

# “FRIENDRAISE” AMONG YOUR GRADUATES: DISCOVER AND CANALIZE ALUMNI RESOURCES FOR UNIVERSITY DEVELOPMENT

Cătălina, AMIHĂIESI<sup>1</sup> and Ioana, MUREȘAN<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Fund Raising Office, Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai Cluj-Napoca, România, [catalina.amihaiesi@ubbcluj.ro](mailto:catalina.amihaiesi@ubbcluj.ro)

<sup>2</sup>Alumni Association, Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai Cluj-Napoca, România, [ioanamuresan@ubbcluj.ro](mailto:ioanamuresan@ubbcluj.ro)

**ABSTRACT:** Romanian universities become more and more concerned with graduate employability and implementation of various tracking systems for their alumni. However, graduates have many untapped resources beyond their demographics, resources that are highly valuable in the process of continually improving universities’ services. One cannot speak of thorough feedback from alumni and accurate tracking of graduates in the absence of a well-suited alumni engagement plan. The authors bring into discussion key aspects of the development and implementation of an alumni engagement plan for one of the biggest Romanian public universities. The paper includes a case study on the cooperation between the Alumni Association and the Fund Raising Office at Babeș-Bolyai University in the process of developing an initial engagement plan for graduates. Some suggestions are offered on how to overcome common challenges in implementing a communication plan for graduates of Romanian public universities, as well as details on setting proper expectations and having the initial assessment done. Conclusions and recommendations are addressed to all alumni, fundraising and communication staff in Romanian higher education institutions.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Romanian public as well as private universities have to face many challenges related to internal and external accountability. The diminishing support from the Government in terms of annual lump sums adds to the pressure to deliver high employability rates as well as to keep high quality standards for all programs. Alumni engagement goes beyond alumni surveys for employability rates and must be perceived not as a burden but as a fascinating way of gathering needed resources to fulfil the mission of the institution. Romanian universities can and should use international benchmarking efforts and best practices to set initial strategic objectives for engaging alumni as well as shape their strategy in terms of methods and channels used, but they should also engage in sharing their experience with other national higher education institutions.

In the current paper the authors identify main characteristics of the attention paid by Romanian universities to alumni engagement (through dedicated websites) at the present moment as well as illustrate the case of an alumni association determined to build an engagement plan for its members. The conclusions of the paper can be used by researchers as well as practitioners, from fundraisers to marketing and career coordinators.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. Universities in the new public management era

A great variety of indicators has evolved in past decades around the world to give direction to what the state assumes to be efficient in the higher education system. This has been described as the shift from input control to output control [3].

Universities are assessed based on the contribution they make to their communities, and they are expected to do more with less. Higher education institutions are also expected to meet different quality standards (at input, process and outcome level) and become a more engaged partner in their communities [8]. The introduction of market-like mechanisms (like performance funding) has determined higher education institutions to make autonomous strategic decisions, to create community support for these decisions and to render account of the results achieved.

The biggest challenge for universities all around the world nowadays is to create a balanced combination of vertical supervision, internal control, and horizontal accountability [4]. There are various examples of how universities are placing their stakeholders in a more central position in their primary and management processes. Having representatives from external communities on governing boards, forming advisory bodies, annual reporting, or organizing stakeholder links in terms of customer-contractor relations are the most encountered relationships with stakeholders [3].

The relation with higher education graduates falls in the same pattern and Romanian universities have to start acknowledging and using graduates’ resources to accomplish their mission.

Universities are not only accountable to their various stakeholders, including alumni, but also dependent in a growing manner to the private funding that they can provide [7]. To meet the challenges of a diminishing support from the state, higher education institutions worldwide are encouraged to seek alternative income streams. The more diversified the revenue sources of an institution, the more stable its financial state [5]. The possible new income sources for universities in the context of New Public Management include support from other public agencies, support from business firms, philanthropic foundations, university fund-raising from alumni and friends, student tuition and fees [6]. Romanian universities are just starting to discover their fundraising potential and develop proper skills for it and graduates are a valuable source of support in the matter.

### 2.2. Higher education graduates as valuable resources

The focus on higher education graduates in Romania has its roots in the employability agenda of the government. The blame for the market dysfunction regarding graduates’ immersion on the labour market has been placed firmly at the door of the universities and responsibility for its correction is a task that the state has appropriated to itself [2].

