

**Title:** Wayne State University Alumni Association Legislative Advocacy Program

**Category 4:** Excellence in Alumni Relations, Best Volunteer Engagement Program-AR

**Institution:** Wayne State University

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**General Description:** The alumni association identified “communicating the vital importance of the university to elected officials” as a strategic objective in its 2007-2010 Strategic Action Plan. Wayne State University is a state-supported institution whose funding has decreased by more than \$40 million since 2002. To reverse the trend of decreased funding, the alumni association in conjunction with the Office of Governmental Affairs developed a grassroots advocacy program to engage the more than 175,000 alumni who live and vote in Michigan.

**Goals and objectives:**

Communicate to elected officials the vital importance of Wayne State University.

Target key decision makers in the Michigan Legislature who directly affect state funding for the university.

Train a network of advocates to build and maintain relationships with legislators.

Develop a network for legislative staff in Lansing who are WSU alumni.

Create opportunities for alumni to meet legislators and other elected officials at events on campus and throughout Michigan.

**Description of how project fits into overall institutional goals:**

The university’s five-year strategic action plan calls for a commitment to educate and influence state legislators on the unique needs of the university’s urban mission. Through the advocates program, the alumni association is meeting the university’s strategic goal by providing alumni an opportunity to influence public officials and create a dialogue on the university funding needs.

**Audience:** Approximately 175,000 alumni of the university who live in Michigan.

**Total Number of Staff:** The legislative advocacy program is staffed by one full-time professional who also has other responsibilities, including student recruitment programs and management of two alumni association constituent groups. Approximately 50 percent of her time is dedicated to legislative advocacy.

**Program Budget:** Expenses were about \$7,500 from June 2007 to July 2008.

### **Special Circumstances or Challenges faced:**

One of the greatest challenges faced by the advocacy program is keeping volunteers engaged throughout the year and turning what can be a reactive program into a proactive one; that is, encouraging alumni to be engaged not only when the state budget is being decided, but to remain engaged year-around in carrying the university's messages forward to legislators.

We encourage advocates to maintain personal contact with legislators throughout the year in addition to critical times when they are asked to contact legislators on specific issues. For example, summer is traditionally a quiet time in the state capitol as legislators are home in their districts. To keep alums engaged during the quiet summer months, the alumni association encourages alumni volunteers to visit with legislators in their districts by publicizing the schedule of "coffee hours" and by writing letters to the editors of local newspapers when issues can be identified that impact the university.

Besides issuing electronic "calls to action" with messages developed by the university's Office of Government Affairs, we utilize a monthly electronic newsletter, "Advocacy Now," with updates on important issues.

### **Documented Results:**

#### **Participation**

In just over a year, the advocacy program has recruited nearly 1,000 volunteers who have reported 3,500 contacts with legislators.

The role of advocates is to:

- Contact state legislators by telephone, e-mail, mail or personal visits.
- Attend alumni and university legislative events to meet elected officials.
- Write letters supporting university positions to local newspapers.
- Stay informed by reading the monthly advocacy e-newsletter.

#### **Legislative Advocacy Workshops**

The alumni association recruited a prominent Law School graduate who is a United States District Court Judge to lead this effort, and she has been instrumental in developing advocacy workshops in key legislative districts – primarily at law firms with a significant number of Wayne State graduates. At these workshops we offer a presentation on "state government 101;" explain the advocate's role; and provide supplementary materials. We have now expanded beyond Law School graduates to offer advocacy workshops for alumni of the Colleges of Education and Nursing. We have held six advocacy workshops since June 2007 and have plans for four additional workshops in the next six months.

#### **Warrior Caucus**

The alumni association created a Warrior Caucus as an official legislative caucus to bring together alumni in Lansing for networking and informational programs. While the organization is open to all alumni working in the State Capitol, its focus is on the 15 alumni who are members of the State Legislature, one of whom serves as the chair of the Warrior Caucus. For the first time the university has an identifiable presence within the state legislature and a direct connection to those in decision-making roles.

### **Calls-to-Action**

The alumni association issued four electronic calls-to-action in collaboration with the Office of Government Affairs throughout the summer and early fall of 2007. These calls-to-action were issued in the face of a \$23 million reduction in funding proposed by the legislature and the governor. Alumni response was overwhelming and resulted in 2,606 e-mails and letters sent to elected state officials. Due in part to these contacts and a university wide grassroots outreach plan, \$20 million in state funding was restored to the university in October 2007.

### **Letters to the Editor**

More than 45 alumni contacted 23 newspapers across the state to advocate increased funding for Wayne State University. During the summer of 2007, seven letters appeared in large daily newspapers, including the *Detroit Free Press* (3 media hits; circulation 320,125); *Detroit News* (circulation 198,098); *Macomb Daily* (circulation 42,045); *Grand Rapids Press* (circulation 138,126); and the *Port Huron Times Herald* (circulation 28,522). In addition, a letter appeared in the weekly *Grosse Pointe News* (circulation 20,000).

### **Alumni Events**

The alumni association hosts two annual events in partnership with the Office of Government and Community Affairs. In January 2008, 15 legislators and 30 alumni leaders attended a legislative brunch on campus. In May 2008, 30 legislators and their staff and 28 alumni leaders participated in a legislative reception in Lansing.

### **Alumni Achievements and Legislators**

The alumni association sent the names and addresses of more than 5,355 new graduates to the legislators for personal recognition. In addition, we notified legislators of scholarship recipients from their districts. Legislators have been delighted to have these opportunities to reach out to their constituents, and we have forged many positive relationships with staff members who appreciate connecting with voters.

### **Lattes and Legislators**

Public officials often host informal meetings in their districts to meet with constituents. We publish schedules of legislative “coffee hours” in the monthly electronic newsletter to encourage advocates to meet one-on-one with legislators. Throughout the summer and fall of 2007, 10 alumni reported attending coffee hours.

### **Conclusion**

In less than two years, the Wayne State University Alumni Association has progressed from virtually no organized legislative advocacy by alumni to a strong, focused effort that contributed to the reversal of what could have been devastating funding cuts to the university in this current budget year.

#### **a) Attachments**

- **Advocacy Volunteer Brochures**
- **Advocacy Now Newsletter**
- **Advocacy Website Materials**

