



Turn Career & Alumni Engagement Into a Data Story

A Practical Guide to Sharing Metrics & Outcomes with University Leadership

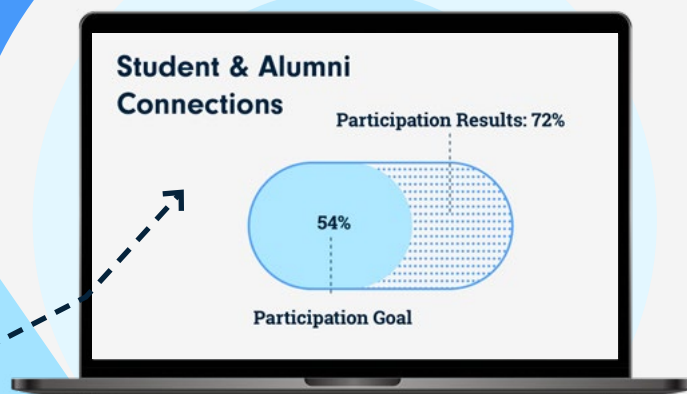


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Introduction

Imagine you're giving a presentation to your Board of Regents. CEOs, Presidents, Executive Chairs, and other accomplished professionals are sitting around a table waiting to hear about the incredible work you're doing.

These experts in their field have spent their career caring mainly about one thing — results. Is your slide with the number of event attendees really what they care about? Perhaps before, but not in the new world of higher education that we're living in today.

There's a data revolution happening in across campus, from coast to coast. The "odometer" readings of the number of stakeholders served used to be sufficient when



describing our work. But with all the pressure on higher education today,¹ the industry is starting to look beyond those numbers.

This presents a unique challenge to different on-campus departments. Especially for those departments whose sole mission is to engage stakeholders at scale (we're looking at you Career Services and Alumni Relations). So how do you take odometer readings and turn them into results for your Board of Regents?

This guide will provide ideas and best practices we've seen for turning those numbers into a compelling story that describes not just how many stakeholders you are reaching, but the impact you're having on those learners.

1. PeopleGrove, "Higher Education's New Differentiator," 2023

Trends in Defining Success

Before building your narrative, it's important to look at how the industry at large, the media, and most importantly, students and alumni are starting to talk about success.

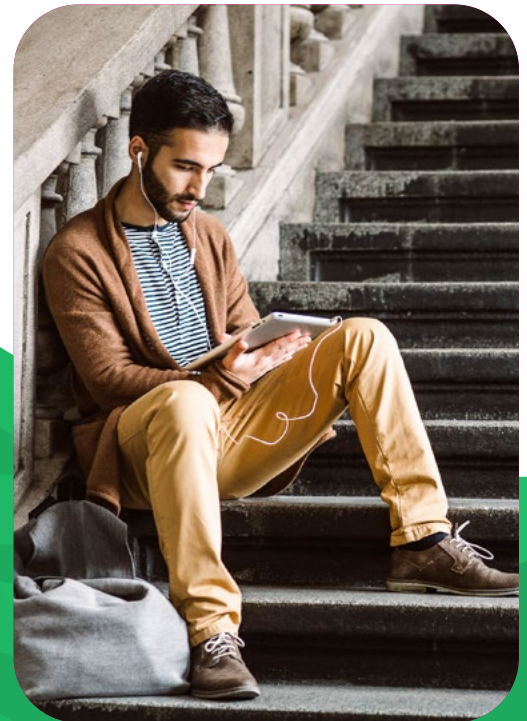
Beyond Graduation

The biggest question facing higher education right now is, “what does success even mean?” In the past, institutions could answer that question with their graduation rates. Colleges and universities were successful if they graduated most if not all of their students. But as tuition skyrocketed and a degree was no longer an ultimate ticket to a good job, graduation rate lost most of its meaning as a metric for learners.

Then came First-Destination Surveys, measuring whether or not graduates had a next step after school. And while that metric got a little closer to what learners were seeking, it still left the impression that higher education was a path to that first job, and then their job was done.

