

NCTN Promising Practice Series: Creating an Alumni Newsletter for Transition-to-College Programs

The NCTN Promising Practice Series presents detailed descriptions of strategies from the field designed to promote the successful transition of students from ABE/ESOL to postsecondary education.

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INTRODUCTION

This promising practice describes the benefits of staying connected with alumni, both for the student and the program, as well as the steps for creating an alumni newsletter for your college transition program.

PROGRAM CONTEXT

The CLC Bridge Program is a one-year college preparation program for adults who have a GED or high school diploma but who know they need review before they will be able to succeed in college. Begun in 1997, the program serves 28 students from the greater Boston area each year. From October through May, students meet Tuesday and Thursday evenings to review math, reading, writing, and computer skills, to receive career counseling, and to be helped through the college and financial aid application process. During the summer, students have the option of taking courses in algebra, ESOL, or other electives.

The Bridge Program is part of the Community Learning Center (CLC), which serves adults from Cambridge, Massachusetts, and surrounding communities. The CLC offers a full range of educational services, including GED, adult diploma, ESOL, citizenship, family literacy, and homeless programs. The CLC, a program of the city of Cambridge's Department of Human Services Programs, serves over 1,000 people annually.

RATIONALE AND BACKGROUND OF THE PRACTICE

We produce a biannual newsletter and distribute it to Bridge Program alumni and current Bridge students with courtesy copies to funders. Each issue is four to eight pages in length and includes photos and news about program graduates as well as articles on financial aid and other topics of interest to college students.

The newsletter has proved beneficial on many fronts:

- Most importantly, it increases our graduates' sense of belonging to a learning community. Alumni now in college enjoy reading about friends they made during their year in Bridge, feel pride seeing their own names and accomplishments in print, and appreciate reminders about college financial aid deadlines. Current Bridge students reading it gain faith that if they persevere, they, too, will join the ranks of the college educated.
- It gives alumni, teachers, and counselors a vehicle to communicate new ideas to one another. Each year we learn of new scholarship opportunities for nontraditional students, and each year our graduates experiment with newer modes of college learning like intensive weekend classes and distance learning courses. The newsletter allows both students and staff to share knowledge with one another.
- It gives funders something tangible to show their boards and their own donors as evidence that grant and scholarship money is being well spent.
- On a purely practical level, it eases the process of gathering follow-up data for grant reports. We even have a few graduates who email their news ahead rather than waiting for the end-of-term follow-up call.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PRACTICE

The alumni newsletter began in fall 2003 somewhat by accident. While learning how to use Microsoft Publisher, I decided to apply my new computer skill by working up a mock issue using Bridge Program photos I'd taken and information about a scholarship I'd recently run across. My supervisor and the CLC director approved it immediately, and the alumni response to the first issue was so positive we decided to make it a permanent feature of the program.

Alumni newsletters are certainly not new to the educational world: high schools and colleges have been producing them for as long as most of us have been alive. The only innovation here is applying this tradition to a college transition program.

As the *Bridge Alumni News* has evolved over time, we have developed certain routines. Each July the page one lead article is about the most recent Bridge Program graduates and scholarship winners; inside is a two-page spread of photos from the class party and the graduation ceremony. Every Bridge alumnus who finishes a college degree or certificate program is interviewed by phone and gets an article written exclusively about him or her. The January issue always has some article relating to financial aid. And the heart and soul of every issue is the "Alumni News & Views" column, in which all alumni who respond to our follow-up calls or emails get their academic or personal news summarized in a paragraph or two.

If another program wants to begin its own newsletter, it should have one or more staff members willing to do the following:

- Follow up to alumni via phone and email (taking notes not only on the details of their academic progress needed for grant reports, but also on family births, deaths, moves, job changes, and other things friends share with friends) and summarize the news in a paragraph or two about each graduate.
- Take photos at all special occasions (campus tours, guest speakers, mentor nights, parties, graduation ceremonies, etc.) and adapt them for publication using Adobe Photoshop or some other graphics program.
- Write four to six articles per issue. Most of the articles will be about the alumni themselves and so should be easy to write; however, items about careers, scholarships for nontraditional students, and changes at local colleges are also good, even if they require a bit more research.

- Use Microsoft Publisher or an equivalent program to assemble the parts into an aesthetically pleasing whole.

I'd also advise programs to have certain practices in place *before* beginning a newsletter. One necessity is a student/alumni database capable of producing mailing labels. Another is the practice of having students sign release forms before they leave your program and move on to college. (See "Challenges" section below.) A third is having an Address Service Requested account with the post office so that newsletters sent to alumni who have moved get returned to you with any known forwarding address. The post office does charge for this service, but it's invaluable in helping you keep your mailing list up-to-date.

CHALLENGES

The major challenge the first year of the newsletter was in obtaining graduates' signatures on release forms granting us permission to use their names, stories, and photos. Whenever I got news items about alumni that I wanted to include in the next issue, I would mail out release forms, but it sometimes took two or three reminder phone calls before the signed forms were returned. We solved that problem the following year by including the release form as part of our intake form and keeping track of who had signed the form in our student database.

The challenge every year is staying organized so that there is time in January and July to produce the newsletter.

COST & FUNDING

Before beginning our newsletter project, our program already had access to a computer loaded with Microsoft Publisher and Adobe Photoshop, a color printer, a digital camera, and a student/alumni progress database capable of producing mailing labels. We were already budgeting approximately 30 hours of staff time annually to do alumni follow-up calls for grant reports and were able to use the information gleaned from those calls for newsletter articles. Thus, the only start-up cost for the newsletter was a \$10 deposit to open the Address Service Requested account with the post office.

To produce 200 copies of each issue, we need approximately \$50 worth of supplies: a ream of paper, a few sheets of mailing labels, a package of round mailing seals to secure the edges of the folded copies, and a roll of first class stamps. In addition, we budget approximately \$100 per issue for printer cartridges. Each issue requires approximately 10-15 hours of staff time for writing and editing the issue plus 8-10 hours for printing and mailing.

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT AND EFFECTIVENESS

The evidence we have of the effectiveness of the *Bridge Alumni News* is anecdotal, but powerful nonetheless.

We know that alumni do read the issues because they call or email us to tell us so and to offer personal news or suggest articles for future editions. One alumna with prior journalism and computer experience acted as guest editor for an issue, and another regularly contributes inspirational quotations for our "Quotes of Note" feature on the back page. Students who have been the subject of interviews have called to ask for extra copies of the issue to share with family, friends, and coworkers.

Beyond the educational and community building value for students, we also know that the newsletter is a good public relations tool. We send copies to all program funders and to the funders of scholarships our graduates have won. Two of the scholarship funders called to ask for

additional copies to hand out at a fundraiser they were co-hosting. In addition, in 2005 the CLC director began giving copies to Cambridge City Council members to increase the councilors' awareness of our school's positive impact on the community.

Research on Alumni Newsletters

Most research on alumni newsletters is market research that examines the rate of alumni giving in response to receiving a newsletter. Beyond creating a pool of potential donors, however, this research does point to improved communication between graduates and their institution as an important by-product of newsletters. In addition, targeted communication – both the phone call made to gather information and the personal information available through the newsletter – is more likely to get a response. When seen as an overall communication strategy that can further develop adult education advocates and reach voters, alumni newsletters may be an important overall strategy of communication for adult education programs.

About the author

Pat Fina has been in adult education for a decade, specializing in college transition. She is currently creating an online college transition math course for healthcare workers who want to begin LPN and other professional healthcare training programs. The course is one component of a larger project called the Healthcare Learning Network.