Report on the Alumni Volunteer Leadership Conference 2013

28 – 29 June 2013 – Merton College



Lectures:

Alumni Relations at Oxford: Building Engagement That Lasts a Lifetime **by Christine Fairchild, Director of Alumni Relations:**

- **View presentation**

Admissions and Access at Oxford **by Mike Nicholson, Director of Undergraduate Admissions:**

- 545,000 – number of UK applicants to UCAS in 2012
- 43,000 – number of courses in UCAS in 2012
- 17,200 – number of applications to Oxford in 2012
- 41,500 – number of students achieving AAA grades or better at A-level in 2012
- 3,500 – number of offers made by Oxford in 2012
- 264 – number of courses at Oxford
- 33 – percentage of UK AAA grade students that are educated in the independent sector
- 58 – percentage of UK state-educated applicants admitted to Oxford
- 61 – percentage of AAA grade students applying to study medicine from the state sector
- 25 – percentage of AAA grade students applying to study classics from the state sector
- 34,000 – number of students achieving AAA grades in 2012 who classified themselves as white
- 608 – number of students achieving AAA grades in 2012 who classified themselves as black
- 80,000 – number of students receiving free school meals in 2010
- 176 – number of students who receive free school meals who achieved AAA in 2010
- 35 – percentage of students educated in Reading who achieved AAA or better

- 8 – percentage of students educated in Newcastle who achieved AAA or better

General discussion:

- Discussion of ratios of places offered being taken up by candidates: some universities over-offer, but Oxford cannot over-recruit because students have to live in.
- Current emphasis on being able to offer internships to students. 700 currently offered (mainly by alumni or through their contacts), but target is 1,000.
- Planning of numbers of places available for different courses is a real "issue" with many courses being closed at different universities. Oxford a bit more resistant to change – with Classics being a good example of something which has been taught for hundreds of years and which is likely to continue despite the reduction in Classics courses elsewhere.
- Some discussion of the demographics of applicants. The most popular courses among students from relatively deprived backgrounds and international students tend to be vocational courses such as medicine and law, which are more over-subscribed.
- The University aims to encourage applications from those who feel that they cannot afford to go to Oxford as there is financial support available. Applications are not determined on the basis of the financial ability of the candidate.
- The University has experimented with interviewing applicants based in the Far East over Skype. This appears to have had a neutral impact on their success rate and the technique is likely to be used more.

Workshop notes:

Workshops 1 & 5 – Running Successful Events:

- **View presentation**

Examples of successful events:

Lalik Nasmyth – Secretary, OUS Westmorland:

- Musical evening where the group links up with local music societies and dinner in a hotel .
    - Held in August, advertised in the group's newsletter.
    - Individuals pay the hotel directly.

Jessany Marsden – OUS West Kent:

- Speaker events:
    - Use high profile names e.g. the Vice Chancellor, Professor Hew Strachan.
    - Branch officers include a retired headmaster who uses his contacts to include schools. Students can liven up debates.
    - Example of a debate: *'Is it worth having a classical education?'*

Dorothy Kennedy – President, Oxford & Cambridge Society of Vancouver Island:

- Co-hosted an event with the University of Victoria, speech followed by dinner.

Cheryl-Lisa Hearne – Secretary, OUS London:

- Tastings:
    - Local companies keen to promote their produce, may reduce their prices or attend the event.

    - Perfect for smaller groups hosted in someone's home.
- OUDS (Oxford University Dramatic Society) event:
    - Theatrical evening at the globe with Q&A afterwards with the players.
    - Ticket price covers costs (OUDS offer alumni a discount), the society buys a few bottles of wine.
- Book launches for books published by members.

Jo Ann Corey – Director of Special Events & Alumni Relations, University of Oxford's North American Office:

- OUS Florida group attend talks given by a local bookshop.

Rosemary Broadbent – Secretary, OUS Manchester:

- The group aims to clear £2 per each ticket for events they hold.
- Considering organising a lecture without a dinner to keep the costs down.

John Evans – Secretary, OUS Cheshire & North Wales:

- Annual Dinner for 80 people.
- Planning a family garden party with entertainment in the Bishop of Chester's house.

Tony Barton – Secretary, OUS Norfolk:

- Drinks in spring with a lecture at a law firm where an Oxonian works; garden party in summer with exclusive venue; AGM/lunch in autumn.

