2026 National Alumni Survey

ANNUAL REPORT

Contents

Foreword by Howard Heevner

An old parable in fundraising says: *To get someone's opinion, ask for money—and to get money, ask for their opinion.* For much of my career, higher education embraced only the first half of that wisdom for the greater population. We became adept at asking for money and interpreting the response as feedback. Participation rates rose or fell, channels performed or didn't, and we treated outcomes as evidence that we understood what alumni thought and felt. But transactional response is not opinion, and optimization is not listening. We have mistaken performance metrics for understanding—and missed what alumni were telling us about trust and the kind of relationship they wanted.

For much of my career, I followed the playbook.

We just kept improving processes, reviewing results, and refining strategies. Progress came through revision. Even as donor participation began its gradual decline, we simply adjusted tactics without questioning our foundational assumptions. When first-time donor retention rates began to fall in the early 2000s, we responded with what felt reasonable at the time: better stewardship, more elaborate first-time donor packages, and layered thank-you strategies.

Gratitude matters, but we were offering it disproportionate to the gift—and more importantly, it avoided a harder truth. We were receiving the tail end of loyalty-based giving patterns that were no longer sustainable. We optimized channels. We made incremental improvements. And for a time, those changes produced results.

> We were avoiding a hard truth. We weren't listening to what the outcomes were telling us. The signs were there all along.

Refining what we have always done is no longer enough. The challenges we face are not the result of poor execution. Old systems and assumptions no longer align with how alumni experience their relationship with their alma mater and higher education. At some point, incremental improvement at the margins stops producing meaningful change. It is time to discard the strategy of incremental adjustments and rise to the call for a deeper reckoning.

During my first ever giving day at UC Santa Cruz, we noticed a consistent and surprising pattern. The funds generating the strongest participation were not the traditional, broadly framed institutional priorities. They were the very specific funds that were clearly connected to values, identity, and visible impact. These were outperforming expectations. Who was responding was just as important as the dollars raised. We saw younger alumni, more racially and ethnically diverse alumni, and a significantly higher proportion of women responding.

At first, I treated this as a tactical insight, an opportunity for optimization. But the pattern persisted. What was working wasn't better copy or sharper segmentation. We had turned control of the message completely over to non-fundraising professionals. And, while I would argue it was much poorer content, we realized—it was alignment. These funds gave alumni a way to see themselves in the institution—and to understand how their generosity translated into outcomes they believed in.

When we began testing these same concepts at UC Berkeley, and encouraged others to test them, we saw similar results. Values-driven strategies consistently outperformed loyalty-based appeals. They didn't simply improve participation; they changed who felt invited into the relationship. These approaches expanded the donor base by creating entry points for alumni who had long existed outside our traditional engagement models and therefore could not see themselves in our messaging. This was a strategic insight, and the National Alumni Survey helped understand it as a generational one.

Across institutions and cohorts, the survey data reinforces what practice had already revealed. Alumni—particularly from rising generations—are philanthropic. They care deeply about impact. But they no longer give based on affiliation alone. They respond to opportunities that reflect their values, respect their agency, and demonstrate credibility. Declining participation is not a lack-of-generosity problem; it is a trust problem. We have to earn alumni trust. We can no longer assume it.

At the same time, our field has accelerated its investment in new technology.

Over the past decade, higher education has embraced tools designed to increase efficiency and effectiveness—automation, segmentation, AI-driven optimization, and digital engagement platforms. These tools have helped us move faster and scale more broadly. But too often, they have been used to optimize systems that were never designed for today's alumni population. Without addressing the fundamental fracture in our structures and the damage it has done to our relationships with our alumni, we are likely intensifying the sense of disconnect and disappointment and further breaking the trust that the current model reinforces.

Many of our fundraising and engagement structures were built in an era when alumni populations were far less diverse. Giving norms reflected the lived experiences of a relatively narrow group—predominantly white men whose relationships with institutions were shaped by expectations of access, power, and trust. These outdated structures are being scaled (often through technology) and used with alumni populations that are increasingly female, more racially and ethnically diverse, and more varied in how they experience institutions and philanthropy.

> Technology has made us more efficient. It has not made us more effective, and certainly not more trustworthy.

Efficiency does not repair trust. Effectiveness does not resolve a misalignment between who systems were built for and who today's alumni actually are. Without intentional listening and humility, innovation risks reinforcing the very inequities and blind spots that have driven disengagement.

This is where The National Alumni Survey plays a different role.

This project is not a fundraising instrument. It is a listening instrument. This multi-institutional study reflects a belief that listening—at scale, with intention, and without immediate transactional demand—is an ethical responsibility of institutions seeking people's generosity.

The findings are inspiring. There is a path forward that requires clarity and purpose. Alumni across the country are philanthropic. They need to feel heard, represented, and respected by their alma mater. Donor counts are declining, not because alumni have disengaged from generosity, but because we have failed to earn their trust in a changing world.

Higher education is approaching a donor cliff shaped by generational shifts in enrollment, engagement, and trust in institutions. This moment carries real risk. It also brings real opportunity.

My hope is that the insights in this survey encourage institutions to move beyond refining systems built for a different era and move toward designing relationships grounded in listening, agency, and shared values. If we are willing to act more humbly, listen more deeply, and use data and technology to restore trust—not merely optimize revenue—we will build stronger and more sustainable relationships.

That work begins with listening.

Introduction

The National Alumni Survey (NAS) is a nationwide initiative focused on understanding alumni experiences and philanthropy. Now in its third year, NAS is the largest research study of its kind, with more than 150,000 responses collected since its inception.

The survey invites alumni to share more about their volunteer and giving activity, their levels of connection and satisfaction with their alma mater, what they are passionate about, and what is most likely to inspire their engagement.

This year, we were privileged to collaborate with thirty-one colleges and universities, along with our presenting partners at Washburn McGoldrick, Chris Marshall Advancement Consulting (CMAC), and Parisleaf. We are deeply grateful for their expertise and partnership, and for our sponsors, whose support made it possible for institutions to participate in the base survey at no cost.

> Our objective is to ask, listen, and share what we learn.

With more than 82,000 alumni voices represented this year, and greater diversity among those participating, there was no shortage of feedback upon which to draw. Analysis of the responses reinforces several familiar trends, while bringing to light new and more pronounced findings.

Nine key takeaways are highlighted in the 2026 NAS report.

"NAS was created to help institutions move from assumption to understanding—and that mission remains as important as ever. RNL underwrote the first two years of the NAS project to provide a credible, shared source of insight into alumni attitudes, motivations, and trust. As Encoura + RNL, we're proud to continue supporting the survey in 2026, investing in research that equips advancement leaders with actionable insight and helps the sector respond to a rapidly evolving landscape."

Dennis Syracuse, CEO of Encoura

"We're committed to helping institutions drive outcomes through meaningful engagement. Partnering on the NAS project allows us to deliver meaningful insights that strengthen alumni engagement opportunities and highlight the important and long-term impact of higher education."

Dawn Hiles, CEO of PeopleGrove

"It's important for universities and schools to give value to alumni before seeking value in return. Giving value starts with listening to our alumni and understanding what drives connection and generosity. That's where the work NAS is doing is so important for our field. Those insights help all of us do better for the institutions we serve, and I'm proud that we can play a part in supporting that effort."

Kalyan Varma, Co-Founder & CEO of Almabase

"Alumni sentiment isn't shaped solely by the time someone spent on campus, it's built over years of alma mater connection. Advancement teams need to adapt to the evolving dynamics of their alumni and engage them in ways that matter today. That's core to the mission we have at Givzey | Version2.ai. We're proud to partner with NAS because it's focused on giving a voice to the way alumni want to engage."

