Preparing Flexible Minds for Flexible Careers: What Can We Learn from Our Alumni?

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Northeastern in the New Economy

The career paths of twenty-first century workers will bear little resemblance to those of their predecessors. Globalization, rapid technological change, and economic conditions have made jobs less stable. Corporations need flexible workforces so that they can respond quickly to market forces. Simultaneously, workers have become less committed to climbing the corporate ladder, instead seeking work-life balance, career exploration, and the life opportunities inherent to the New Economy. A recent global study found that among contenders for CEO positions, two thirds said they would prefer not to take the top position, citing work-life balance as the key concern (KRC Research, 2015). Millennials, in particular, place a high value on both their professional and personal lives (Bresman, 2015), and are less interested than their parents in careers that compromise leisure time. Indeed, 45% of Millennials said that they would rather have more flexibility in the workplace than more pay (Taylor, 2013).

Universities seeking to prepare their graduates for the New Economy should take into account these new workforce preferences and career models. We believe that Northeastern is well-positioned to do so. Co-op education fosters flexibility and exposes students to a wealth of career possibilities, while initiatives such as ISLE promise to enhance key dimensions of learning like intellectual agility. Exciting new programs such as Level may also help students gain in-demand skills.

However, we have only just begun to understand how co-op, classroom, and other programs and experiences have helped prepare students for this economy. While we may know something about our graduates’ first jobs, we know little about their career trajectories and how they were shaped by Northeastern. Our discussions with key administrators revealed that poor survey response rates, insufficient data, and siloed areas of responsibility encumber efforts to understand the impact of the Northeastern experience.

Northeastern alumni could help fill the data gap. By reaching out to alumni more systematically, Northeastern could both strengthen alumni relationships and gather information that will facilitate development and assessment of curricula, programs, and services. In an era in which both Northeastern and the economy are rapidly changing, a framework that ensures ongoing, systematic collection of a rich set of information will be critical for developing programs that help current students and alumni fulfill their life goals.

Alumni as an Informational Resource

Alumni can support Northeastern’s efforts to help students achieve career and personal success by providing critical information in four areas: educational programs, career paths, future workforce needs, and the alumni experience.

Educational programs. Alumni-provided information could supplement existing efforts across campus to identify and assess learning outcomes. With additional time for reflection and broader real-world experience, alumni can offer a comprehensive assessment of the skills and knowledge they obtained while at Northeastern. Appropriate questions could be asked systematically across all majors and over
time, allowing for comparative assessments within Northeastern and, potentially, across universities. In
addition, units could develop more specific questions about courses, skills, knowledge, or experiences
that would allow them to better tailor course offerings.

*Career paths.* Alumni could provide detailed information about both the career paths they have pursued
and the outcomes they have achieved. As career paths and life goals change, collecting subjective
measures of success such as self-efficacy and career satisfaction becomes especially important. If
systematically collected and appropriately analyzed, this information could be helpful in redesigning
undergraduate curricula, improving learning outcomes and student experiences, enhancing co-op and
career services, and creating new graduate offerings.

*Future workforce needs.* Because Northeastern alumni take on diverse roles in myriad sectors of the
economy, they are well-positioned to assess industry needs, trends, and skills gaps. If Northeastern
students pursue different career paths than students who graduate from other institutions, the
information alumni provide could be an especially valuable supplement to national surveys.

*Alumni experience.* An alumni survey offers an opportunity for feedback about services and programs
that might interest alumni. For example, what kinds of events would bring alumni back to campus?
What kinds of career services would they find most useful? What new learning opportunities do they
desire? And how can we best keep alumni engaged with Northeastern as life-long huskies?

**Existing University-Wide Survey Efforts**

In the past, the Office of Institutional Research has surveyed recent graduates about graduate school
attendance, current employment, and the benefits of co-op. In more recent surveys sent to graduates
several years out (classes of 2009-11 and 2000-04), Susan Ambrose has worked with OIR and
departments across campus to capture much richer information. These surveys asked for detailed
information about individuals' first and current jobs, the benefits of co-op, and preparedness in key
skills areas (communication, planning, problem solving, analytical reasoning, etc.), while also asking a
few open-ended questions about student experience. Individual departments also were able to ask
questions about outcomes specific to their programs.

These surveys made significant strides toward capturing the types of information that could be useful in
assessing, modifying, and developing programs. However, there is room to build upon this effort. First,
the survey response rate was quite low. Second, survey content could be refined and should evolve as
programs evolve and as related initiatives such as ISLE are rolled out on campus. Third, the scope of
the survey could be expanded to capture outcomes such as career satisfaction as well as data related to
alumni engagement.