Graduates however can play various roles in campus and contribute through a variety of ways to the advancement of the Alumni Association as well as the university. A very

comprehensive scheme that supports the statement is the one developed by Noel-Bentley & Sollis who identify major roles played by graduates as the following (see Figure 1):

- Alumni contribution to institutional reputation – graduates are the largest constituency group and they play a very important part in the branding strategy of the university by being ambassadors of the institution, as well as affiliating themselves with the institution and vice versa;
- Alumni as resources – graduates can offer their energy through volunteering, they can offer their knowledge as well as make financial donations; graduates can also fill key leadership positions that may influence the image of the Association/the university in the community and attract other graduates.
- Alumni and current students – graduates are important role models for current students, they can connect students to real world experience by playing roles such as mentors, advisors, or guest lecturers;
- Alumni and the university’s strategic priorities – graduates can become solid partners in identifying and supporting strategic priorities of the association/university;
- Alumni role in the marketing strategy of the university – graduates are perfect to recruit new students, promote programs as well as profile the success of a certain program and thus shape the reputation of the institution;
- The loyalty of alumni – graduates are connected to their alma mater for a lifetime, they develop a sense of belonging and pride; graduates also have needs of lifelong learning that the university can fulfil.



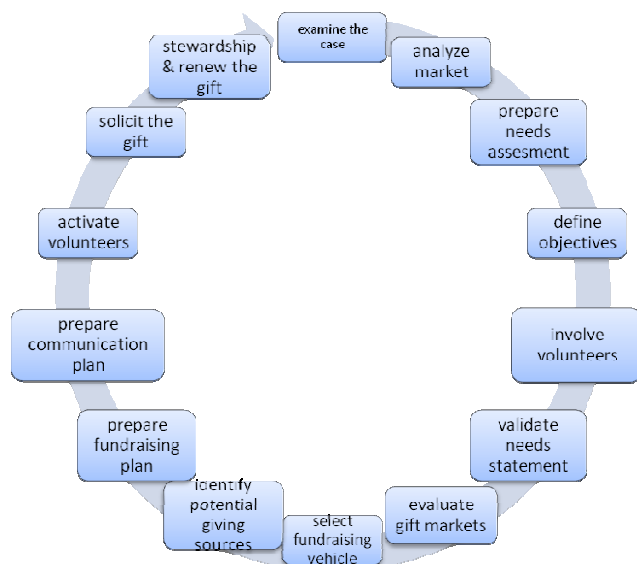
**Figure 1.** Roles of alumni. Adapted after [9]

### 2.3. “Friendraising” & fundraising in the New University

The costs of higher education have been rising, and will continue to rise, everywhere in the world at rates that are substantially beyond the capacity of governments and taxpayers to meet [7]. In addition, stakeholders like alumni and employers are more and more involved in the process of institutional and program evaluation in a way that makes relationship development inevitable. So fundraising becomes an enormously attractive alternative, as it includes not only raising funds from the community but also “friendraising”. Universities can gain resources like time, talent and treasure from their graduates, thus adjusting to the challenges mentioned before and building a much stronger foundation for institutional development and quality enhancement.

The best way to understand fundraising among alumni is to refer to the fundraising cycle. A graduate that is highly engaged with the institution will be more proactive in seeking to help solve institutional challenges, whether these are performance funding or international rankings.

What is so fascinating about the fundraising process is that it encloses all the elements that a Romanian higher education institution has to put in place in order to overcome the present national and international challenges: raise the trust and transparency among its alumni and employers (thus receiving more money in case of a performance funding that includes them), build solid relations with them that count for national and international higher education rankings, and supplement its revenues by philanthropic giving from individuals and companies. Being successful in raising private funds from alumni involves a great amount of preparation, like the one seen in figure 2. The preparation of a communication plan is due to be only the 11<sup>th</sup> step out of a total of 14 steps that are included in the fundraising cycle. The 14 steps that need to be taken by any part of an university involved in alumni communication help define, develop and properly maintain the relationship with graduates as well as with the community at large.



**Figure 2.** The fund raising cycle. Adapted after [10]

The cycle is an effective planning tool to help fund raisers understand the manageable process that fund raising is together with all the effort and benefits it encloses.

Effective fund raising depends on effective planning and rigorous execution. The fund raising cycle illustrates the principle that it is possible to ask someone for his/her support too soon. A premature solicitation usually leads to one of two outcomes: the graduate refuses to make a gift, or the graduate gives a gift that is neither appropriate for his or her capacity to give nor adequate for the university’s needs. Using the fund raising cycle one can avoid these outcomes and pave the way to the preferred response to a solicitation.