Emily Groccia, Vice President of Customer Success & Director of Version2.ai

Survey Responses

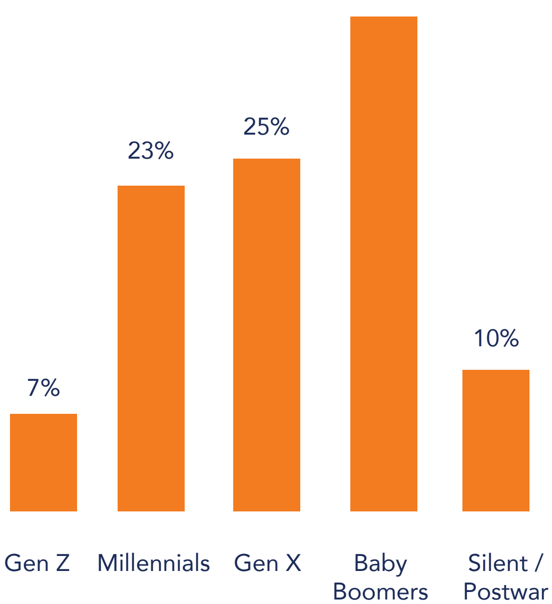
The survey included twenty-two core questions and two optional demographic questions. Survey participants were able to skip, decline to respond, or "select all that apply" to several questions, resulting in variable denominators.

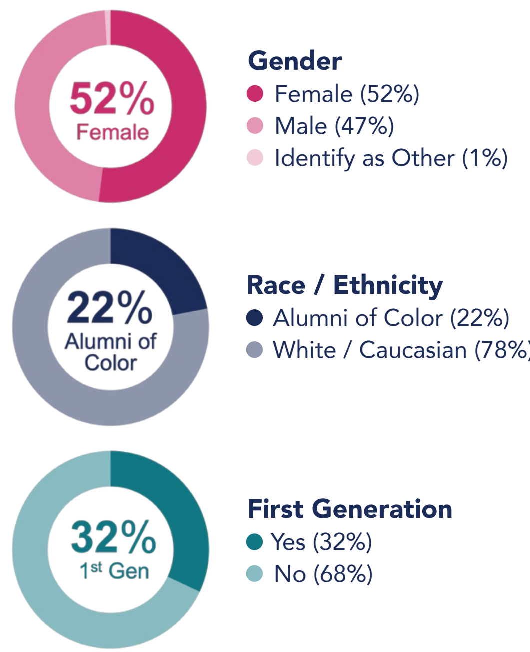
Information about survey methodology is provided at the end of the report.

NAS received record response this year:

82,252 **alumni voices represented.**

Generations



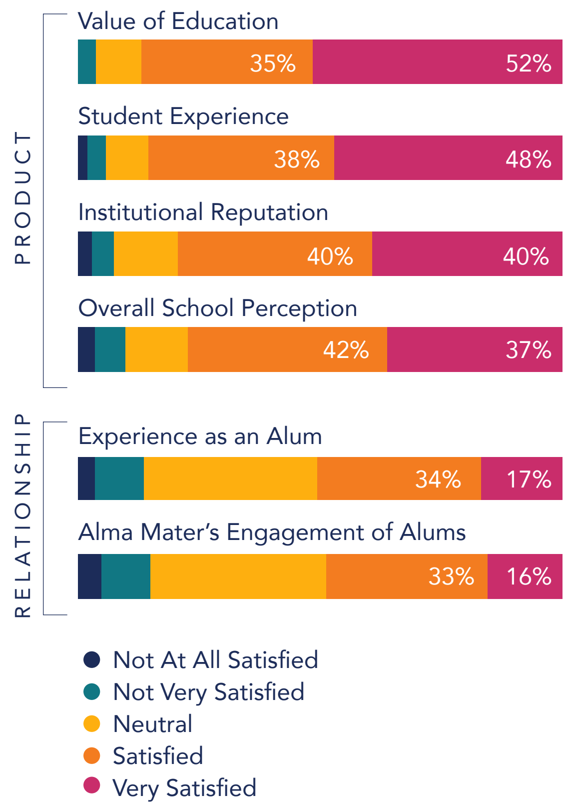


Giving & Volunteer Status

Survey Insights

1 Alumni Feel Good About the *Product*—Less So About the *Relationship*

Across the "feelings" measures, alumni rate the value of their education, student experience, institutional reputation, and overall school perception ***very highly***, with ***satisfied*** or ***very satisfied*** responses clustered at the top of the scale. However, when questions shift from past experience and product—their education—to their *current* relationship, ratings drop sharply.



Strong satisfaction with the product—Alumni feel *satisfied* or *very satisfied*:

- 87% with the value of their education
- 86% with their overall experience as a student
- 80% with institutional reputation
- 79% with their overall perception of the school

Weaker satisfaction with the ongoing relationship—Alumni feel *satisfied* or *very satisfied*:

- 50% with their experience as an alum
- 49% with how their alma mater engages alumni

Sharp contrast between highest levels of satisfaction.

The contrast is most pronounced at the highest end of the scale. Nearly half of alumni (48%) report being ***very satisfied*** with their student experience, compared to just 17% feeling ***very satisfied*** with their alumni experience—a 30-point decline. This drop is even steeper among recent graduates, signaling early disengagement rather than gradual drift.

Indifference or 'neutral' is on the rise.

Shifting away from "very satisfied", one-third (34%) of alumni describe themselves as simply ***satisfied*** with their alumni experience. While not inherently negative, this represents a six-point decline from last year, and places satisfied alumni in a fragile middle—outnumbered by those who feel ***neutral*** (36%) or ***not very*** and ***not at all satisfied*** (13%).

Generational differences raise concern.

Millennial and Gen Z alumni report the lowest satisfaction across every dimension—including educational value, institutional reputation, and student experience. One in five (20%) say they are ***not very*** or ***not at all satisfied*** with their alumni experience, and younger alumni are four-times more likely than older generations to feel indifferent or ***neutral*** about their alma mater's engagement of alums.

IN PRACTICE / WHAT'S ACTIONABLE

Rebuild the Relationship—Not the Memory

- **Stop leading with pride; start with relevance.** Alumni already believe in the value of their education and the institution's reputation. Communications and engagement strategies should shift from celebrating the past to demonstrating present-day relevance for alumni.
- **Design engagement for the "satisfied but fragile" middle.** One-third of alumni are neither advocates nor detractors. Prioritize this group with low-barrier, meaningful opportunities that reinforce connection before indifference hardens into disengagement.

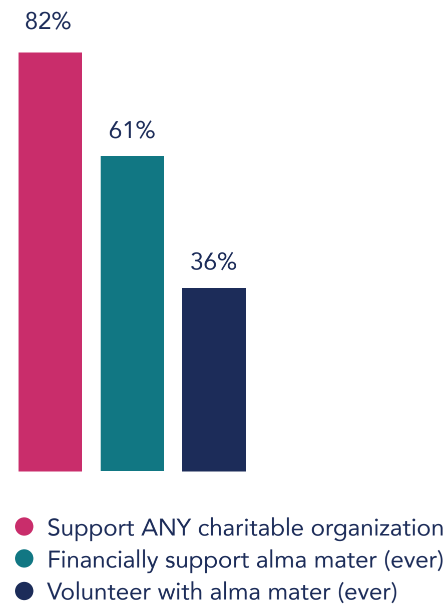
2 Alumni Are Generous, Just Not Necessarily to Their Alma Mater

Alumni generosity is widespread.

A majority of survey participants (82%) report volunteering their time and/or making financial donations. Many are engaged with multiple causes, volunteering with an average of three organizations and financially supporting an average of four organizations in the past year.

When asked about their charitable giving (sum of all gifts made to any nonprofit organization or institution last year), 48% report contributing more than $1,000. Of those, 16% contributed more than $10,000. Alumni give regularly with 51% reporting they donate 'as needed', once per month, or more.

