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# The Importance of University Traditions And Rituals in Building Alumni Brand Communities and Loyalty

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# THE IMPORTANCE OF UNIVERSITY TRADITIONS AND RITUALS IN BUILDING ALUMNI BRAND COMMUNITIES AND LOYALTY

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this study is to expand the literature and determine factors that impact alumni giving and loyalty at institutions of higher education. Specifically, this research aims to identify a relationship between university traditions and rituals, the relationships of an alumni brand community, and loyalty toward an institution of higher education. This research proposes that a university, as a branded institution, constitutes a brand community, and that traditions and rituals, an important component of brand communities, can serve as a means by which students engage on campus and participate in a university's brand community and, in turn, become active and giving alumni of a university. We propose that the greater the perception of alumni that a university has valued, well-established traditions and rituals, the greater their brand community relationships and intended behaviors associated with loyalty.*

*The research was conducted in the context of the "University," a regional, comprehensive state university in the Midwest. A survey was conducted with alumni of the University to test a series of six hypotheses. Statistical analyses of MANOVA, ANOVA, and independent t-tests found support for all hypotheses; the mean scores for all four brand community relationships, overall brand community integration, and for four loyalty measures were all significantly different. Alumni who perceive that the University has valued, well-established traditions and rituals perceive stronger alumni-product, alumni-brand, alumni-institution, and alumni-alumni relationships, perceive a stronger overall integration within the alumni brand community, and exhibit stronger behaviors associated with loyalty than alumni who do not perceive that the University has valued, well-established traditions and rituals.*

*The results from this analysis provide theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the contribution of the research reported here is considering the importance of traditions and rituals in alumni brand communities and loyalty, a concept not addressed in previous research. Research has demonstrated that brand community integration is an influential contributor to desired marketing outcomes of institutions of higher education, both large and small. So, university initiatives that enhance and strengthen alumni brand community relationships are vital. Further, given the economic climate in higher education today, it is also vital that universities foster active and dedicated alumni as to garner financial support. Future research may incorporate the role and impact of additional constructs, such as nostalgia, on university traditions and rituals and alumni brand community relationships, expand the study beyond the University studied here, and expand the conceptualization and measurement of the four alumni brand community relationships.*

*Practically, suggestions for universities' marketing strategies and tactics are provided. Alumni associations, in particular, should be viewed as strategic, vital assets of*

*universities and serve as keepers of traditions and rituals by supporting active student alumni groups and promoting the importance of traditions and rituals. Further, alumni associations should create new, cultivate existing, and revitalize old traditions and rituals. Finally, universities should develop and nurture brand communities with online students as well, create and foster traditions and rituals in which they may participate, and instill a sense that the university has valued, well-established traditions and rituals.*

## INTRODUCTION

Alumni support, especially financial support, is increasingly important at institutions of higher education in today's economic climate. Since the latest economic recession, many universities, particularly state-funded institutions of higher learning, have had to cut their budgets and find alternative funding sources beyond state governments to increase revenues. According to the Voluntary Support of Education (VSE) survey, charitable contributions to colleges and universities in the U.S. increased 10.8 percent in 2014 to $37.45 billion, the highest recorded in the history of the survey (Council for Aid to Education newsletter, January 28, 2015). Giving from alumni increased 9.4 percent, but alumni participation (calculated by dividing the number of alumni donors by the number of alumni for whom the institution has a means of contact) declined to 8.3 percent from 8.7 percent in 2013, and from 9.2 percent in 2012. Alumni gave $9.85 billion in 2014, making up 26.3 percent of total contributions, second only to foundations which gave $11.2 billion or 29.9 percent of total contributions. The institution that raised the most in charitable contributions in 2014 was Harvard University ($1.16 billion). According to a *U.S. News and World Report* study, the number of university alumni donors continues to decrease, much as it did before the economic downturn. Florida College topped the list of colleges and universities with the highest two-year average percentage of alumni donors. An average of 64.7 percent of alumni gave back to the school during the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years – the highest percentage among the 1,146 ranked schools that reported the data to *U.S. News* in an annual survey (Haynie, 2014).