Today, much of what dominates the measurement conversation is “return on investment” — can we quantify what a graduate gets for their tuition. Studies like “First Try at ROI” out of Georgetown University’s Center for Education and the Workforce have attempted to present a framework to answer that very question while giving a learner a chance to compare and contrast between different schools or degrees.²

And while you may disagree with using ROI as the core metric, these trends point to the idea that **students, alumni, and their families are expecting value in their education farther and farther beyond their graduation.**



2. Georgetown University, “A First Try at ROI: Ranking 4,500 Colleges,” 2019

Measuring Sentiment

A second trend to watch in higher education revolves around measuring student and alumni sentiment. For a researcher, measuring sentiment is always challenging. For one, sentiment is simply less tangible than other metrics. Did a student graduate or not? Did an alum donate or not? Those statistics are easier to collect and report on.

Secondly, sentiment analysis is often reflective of one moment in time. This means that sentiment measurements often lose their power over time. Researchers should be measuring sentiment on a regular basis to get accurate and current data.

However, that weakness is also a strength when collecting and reporting on this data. Researchers then have the chance to analyze sentiment over the course of time and see what

impact certain activities have on that sentiment. For example, if stakeholders express frustration with a certain service, and you make changes to that service based on feedback, you have the chance to demonstrate impact by measuring sentiment year over year.

In higher education, we are seeing more and more sentiment analysis, particularly around individual's perception of the value of their degree. Organizations like Strada are regularly reporting on student and alumni perspectives through their "Public Viewpoint" initiative.³

Overall, measuring sentiment provides a meaningful way to analyze the effectiveness of activities and how that may change over time.

Trade Association Frameworks

Higher education institutions can vary considerably when it comes to their experience and complexity with data. Some are using sophisticated systems to collect and analyze all sorts of data points while others may just be developing their data strategies.

In order to provide the industry with frameworks to make sense of their data, higher education trade associations have begun large-scale, long-term projects dedicated to helping institutions analyze their data effectively and show the market the value of the work being done in different higher ed departments.



4. <https://www.nacweb.org/job-market/graduate-outcomes/first-destination/>

8 Competencies from NACE:

- Career & Self-Development
- Communication
- Critical Thinking
- Equity & Inclusion
- Leadership
- Professionalism
- Teamwork
- Technology

Trade Association Frameworks

NACE

In Career Services, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) has played a huge role in the development of the First-Destination Survey and offers nearly a decade's worth of national data on their website.⁴

More recently, NACE has researched and developed eight Career Readiness competencies to provide "a framework for addressing career-related goals and outcomes of curricular and extracurricular activities, regardless of the student's course of study."⁵ At the NACE 2023 Conference, researchers presented a framework for evaluating learners on these competencies based on a number of factors, including a learners own assessment of their development in these areas.

In the Alumni Relations and Advancement space, alumni affinity has always been a challenge to measure and define. For many years, college rankings like those in the US News & World Report have used alumni giving percentage as a metric for alumni affinity. But that has never truly encompassed all the ways that graduates show their support to their alma mater. For example, if you just count giving, the alumni affinity metric nationally would be just 6.5%.

4. <https://www.nacweb.org/job-market/graduate-outcomes/first-destination/>

Trade Association Frameworks

CASE

The Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) is working to replace that metric in the market while also standardizing the data analysis for those offices. Researchers with CASE have developed a framework with four categories that attempts to help institutions look at their engagement data, and thereby have a more meaningful metric for alumni affinity. The formula for that looks like this:

$$\text{alumni affinity} = \frac{\text{\# of alumni engaging in any of the 4 categories - duplicates}}{\text{total living contactable alumni}^6}$$

If using this formula, the nationwide “alumni affinity” rate jumps from 6.5% to 25.3%.

Using these national frameworks can give your work important context when preparing a presentation or thinking about showing the value of your programs or activities. However, it’s always important to apply those frameworks to your own institution. Some elements might make sense for you and your school, and some might not. But being able to speak to the frameworks can put your work in the context of the national conversations.