Notably, one in five alumni (20%) support charitable causes through more complex giving vehicles, including planned gifts or bequests, gifts of property or stock, Donor-Advised Funds (DAFs), or Qualified Charitable Distributions (QCDs).



The challenge for colleges and universities: Philanthropy is directed elsewhere.

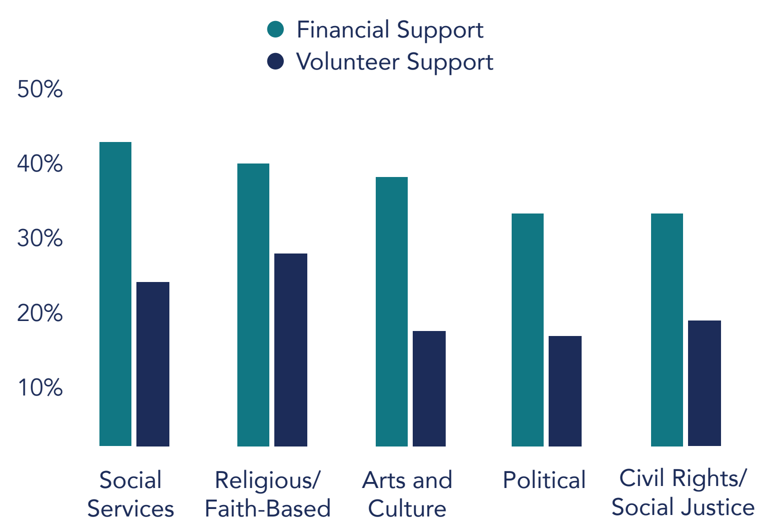
Among those who donate and volunteer, only 35% report giving to their alma mater last year, and just 10% report volunteering. Overall, 42% of alumni don't see their school as a philanthropic priority, a figure that rises to 54% among Millennials and 59% among Gen Z graduates.

Alumni are philanthropic, but higher education is not attracting their support. ***Two-thirds (67%) of alumni who report never donating to their alma maters are actively supporting other causes.*** So are 86% of "lapsed donors" (alumni who have given since graduation but not in the past year).

What causes do alumni support?

When asked where they direct their time and financial donations, alumni report the strongest engagement with social services, religious or faith-based organizations, arts and culture, and civil rights / social justice causes. These areas rank highly across both giving and volunteering. K–12 education presents a slight divergence, ranking third for volunteer engagement and tenth in financial support. This is the area where most Gen X and Millennials indicate spending their time.

Top 5 Causes Alumni Supported in the Past Year



Where does higher education fit?

It ranks lower by comparison, particularly among younger alumni, who are increasingly drawn to other causes. Only 13% of Millennial and Gen Z donors report giving to higher education in the past year. By contrast, 37% gave to 'individual' needs through GoFundMe-style campaigns and 34% supported civil rights or social justice causes. That's encouraging and should help point us in the right direction—it's evidence of values-driven generosity and a strong preference for specific, immediate impact.

Yes, the steady and dramatic decline in alumni participation rates is alarming, accelerates risk, and represents one of the sector's most pressing challenges. However, NAS findings offer clear reasons for optimism. Philanthropy, broadly defined, remains strong across generations.

Nearly nine out of ten alumni from the Silent / Postwar Generation, Boomers, and Gen X report that they donated or volunteered in the past year.

Younger generations actively support the causes and people they care about.

Seven in ten Millennials and roughly half of Gen Z graduates report making a gift or volunteering their time.

74% MILLENNIALS

49% GEN Z

Alumni have not disengaged from generosity; they are simply directing it differently.

Silent / Postwar Generation and Boomers
#1 Social Services and Religious Causes (tie) – 49%
#5 Higher Education – 35%
#12 Individuals (GoFundMe-style campaigns) – 17%

Millennials and Gen Z
#1 Individuals (GoFundMe-style campaigns) – 37%
#2 Civil Rights / Social Justice – 34%
#11 Higher Education – 13%

IN PRACTICE / WHAT'S ACTIONABLE

Compete for Generosity—Don't Assume It

- **Stop treating non-giving as disengagement.** Alumni who aren't giving to their alma mater are often active donors elsewhere. Reframe strategy from "reactivating disengaged alumni" to earning relevance in a crowded philanthropic marketplace.
- **Align institutional giving with alumni values.** Alumni prioritize causes with visible, immediate impact—social services, civil rights, arts and culture, and individual or immediate needs. Frame institutional priorities through these same lenses, showing how higher education advances equity, opportunity, and social good.
- **Offer cause-based, not institution-based appeals.** Replace broad annual fund messaging with specific, values-driven opportunities (e.g., student emergency support, school food pantries, access and affordability, community impact, career mobility) that mirror the causes alumni already support.
- **Design for immediacy and participation.** Younger alumni gravitate toward time-bound, shareable, and socially reinforced giving (e.g., Giving Days, peer-led challenges, collective goals). Make giving feel active, communal, and consequential.

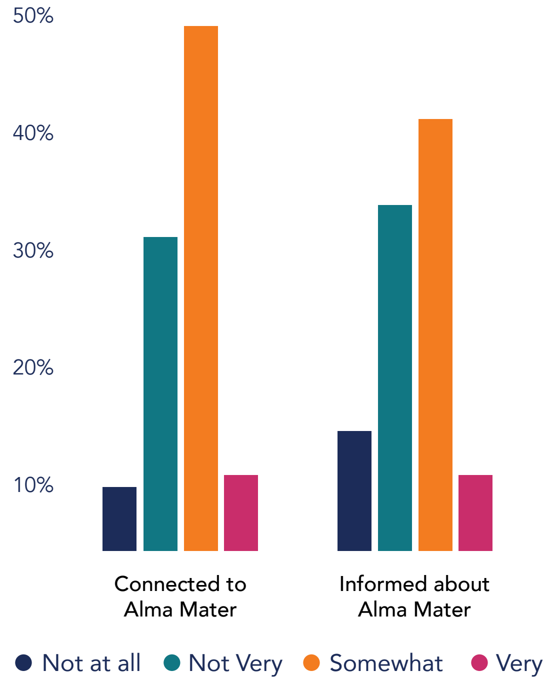
3 Connection and Information are Among the Strongest Predictors of Giving

The "Connected" and "Informed" survey questions provide some of the most powerful lenses in the dataset.

Alumni who report feeling ***very connected*** to—and ***well informed*** about—their alma mater are significantly more likely to give, to give frequently, and to prioritize their institution over other causes. Conversely, alumni who feel ***disconnected*** or ***uninformed*** cluster heavily among non-donors and lapsed donors; many are generous, but again, direct their support elsewhere.

A small population of alumni (10%) report feeling ***very connected*** to their alma mater and ***very informed*** about the institution and its strategic direction. Institutions are most likely engaging regularly with this small cohort.

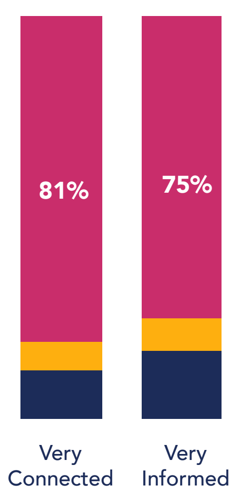
The bigger challenge—and opportunity—is cultivating affinity, trust, and meaningful relationships with alumni who express moderate or lower levels of connection and awareness. That's not a small population. Nearly half (48%) of alumni report feeling ill-informed about their institution, and 40% report feeling disconnected.



The good news: This doesn't mean they are disengaged philanthropically.

More than 75% of alumni who feel ***disconnected*** or ***very disconnected*** financially support other causes and 50% volunteer their time elsewhere.

Strengthening connection and awareness pays off.