The purpose of this study is to expand the literature and determine factors that impact alumni giving and loyalty. Specifically, this research aims to identify a relationship between university traditions and rituals, the relationships of an alumni brand community, and loyalty toward an institution of higher education. This research proposes that a university, as a branded institution, constitutes a brand community (McAlexander, Koenig & Schouten, 2004), and that traditions and rituals, an important component of brand communities, can serve as a means by which students engage on campus and participate in a university's brand community and, in turn, become active and giving alumni of a university. The research was conducted in the context of the "University," a regional, comprehensive state university in the Midwest. The results from this analysis provide theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the research will contribute to the literature on brand communities by examining empirically the role of university traditions and rituals. Practically, the research will assist universities in determining the role that traditions and rituals play in alumni brand communities and in generating marketing strategies and tactics for garnering alumni support.

## ALUMNI SUPPORT OF UNIVERSITIES

While charitable contributions to some colleges and universities in 2014 was substantial, financial support is important to universities of all sizes. Unfortunately, smaller, state-funded institutions with smaller alumni bases sometimes struggle to garner such alumni support in comparison to larger, state-funded or private institutions with large alumni bases.

While Harvard University raised $1.16 billion in 2014, the University raised $6.202 million from 7,819 donors (University Foundation Financial Report 2013-2014, n.d.).

What drives alumni support at institutions of higher education? Much research has attempted to determine university alumni profiles and what motivations and attitudes drive their giving and participatory behavior. Some predictors include household income, student activities and emotional attachment (Conely, 1999; Lindahl & Conely, 2002). In addition, more and more universities are recognizing the value of and practicing *relationship marketing* whereby they utilize strategies to communicate both economic and noneconomic benefits better and develop and maintain relationships with individual donors to influence marketing outcomes such as loyalty and support (Arnett, German, & Hunt, 2003; McAlexander, Koenig, & Schouten, 2004; Schertzer & Schertzer, 2004). McAlexander and Koenig (2001), for example, examine the impacts of the alumni-university relationship and alumni assessments of their college experiences on important expressions of loyalty toward an institution of higher education. In the study, expressions of loyalty include current behavior (wearing university logo clothing, current involvement in alumni functions, donations to the university) and behavioral intentions (future involvement in an alumni group, future donations of money, wanting their children to attend the university, a preference for future enrollment in continuing education at the university). The researchers found that alumni perceptions of their present relationship with the institution and the character of their university experience are positively related to expressions of loyalty, including current behavior and behavioral intentions. They conclude that "alumni relationships with the university have significant impacts upon loyalty-related behaviors and attitudes" (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001, p. 37). Similarly, Bruce (2007) found that alumni involvement of MBA graduates is correlated more strongly with alumni giving behavior than other variables assessed, including school location, overall value of the MBA, the opportunity to network and to form relationships with long-term value, and desired credentials.

Therefore, it is important to provide universities with a means of creating and increasing positive relationships with and support from alumni and other various constituency groups. A university must look at the tools at its disposal, and one of the most readily available activities that a university can promote in an effort to increase alumni support are its *traditions and rituals*. "Traditions and rituals represent vital social processes by which the meaning of the community is reproduced and transmitted within and beyond the community" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 421). They "perpetuate the community's shared history, culture, and consciousness" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 413). Traditions and rituals are a characteristic of *brand communities* and literature on brand communities will be reviewed first. Then, literature on traditions and rituals will be reviewed.

## BRAND COMMUNITIES

Literature on brand communities is relevant to the study of alumni support at institutions of higher education and university traditions and rituals. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) introduce the idea of brand community and defined it as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412). Brand communities create value for consumers (Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009) and loyalty to a brand is enhanced by a greater number of and stronger relationships that bind a person to a brand community (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). As an example of how a brand community, when implemented effectively and efficiently, Fournier and Lee (2009) discuss Harley-Davidson:

*In 1983, Harley-Davidson faced extinction. Twenty five years later, the company boasted a top-50 global brand valued at $7.8 billion. Central to the company's turnaround, and to its subsequent success, was Harley's commitment to building a brand community: a group of ardent consumers organized around the lifestyle, activities, and ethos of the brand (Fournier & Lee, 2009, p. 105).*