The first thing to note about the fund raising cycle is its name, as the fund raising process is continuous. The fund raising manager together with the alumni director must coordinate the various activities necessary for moving the graduates through the phases in the cycle. The second thing to note about the fund raising cycle is the number of discrete steps constituting the whole. Starting with the step labeled "Examine the Case" and proceeding clockwise around the cycle, there are fourteen steps

and the asking for a contribution comes at step thirteen. Planning to make the solicitation therefore involves twelve steps. Skipping any of these steps will end in less than desirable results. Making the solicitation (step thirteen) does not stop the process; it begins it anew. Thus the fund raising cycle is a continuous process of planning for and asking for charitable gifts. Along the way the university succeeds in getting everything it desires from its graduates: commitment to the institution and its educational causes, participation for reunions, meetings with students and survey filling, and gaining friends as the fund raising process is first of all a “friendraising” one.

In order to successfully achieve all steps in the cycle, the university needs to develop feedback systems to measure and monitor the needs, perceptions, wants, and values of its graduates. The better the university understands the exchange that takes place between the institution and alumni, the better it will manage its fund raising cycle.

The first step in the fund raising cycle is the examination of the university’s case for support. The case is the sum of all the reasons why anyone should make a contribution to support the university or engage in its activities whatsoever. Each university must develop its own compelling case and test it in the community to make sure that various stakeholders perceive the same values and action directions as being important.

The next step is to analyze market requirements. The university’s case is tested against the wants and needs of its graduates. If they don’t understand or accept the importance of the needs being addressed by the university in its solicitation, fund raising faces a serious obstacle. Next follows the preparation of a needs statement which is the university’s plan for carrying out its work toward mission fulfilment. This is the justification for fund raising and it has to be done rigorously. The preparation of the needs statement involves the volunteer leadership of the university, especially board members, selected major donors from among graduates, and other volunteers who can affect the organization and its fund raising priorities and process. The next planning checkpoint is the definition of objectives. The programs must be translated into specific, measurable action plans for providing solutions to problems the university addresses. The next step is the involvement of volunteers in developing and carrying out effective fund raising strategies.

The seventh step is the evaluation of gift markets to determine their ability and perceived willingness to support the university’s various causes. This step includes making informed judgments about which alumni to approach and what to ask. While there is plenty of literature and documentation on various stages that characterize graduates’ life, each university has the obligation to test various statements that would lead to an accurate perception of the capacity and willingness to contribute for each category of graduates according to their age, gender, annual income, profession or faculty major.

Planning continues with careful selection of fund raising strategies, while fund raising methods can include direct mail, special events, personal solicitations, recognition groups, as well as special websites. A successful fund raising program will analyze all the methods, test various ones, and evaluate their effectiveness through cost-benefit ratios and other measures of success.

Identifying potential gift sources is the next planning step in the cycle. Each graduate or group of graduates is identified and

qualified by three criteria: *linkage* to the organization, *ability* to give gifts at the level being sought, and *interest* in the organization's work.

The tenth step in the cycle is the preparation of the fund raising plan. The fund raising plan mentions what resources will be raised in what amount for what programs in what time frame using which methods. The plan should include roles for volunteers and staff.

Graduates will support causes they know about and care about. Each university should test whether its graduates are more willing to support certain causes at the faculty level or at the university level. In this matter, effective fund raising communication is a two-way interaction providing a means for graduates to express concerns. Fund raising is about relationships built on mutual interests and concerns. People give to people with causes.

A very important role at this point is played by graduates that are volunteering to support the cause of the institution and be willing to ask the support of other graduates.

The solicitation step calls for the help of already committed graduates who invite other graduates to join in the fulfilment of the mission by contributing with their time, knowledge and/or financial resources. Soliciting and receiving the gift is not the end of the process, but the beginning of a new relationship between the graduate and the university. Proper acknowledgment of the contribution must be expressed by the university and the institution must also mention how the gift will be used (if it is a financial contribution) and demonstrate the highest level of accountability. Properly thanking graduates, or reporting the use of gifts make renewal of the gift possible. The renewal process restarts the cycle, as each university has causes that need a continuous support for many years in order to prove their impact on new generations of students.

## 2.4. Using online tools to engage graduates

One important aspect of engaging alumni in incipient phases of developing an alumni structure as well as throughout the building and implementation of a fundraising plan as well as communication plan is the usage of online communication tools. Having relatively low initial and running costs as well as many facilities that help the identification of supplementary information about graduates (like location, friends, favourite groups or causes) online communication tools (including social networks) are a must-have for every Romanian university and alumni association. Among the goals that graduates associations and universities hope to achieve by using online social communities are: connect with alumni, find currently disconnected alumni, connect with younger alumni, get alumni more involved with the institution, use tools to communicate and share information with alumni through a fast, easy, free method, use viral marketing and promote other institutional initiatives as well as various events, connect alumni with each other, make online social communities a network connection centre for coordinating chapters, clubs, or reunions, and provide career services and professional networking for students through alumni [11]. Thus using well designed and updated websites, as well as social networks can help a lot in shaping the first steps towards building a communication plan with higher education graduates as well as involve one’s graduates as volunteers and pass them through all needed steps in order to become donors.