Alumni who feel ***very connected*** are twenty-four times more likely to donate than those who feel ***very disconnected***. Those who feel ***very connected*** (81%) and ***very informed*** (75%) rank their alma mater as a top philanthropic priority.

In stark contrast, only 4% of alumni who feel ***very disconnected*** and 9% of those who feel ***not at all informed*** rank their alma mater as a top philanthropic priority.

- Alma Mater Among Top 10 Philanthropic Priorities
- Alma Mater Outside Top 10 Philanthropic Priorities
- Alma Mater Not a Philanthropic Priority

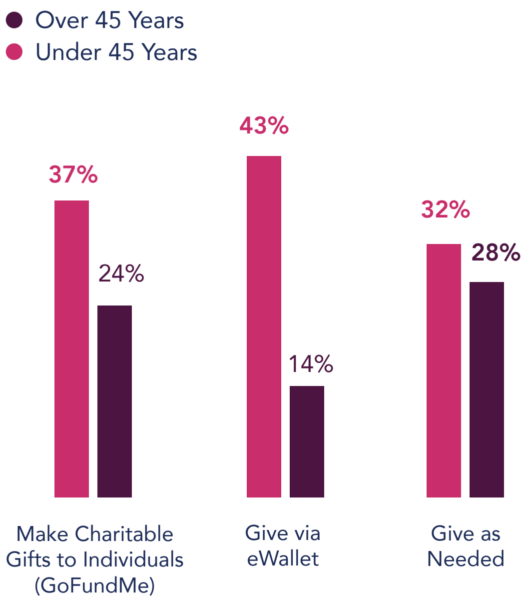
IN PRACTICE / WHAT'S ACTIONABLE

Build Connection and Clarity at Scale

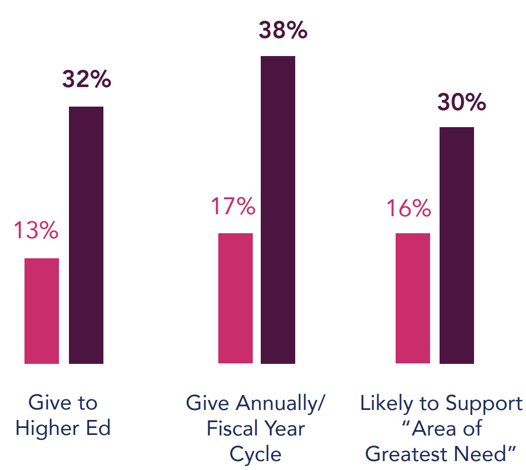
- **Define and operationalize "connection."** Treat connection as a measurable outcome, not a vague sentiment. Establish shared indicators (engagement touchpoints, responsiveness, content interaction). Design non-financial touchpoints (events, volunteering, digital engagement) that intentionally build awareness and trust. Hold teams accountable for moving alumni up the connection spectrum.
- **Replace volume with relevance.** Nearly half of alumni feel ill-informed despite frequent institutional communication. Shift from high-frequency messaging to fewer, clearer updates that explain why decisions matter and how alumni can participate.
- **Make strategy accessible.** Alumni are more likely to prioritize giving when they understand institutional direction. Translate strategic priorities into plain language, tangible outcomes, and real-world impact—especially for non-giving and lapsed segments.

4 Giving Behaviors Differ Across Generations

Younger alumni demonstrate different charitable behaviors than older graduates, both in who they give to and how they give.



Millennial and Gen Z alumni are more inclined to support individuals over institutions, give responsively rather than on a fixed schedule, and expect frictionless, mobile-first giving options.



Key generational differences

- **Preference for individuals over organizations.** 37% of Millennial and Gen Z donors made charitable gifts to individuals (e.g., GoFundMe, Fundly, CaringBridge) in the past year, compared to 24% of older alumni.
- **Lower participation in higher-education giving.** Only 13% of younger alumni gave to higher education, versus 32% of older alumni—a troubling trend for pipeline development and long-term sustainable fundraising.
- **Strong reliance on digital wallets.** 43% of younger alumni give via Apple Pay, Venmo, PayPal, or Google Pay, compared to just 14% of older graduates.
- **Event- or need-driven giving habits.** Nearly one-third (32%) of younger alumni give on an "as needed" basis—responding when a cause or individual requires support—rather than following annual or fiscal year timelines. Only 17% give on a regular or prescribed schedule, compared to 38% of older alumni.

Where do motivations align and diverge?

When asked about the type of giving opportunities that would inspire future giving, scholarships and support for specific departments or majors resonate across all generations. However, general or unrestricted appeals are significantly less motivating for younger alumni.

Only 16% of younger graduates are likely to support the "Area of Greatest Need" or annual fund, compared to 30% of older graduates. Younger alumni respond to projects that visibly improve student success and experience, such as mental health services, first-generation initiatives, and student emergency funds.

The findings reinforce a consistent pattern observed across each year of the NAS—to engage younger alumni effectively, institutions must move beyond general appeals and unrestricted messaging, and instead emphasize timely, impact-driven campaigns, delivered through modern, mobile-friendly giving channels.

IN PRACTICE / WHAT'S ACTIONABLE

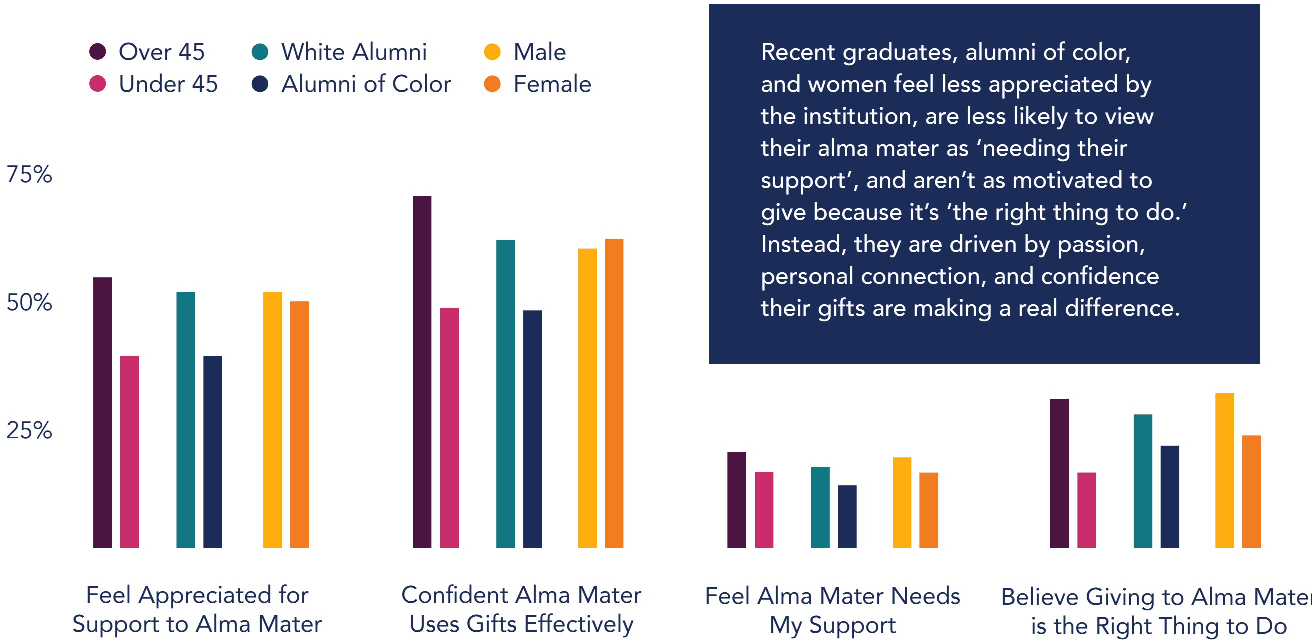
Make it Personal, Timely, and Easy

- **Support individuals, not organizations.** Communicate the needs of the individuals who will benefit from the gift. The story is about helping people, not an institution.
- **Seize the moment, not make the schedule.** Be in the moment. Create opportunities for alumni to give in the moment and feel part of a community that genuinely cares and makes an impact on people's lives.
- **Simple payment options.** Provide quickclick payment options for in the moment responses to a request for help, and e-wallet donation options with immediate stewardship.