McAlexander, Koenig and Schouten (2004) propose that a university, as a branded institution, constitutes a brand community, which consists of "all the people for whom a particular brand is relevant and the relationships they form in the context of using the brand" (p. 62) and that a university as a brand community "consists of a wide assortment of entities and the relationships among them" (p. 63). Student communities are an important component of a university's brand community, where "students have opportunities to interact with one another and form connections that, although temporary in nature, can sometimes last a lifetime" (McAlexander, Koenig, & Schouten, 2004, p. 63). The researchers describe the university experience as a transformational experience for students where "shared and extraordinary experiences provide situations that build relationships" (p. 65). The researchers found that the interpersonal ties among students and the feeling that they enjoyed their time at the university strongly influence students' loyalty behavior (wearing university-logo clothing, participating in alumni functions, and donating money to the university). Balmer and Liao (2007) investigate corporate brand identification towards a UK university, a leading UK business school, and an overseas collaborative partner institute in Asia, three closely linked corporate brands. The authors found that the strength of student identification with a corporate brand is related to corporate brand community; students believe it to be important to belong to a distinct brand community.

McAlexander, Koenig and Schouten (2006) propose a model of brand community in the context of higher education that includes four relationships: the customer-product relationship, the customer-brand relationship, the customer-institution relationship, and the customer-customer relationship:

1. *The Customer-Product Relationship* – student and alumni perceptions of the quality of their education and satisfaction with the educational experience; one's perceived identity connection with her university education
2. *The Customer-Brand Relationship* – the value and meanings derived from a brand; one's personal connection developed with the university brand and its personality (e.g., wearing university-logo-branded merchandise demonstrates this connection)
3. *The Customer-Institution Relationship* – one's interpersonal relationships with agents of the university; relationships between students and alumni and faculty and staff of the university
4. *The Customer-Customer Relationship* – social groups (dorms, fraternities and sororities), affiliations (majors, students organizations), and events (cultural, athletic) that allow students to interact with one another and form connections; in fact, "relationships among customers are more fundamental to the existence of a brand community than any other type of customer relationship" (McAlexander, Koenig & Schouten, 2006, p. 111).

The researchers propose that a university should assess and manage these various dyadic relationships collectively to build a university brand community in synergistic ways (McAlexander, Koenig & Schouten, 2006). They found support for the higher-order construct of brand community comprised of the four relationships and that brand community in higher education can contribute to donations, college referrals, engagement in alumni groups, and participation in continuing education. The authors propose that a brand community can be nurtured and strengthened by the institution, and that "integration in the brand community creates enduring bonds of loyalty to the institution" (McAlexander, Koenig & Schouten, 2006, p. 117). Further, "loyalty yields returns in terms of support for the university, its products, and its programs" (McAlexander, Koenig & Schouten, 2006, pp. 117-118).

In the context of university alumni, McAlexander and Koenig (2010) examine the impact of institutional size (small versus large universities) on alumni brand community relationships (alumni-product, alumni-brand, alumni-institution, and alumni-alumni). The authors found that smaller universities tend to be more successful in fostering relationships between their alumni and the institution, though graduates of larger institutions are generally more disposed toward purchasing licensed apparel and recommending the university to family or friends. "Alumni of smaller schools have more opportunities to build tighter bonds with faculty and other institutional professionals while they are students than alumni of the larger schools. Evidently, these alumni also feel that the institution does a better job of extending this relationship into the present day" (McAlexander & Koenig, 2010, p. 81). The authors also concluded that alumni of smaller universities believe their educational experience to be more impactful than do graduates of larger universities. In the broader context of higher education marketing, "… Brand community integration is the most influential contributor to the desired marketing outcomes. Brand community integration manifests its influence to alumni of both the small and large institutions of higher education" (McAlexander & Koenig, 2010, p. 82).

