

Alumni students and their engagement in entrepreneurship education and student Entrepreneurs

Alumni engagement is invaluable to enterprise and entrepreneurship students. However, we do not know why they engage as much as they do. The alumni engagement literature (Baroncelli et al., 2022; El-Awad et al., 2022; Meyer et al., 2020) identify a providing function of alumni engagement where alumni are resource providers and a connecting function where alumni are dealmakers. Furthermore, El-Awad et al., (2022) separate between instrumental alumni engagement driven by proximity and compatible resources and emotional alumni engagement associated with social conventions. Moreover, Politis et al., (2022) found that perceived importance of peers and engagement in start-up activity after graduation are associated with higher alumni engagement.

While previous alumni engagement literature tends to focus on the dyad between the alumnus/a and the program or current student, this presentation argues that we also need to include the relationships to other alumni students as a major driver to why alumni continue to invest in current students and the alumni network over time.

The master program where I work is a Venture Creation Program (VCP) and the alumni organization has the same structural appearance as many other alumni organizations around the world. The alumni organization consists of all previous students from the VCP. The organization is managed by a board consisting of the most recently graduated students and replaced every year and a general assembly where all members are invited. The main task of the board is to organize the yearly alumni weekend where alumni students return to the university to advise the current students about their start-ups in workshops and participate in social activities. Each year there is a new cohort joining and the members are reminded about the older members and their experiences. The alumni argue that the alumni weekends make you visible in the network. The older alumni also refer to the alumni weekends as the biggest relaxation of the year and something that gives them energy “I work a bit differently, a bit better and [I am] a bit more motivated when I get home”. The alumni organization also has a highly active Facebook group where the members post open questions to the network and receive answers and comments. While many other alumni organizations report that it is difficult to engage alumni students to interact with current students, our alumni organization is a highly engaged community. The relationships between the alumni students are a major driver of why alumni continue to invest in current students and the alumni network over time. There are several ways to contribute to the alumni network besides the yearly weekend. Hiring alumni as generalists in the early phases of a start-up is one common example. In addition, there are many examples of alumni being the pilot customer of student or alumni start-ups. Many alumni develop into experts on for instance mergers and acquisitions through their experiences over time and can answer questions regarding that from the others. Other alumni take part in informal advisory boards consisting of alumni for other alumni start-ups. Some alumni invest in other alumni start-ups, not necessarily to make money, they may even expect to lose the money, but to learn by experiencing the subsequent processes from an investor’s perspective.

The alumni emphasize that they find their alumni network useful: “the network is the main reason the start-up is still viable today. I use it [the network] for everything”. “We could go to a consultancy firm and pay 4000 NOK/hour to get good advice that you can get for free in the network”. The alumni also argue that they find it important to contribute so that the network continues to develop and being valuable and that this is also a motivation for them to engage. “...each cohort learns from the previous cohort that in turn learned from the previous cohort, so the quality just increases.” The alumni argue that they feel that they owe so much of what they are today to the study program and the network so that they want to give back and pay it forward and it was also mentioned that a culture of helping more than you expect in return is fostered already in the study program and that their engagement therefore comes from “That you personally identify with the whole concept of [the VCP] as something more than only the professional.” Other emotions were more personal, such as being flattered when being asked to talk about their accomplishments, but also that they enjoy being part of the group of “Intellectual outcasts...that you understand that you like a lot but never meet in other settings of your life”.

The shared educational background creates a legitimacy and a perception of being steadfast that facilitates referrals and the first meetings for the alumni over time. The alumni trust that the other alumni will do a good job if they refer them or hire them because they have managed to complete the program and have been fostered in the same culture of sharing, teamwork and ‘start to try out’.

For the alumni network to succeed the alumni network members need to remain updated on the other members and make the effort of either facilitating or pointing to the right person. By facilitating meeting places and opportunities for alumni to engage in the study program, the program simultaneously facilitates a socialization into the culture of paying forward. The commitment to give back to the community illustrates the emotional connection and institutional loyalty that stems from shared experiences.