5 Recognition and Impact Transparency are Structural Weak Points

Many institutions continue to operate with a gratitude and stewardship model built for a different donor era—one that assumes loyalty rather than actively earning trust and confidence.

A growing share of alumni are no longer compelled to give or volunteer out of obligation or a sense of duty. Instead, their engagement is driven by passion, personal connection to a cause, and confidence that their support makes a tangible difference. These shifts are especially evident among recent graduates, alumni of color, and women. Across multiple measures, these groups report lower levels of recognition, weaker confidence in institutional stewardship, and less motivation to give because it's 'the right thing to do.'



Recent graduates, alumni of color, and women feel less appreciated by the institution, are less likely to view their alma mater as 'needing their support', and aren't as motivated to give because it's 'the right thing to do.' Instead, they are driven by passion, personal connection, and confidence their gifts are making a real difference.

Recognition gaps are significant.

When asked to describe their experience of being recognized for past gifts, 57% of older generations feel appreciated, compared to 41% of younger generations. Similarly, 52% of white alumni feel recognized, compared to 41% of alumni of color. Volunteer engagement strongly moderates this perception: 70% of recent volunteers feel appreciated as donors, versus 44% of those who have not volunteered with the institution.

Confidence in institutional stewardship varies by cohort.

Outside of current volunteers, older generations report the highest confidence that their school uses philanthropic gifts effectively (67%), compared to 51% confidence among younger generations. Confidence drops to 48% among alumni of color, who express the greatest degree of uncertainty.

Perceived institutional need is relatively low across all groups, and lowest among younger generations and alumni of color.

Twenty-six percent (26%) of older generations perceive institutional need and give because ‘my school needs support,’ compared to 18% of younger generations. Twenty percent (20%) of white alumni believe their alma mater needs their support, compared to 17% of alumni of color. Men report slightly higher perceived need than women (22% vs.19%).

Motivations for giving to institutions are shifting away from loyalty-based drivers.

What influences the decision to give? The traditional motivations of pride (31%), duty (29%), and expectations as a graduate (13%) are secondary compared to the desire to give back (54%). Appeals based in “loyalty” and “duty” are also less likely to resonate across generations and demographics. More than a third of older generations (37%) give because it’s ‘the right thing to do,’ compared to only 20% of younger generations. Similar gaps appear by race and gender: 30% of white alumni versus 24% of alumni of color, and 34% of men versus 26% of women cite this motivation. Passion for and connection to a specific cause are more influential for younger generations, alumni of color, and women.

Many institutions continue to operate with a gratitude and stewardship model built for a different donor era—one that assumes loyalty rather than actively earning trust and confidence. A growing share of alumni are no longer compelled to give or volunteer out of obligation or a sense of duty. Instead, their engagement is driven by passion, personal connection to a cause, and confidence that their support makes a tangible difference. These shifts are especially evident among recent graduates, alumni of color, and women. Across multiple measures, these groups report lower levels of recognition, weaker confidence in institutional stewardship, and less motivation to give because it’s ‘the right thing to do.’

Motivations for volunteering are shifting away from traditional roles to hands-on involvement.

Traditional volunteer opportunities such as attending alumni events (33%) or serving on leadership committees (28%) rank lower than sharing career insights (55%) or participating in service projects (39%). Specifically, male alumni show stronger interest in sharing career insights (60%), while female alumni and alumni of color are more interested in service projects (46%). The gap between generations is also evident as younger alumni demonstrate higher interest than older cohorts in both career-focused engagement and hands-on service opportunities.

IN PRACTICE / WHAT’S ACTIONABLE

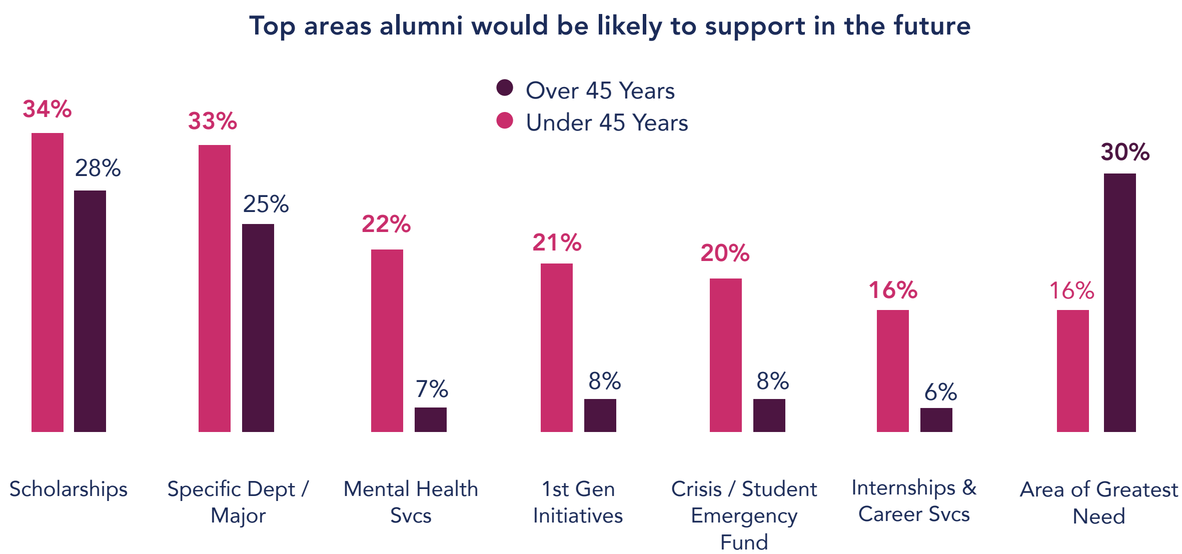
Connect, Create, and Communicate

- **Design volunteer and community connection opportunities that align with giving opportunities.** Connect the desire to give with engagement in the community to make it more personal and fuel the passion.
- **Build trust in the institution’s use of the gift.** Inform the donor how their gifts make an impact. Don’t assume they trust how you use their money.
- **Say thank you how and when the donor can hear it.** Match the thank you message to the gift in communication avenue, style, and timing.

6 Alumni Want Clear, Meaningful Opportunities —Not Generic Appeals

Alumni express a consistent desire for specificity, personal relevance, and opportunities to support projects that align with their interests and values. They are looking for greater choice and agency as donors.

Overall, 'Area of Greatest Need' (general annual giving) ranks among the top three funding areas alumni are likely to support. But it's near the bottom for recent graduates and alumni of color. First-generation initiatives, crisis or student emergency funds, and student mental health services are a much better fit.



IN PRACTICE / WHAT'S ACTIONABLE

Repeat Back What You Hear with Specific Opportunities

- **Ask where their known interest is.** Connect the ask to their desire to leverage their giving as an expression of their personal values. Do not assume that loyalty is the driver of giving.
- **Uncover new areas of passion and ask accordingly.** Develop methods to take in interest indicators and then leverage them. Too often, data sits unused or is used for a short time and forgotten.
- **Build trust one gift at a time.** Begin to develop stewardship strategies that illustrate how gifts of all sizes are respected and leveraged. The critical time in the giving process is the first half dozen gifts. Do not underestimate the effect of "word of mouth" and the power of social media as alumni share their donor experiences. As seen in the 2025 National Alumni Survey, social media ranks higher for younger generations, with Facebook the top platform among Gen X and Instagram among Millennials and Gen Z alumni.