## 2.5. Setting expectations for alumni engagement in Romania

A key challenge in the continental Europe and especially in Romania is to better position education and to argue that supporting this field may be the most effective way to support the economic growth. European higher education institutions can learn from one another based on good examples that have been set in UK, Germany or Scandinavian countries as well as through professional networks like CASE Europe (Council for Advancement and Support of Education). The phrases “We don’t have a culture of giving”, “We don’t have the time” or “It is easier to write a project for some European funds” are not only false problems, but also threatening thoughts that can affect the institution’s development in the middle and long term.

A major barrier for the Romanian universities when it comes to fund raising among their graduates is a psychological one and has to do with the false impression that Romanian citizens – and higher education graduates in particular – are not willing to support their cause. According to a national survey done by the Association for Community Relations in Romania, 2.4% of the Romanian citizens donated in 2007 for the field of education & research and the percent was quite similar in 2002. Also 9.8% of the citizens who made use of the percentage law scheme (2% of the income tax can go to certain public benefit organizations) decided to redirect the money towards the field of education & research. An interesting result of the mentioned survey is the potential of giving towards education and research in the years to come, as 19.6 % of the respondents declared themselves willing to donate to this field if they are asked to. It seems that individual donors from Romania are ready to support a good educational cause so a well calibrated fund raising effort from a well-known university would be most probably successful.

Apart from the national data reflecting the tendency to financially support higher education causes, of great relevance for the present paper is the International CASE Alumni Relations Survey (ICARS), a study conducted by Council for Advancement and Support of Education among alumni relations directors in order to identify what successful alumni relations looks like in USA and outside it. Some results of this survey are useful for the Romanian universities for two reasons. First, one can take these figures into consideration when developing a strategic plan for the alumni association as well as build a communication plan for higher education graduates. Second, the survey helps establish important parameters to be measured along the effort of building a communication plan and further on carry a fundraising campaign among higher education graduates.

The 2010 edition of ICARS brings into focus the following important results:

- If you want to increase attendees, then have sufficient staff and budget to put on more events and be able to connect with potential attendees via email or e-newsletters;
- If you want to increase your volunteers, then be able to connect with them via e-mail or e-newsletters and have a website and a frequent magazine;
- Your alumni operation would be in top third of the international group questioned by CASE in 2009 on each measure of success if you have more than 210 attendees, 154 volunteers and 485 donors per ten thousand constituents.

A very important observation is that only one in four universities that were questioned was “successful” on more than one measure, and those that are successful on all three variables are labelled as “mature” (around for several years with a stable level of staff and a repeated portfolio of projects). Another piece of information that is very useful for Romanian universities comes from foreign higher education institutions that have a broader experience in following the steps from the fund raising cycle. The picture based on this experience has the following elements: graduates tend to offer their time and knowledge first and then their financial support, so universities have to find ways of engaging their alumni in campus activities that would bring them closer to current students and staff; graduates tend to engage more easily in educational programs that have a direct impact on current students (like career initiatives) and can use their experience (like mentoring programs); current students need to be involved in common activities with graduates in order to help the development of an alumni culture and especially an alumni giving culture; graduates tend to identify themselves more with the faculty/department than with the whole university when it comes to support various causes that come from different organizational levels. While every assumption needs to be tested on Romanian universities, these results offer some guidelines and initial hypotheses for Romanian practitioners.

Romanian public as well as private universities can use international benchmarking efforts to help set initial strategic objectives for engaging alumni as well as shape their strategy in terms of methods and channels used. While the importance of engaging graduates can be seen as of strategic importance in the light of the environmental challenges mentioned in the present paper, there are many ways in which the 14 steps of alumni engagement can be made. The international literature as well as the experience of universities outside Romania indicates that using online tools like websites, e-newsletters, social networks, can and will boost the number of graduates that participate to campus activities, volunteer or financially support their alma mater at reasonable costs for the university.