## THE ROLE OF TRADITIONS AND RITUALS IN BRAND COMMUNITIES

Brand communities have specific characteristics; one of those is *traditions and rituals*. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) identify three characteristics of brand communities: consciousness of kind, moral responsibility, and shared traditions and rituals. The function of shared traditions and rituals in a brand community is to maintain the culture of the community. At an institution of higher education, traditions and rituals include activities such as a university mascot performing pushups for each point scored during a football game (About U.H. Traditions, n.d.), a school fight song (K-State Traditions, 2009), and a specific greeting of "howdy" to and from university alumni and fans (Aggie Traditions, n.d.). The importance of traditions and rituals to institutions of higher education is demonstrated by the fact that Texas A&M University formed a *Traditions Council* "dedicated to promoting and preserving the traditions of Texas A&M University through education and awareness" (Aggie Traditions - Home Page, n.d.). The importance is also demonstrated by programs like the UNI Traditions Challenge. This program is an opportunity for a University of Northern Iowa student to become an official *Traditions Keeper* of the university. A Traditions Challenge Book provides students challenges or must-do campus activities to complete while attending the university "to make memories as a Panther" (Traditions Challenge - University of Northern Iowa, n.d.).

Schau and Muniz (2002) examine brand communities in the context of personal websites devoted to various brands. Participating in brand-related traditions and rituals demonstrates a consumer's legitimacy (understanding the brand) and authority (expertise, experience and knowledge) of the brand within that brand community. "The more rituals the web author has participated in, the more legitimacy he/she demonstrates and the more credible all content becomes within the context of the community" (Schau & Muniz, 2002, p. 347). In the personal websites studied by Schau and Muniz (2002), the rituals, such as singer Tom Petty concert attendance or attendance at Xena, Warrior Princess television show conventions, are demonstrated through personal stories shared on the websites. The authors also found that the density and intensity of traditions and rituals vary between brand communities, depending on the age of the brand (Schau & Muniz, 2002). Older brands have more history and traditions and rituals than newer brands.

Madupu and Cooley (2010) propose a conceptual framework for online brand communities that includes antecedents and consequences of participation in an online brand

community. One type of community consequence proposed by Madupu and Cooley (2010) is shared traditions and rituals which can include greeting rituals, jargon, conventions and best practices, celebrations of special events and member milestones, sharing the brand's history, brand stories, new member initiations, and elevation of members to formalized volunteer roles. When brand community members participate in the community, they become more familiar with, learn about and gain a better understanding of the shared traditions and rituals. In turn, the members' awareness of the community's shared traditions and rituals has a positive effect on sustainable brand loyalty among the community members (Madupu & Cooley, 2010). In a study of online brand communities formed around motorcycle, car and camera brands, Madupu and Krishnan (2008) found that online brand community participation is positively related to shared traditions and rituals.

The common factor among the studies cited here is brand community member engagement and participation. For example, those who are active in university activities as students tend to become more active and giving alumni of the institution. Universities viewing themselves as *brand communities* will be more successful in developing and maintaining an active student body and, in turn, garner more support, both financial and participative, from those students as alumni. Traditions and rituals, an important component of brand communities, can serve as a means by which students engage on campus and participate in a university's brand community.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

This research analysis attempts to answer the following question: What is the relationship between the extent to which alumni believe a university has valued, well-established traditions and rituals and their alumni brand communities and loyalty? Specifically, we propose that the greater the perception of alumni that a university has valued, well-established traditions and rituals, the greater their brand community relationships and intended behaviors associated with loyalty, and this is articulated in the following hypotheses:

> *H1*    *Alumni who perceive that a university has valued, well-established traditions and rituals will perceive stronger alumni-product relationships than alumni who do not perceive that a university has valued, well-established traditions and rituals.*

> *H2*    *Alumni who perceive that a university has valued, well-established traditions and rituals will perceive stronger alumni-brand relationships than alumni who do not perceive that a university has valued, well-established traditions and rituals.*

> *H3*    *Alumni who perceive that a university has valued, well-established traditions and rituals will perceive stronger alumni-institution relationships than alumni who do not perceive that a university has valued, well-established traditions and rituals.*