7 Student Debt Matters, But It's Not the Whole Story

Student loan debt is a real and consequential factor in alumni philanthropy—particularly for recent graduates, alumni of color, and women. It often correlates with lower giving frequency, smaller gift amounts, and reduced prioritization of the institution.

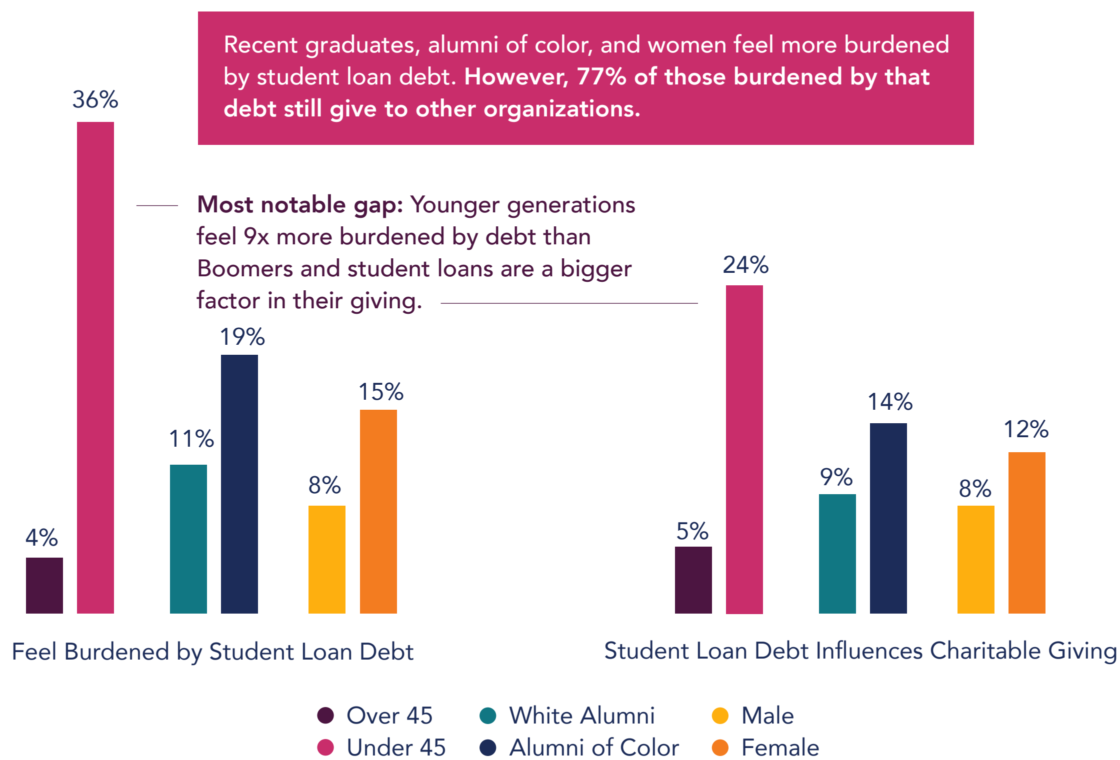
Alumni with debt are making deliberate choices about where their limited discretionary resources can do the most good. For Gen Z alumni in particular, "debt and financial obligations" rank as a top consideration in giving decisions—but not the decisive one. Their student experience ranks notably higher than any other factor, followed by connection to the institution, passion for the cause, and confidence in the impact of the gift.

But debt is not the end of the story.

Alumni burdened by student loans have not disengaged from generosity; they have redirected it. **More than three-quarters (77%) of those who feel burdened by debt still support other organizations financially.**

This creates an opportunity for institutions.

Colleges and universities that adapt how they present the case are better positioned to overcome the "debt roadblock." When giving opportunities are framed around clear outcomes and personal passion, alumni are more likely to view participation as meaningful and worthwhile, rather than obligatory.



IN PRACTICE / WHAT'S ACTIONABLE

Reinforce Sense of Community—We're in it Together

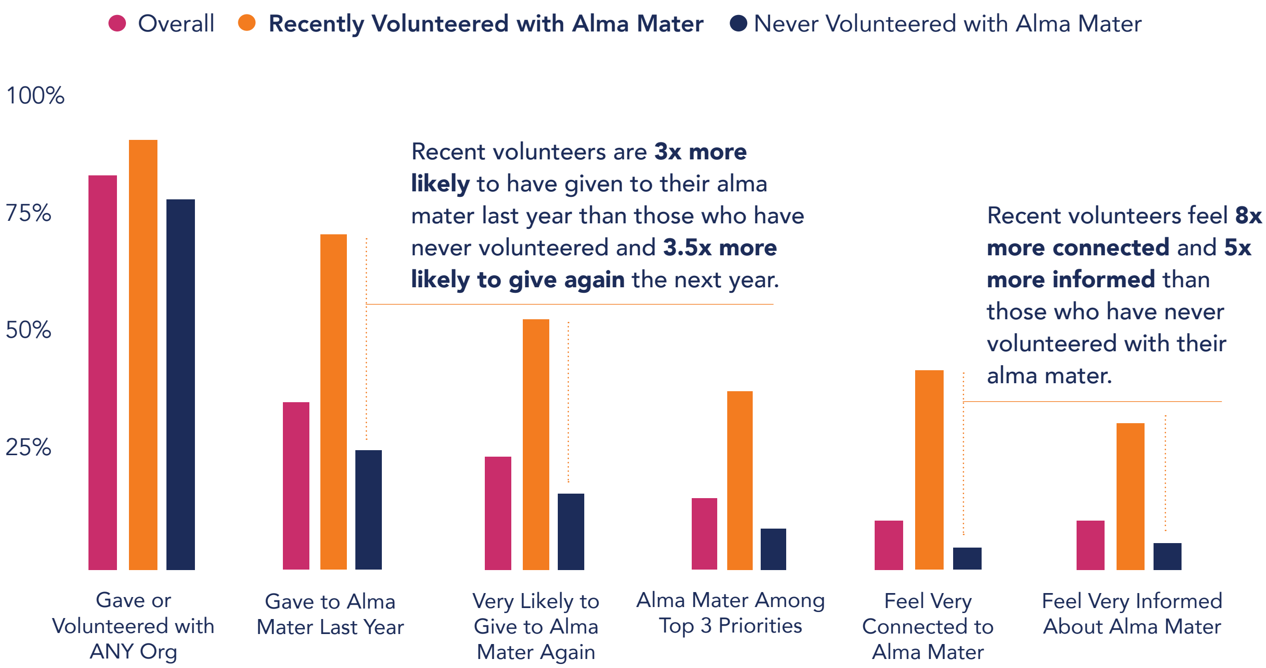
- **Create low-barrier, high-impact entry points** (e.g., $25 – $50 gifts tied to specific outcomes).
- **Frame giving as collective action, not individual sacrifice.** Explain how the collective can have even greater impact and recognize each as part of the collective.
- **Acknowledge debt directly in messaging, without apology or pressure.** Acknowledge there are many competing priorities for alumni.
- **Emphasize immediacy and outcomes,** not institutional need or tradition.

8 Volunteering Signals Engagement and Giving Potential

Volunteering is not a fallback behavior; it is a primary expression of generosity for many alumni. Volunteers—even those who aren't current donors—feel more connected and informed, express greater intent to give in the future, and score higher on 'school as a priority' when impact is clear.

Alumni who volunteer with their alma mater are among the most philanthropic.

Comparing alumni who recently volunteered with their alma mater to alumni in general, you can see the impact volunteering has on giving. Ninety percent (90%) of alumni who recently volunteered with their alma mater gave to or volunteered with at least one organization or cause, compared to 82% overall. Nearly half (48%) ranked their alma mater among their top three philanthropic priorities (vs. 15% overall), 70% gave to their alma mater in the past year (vs. 35% overall), and 68% indicated they are likely to give in the coming year (vs. 37% overall).