## 3. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

The present paper has the following objectives:

1. Identify what are the main online facilities that are offered by Romanian public and private universities for their graduates.
2. Identify whether Romanian universities use social networks to keep in touch with their graduates, and what are the main characteristics of social media usage in terms of “friends”, “likes”, “pages” or “group members”.
3. Present the case study of a Romanian alumni association that started the implementation of an alumni engagement plan

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1. Methodology for identification of online facilities for graduates and social networks usage

For the achievement of the first objective of the present paper the first author conducted an online search together with browsing the web pages of all 84 Romanian universities that are either public or private, but all accredited. In order to better scan for the presence of various online facilities for university graduates, the author used the search engine Google to search for key words like “alumni, graduates, association” together with the name of the university. This way the author was able

to also find alumni pages that were not included on a university's web domain but still dedicated to its graduates. The online search was carried out in December 2010.

Apart from offering various sections on their web domain, universities can communicate with their graduates using main social media networks, so the next objective deals with social media usage among Romanian higher education institutions. From all the social networks that are currently used in Romania, the authors chose Facebook and LinkedIn for their current spread and continuous expanding number of users. While Facebook is mainly included in the "personal" category of social networks, LinkedIn is part of the "professional" networks. There were over 300.000 LinkedIn users in Romania in October 2010, as well as over 1.700.000 Facebook users at the same date. The search was done using a personal account and the "search" option of the social networks. This part of the research was also carried out in December 2010.

## 4.2. Case study methodology

All data needed to present the descriptive case study was gathered by both authors between November 2010 and February 2011 and was obtained through the following:

- Content analysis of documents of the Association: Bylaw, internal reports, media releases throughout the years (from 1996 to 2011), reports written for the management of the Babes-Bolyai University, all website versions (three of them, including the present one).
- Conducted two semi structured interviews with two of the founding members of the association. The questions focused on the initial moment of setting the association (back in 1996), as well as the motivation of the members and vision for the association back then.

## 5. RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

### 5.1. Alumni sections on universities' websites

From the 84 universities that have been analyzed, 36 universities have a special section for alumni on their main websites. Together with these universities, 4 more higher education institutions have alumni sections on faculty pages without having a central section on the university website, while another university explicitly includes alumni communication among the responsibilities of the university's career center. On the other hand, 43 universities have nothing on their websites dedicated to their alumni (except from the employability survey that many universities have developed and conducted either online or offline). The authors didn't take into consideration the presence of a special section on the universities' websites for the national project from European Funds that was initiated in the fall of 2010 by the Ministry of Education and deals with the employability of certain university graduates cohorts.

In terms of the presence of alumni communication section on the websites of public and private universities, 29 public universities out of 56 do have an alumni section (roughly 1 in 2 public universities has a special alumni section), while 7 private accredited universities out of 28 have an alumni section (1 in 4 private universities has a special alumni section) (see table 1).

Apart from the facilities mentioned in table 1, there are some associations that include among their plans activities such as development of alumni clubs, alumni magazines, career services for graduates, alumni travel options, alumni awards for students (mainly for academic performance), or summer schools. One association states that it can offer services for

companies that need the specific expertise of the graduates that are part of the association.

Other initiatives that are rather isolated (one or two universities have them) are the inclusion of the Trendence Barometer Study results in the alumni section, details about getting one's diploma after graduation, Google map with the countries where graduates that are part of the association are located, and tourist offers for graduates. Only one university includes a section for donations as well as causes that graduates could support.

**Table 1.** Facilities for alumni offered by Romanian universities that have an alumni section (36 universities).

<b>The section is fully functional</b>	<b>The section is updated</b>	<b>Can I contact the association/club?</b>
YES for 23 universities	YES for 14 universities	YES for 24 universities
<b>Graduates search</b>	<b>Alumni news</b>	<b>Photo gallery &amp; video</b>
5 out of 36 (one in 7 universities)	8 out of 36 (one in 4 universities)	6 out of 36 (one in 6 universities)
<b>Testimonials &amp; stories</b>	<b>Association/club info</b>	<b>Forum</b>
4 out of 36 (one in 9 universities)	(one in 2 universities)	7 out of 36 (one in 5 universities)
<b>Subscription form</b>	<b>How many clicks to reach the subscription form?</b>	<b>Career services</b>
15 out of 36 (one in 2 universities)	2 clicks at 6 universities 3 clicks at 5 universities 4 clicks at 4 universities	2 out of 36 (one in 18 universities)
<b>Events for alumni</b>	<b>Alumni publications</b>	<b>Lists of graduates</b>
6 out of 36 (one in 6 universities)	2 out of 36 (one in 18 universities)	12 out of 36 (one in 3 universities)

### 5.2. Social media usage

When it comes to LinkedIn usage, 23 universities have a LinkedIn group. The biggest group has almost 3000 members, while other groups that are created at the faculty level have less than 20 members. The majority of these groups are created and managed by alumni.