> *H4*    *Alumni who perceive that a university has valued, well-established traditions and rituals will perceive stronger alumni-alumni relationships than alumni who do not perceive that a university has valued, well-established traditions and rituals.*

> *H5*    *Alumni who perceive that a university has valued, well-established traditions and rituals will perceive a stronger overall integration within the alumni brand community than alumni who do not perceive that a university has valued, well-established traditions and rituals.*

> *H6*    *Alumni who perceive that a university has valued, well-established traditions and rituals will exhibit stronger behaviors associated with loyalty than alumni who do not perceive that a university has valued, well-established traditions and rituals.*

# METHODOLOGY

## Sample and Data Collection Procedure

The University is a public, regional comprehensive state institution with a total enrollment of approximately 13,400, including on-campus, online, and international students. It is located in a rural region of a Midwestern state in a city with an approximate population of 20,000. The population for this research project was defined as all alumni of the University with e-mail addresses registered with the University or those using the University's e-mail accounts. If alumni did not have an e-mail account or do not have their updated e-mail account listed with the University's Alumni Association, they were excluded from the population. A total of 19,541 emails were sent, with 1,227 alumni respondents completing the survey for a sample size of 6.3 percent. Unfortunately, the number of outdated or undelivered emails was unable to be determined, so the sample size reported here may be underestimated. Respondents' ages ranged from 21 to 81 or older, 65.5 percent work full-time, and 74.9 percent are married. The sample is split almost evenly by gender (52.1 percent are male; 47.9 percent are female).

A tool called *Student Voice* was used to create the online survey, send the survey to recipients, collect the data and aid in the analysis of the survey data. The tool was obtained through the permission of the University's Student Affairs office.

## Measures

The Alumni-Product Relationship was measured with a Satisfaction with Educational Institution scale. Four, five-point Likert statements ($\alpha = .78$) measured the degree to which a person is satisfied with the University, including the education she received at the University, its facilities, the manner in which she was treated, and the extent to which the University helped prepare her for a career (Arnett, German, & Hunt, 2003).

The Alumni-Brand Relationship was measured with three, five-point Likert statements ($\alpha = .54$) that assess the degree to which a person wears university logo clothing, is currently involved in alumni functions, and donates to the University (McAlexander & Koenig 2001). The Cronbach's $\alpha$ of .54 likely resulted from the items assessing somewhat diverse types of behavior and the number of scale items.

The Alumni-Institution Relationship was measured with four, five-point Likert statements ($\alpha = .71$) that assess the degree to which a person feels connected to the University through her present or past relationship with it (McAlexander & Koenig 2001). Items assessed the belief that the University values and cares about a person's needs and opinions, the extent to which she interacted with faculty, and her belief that faculty showed a personal interest in her.

The Alumni-Alumni Relationship was measured by determining the degree to which a person participated in on- or off-campus activities while a student at the University. A respondent indicated which activities in which she participated including student government, intramurals, Greek life, athletics, academic/departmental organizations, student alumni association, university activities board, diversity affairs, and/or other. The number of activities in which a person participated was calculated by summing the activities selected.

Brand community integration was measured with an additive combination of the four components of brand community integration (alumni-product, alumni-brand, alumni-institution, and alumni-alumni) was used (McAlexander & Koenig, 2010).

Four, five-point Likert statements ($\alpha = .70$) measured the degree to which a person expresses intended behaviors associated with her loyalty to the University, including future involvement in an alumni group, future donations of money, wanting their children to attend

the University, and a preference for future enrollment in continuing education at the University (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001).

The extent to which a person believes the University has strong traditions and rituals was measured with two five-point Likert statements that assess their belief that the University has well-established traditions and rituals and the value they place on those traditions and rituals.