Peter Morgan – Chairman, OUS East Kent:

- The group runs a student bursary scheme, providing a sum of money to a current undergraduate from their local area to undertake a summer project.

Ian Gordon – Secretary, Geneva Oxford & Cambridge Dining Club:

- The group runs moonlit walks followed by a meal at a restaurant, and spring flower walks.

Emefa Amoako – Ghana Oxford area contact:

- The group ran a reading session for children for their first event – it was held during a weekday. The group will now try to organise an evening event.

Summary:

- Be sure of the aims of your event.
- Ask for feedback.
- Ensure you get the catering right.
- Do not change too many things at once.
- Diversity of branches means that each will have own version and range of events.
- If possible, piggy-back events on others taking place in your area, e.g. Cumbria arranges for its alumni to go to events of the Grange (Over-Sands) Music Society.
- Helpful to know of Oxonians passing through regions.
- Consider collaborating with other branches, organisations, Universities (alumni societies or University departments).
- Branches could invite own Heads of House, and Heads of Department.

- When you can't get a high profile speaker, try a parent – e.g.: Dorothy Kennedy, President of the Oxford & Cambridge Society of Vancouver Island, asked the mother of Canadian rower Malcolm Howard.

Workshop 2 – Student Outreach Activity:

Daniel Weiss – President, OUS Paris:

- The group holds 60-65 events per year, including:
    - Drinks every 3rd Thursday of the month.
    - Events specifically aimed at younger members – they find that younger members' prime concern is job-hunting (20 – 25% of their members are classed as 'younger members').
    - Annual freshers' events.
    - Wine and cheese-tasting parties.
    - Lectures – e.g. by academics or business leaders, or on prose and poetry.
    - Informal dinners, museum visits and free events.
- 10% – 15% of their members disappear from their membership every year.
- They try to hold free events, to ensure that members get a return for their membership.

John Gelling – Chairman, OUS West Kent:

- The group has focused on schools' outreach events for the past three years and also holds a number of dinner and debate events with debate topics such as *'How Going to University Changed My Life'* and *'The Advantages of a Classical Education'.*
    - The events have incorporated alumni, students and their teachers.
    - They are usually held in a hotel with three-course buffet-style dinner followed by debate for £29.50 per head – the price has remained the same over the years.
    - They receive very positive feedback from attendees.
    - Teachers recommend specific students to attend the events. Both students and alumni attend the events.
    - The group has a policy of inclusion on selecting the schools they work with – a mix of grammar, state and independent schools.
- Jessany Marsden, also on the OUS West Kent committee, has had a successful career to date in the media and runs workshops on how to enter the profession.

Marisa Benoit – President, OxSAS (Oxford Student and Alumni Association):

- As a [postgraduate] student representative, Marisa would welcome any questions about ideas to attract students leaving university, and suggested that students were keen to network to get jobs and to network socially.
- She saw it being important to integrate current students into groups, and that this could be done despite their also being involved in Oxford10.
- Marisa would be happy to speak to schoolchildren about going to Oxford.
- She also noted the importance of being aware of the timing of events. For instance, in autumn students are more likely to be looking for work, whereas they are more likely to be gainfully employed in, say, June.

- OxSAS has held its own events but felt it was duplicating the work of others student societies and the colleges. It now therefore works as an advisory group in close partnership with the University of Oxford Alumni Office.
- Marisa mentioned that networking meant to her meeting people at all stages in life, all of which she felt had something to offer in way of experience, etc.
- She also mentioned that postgraduates could be very useful in providing a link, because of their understanding of the process, and that new postgraduates should be invited to freshers' events.

Caroline Whateley-Smith – Secretary, OUS Hertfordshire:

- The group holds a schools' meeting for state schools, led by the Admissions Tutor at Balliol College, with the aim being to demystify the admissions process.
    - 200 people – a mix of students, teachers, etc. – attended the last such event.
- The group holds an annual freshers' meeting at the end of September using a meeting room provided free of charge by Price-Waterhouse on their premises. No alcohol is served at the event.
    - 90-100 people in Herts who are offered places are invited and about 50 usually attend.
    - Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education) Sally Mapstone attends and informs attendees what to expect of the admissions process and how to manage their time.
- The group also provides a travel bursary each year worth £300 for local undergraduates to go towards a trip enriching the applicant's course.
    - Competitive applications are submitted in writing with a 200 word limit.
    - The group has c. 8-9 applicants a year and they ask successful applicants to come back and inform them about their trip after the event.
- The group had arranged an event with the Careers' Service in June which had to be cancelled as only two people applied and they were both on the group's committee:
    - Was this because people aren't interested in such an event or was it the wrong time of year?
    - There was the suggestion that, perhaps because of the current economic climate, those who are in jobs are afraid to move and those who are looking for employment already have a support network in place.
- Caroline informs the colleges of the group's activities at every occasion – i.e.: when called by the colleges as part of their telethons.