Regarding Facebook, there are 69 universities that are present on Facebook through pages or groups. 48 universities have 10 or less pages, 15 universities have between 10 and 50 pages, and 6 universities have over 50 pages. In terms of fans, 23 universities have 50 fans or less, 15 universities have between 50 and 200 fans, 19 universities have between 200 and 1000 fans, 8 universities have between 1000 and 2000 fans, and 4 universities have over 2000 fans. There are universities that have as less as one page and fewer than 10 fans, while the biggest number of fans goes to over 8000 for one Romanian public university. 9 universities have more than 15 pages and no more than 200 fans (with one university having more than 50 pages and less than 100 fans).

As a graduate that didn't keep in touch with the university for some time but willing to reconnect, only 1 in 2 graduates from public universities can find an alumni section on the official

website of the institution, while 1 in 4 graduates from private universities can do the same. While engaging alumni using online platforms can be the easiest and cheapest way of reconnecting with your graduates, these results indicate that Romanian universities are not yet aware how helpful their alumni can be in front of challenges that each higher education institution has to face.

Regarding the characteristics like functionality and updated information, only 23 out of 36 universities have a completely functional section, while 14 universities have updated information. These results indicate the lack of continuity and ongoing interest for the development and maintenance of an alumni section. The people responsible may be engaged in other departments of the university and be unable to constantly monitor and improve the website.

In terms of content, the most interesting results come from the observation that 5 out of 36 universities have the “graduates search” option while 12 universities have “lists of graduates” on their websites. Considering the fact that there must be a functional database with enough information behind this option, one can state that universities lack a centralized database with updated information about their graduates. In addition, there is a lack of clear privacy options in terms of “who can contact who”, with the extreme situation being the publication of “lists of graduates” that contain not only the name and graduation year of some of the graduates, but also contact information, such as e-mails (two universities had this major privacy problem in December 2010). The chances that all graduates had willingly given their contact information to be published on a public website are small, and even so, should be handled with great consideration.

Another interesting result in terms of web site content is the fact that only two thirds of the alumni associations/clubs/departments have their complete contact information online, forcing the graduates to contact the faculty or the university and ask for more specific information. Together with the fact that more than half of the universities that have a subscription form keep it more than 2 clicks away, one can state that most of the universities are trying to “hide” their alumni association/club/department rather than make it more visible and easy to reach online.

While one in two universities have a description of its alumni structure, the rest of the content strongly reflects the “offline” activity in the university that is alumni focused. One in four universities have alumni news included, while one in six universities have a photo gallery and an events section for graduates. Only one in 18 universities have a publication for graduates (either print or online version), and the career services for graduates have the same occurrence rate.

While universities don’t focus enough on their graduates at the present time, the statistics revealed during the analysis of the presence of universities on social networks bring another aspect of the puzzle to the surface, namely the fact that current students and graduates have the need to affiliate based on their common academic background and feel the need to create various sections like pages, profiles or groups on social networks that can help them memorize the academic experience. This affiliation and identification need is illustrated by the presence of almost 70 universities on Facebook through various pages or groups. The great number of pages with little information on them and a small number of fans (under 50) indicate the fact that the need among students and graduates is not met by the alumni structure that should canalize all this enthusiasm and use it to fulfill strategic development objectives. Seems more like universities have “checked” their

presence on social networks (like Facebook) and oversaw the fact that graduates can be easily and cheaply “touched” in this environment and further engaged in various activities. LinkedIn is not as popular as Facebook, and only 23 universities have a group on this social network, with most of these groups being created and administered by graduates that are not in constant contact with the alumni structure of the university (sometimes this structure doesn’t even exist).

### 5.3. Case study on Babes-Bolyai University Alumni Association

#### 5.3.1. *University of Babes-Bolyai Alumni Association background*

Babes-Bolyai University Alumni Association was founded on the 19<sup>th</sup> of August, 1996, having 105 founding members, most of them staff and faculty from UBB. In spite of the enthusiasm and perceived need to develop an alumni community, there are small activity tracks for the period between 1996 and 2003. The year 2003 brought along certain changes in the board of the association and a new executive secretary of the association was appointed. He was the one involved in the changes that followed that year: the Association received a visual identity through a logo and a functional website, the number of members grew from 105 to 171 and on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April 2003 the boarding committee decided to change the strategic priorities of the organization, focusing more on promoting the association in the local community, and also among UBB graduates that were living outside Romania. The projects that were implemented in the period 2003-2006 while the association had the previously mentioned structure were:

- Lectures held with and for university faculty and staff together with other academic events such as open seminars or conferences;
- In 2003 the association intended to raise private funds to “support the university”, and the poor results were considered to be the fault of the local companies that decided not to get involved;
- Another initiative came in 2003 and was related to the creation of facilities for UBB graduates, like discounts at local companies; a few graduates that had local businesses agreed to offer discounts for the products and services that were purchased by UBB graduates.