Volunteers are generous with their time, talents, and treasure.

Nearly two-thirds report donating $1,000 or more to charitable organizations last year. Based on giving history provided by NAS participating colleges and universities, **average lifetime giving for recent volunteers is $180,768 (three times that of those who volunteered but not recently)**. That's well above the average across the full population ($45,321) and significantly higher than the average lifetime giving for donors who have never volunteered with their alma mater ($13,002).

Alumni volunteers are eight times more likely to feel very connected and five times more likely to feel very informed than those who have never volunteered. They invest both their time and financial resources. So, how do institutions get more alumni volunteers on board?

IN PRACTICE / WHAT'S ACTIONABLE

- **Lower the barrier to entry with clearly scoped, time-bound opportunities.** Younger alumni and first-time volunteers are less likely to commit to standing committees and open-ended roles. Instead, institutions should offer short virtual mentoring sessions, event-based micro-volunteering, and Giving Day ambassador opportunities that allow alumni to engage without long-term obligation.

- **Make impact visible, immediate, and personal.** Volunteers should see the outcomes of their contributions. Closing the loop after events, sharing stories of impact tied directly to their actions, and connecting volunteer efforts to student outcomes builds trust and reinforces continued engagement.

- **Offer volunteer roles that reflect what alumni care about.** A narrow set of traditional roles limits participation. Many institutions have broadened offerings to include cause-based, identity-based, and skill-based roles (e.g., career advising, issue-focused advocacy, project-based consulting).

- **Recognize volunteers in meaningful, inclusive ways.** Recognition should be timely, authentic, and personalized—not a one-size-fits all approach. Peer recognition, digital badges, public storytelling, and acknowledgments tied to impact help show appreciation.

9 Alumni Don't Feel "Known" by Their Alma Mater

A new question this year reveals an unavoidable truth: **Most alumni do not believe their alma maters know who they are.**

Across every dimension measured—intellectual interests, career and life stage, personal interests, and philanthropy—**well over half of alumni report feeling *not very* or *not at all known*.** While alumni from historically underrepresented groups are even less likely to feel known, this perception is widespread and not confined to any single population.

Despite decades of institutional emphasis on career outcomes, only 14% of alumni believe their institution has a good understanding of their current career or life stage. Just 13% say their giving and volunteer priorities are ***very or extremely well known***, while nearly half (48%) feel their priorities are ***not known at all***. Personal interests fare even worse—only 8% of alumni feel ***very or extremely well known***, and 54% feel their interests are ***not known at all***.

Institutions track graduation year, degree, employer (sometimes), student involvement (sometimes), and giving history, but it is difficult to truly know alumni through data alone, particularly static data.

Because career paths evolve, life stages shift, interests change, and philanthropic motivations mature over time, institutions are far better positioned to understand alumni through ongoing, active engagement. Volunteering once again emerges as a powerful differentiator. Nearly four in ten alumni (39%) who volunteered with their alma mater in the past year feel ***very or extremely well known***, compared to just 7% of those who have never volunteered.

Move from feelings to behavior.

We see a dramatic lift in average lifetime giving for alumni who feel ***extremely well-known***. *Feeling known* is not just an emotional metric; it is a powerful predictor of philanthropic behavior.

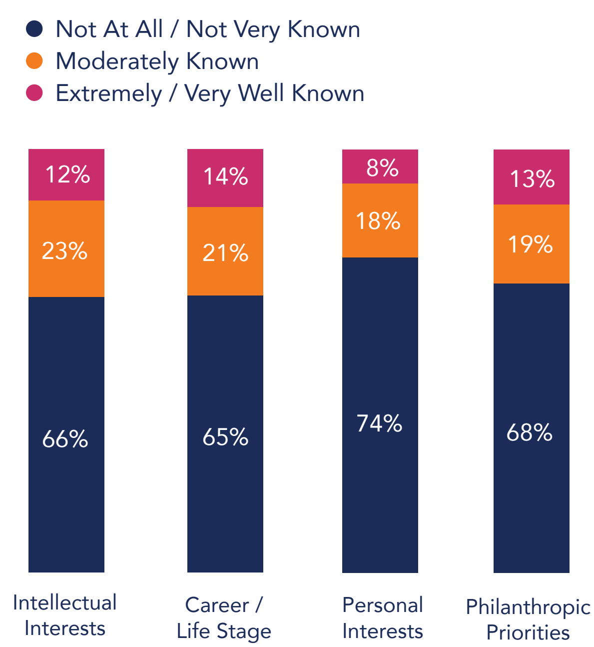
Alumni who feel ***extremely well known*** demonstrate dramatically higher lifetime giving than those who do not.

The average lifetime giving among alumni who feel their personal interests are known ***extremely well*** is **$481,228**, compared to just **$8,092** among those who feel ***not known at all***.

The pattern is even more acute when it comes to philanthropy. Alumni who believe their philanthropic priorities are ***known extremely well*** average **$500,774** in lifetime giving, versus **$3,732** among those who feel their priorities are ***not known at all***.

These differences are striking—and instructive. They underscore that personalization and listening are not soft engagement tactics; they are central drivers of generosity.

If institutions can close the "feeling known" gap—by investing in deeper listening, relevance, and relationship-building—they unlock significantly greater philanthropic potential. If the gap remains (or widens), generosity doesn't disappear; it simply flows elsewhere.



IN PRACTICE / WHAT'S ACTIONABLE

- **Shift from static records to active signals.** Career stage, interests, and philanthropic priorities change (often quickly) and must be refreshed through engagement, not inferred from legacy data.
- **Normalize structured check-ins at life-stage moments.** Build lightweight outreach tied to predictable transitions (e.g., 1, 5, 10 years post-graduation; job changes; geographic moves, retirements). Ask a few purposeful questions: What matters to you now? How do you want to stay involved? What kinds of causes motivate you? Responses should be fed directly into advancement workflows, not sit in survey files.
- **Make listening visible.** Close the loop by explicitly referencing what alumni have shared ("Because you care about…"). Feeling known requires evidence, not inference.
- **Treat volunteering as an intelligence strategy, not just engagement.** Volunteering dramatically increases the likelihood alumni feel known. Design volunteer roles that match alumni interests and help surface preferences and motivations.
- **Stop equating transactions with understanding.** Giving history explains what happened, not why. Embed short reflective prompts into stewardship, thank-you communications, and follow-ups to surface motivations while goodwill is high.
- **Reward engagement with relevance, not volume.** Fewer, more personalized touchpoints outperform frequent, generic communications—especially for high-potential donors.
- **Align personalization with institutional needs.** Match giving opportunities to the causes alumni say matter most, rather than defaulting to generalized institutional needs. Personalization is not a courtesy; it is a growth strategy and the upside is substantial. Alumni who feel known show exponentially higher lifetime giving.

Putting it All Together

What's Next

How can we act on the data? How can we influence and lead transformational change? When we zoom out, the data tells a coherent story.

> Higher education has not lost alumni goodwill, but it has lost its default claim on alumni generosity.

Alumni continue to value their education and believe in philanthropy. What has changed is trust—institutions must now earn it, rather than assume it. Across all nine insights, alumni consistently signal the same shift—relevance over tradition, clarity over frequency, and agency over obligation.

The National Alumni Survey exists to surface that truth. It is not a fundraising tool. It is a listening instrument. And it points to a small set of practices that distinguish the institutions rebuilding trust from those refining systems built for a different era.

This moment carries real risk for higher education—but also real opportunity.

Institutions willing to listen more deeply, act more humbly, and align strategy with how alumni experience trust today can rebuild participation and create more sustainable philanthropic futures.

