




## Review of *Engaging International Alumni as Strategic Partners* by Gretchen Dobson and Sandra Rincon

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### Abstract

About 1.1 million international students were enrolled in U.S. institutions in the 2019–2020 academic year (Institute of International Education, 2021). Given limited work visas and the ever-changing political climates that impact migration, most international students will return to their home countries and will be unable to remain connected with alumni activities in their former host countries. A few institutions have attempted to maintain relationships with these former international students through their alumni relations office. The book *Engaging International Alumni as Strategic Partners* offers innovative ideas and approaches on how institutions can effectively develop, grow, and sustain such programs of engagement and why institutions should be strategic in their engagement with international alumni.

### Review

Rincon, S., & Dobson, G. (2021). *Engaging international alumni as strategic partners*. NAFSA, Association of International Educators.

The intended audience for this book includes deans and managers of international programs, international education professionals, directors of international enrollment management, international student offices, directors of alumni relations programs, faculty, and graduate students eager to expand their knowledge of the field and conduct research in international students/alumni relations. Ultimately, I believe that this book is most beneficial to directors of international alumni relations programs and senior university executives who have the power to leverage institutional resources to effect the changes proposed in the book.

Chapter 1, “Why higher education should engage international alumni,” provides four reasons why institutions of higher education (IHEs) should invest in an international alumni relations program: (a) international alumni can serve IHEs service mission, which is the service of society; (b) international alumni

networks have the potential to attract new international students, adding to talent and innovation; (c) such a program can have an economic impact for the university; and (d) the program would support global problem solving that supports Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This chapter makes a strong case for the development of an international alumni chapter, sets up the context for chapter 2, and raises the reader's interest in how an international alumni chapter can be developed.

Chapter 2, "International Alumni Relations Development," elaborates on six strategies for building an international alumni program: (a) define international alumni and roles; (b) set up alumni chapters organized either by academic discipline or professional themes; (c) develop chapter governance consisting of mission and objectives, leadership, professional staffing, volunteer management, and financial planning; (d) provide university support for the chapters (e) map internal and external stakeholders; and (f) define key performance indicators/return on investment. In this chapter, the authors emphasize the need to garner buy-in amongst top university management and administrative staff and provide them with justification for why they should invest in an international alumni relations program. The authors provide a case study of an institution in Belgium and how they followed these steps to gain institutional buy-in, justify costs, and build a successful alumni program. This chapter is the most innovative piece of this book and is very useful for any institution within and outside the United States that needs a model to follow in building its own program.

Chapter 3, "A Framework for Growing and Maintaining International Alumni Engagement," explained how IHEs can engage international alumni at the individual level. This chapter introduces the reader to the LEARN model for Alumni Relations—**L**ocate international alumni; **E**ngage them through intentional programming; **A**sk them to serve as volunteers; **R**ecognize their contributions and successes; **N**urture two-way relationships to meet their needs. This simple but effective format is supported with case studies from universities that have built successful programs over the years. The components included in this chapter offer significant benefits to international education practitioners seeking to apply a holistic framework to their work. The authors discuss every aspect of this framework in a way that effectively presents their ideas as a tool that can guide practice.

Chapter 4, "International Alumni Ambassador Programs," offers suggestions for establishing and facilitating an international alumni ambassador program. This chapter addresses the important aspects of developing such programs, including how to train, recognize, and sustain individuals in such roles, as well as how to evaluate the program's success by using strong metrics and performance measures to determine perceived benefits. An important contribution of this chapter is how to include international parents and family members as active international ambassadors. The final section of the chapter discusses how to develop strong metrics and the importance of tracking retention and satisfaction of the program.

Chapter 5, "Transformational Philanthropy: Alumni Giving to Advance the International Agenda," is written by Maria Gallo and Kevin Flaming. Initially, the authors state that "alumni can be involved in philanthropic giving by volunteering their time and talent, and these nonmonetary contributions can have as much, or even more of a profound impact on the internationalization imprint" (p. 73). However, they later clarified that the chapter focused on fundraising when they state that "despite this broadened definition of philanthropy as time, talent, and treasure, this chapter focuses on fundraising with an emphasis on transformational philanthropy" (p. 74). In this chapter, the authors provide a conceptual framework for transformational philanthropy and examine how the overlap between three strategic elements enables transformational philanthropy: (a) the anchor (the institution's mission, values, and strategy); (b) the landscape (institutional context and constituents); and (c) the lens (the institution's international strategy). A case study of the University of Michigan's Pan-Asia Alumni Scholarship, established in 2014 by an alumnus in Hong Kong, is provided. It is impressive to read about how this alumni group has now raised more than \$250,000 and awarded six scholarships to Asian students.