In terms of support from graduates & friends, UBB Alumni Association managed to raise donations from 30 individuals as well as companies; the amount didn’t exceed 5000 EUR in the mentioned period. More important than the amount of the donations is the fact that around ¼ of the donors are still friends and supporters of the university in 2011.

Regarding the management of the association, the first board was appointed by the Rector of the Babes-Bolyai University, who was Mr. Andrei Marga, and it was formed mainly of teaching staff from the university. The changes among board members were quite small during 1996-2003, when more members were replaced in the hope of a revitalization of the association’s activity. The year 2008 brought along another major change in the board of the organization, as well as the replacement of the executive secretary. Apart from the board members of the association, each faculty was asked in 2008 to name an “alumni coordinator” that would be in charge with keeping in touch with the Association and work towards the attainment of its mission. All alumni coordinators were named by deans, and some were willing to try out their new roles while some proved to be reluctant to the idea.

### 5.3.2. Babes-Bolyai University Alumni Association mission

As per Bylaw of the Babes-Bolyai University Alumni Association, the Association's mission can be stated in the following manner:

The Babes-Bolyai Alumni Association is dedicated to *promoting* the Babes-Bolyai University by *connecting* with alumni, friends, and current students through programs, scholarships and activities that create awareness and loyalty, *supporting* the ideals of the University.

### 5.3.3. Engaging alumni and faculty

The shift in activity that makes the subject of the present case study occurred in 2009 when the new executive secretary decided to team up with colleagues from Career Centre and the later Fund Raising Office and restart the association's activity. The steps taken in 2009 were meant to build a strong foundation for the association's activity keeping the perspectives open for various later priorities and try to position the association as a resource centre for the faculties and not a competitor/ perceived extra obligation. Reliable database software was fundraised for at the beginning of 2009 (it allows keeping track of all graduates and communication initiatives) and a new website was build. The team also focused on providing deans and alumni coordinators with useful information about the association as well as conduct an internal survey regarding perception of alumni communication, the needs as well as professional plans of alumni coordinators.

Based on the results of the internal survey, the team decided to approach the cooperation with faculties starting with one dean and one faculty and moving on to the next one when results were solid enough.

The cooperation with one faculty lead to the first 1000 contacts in the association's database together with testing two activities that were meant to engage alumni and students in spite of little resources both association and faculty had for them: "webinars" and alumni mentoring program. These activities added extra contacts, but most importantly, grew the trust of the faculty members in the importance of alumni engagement and brought together graduates interested in supporting the faculty and its educational priorities. It also gave the association an "internal comeback" in terms of an activity agenda and visibility among university faculty and staff. It also attracted the first sponsors interested in supporting the association's programs.

The webinars were held between March and June 2010, on a weekly basis. The association managed to engage 5 guest speakers from among UBB graduates who had relevant experience for the covered topics and gathered more than 80 attendees from the faculty's students. The feedback was positive from all parts and the activity is to be carried on as a permanent one in the association's portfolio.

The alumni mentoring program was piloted at the same faculty in the first half of 2010 and the 12 pairs of mentor-student obtained encouraging results, so the team decided to launch the first edition of the program at a larger scale. The 12 graduates that decided to become mentors have contributed with over 150 hours of voluntarily work to the achievement of objectives such as: guiding the student for writing the final paper, helping with the application process for an international scholarship or a Master's program abroad, helping with CV writing and interview preparation, work visits and free participation to personal development training programs.

The association continued to develop its agenda and engaged two more faculties in the alumni mentoring program. The first edition of the program to cover the whole university was launched in January 2011 with the target of 100 mentors and a

stronger internal promotion of the program as well as the association. There was an online platform developed for the program, where students could choose their mentors. The database also grew to more than 2000 contacts that could be reached by e-mail. The number of association members grew to 600 and the graduates who subscribe to the website platform is constantly growing at the present moment, with more than 130 at the end of January 2011.

The website that was launched in the last part of 2010 offers key functionalities to UBB students and graduates that help them reconnect:

- A dedicated section for members, where graduates can search each other and access useful resources such as content of past webinars.
- An events calendar that is also available for members and includes academic as well as recreational activities being organized on a permanent basis in each faculty of UBB and open for alumni participation. This allows graduates to reconnect with their faculties at low or no extra-costs for the faculties and encourages graduates to login and revisit the website.
- The section dedicated to members also contains different modules and widgets that help graduates build a "sense of community" and encourage them to stay longer on the website: an "alumni map", "birthday calendar", forum, etc.
- A special section describing the "alumni network" at UBB, with contact data for each alumni coordinator at faculty level. Graduates need to find all contact information in the same section, not having to chase it around.
- The website and all other applications are open source, therefore used under an open license and with no purchasing costs.