## DATA ANALYSIS

For all statistical tests, comparisons were made between alumni who perceive the University has valued, well-established traditions and rituals (scores of 9 or 10 on the summed scale; n=460) and those who believe the University does not have valued, well-established traditions and rituals (scores of 2-8 on the summed scale; n=705). A multivariate analysis of variance analysis was used to test hypotheses 1-4 because four individual ANOVAs would have inflated the overall Type 1 error rate and the four relationships of brand community are correlated (McAlexander & Koenig, 2010). Hypothesis 5 for overall brand community integration was tested in a separate ANOVA (McAlexander & Koenig, 2010). As in McAlexander and Koenig's (2010) study, separate analyses for each of the four items that measured expressions of loyalty were run to test hypothesis 6 because the items appear sufficiently different. Individual independent t-tests were run. Two of the four loyalty variables exhibited unequal variances (using Levene's test for homogeneity of variance), and the appropriate statistic is reported depending on whether a variable passed or failed the Levene test.

## RESULTS

The one-way MANOVA was significant (*Lambda*(4,1118)=.727, *p*=.000). The mean scores for all four brand community relationships for the two groups of alumni are statistically different (see Table 1). Hypotheses 1-4 are supported; alumni who perceive that the University has valued, well-established traditions and rituals perceive *stronger* alumni-product, alumni-brand, alumni-institution, and alumni-alumni relationships than alumni who do not perceive that the University has valued, well-established traditions and rituals.

The mean scores for overall brand community integration for the two groups of alumni are statistically different (see Table 1). Hypothesis 5 is supported; alumni who perceive that the University has valued, well-established traditions and rituals perceive *a stronger overall integration within the alumni brand community* than alumni who do not perceive that the University has valued, well-established traditions and rituals.

| | | Table 1 | | |
| | | RESULTS FOR HYPOTHESES 1-5 | | |
| Hypothesis | Brand Connection* | Low – Valued, well-established traditions and rituals | High – Valued, well-established traditions and rituals | MANOVA or ANOVA results |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Alumni-Product | 16.90 | 18.90 | $p = .000$ $F(1,1121)=259.27$ |
| 2 | Alumni-Brand | 10.01 | 12.23 | $p = .000$ $F(1,1121)=212.72$ |
| 3 | Alumni-Institution | 14.77 | 17.02 | $p = .000$ $F(1,1121)=267.67$ |
| 4 | Alumni-Alumni | 1.68 | 2.01 | $p = .000$ $F(1,1121)=16.51$ |
| 5 | Overall BCI | 43.36 | 50.16 | $p = .000$ $F(1,1121)=404.76$ |

*Summative scales

Of the four loyalty variables used to test Hypothesis 6, the means for all of the items are significantly different for the two groups of alumni (see Table 2). Hypothesis 6 is supported; alumni who perceive that the University has valued, well-established traditions and rituals exhibit stronger behaviors associated with loyalty than alumni who do not perceive that the University has valued, well-established traditions and rituals.

| **Table 2**<br>**RESULTS FOR HYPOTHESIS 6** | | |
|---|---|---|
| Loyalty Outcomes* | Low – Valued, well-established traditions and rituals | High – Valued, well-established traditions and rituals | Independent-samples $t$ test results |
| I would like to be involved in a University alumni group. | 2.89 | 3.58 | $p = .000$<br>$t(984)=-11.51$ |
| If I were to continue my professional education, I would prefer to take those classes at the University. | 3.33 | 4.05 | $p = .000$<br>$t(1163)=-11.2$ |
| In the future, I could see myself donating money to the University. | 3.61 | 4.30 | $p = .000$<br>$t(1129)=-11.78$ |
| If I were to have children, I would want them to go to the University. | 3.38 | 4.18 | $p = .000$<br>$t(1163)=-15.03$ |

*Five-point Likert scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree"

## DISCUSSION

Consistent with McAlexander, Koenig and Schouten (2004), this research proposes that a university, as a branded institution, constitutes a brand community, and that traditions and rituals can serve as a means by which students engage on campus, participate in a university's brand community, and, in turn, become active and giving alumni of a university. Six hypotheses that addressed alumni perceptions of the value and establishment of traditions and rituals were supported; the greater the perception of alumni that a university has valued, well-established traditions and rituals, the greater their brand community relationships and intended behaviors associated with loyalty.