CASE Framework

Communication

Interactive, meaningful and informative communication that supports the institution’s mission, strategic goals, and reputation.

Experiential

Meaningful experiences that inspire alumni, are valued by the institution, promote its mission, celebrate its achievements, and strengthen its reputation.

Volunteer

Formally defined and rewarding volunteer roles that are endorsed by and valued by the institution.

Philanthropic

Financial support that is meaningful to the donor and supports the institution’s mission and strategic goals.

4. <https://www.nacweb.org/job-market/graduate-outcomes/first-destination/>

5. NACE, “What is Career Readiness?,” 2023

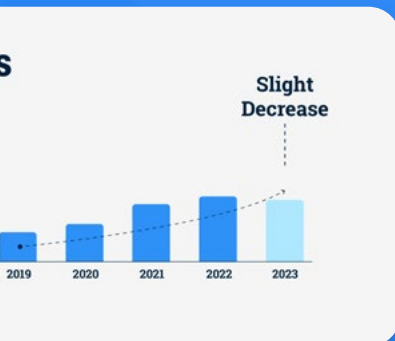
6. CASE, “AEM Key Findings Webinar,” 2023

Putting the Presentation Together

With these trends in mind, it's time to plan that presentation. The first, and most important, thing to do is attack your plan with the right mindset. Don't think of yourself as the manager of a small program or just a cog in the big machine. Remember that you are the leader of a crucial university function that advances the needs of your constituents and the institution at large. With that self-perception, you're ready to tackle the challenge and connect with your audience.

Once you have your business leader mindset, you're ready to follow these effective presentation principles to create a compelling story:

- Define What Success Means
- Give Results in Context of Goals
- Connect Activities to Results
- Break Down the Data
- Make Recommendations



Next Steps

- Continue moving forward
- Increase contribution to
- Reassess next year's goal

Presentation Step 1

Define What Success Means

Perhaps this sounds familiar or even basic. But given what we discussed in the section on trends, it can be a misunderstood concept for individual university offices today.

The first question to ask yourself is “Who does the work that I do really serve?” Once you have your answer there, the next question should be “What do they really want?”

Consider a Career Services office. Usually the answer to the first question is that Career Services serves students. And what do students want? Well survey after survey tells us that they want a good job at graduation.⁷ So for graduating students, the first-destination survey is a good way to measure and report on that outcome.

But what about those who aren’t graduating? For that, we need to look at ways of identifying if they’re on track towards that end goal. Things like student confidence in their career readiness or an evaluation of their progress on the eight NACE competencies. These measures of success can help show that students are on track towards their goals.

However, if you read the first question (who do I serve?) and said the institution, you aren’t wrong or alone. The college or university itself is certainly a stakeholder you need to speak to. The key is defining how your work impacts the institution. Are confident students more likely to persist, thereby helping the school maintain revenue in tuition dollars? Do satisfied students speak highly of the institution and boost its overall brand? All of this depends on your own institutional priorities.



Worksheet

Who is my audience?

Who does the work that I do really serve?
(Students? Alumni? The institution?)

What do those groups really want? (For students, is it a job after graduation? To feel confident in their decisions? For alumni, is it to feel a sense of belonging? To have a sense of purpose? For institutions, is it to graduate students? Improve its reputation? Raise money?)

Presentation Step 2

Give Results in the Context of Goals

"If you can't measure it, it doesn't exist."

Most of us have heard this saying before. And really ever since Moneyball came out, data and numbers have reigned supreme in almost every industry and every facet of our culture. And while we certainly believe it's not everything (see the section on sentiment above), numbers are critically important to telling a successful story today.

So as you prepare your presentation, be sure to report your results in the context of your goals. For example:

- 94% of students had a first destination vs. a goal of 90%
- 54% of program participants donated vs. a goal of 45%
- 68% of students agreed that they would speak favorably about their experience vs. a goal of 75%

And if you don't hit your goals (like that last example), be prepared to talk about why.

It may also be the case that this is the first time you're measuring outcomes like these. Given how quickly some of the trends above are happening, you're not alone. So if you are just presenting these metrics and setting your goals, make sure you are ready to talk about why you chose these measurements and how you decided on your numbers.