The relevant metrics for the website from the 7<sup>th</sup> of January 2011 when the launching of "Mentor Alumni" program occurred until 14<sup>th</sup> of February 2011 are: more than 5500 unique visitors from 62 countries who spent an average of 3.5 minutes on the website, which is an increase of 266% of the traffic rates compared to the previous period.

The numbers increased also on social networks, reaching over 500 "friends" on Facebook and more than 1200 "likes". The Association has also published the first number of its e-newsletter in February 2011 dedicated to all UBB graduates. The electronic publication is meant to "touch" all graduates and familiarize them with the association and the idea of an "active graduate" that reads news about his/her alma mater and may later support some of its initiatives.

The Association plans to have the first gift solicitation among graduates in the second half of 2011 and the cause to be supported as well as methods used will be decided upon based on a preliminary evaluation of the association' activity and results.

### 5.3.4. Main lessons from present case study

UBB Alumni Association was repositioned in 2009 as a resource centre for both UBB faculties and graduates. The cooperation with UBB faculties in order to develop an alumni engagement plan at the faculty level started with one faculty and expanded based on intermediate results. The Association teamed up with the Career Centre and Fund Raising office in order to expand its first activities: alumni mentoring program and online seminars. Both initiatives engage graduates together with students and bring them closer in an attempt to develop the sense of usefulness among graduates and offer a good example of implication to current students. Both activities, together with online modules on website and e-newsletter are relatively inexpensive initiatives that can be done with few

initial human and financial resources. All programs are built to allow student volunteers to help the team and add value to the cause.

The association made the first steps from the fund raising cycle, still many have to be taken in order to properly identify graduates' needs and preferences and build a solid communication plan. The internal communication and support still have a long way to go, but essential steps have been taken in terms of faculty engagement based on first positive results.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF RESEARCH

The present paper was meant to investigate what are the main online facilities that are offered by Romanian public and private universities for their graduates and whether universities use social networks to keep in touch with their graduates. Staying connected with higher education graduates can bring many benefits for the universities, and using online communication has never been easier and cheaper. There are plenty of open source resources as well as open software communities that can support a small initiative from the university to turn into a solid community. Facebook and LinkedIn, as well as a dedicated page on the university's web domain are main instruments that higher education institutions can use to attract their "lost" and "unengaged" alumni at low costs, as well as "compensate" for the initial lack of human and financial resources. The statistics that have been revealed in the present paper indicate that universities are on the verge of identifying the role of online tools in alumni communication and have taken a few steps in the right direction of engaging their graduates. One can still encounter huge mistakes (like offering private information about one's graduates on a visitors' section of the website) but many universities have made the step of building an association or some kind of structure to deal with graduates and also built the first elements that indicate their interest in alumni engagement. However, this interest must be a genuine one, build not on external requirements from governmental agencies or international evaluation bodies, but on purposeful objectives as well as perceived and measured benefits.

The case study presented offered an insight on first steps taken by an alumni association in order to get from unengaged alumni and faculty staff to "active graduates" and involved university employees. The association applied few key principles in order to prepare UBB graduates for a first gift solicitation.

Key elements to keep in mind when planning your alumni activity would be:

- Go where your graduates are – on Facebook, LinkedIn, etc. Use social networks to find alumni and promote yourself
- Develop online services that are tailored to your graduates' needs – use open software and open licenses;
- Build on a solid model of engagement that fits your needs and can be adapted to your circumstances like the one presented in this paper;
- Get appropriate software to keep track to your alumni; a good database is vital;
- Build an internal communication plan – do you want to go for all graduates and all faculties or maybe for some of them?

- Get everybody involved – bring student volunteers, talk to Career Centre/Fundraising office/marketing department; work with people who would work with you and sponsors will follow;
- Test all international recipes and write your own.

Future directions of research that the authors plan to explore are twofold: on one side, there is a great need for surveys among Romanian universities that do have alumni associations and do try to engage their alumni on various activities. All international surveys and benchmark attempts are not fully compatible with our national institutions and Romanian environment. On the other side, there is an increased need to identify factors that can have a positive as well as a negative impact on alumni engagement in Romanian universities. The initiatives and strategic decisions made by alumni coordinators together with their colleagues from career centers or any other employee that has some responsibility in the area of alumni communication need to be based on reliable data at the national level as well as on examples of good practice across the country.

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