Chapter 6, “The Roles of International Alumni: Perspectives from the Field,” is divided into four sections. Each section provides case studies and examples from professionals in the field about cultivating and sustaining international alumni relationships. The section on brand management offers recommendations on how to build and evolve a brand, leverage recent graduates as international alumni ambassadors, and the creation of connections with students and alumni as a brand management tool. The section on attracting and retaining talent highlights several examples and case studies of how international alumni can assist in international recruitment. The third section on employability provided case studies that portrayed how international alumni served as employers, mentors, and advisors to current students. The final section on social responsibility presented ways in which international alumni networks served as social innovators by creating collaborations with start-ups, larger companies, and academic researchers.

## Evaluation

### Positive Critique

*Engaging International Alumni as Strategic Partners* is organized into six chapters that effectively and coherently present the authors’ ideas. What I appreciated most about this book is the easy-to-read and implement style in which it is written and how efficiently the authors present their ideas. The step-by-step process of this book makes it easy to follow and replicate at the institutional level regardless of the size of the institution. This book provides an easy-to-follow model for institutions seeking to establish an international alumni relations program. It achieves this by not only convincing its readers about the necessity of such a program but also by providing directions, strategies, and case studies that showcase how such programs can be successfully developed and sustained. It is noteworthy that this book was published in 2021, post-COVID and its ideas are both relevant and timely.

This book provides several important implications and directions for future research on international students and alumni. The LEARN model discussed in Chapter 3 and the various frameworks for growing international alumni relations make significant contributions to theory development in international student research and practice for higher education professionals. Following the frameworks outlined in this book will help researchers in further developing theoretical and conceptual frameworks for future studies on creating and maintaining international alumni programs. Many studies analyze the experiences and outcomes of international students while on the U.S. or host country campus. However, a gap exists in the literature about their transitions and experiences outside of the United States or other host countries. This is partly due to the unavailability of data for these groups of students after they return to their home countries. For example, the Survey of Earned Doctorates and the Survey of Doctoral Recipients collected by the National Science Foundation only provide intended post-graduation plans of students as this data is collected shortly before graduation. Establishing and sustaining an alumni relations program could potentially allow researchers to track these students after they return home and create meaningful data for future research on international students’ post-graduation experiences, trajectories, and assessment of the impact of their international education.

### Negative Critique

While the ideas presented in Chapter 5 are truly innovative, I will note a limitation of this chapter. The authors do not address international wage differentials and economics that may prevent students from poorer countries from participating in transformational philanthropy. A comparison of the wages of workers with the same level of education or performing similar occupations across countries has revealed massive gaps between rich and poor countries (Pritchett & Hani, 2020). This is worsened when the cost of the education or training is the same or even higher, as in the case of international students, but the benefits (wages) are significantly lower because of international labor market imperfections (occupational immobility,

geographical immobility, discrimination, etc.). Hence, an undergraduate student from a poor country like Burkina Faso, having paid tuition and international fees for four years but who is unable to work in the United States after graduation because of H-1B caps and limited work visas, will invariably be presented with a much lower wage than their domestic counterparts and even other international students from richer countries like Canada and some Asian countries. The combination of “unrecouped investments” in their international education and lower wages may effectively prevent such students from contributing their financial resources. Another issue that may impact alumni giving is the issue of competition between the host institution and other “urgent matters” requiring philanthropy in the home country. This may be more applicable to students from poorer countries. There is also the issue of competition between the institution and other institutions attended by the students. This may be applicable to graduate students and students who attended more than one institution in the host country before returning home. These external factors may impact monetary transformational philanthropy even after all three strategic elements (anchor, lens, and landscape) are aligned.

## Summary

In *Engaging International Alumni as Strategic Partners*, Rincon and Dobson have developed a comprehensive model with easy-to-use methods for developing, growing, and sustaining an international alumni network. This book is a prescription for institutions of higher education across the world and would be useful to graduate students, faculty, deans, and senior administration as well as the office of international students and scholars.

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