Worksheet

How can I figure out which goals I should pursue?

Are there similar programs at my university? How do they measure their success? Would those goals apply to my department too?

Which of my colleagues at similar institutions might share their goals and successes with me?

Researching the work of trade associations, what industry averages do they provide that I can use as benchmarks to compare my data to?



Worksheet

What outcomes can I correlate my data to?

What “odometer reading” engagement numbers are available to me?

What sentiments are these connected to?

What outcomes are influenced by those sentiments?

Presentation Step 3

Connect Activities to Results

This is the piece of the presentation where the old world meets the new world. For those who work in engagement-focused roles, you are probably used to sharing numbers like “event attendees” or “number of counseling appointments completed.” And we can still report on those types of numbers...with one extra step.

Here’s an example. Research tells us that students with more confidence in their ability to be successful in the job market are more likely to report getting a good job at graduation. So it stands to reason that if we can help students with their confidence in their career readiness, we can help them achieve their end goal. Our research shows that students who have connections within their university community are more confident in their career readiness than those who don’t have connections. In fact, we found that the greater the number of connections, the greater the confidence.⁸

So here we have an “odometer reading” (# of connections or even # of connections per student) that we can connect to a sentiment (confidence in career readiness) that connects to an outcome.

One note on this: we are not trying to directly show causation, only correlation. There are countless reasons why a student or alumni may make a choice or achieve a goal. You’re merely trying to demonstrate that what you do has an impact on that choice or achievement.

Drawing these connections between the programs we run not only helps us tell our story, but also helps justify the investment of time and money that go into these engagement activities.

Presentation Step 4

Break Down and Compare the Data

After you've presented your results and how your work connects to those results, you may have the opportunity to compare the effectiveness of your activities to other programs you may run, or even across teams. For example, did you see a higher giving percentage from alumni participating in mentoring programs or who attended events?

Additionally, you'll want to break down the data and segment by population. As higher education seeks to better support traditionally underserved populations, your presentation should include details on how your work impacts those students and alumni.

Such breakdowns may include:

- First-generation Students and Alumni
- Pell Grant Recipients
- Students and Alumni from Racial/Ethnic Minorities
- Gender Identity
- Geography

Here, it's likely helpful to compare the results from these populations to the main averages you see in your community. For example, we found that at universities using PeopleGrove, first-generation students who have 5 or more connections are 2.4x more likely to agree their PeopleGrove community got them a good job or internship compared to the average for all learners with 5 or more connections. For more ideas, read [PeopleGrove's Social Capital Impact Report](#).



Worksheet

Where should I dive deeper into my data?

How effective are each of my programs/activities?

What underserved groups does my institution serve?

Are my programs/activities more effective with those underserved groups?



Worksheet

How does my data provide guidance for the future?

If I didn't hit my goals, what went wrong? How can I address that moving forward?

Was there a particular activity that was more successful than others? Is it worth an additional investment in that activity?

Did everyone have access to that activity? How can I increase scale while still maintaining my results?

Presentation Step 5

Make Recommendations

As the leader of your crucial university function, it's important to draw some conclusions about your data and have a go-forward plan. You have to make sure that you demonstrate to your audience that you are thinking strategically.

Overall, your recommendations should focus around where you and your team are investing your time and money. After spending the entire presentation justifying these investments through your results, these recommendations will show that you are continuing to think strategically and won't rest on your laurels.



If there was something that proved ineffective, would my time best be spent elsewhere?

Conclusion

As higher education is being challenged in the market,⁹ the industry is responding by changing the conversation about what success looks like for colleges and universities.

Simple metrics like graduation rate and donor participation rate and being replaced with more nuanced and, frankly, more complicated measures of progress and impact.

This presents both a challenge and an opportunity for those working in higher education. While rethinking the definition of success, measuring sentiment, and tracking the latest research from higher ed trade associations certainly requires additional work, they provide us with a new, deeper way of not just telling the story of our work; but connecting with our work and our own impact on a deeper level.



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