Possible institutional responses to these survey findings:

- Treat listening as core infrastructure, embedding curiosity into everyday engagement rather than relying on episodic surveys.
- Think about how an individual's experience with an institution is a relationship—not static, but dynamic with changes reflecting the individual's evolving life.
- Redesign the philanthropic offer before optimizing the ask.
- Lead with clear, values-aligned opportunities rather than generic appeals.
- Elevate volunteering from a peripheral activity to a primary strategy for connection and insight.
- Expand how success is measured, tracking connection, information, recognition, and feeling known as leading indicators of future generosity.

> The work begins and continues with listening.

With Gratitude

Special thanks to all participating colleges and universities.

Alfred University
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Elizabeth City State University
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Wayne State University
Western Kentucky University
Wheaton College (MA)
Whitman College
Wingate University

Composition of Schools

Carnegie Classification: 9 Baccalaureate, 7 Master's, 15 Doctoral
Control: 19 Private, 12 Public

Presenting Partners

CMAC
Washburn McGoldrick

CMAC and **Washburn McGoldrick** became the lead partners in the National Alumni Survey in Fall of 2025, combining efforts to increase the number of participating institutions by 50% and introducing national benchmarking—providing insights that will bring value for years into the future.

Parisleaf [ ]

Parisleaf joined the National Alumni Survey as a lead storytelling and design partner in 2026, shaping how insights are translated into clear, compelling narratives and visual experiences. Through intentional design and data storytelling, Parisleaf helped ensure the findings are not only understood, but felt—extending the reach and resonance of the survey for years to come.

Q & A with Presenting Partners

Q: What would you suggest to an institution to build a program that creates better opportunities to understand what alumni are telling us?

Chris Marshall (*CMAC*): Institutions need to move from episodic listening to continuous feedback loops—using surveys, digital behavior, events, and frontline insights together, not in silos. Just as important, alumni need to see that their input leads to action; listening only matters when it visibly shapes decisions, priorities, and engagement.

Bonnie Devlin (*Washburn McGoldrick*): The NAS findings suggest great opportunity surrounding volunteerism. Based on the benefits of volunteerism noted in the NAS data, review your current volunteer offerings. Develop new, accessible and flexible ways for alumni to connect and to feel known. Survey regularly. And don't overlook the value of campus partners – not only Alumni Engagement and Advancement staff – in connecting and knowing your alumni better.

Q: How should institutions leverage survey data to tell their story better?

Chad Paris (*Parisleaf*): Institutions should use survey data to understand what motivates today's donors to give to higher education, including how priorities differ across generations and how expectations around impact, transparency, and relevance are evolving. When those insights shape storytelling, donors are more likely to see themselves in the mission and understand how their support advances student success and creates meaningful, long-term impact.

Q: How is values-based storytelling different from traditional loyalty storytelling?

Chad Paris (*Parisleaf*): Traditional loyalty storytelling in higher education often looks to the past, rewarding people for what they've already done. Values-based storytelling looks ahead, centering shared beliefs about access, opportunity, and impact, and inviting donors to give not out of habit or obligation, but because the mission aligns with who they are and the future they want to help shape.

Q: Why does NAS matter to the industry and our alumni?

Bonnie Devlin (*Washburn McGoldrick*): NAS provides a clear pathway for colleges and universities to know their alumni better. Instead of staying mired in collective wringing of hands over the decline in alumni giving, institutions can use the NAS insights to build deeper, more authentic and meaningful relationships with their graduates. We encourage advancement leaders to use the NAS report to educate campus leaders and governing boards about these important findings and the implications for their schools. Given the intense political and economic pressures on higher education, institutions who can adapt their alumni programs will reap greater advocacy, connectedness, and financial support.

Chris Marshall (*CMAC*): NAS brings clarity and credibility to alumni engagement by providing a common framework for measuring impact. More importantly, it signals to alumni that their relationship with the institution—and their voice—truly matters.

Chad Paris (*Parisleaf*): NAS helps bridge a widening gap between institutions and their alumni. Listening at this scale teaches us how to rebuild trust and inspire generosity across every generation. It also demonstrates how the next wave of donors responds to story, meaning, and purpose, which has tremendous implications for the entire nonprofit field. That is why I'm proud that Parisleaf supports this work–it helps shape the future of philanthropy and strengthens the relationships that make it possible.

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With more than 30 years of higher education fundraising experience, Howard currently serves as executive director of annual programs at the University of California, Berkeley. He has previously held advancement leadership roles at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Penn State University, DePaul University, the University of Michigan, and the University of Iowa where Howard began his career.

A frequent speaker at Council for Advancement and Support of Education conferences, he serves on the CASE Commission on Philanthropy and authored "Rethinking the Donor Pipeline" for CASE Currents (July 2025). Howard also consults with Chris Marshall Advancement Consulting and holds degrees from Iowa and Penn State, along with a DEI certificate from Cornell University.

Sarah Kleeberger

Sarah has spent 25 years advancing philanthropy as a practitioner, fundraiser, and consultant. Through Encoura + RNL, she has supported hundreds of institutions and organizations across the country and led the design of signature solutions including the RNL360 analysis and constituent surveys. Today, she delivers consulting and analytics services that help partners turn alumni and donor data into practical action that drives stronger engagement and outcomes.

Survey Methodology & Responses

National Alumni Survey data were collected beginning on September 30, 2025. Personalized invitations were sent in batches until November 1st. Overall, 2,104,487 alumni from 31 colleges and universities received an invitation to participate. Reminders to non-respondents were sent one and two weeks after the initial email invitation. The survey closed on November 26. The analysis in this report is based on the 82,252 responses received by that date.

Twenty-two core questions and two optional demographic questions were included in the survey. Not all participating institutions included the optional questions (race / ethnicity and gender identity). Survey participants were able to skip, decline to respond, or "select all that apply" to several questions, resulting in variable denominators. The average completion time was eight minutes, including time for the open-ended responses.

The margin of error for the National Alumni Survey responses is +/- .3% (three-tenths of a percent) at a 95% confidence level and +/-.4% (four-tenths of a percent) at a 99% confidence level.

The acceptable margin of error in survey research is +/- 4.0% at a 95% confidence level.

The margin of error is a measure of the accuracy of the results. While response rates are frequently cited as a measure of a survey's "success," the margin of error is the most important statistic. A margin of error of four-tenths of a percent at 99% confidence level indicates that we are 99% certain that the results are within four-tenths of a percent (plus or minus) of the results we would have observed if we had responses from all 2.1 million alumni.

Assumptions about generation were based on age shared by alumni who participated, and birth dates shared by NAS participating institutions. The term "younger generations" or "rising generations" refers to Millennials (born 1981-1996) and Generation Z (born 1997-2012). The term "older generations" refers to the Silent / Postwar Generation (born 1928-1945) and Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964). Silent / Postwar, Baby Boomers, and Generation X alumni (born 1965 - 1980) are included in the "over 45 yrs" cohort; Millennials and Gen Z alumni are in the "under 45 years" cohort.

The majority of survey responders identified as either Female (52%) or Male (47%). A small portion (1%) identified as Transgender Male, Transgender Female, Non-Binary, Gender Variant / Non-conforming, or Prefer to self-describe.

Survey responders self-identified as white or Caucasian (78%), Asian (5%), Black or African American (5%), Hispanic or Latino (5%), Asian-American (3%), Native American (1%), Middle Eastern or North African (1%), Alaska Native (<1%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (<1%), and Prefer to self-describe (<1%). Because of the sample size, we grouped responses from underrepresented backgrounds in this report. However, we acknowledge the need to review results by each race and ethnicity.

How to cite this report

2026 National Alumni Survey Report. Available at **www.cmac.me/2026-nas-results**

Go further.

Scan here to download the full report and express your interest in participating in the survey next year.