**Proposals for Improved Data Collection**

We offer two sets of recommendations intended to increase Northeastern's ability to take full advantage
of the wealth of information that alumni can provide. The aim of the first set of recommendations is to
engage alumni and improve response rates. The aim of the second set is to establish a framework that
will expand and refine data collected.
Recommendations for engaging alumni and improving response rates

(1) **Consolidate surveys.** Many alumni have been asked repeatedly to fill out surveys. We understand that an effort is now underway to collect information about surveys that are being sent to alumni. When this effort is complete, we recommend consolidating surveys as much as possible (both across surveying entities and across time) to reduce survey fatigue. A consolidated survey could include both university-wide questions and questions tailored to a student's major, college, etc.

(2) **Maintain flexibility in point of contact.** Survey administrators should work with departments to identify individuals within departments who have particularly strong connections with alumni. Those individuals could serve as an initial point of contact and/or engage in personalized follow-up.

(3) **Share results.** Northeastern should share selected aggregate results directly with survey participants after the survey is complete. Another possibility may be to provide real-time comparisons of participant answers with those of previous survey-takers.

(4) **Report on next steps.** Alumni might be more inclined to participate if they felt that their answers had a significant impact on Northeastern programs. At a pre-defined interval after the survey is administered, such as two years later, or at the time of the next round of surveys, participants should be told how survey responses have shaped programmatic changes, including at the unit/major level.

(5) **Initiate focus groups.** Surveys should ask alumni whether they are willing to participate in focus groups that could provide more detailed information. This would reinforce the message that responses matter and offer an opportunity for direct engagement by interested alumni.

(6) **Reward survey takers.** Consider engaging survey takers with a promise of rewards such as cash, free or discounted sports tickets, or discounted graduate programs. We recommend that OIR determine common rewards practices among both educational and non-educational surveying institutions.

(7) **Integrate into broader platform.** Rather than linking survey respondents directly to a survey and merely offering thanks upon completion, consider having them enter from and/or exit to a page that contains other information of interest to alumni, such as upcoming Alumni Affairs events, Career Services' support programs, or graduate programs such as Level.

Recommendations for expanding and refining information collected

(1) **Establish leadership consistent with the broad potential scope of data collection.** Leadership could come from the Provost's office, similar to the most recent survey undertaken by Susan Ambrose's office, or it could come by expanding Office of Institutional Research resources and capabilities to include internally focused research that could benefit units and services across campus.

(2) **Fully engage potential Northeastern stakeholders.** Consistent with the approach of the most recent alumni surveys, future survey efforts should include the many potential stakeholders who could benefit from alumni information, including Alumni Affairs, Career Services, CATLR, and individual units on campus. Units responsible for educational programs should be encouraged to integrate alumni surveys into their broader outcome assessment efforts. To promote continued unit engagement, units should be offered comparative feedback and full and timely access to their alumni data.
(3) **Take advantage of on-campus expertise.** In addition to ensuring that adequate expertise and capacity exists in OIR and/or CATLR to provide basic support for survey design, implementation, and evaluation, consider taking advantage of on-campus expertise in these areas by publicizing research questions, describing data collection initiatives, and making funds available for faculty-driven research. For example, faculty members could assess incentive approaches or conduct exploratory analyses of the relationship between program features and measures of career success.

(4) **Conduct qualitative pilot projects, supplements, and follow-up focus groups.** One way that Northeastern could take advantage of faculty expertise is by conducting qualitative studies alongside broad alumni surveys. While surveys can be relatively low-cost, the information collected will always be limited, especially if response rates are low. Qualitative studies offer an opportunity for more in-depth analyses. For example, faculty could conduct academically rigorous interviews of alumni and co-op students the alumni hire into full-time positions to learn more about both the strengths and limitations of Northeastern programs.

**Investment and Return**

Improved alumni data collection will require investment in the form of initiative leadership, stakeholder involvement, and the costs of survey and basic analytical expertise, in-depth analysis, and data collection. Some of this investment could be redirected from existing survey efforts and grant programs.

This investment could improve University relationships with alumni while also generating data that will permit Northeastern to strengthen educational, career, and alumni programs. If successful, this initiative could help increase alumni giving and enhance student recruitment and retention.

**Conclusion**

In addition to providing information helpful for many stakeholders across campus, carefully designed alumni data collection could provide a foundation for broader efforts to re-connect alumni with Northeastern in ways that could directly benefit current students, future students, and the alumni themselves. Improved data collection will allow Northeastern to not only maintain its advantage but also capitalize on it by demonstrating the connection between the Northeastern experience and alumni success in navigating the New Economy.

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