network searches more automated and efficient, thereby maximizing mutually beneficial contacts.

As an important aside, standardization will also allow us to gather structured data that will fit into our alumni and development databases, improving the accuracy and completeness of our information about alumni.

We identify two types of tags in the alumni networking model: **passive and active tags**.

1. **Passive tags are static** over time and stem primarily from past affiliations on our campuses. They might represent class year, academic major, fraternity or dorm, or the person's status as an alumnus of a particular school.

2. **Active tags are dynamic** and accrue to the user from activities they pursue after graduation, and that tend to be connected to professional and career achievements. These include employers' names, industry expertise, professional memberships, publications, certifications, and awards and honors.

   Passive tags connect members of an alumni network. People who attended the same school, lived in the same dorm or sorority, or participated in the same student clubs have a common experience unique to that institution's alumni. This shared experience alone, however, creates only limited value in a network connection.

Active tags add a second layer of relevance that generates the time value of network connections. Until the alumnus needs something from his network, there is no motivation to interact. But when he needs to find someone who works at a certain company, who knows a particular programming language, or who belongs to a professional organization in his field, the active tags show him who those people are.

Combining the passive and active tags delivers the powerful combination of 1) shared past experience and 2) connections and resources that satisfy functional needs.

We equate passive tagging with membership in the closed alumni network, and active tagging with membership in the open public network. **The two kinds of networks overlap, reinforce and enable one another.** This is a strong rationale for building bridges to connect these related networks.

Tim Ziegler has pointed out that such tagging works best "in non-anonymous systems" where users are accountable for the quality of the information and interaction they generate.[3] If self-policed, this "friends of friends" system increases the value of one's connections in a third-party networking site. If I trust my contacts, and you trust me, you can trust my contacts as well.

Using Social Network Sites to Benefit Alumni Associations

We have seen how an individual benefits from connecting his closed alumni network with his larger open professional network. How can alumni associations benefit from this?

Even as so-called Web 2.0 tools make it easier to create custom private-brand online communities, the wisdom of alumni associations doing so *decreases* continually. Instead, we have the opportunity to connect our closed alumni networks (groups of groups) with very large open networks that provide alumni with access to valuable social and business connections.

An additional benefit would derive from increasing the measurement of alumni networking. A large number of interconnected alumni networks, participating as a positive force for innovation, might **encourage the development of reporting tools** among third-party networking sites. This would enable us to watch and learn as our alumni use third-party social networking sites to their own benefit. Doing this, especially via business networking sites, would help us **determine how to help alumni solve real problems in their careers and professional development**.

Such an effort would also benefit from alumni associations reaching out to the leaders of other membership-type organizations that are using the same tools

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[3] Web 2.0: A Pattern Library (March, 2006), accessed at
http://www.webmonkey.com/webmonkey/06/12/index4a.html?tw=design

for their own affinity-building efforts. Prominent among these groups are corporate alumni associations.

Conclusion

Alumni networks do exist. The question then is, **do alumni networks matter?** Our answer is, "not necessarily." To be relevant the network must help a member do something he needs to do, either socially or professionally.

As for online networking, third party networks are not our foes; they are strong allies in our strategic effort to 1) provide alumni with tools relevant to their real world needs and 2) garner up to date, detailed and useful data about alumni.

We should continue efforts to provide certain online networking tools solely for closed alumni networks. In fact, there is more pressure than ever for us to provide *some* such tools – alumni readily compare our services to freely available commercial sites. This means that we must exert our influence as a profession to obtain aggregate data from third-party sites, and use it to perform functions our alumni will find useful. We can do this most effectively by joining together as alumni organizations to influence the further development of these sites.

Students and alumni are relying on us to bridge the gap between alma mater and the real world. We must give them tools to link their closed Alumni Network with the open Public Network. A coordinated and collaborative partnership with third-party social networking sites can form the foundation for just such a link.

Additional Resources

On the Web:
Alumni Futures – *http://www.alumnifutures.com*
A blog written by Andy Shaindlin, for professionals in higher education advancement & administration.

Complexity & Social Networks – *http://www.iq.harvard.edu/blog/netgov*
This multi-author blog offers "a forum for the discussion of the intertwined subjects of network analysis and complex systems theory" on a moderately technical level.

Facebook – *http://www.facebook.com*
A profile-based online social network that allows users to create and join groups, institutional pages, calendars, threaded discussion, and "friend of friend" networks.

Flickr – *http://www.flickr.com*
A photo-sharing web site that allows for groups and related functions such as commenting and member-contributed content.

Inside Facebook – *http://www.insidefacebook.com*
A blog tracking (and commenting on) regular changes and developments from the Facebook site.

LinkedIn – *http://www.linkedin.com*
A profile-based online business networking site that allows alumni organizations to create groups, where members are identified with an institutional logo and name. LinkedIn allows users to see how they are connected to other members, and by what degree of separation.

LinkedIntelligence – *http://www.linkedintelligence.com*
A blog tracking (and commenting on) regular changes and developments to the LinkedIn networking web site.

Network Weaving – *http://www.networkweaving.com/blog*
A blog written by three social network analysts, highlighting examples of the dynamics within and between organizational social networks.

Xing – *http://www.xing.com*
A profile-driven business networking site that allows users to find connections to other members, and that provides private group discussion groups. Xing is heavily focused on the European market.

In Print:

Watts, D. J. (2003). **Six Degrees: The Science of a Connected Age**. W. W. Norton & Company.

Barabási, A.-L. (2002). **Linked: The New Science of Networks**. Perseus Books Group.