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New models of alumni relations

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Today's college alumni are savvy networkers. And by incorporating their alma maters more strategically into their professional — and personal — lives, they not only increase the value of their own education, they add tremendous value to the college from which they graduated, and to its current students.

From the moment they first step onto their new college campuses as freshmen, students join an alumni network that can support them throughout their lives. This should factor into every college decision. Students who recognize the inherent value in their institution's alumni network — and leverage it — will have a consistent advantage.

In fact, there's a new paradigm in alumni relations across higher education. Alumni will always be counted on to support their colleges philanthropically — particularly important since tuition never covers the full cost of educating a student — but that's just one of the many ways they give back to the institutions that helped shape their lives.

Today's alumni are taking on new roles at colleges by fostering strong cohesive learning and helping current students transition to the next phase of their lives. And while their financial support is vital, the gift of their time and expertise is also transformative to students.

At Connecticut College, we've seen more and more alumni engage themselves in our campus community, offering students the chance to see how they have put their own liberal arts education to good use. David Barber, a 1988 graduate of the college and co-owner of the organic restaurant where President and Michelle Obama dined in New York City, recently came to campus to give a public lecture about sustainable food systems, and afterwards dined with more than a dozen Connecticut College students interested in environmental issues. Earlier this year, Susan Froshauer, a 1974 alumna who founded Rib-X Pharmaceuticals, joined a campus panel discussion for students interested in healthcare, and Agnes Gund, a 1960 graduate and president emerita of the Museum of Modern Art, spoke to art- and museum-studies students about the future of museums.

These are just a few of many examples of alumni offering career advice to students and showing them the possibilities available to them. Alumni also mentor students and provide internships, as well as offer job shadowing opportunities, discuss various industries and even provide introductions to much sought-after employers.

And while many alumni come to campus to connect with students, many more make themselves available to students and other alumni through technology. Technology facilitates all kinds of

contacts that just weren't possible a decade ago. Online chats give Connecticut College students the opportunity to network with such alumni as Baseball Hall of Fame President Jeff Idelson or ask top music-industry executives questions about career paths and internships. Other connections are made online daily through password-protected college alumni networks, Linked In, Facebook, Twitter and more, giving students and alumni broad access to alumni in all different fields and across the globe.

One alumnus, who joined the White House staff as part of the Obama administration, told a group of students recently that "you should never hesitate to seek out alumni for advice. I don't know of any Connecticut College alum who would turn down a call from a fellow Camel (our unique mascot)."

The college is nurturing this infrastructure to enhance alumni networking — and it extends well beyond the new social-media networks to the alumni magazine, events and programming.

This infrastructure is essential for both students and alumni, and has let us offer a variety of career services to alumni to help them through the recession. These have included alumni-employment newsletters, a robust alumni online community, career-specific distinguished speaker series in major cities, a number of targeted networking events and a direct connection to the college's career services.

We continue to invest significant resources in our unique career and life preparation program, and we're seeing dividends come back tenfold in terms of benefits for the students, our alumni and the college as a whole. We've found that our investment in students not only helps prepare them to live full lives, it strengthens their lifelong connection to the college and provides them with a support system that continues throughout their lives.

And alumni who feel connected to the college and its students provide philanthropic support. They make gifts to the college because they recognize the ways in which they benefit from the relationship, they are grateful that the college invested in them as students and they want to support the current students they've had the opportunity to meet and mentor.

In this commencement season, college seniors are preparing to take their own unique paths to careers, graduate school, public service and more. As disparate as their lives will be after graduation, they all share one very important commonality: for the rest of their lives, they will be alumni of the institution that educated them. It's an invaluable connection for alumni — and for their alma mater.

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