Theoretically, the contribution of the research reported here is considering the importance of traditions and rituals in alumni brand communities and loyalty, a concept not addressed in previous research; therefore, our understanding of brand communities and loyalty has been expanded. McAlexander and Koenig (2010) have demonstrated that brand community integration is an influential contributor to desired marketing outcomes of institutions of higher education, both large and small. So, university initiatives that enhance and strengthen alumni brand community relationships are vital. Further, given the economic climate in higher education today, it is also very important that universities foster active and dedicated alumni as to garner financial support. We found that those alumni who perceive a university to have valued, well-established traditions and rituals perceive stronger brand community relationships and overall brand community integration and exhibit stronger loyalty to the institution.

Future research may incorporate the role and impact of additional constructs, such as nostalgia, on university traditions and rituals and alumni brand community relationships. University-related experiences are often remembered with a feeling a nostalgia which may be evoked by tangible objects such as college t-shirts as a give-away from an event or an award

recognition ceremony honoring alumni. "When one feels nostalgic, there seems to be a bittersweet quality to the meaning which is associated with a memory from the past" (Baker & Kennedy, 1994, p. 169). Participation in university traditions and rituals seems like an obvious time in which nostalgia would be experienced, especially for university alumni whereby that participation recalls happy, positive memories from the past but, at the same time, evokes feelings of sadness because the time at which these activities occurred has passed.

Future research should also overcome limitations in this study, such as expanding the study beyond the University studied here and expanding the conceptualization and measurement of the four alumni brand community relationships, especially the brand-alumni relationship where a higher Cronbach's alpha is desirable. In addition, we recognize that using email as a method of contact for the online survey precluded some alumni from participating, particularly older alumni who may not be computer-savvy. Future research should incorporate other methods of contact to result in a more inclusive sample.

From a practical perspective, the findings have implications for higher education marketers. Institutions of higher education should take a holistic approach to the student experience, be willing to invest resources and time to enhancing the student experience, and include a variety of institutional constituencies in that effort. Many universities have placed a priority on the freshmen experience in an effort to increase student retention. However, universities should not neglect the overall student experience. They should facilitate the process of student engagement and participation in the university as a brand community.

Alumni associations and university foundations should work together to develop supportive and active alumni communities that are integrated within a larger brand community to encourage desirable alumni actions. One important action is donating to the university, especially as institutional funding by state governments decreases. But other desirable actions by alumni are important as well, such as wearing university logo clothing, being involved in alumni functions, sending their children to attend the university, and continuing their own education at the university. The broader brand community of alumni should be segmented according to important demographic, psychographic, and behavioral variables. Specific strategies and tactics should be employed to reach specific target markets within that community (e.g., traditional versus nontraditional, international, and online students) when soliciting donations and participation from alumni.

Alumni associations, in particular, should be viewed as strategic, vital assets of universities and serve as keepers of traditions and rituals by supporting active student alumni groups and promoting the importance of traditions and rituals. This may include a Traditions Challenge, listing of traditions and rituals on the alumni association website, memorabilia displays featuring past traditions and rituals, social media updates (e.g., Traditions Tuesday), and holding lectures and seminars about traditions and rituals. As keepers of traditions and rituals, alumni associations should also create new, cultivate existing, and revitalize old traditions and rituals, promoting those traditions and rituals to current students and alumni to encourage meaningful participation. One example at the University is the creation and maintenance of a campaign by the alumni association whereby university faculty, staff and students, as well as community members, are encouraged to wear university colors on Fridays. In addition, the University brought back the bonfire to Homecoming week after it had been abandoned many years ago.

Relationships with alumni should be cultivated while they are students through traditions and rituals and working within the framework of the four brand community relationships. But this effort needs to involve *all* students. According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), a brand community is non-geographically bound because communities evolved from a *place* to a *shared identity*; therefore, the notion of brand community for a university does

not restrict the development and nurturing of a brand community to on-campus students. Those universities that have sizeable populations of online students and international students, such as the University that is studied here, should develop and nurture brand communities with those students as well, create and foster traditions and rituals in which they may participate, and instill a sense that the university has valued, well-established traditions and rituals.

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