

Alumni Affairs at Princeton

A Statement by President Christopher L. Eisgruber '83

August 5, 2016

As part of the University's strategic planning process, the Office of Alumni Affairs produced a valuable self-study that will help to guide it in the years to come. I am grateful to Deputy Vice President for Alumni Affairs Margaret Miller '80 and her staff, who generated the report, and to the many alumni whose ideas helped to inform it. This memorandum responds to the self-study and provides an update on the status of some of the recommendations that it makes.

Recognizing the essential role of Princeton alumni

Princeton University is blessed to have one of the most loyal and engaged alumni bodies of any educational institution in the world (like most of my fellow alumni, I believe that Princeton has *the* world's best and most engaged alumni, but neutral observers might consider my assessment biased). Numerical evidence for this fact can be found, if one needs it, in many forms, including the extraordinary rates at which Princeton alumni return for Reunions, contribute to Annual Giving, and interview on behalf of the Alumni Schools Committee.

The University benefits tremendously from its alumni network. The support that alumni provide to the University, in the form of time and resources, is critical to Princeton's "margin of excellence." The relationships that alumni have with one another and their alma mater extend the educations they received while on campus, creating a culture of lifelong learning and enabling our graduates to sustain old friendships and form new ones. Through service projects, mentorship programs, and other initiatives, our alumni carry the University's values into the world.

Not surprisingly, studies of our alumni programs have consistently highlighted the essential role of Princeton alumni in the life of the University and the importance of preserving the strengths that have long defined alumni relations at Princeton. The recent self-study endorsed that conclusion again: its "first recommendation is to reaffirm the University's commitment to support and encourage the engagement of its alumni through the time-tested programs already in place through the Office of Alumni Affairs."

I concur wholeheartedly with this recommendation. Both as president and as an alumnus myself, I find it impossible to imagine the University without Reunions, Alumni Day, and the other traditional programs that have long defined Princeton's relationship with its alumni. University Provost David S. Lee '99 has worked with Deputy Vice President Miller and Vice President and Secretary Robert K. Durkee '69 to ensure that appropriate funding is in place for these activities.

Growing the program

Though Princeton's level of alumni activity is already extraordinary, Princeton alumni remain eager to find new ways to interact with their alma mater, and, conversely, we at the University continue to seek ways to engage with alumni who may have been less connected to Princeton or less satisfied with existing programs. As the self-study correctly notes, the affinity group conferences that began in 2006 "have been stunningly successful, not only in the overall number of alumni who have participated, but in the number who previously had not returned to campus since graduation." We have therefore embraced the self-study's recommendation to "increase the number of on-campus affinity-based conferences to two each year." We in fact hosted two conferences at Princeton in 2015-16, and have added resources that will allow us to follow that pattern regularly beginning in 2017-18.

Graduate alumni engagement with Princeton has grown in multiple ways, including through participation at Reunions, an affinity conference, and departmental events. I am delighted by this trend: though Princeton has long been top-flight with regard to undergraduate alumni engagement, we have been less successful at building connections with our graduate alumni. The growth in graduate alumni engagement builds on good work both by the Office of the Dean of the Graduate School and by the Office of Alumni Affairs (which, as the self-study observes, incorporated into its team the graduate alumni relations officers previously located in the Graduate School). We will continue to support these important efforts.

The self-study points out that toward the end of her tenure as president, Shirley Tilghman increased the amount of presidential travel to visit with alumni groups, and I have built on that precedent. I concur with the report's assessment of the turnout at these events. It is remarkable to see the number and diversity of Princetonians around the country and the world who wish to interact with their alma mater. I have especially enjoyed some of my trips to see alumni in locations—ranging from Portland, Oregon, to Tel Aviv and Mumbai—that have not hosted a Princeton president's visit in many years, if ever.

This increase in activity has required increases in staffing and program budget. Since the issuance of the self-study, the provost has made allocations that have allowed the Office of Alumni Affairs to create four additional staff lines. Other increases may be possible through the University's ordinary budgeting processes. Of course, given the many possible initiatives mentioned in the self-study and regularly proposed by alumni, the Office of Alumni Affairs, like all other offices, will have to make decisions about how best to set priorities among possible programs and stay within its newly augmented budget.

Coordinating activity with the Office of Development

The self-study quotes with approval the following language from a 2002 joint statement of the Trustee Committee on Alumni Affairs and the Executive Committee of the Alumni Council:

Princeton's experience has been that [a] commitment to broad and lifelong engagement, to frequent communication, and strong support for volunteer initiative redounds to the benefit of its fundraising efforts, and the more so because fundraising is seen as a beneficiary of a broader policy of engagement rather than the goal to which everything else is subservient. ... To achieve the best results for the University as a whole, it is essential that the staffs of the Alumni Council [now the Office of Alumni Affairs] and the fundraising offices, while serving their mutually reinforcing missions, collaborate closely and effectively to maximize synergy and mutual benefit.

The need for effective collaboration is especially manifest to me as I travel to meet with alumni. These trips combine our alumni affairs and development missions, and a seamless partnership between the two offices is essential.

The University has recently had an opportunity to consider how best to achieve the needed collaboration. After publication of the alumni affairs self-study, the University began a search for a new vice president to oversee its development operation. In designing the job description for the new vice president, we reaffirmed that Princeton, unlike some other universities, should have distinct and independent offices devoted to alumni affairs and development. That distinction is important to our model of alumni engagement, as described in the italicized paragraph above. We also concluded that it would be desirable to have both offices report to the same vice president, rather than having them report through entirely separate chains leading up to the president. As part of this reorganization, we elevated the title of the alumni affairs office's leader from "associate vice president" to "deputy vice president," thereby signaling the independent and co-equal status of the alumni affairs and development offices.

Conclusion

On the day of my appointment as president in 2013, I ended my prepared remarks by expressing appreciation for the "devoted body of students, alumni, faculty, staff, and friends who are drenched in every possible shade of orange and who care about this University like no other." They are, I said, "Princeton's not-so-secret weapon and its greatest advantage." The intervening years have only added to the gratitude and admiration I feel for this University's extraordinary alumni. I am pleased that our strategic planning efforts have provided an opportunity to enhance still further the engagement that means so much to this University.