John Broadbent – OUS Manchester:

- The group used to host a very successful event, *'Considering Oxford'*, to challenge misconceptions about applying to Oxford.
    - It stopped however as the colleges and Oxford started running their own similar programmes.
    - The group now focus on attracting recent graduates.

John Evans – Secretary, OUS Cheshire & North Wales:

- The group is trying to attract younger members and is currently planning a garden party at the Bishop's House in Chester on September 7, 2013.

General discussion:

- Some colleges hold regional pre-term freshers' events, e.g. St Anne's in Manchester.
- A suggestion was made to check the outreach work that the colleges do and encourage them to stage local events through the alumni groups.
- Participants suggested that the University produce a video modelled on the present 'Wall of 100 Faces' web page, which could be updated annually.
- Groups recommended to make direct contact with the college which is responsible for the geographical area in which they are located.
- There is a general problem with people being interested in being involved but not wanting to lead or not having the time to devote to being a volunteer.

Summary:

- If you pull alumni in early enough, you pull them in for life.
- Use videos of current students to show to pupils thinking of applying to Oxford.
- Hold regional events on applying to Oxford and get local undergraduates to attend.
- Greater dialogue with colleges and departments is required.
- Hold well-publicised fresher's parties.
- Engage with postgraduate students and link them up with undergraduate students.
- Alumni groups should be promoted as useful forums for networking.

Workshop 3 – Careers Workshops, Internships & Mentoring:

- **View presentation**

Summary:

- The Careers Service is for life, not just for graduation.
- Alumni invited to sign up as mentors.
- Good to have a mix of ages/experience/careers at events.
- **Please also refer to the alumni section of the Careers Service website: http://www.careers.ox.ac.uk/**

Workshop 4 – Branch Communications and Recruiting New Members:

- **View presentation**

General discussion:

- Annual group membership fees were discussed as some branches charge these to meet expenses: others raise an extra amount (typically £2 per head on paid events).
- Many felt chasing small subscriptions was counter-productive and that subscriptions created an unnecessary division between alumni in an area.

Summary:

- 294,000,000,000 emails are sent per day worldwide – 78% of which are considered to be spam. 19% of each individual email is read.
- The need to address a specific audience and for frequent short communications rather than longer, infrequent missives.
- A good way of obtaining responses is for recipients to be invited to enter a competition e.g.: for the best idea for a new event which the winner subsequently has to organise!

Workshop 6 – Committee Structures/Succession Planning:

General discussion:

- Different approaches by various groups – one size doesn't fit all.

Caroline Whately-Smith, Secretary – OUS Hertfordshire:

- The group has a 'Prime Mover' initiative, with individuals taking responsibility for events. The Oxford & Cambridge Club of Zurich also has a similar idea whereby they invite members to organise events. Members are given a place on the committee as a result.
- Each group should have a treasurer and two other core roles – the remaining roles do not need to be defined.
- In addition to having core roles, it is also helpful to have a list of action points assigned to each committee member.
- Someone must keep the membership list up-to-date.
- If members are asked what they want and when, they won't necessarily do it!
- Get to know who your members are so that you can tap into their expertise/experience/contacts.

John Gelling – Chairman, OUS West Kent:

- Has a committee of three – recently gone up to four – and membership of 80.
- One committee member is a retired headmaster.
- The group has no Chairman and no social meetings.

Rosemary Broadbent – Secretary, OUS Manchester:

- Has a Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer and three other committee members.
- Everyone on the group committee organises events, bar the Chair.
- 'Sharing the load is the key'.
- Aim to make a £2 profit per head on each event they hold – need for a buffer in the case of an event which fails.
- The group has a formal structure of elections every three years and find this works very well.

Felicity Burch – President, Oxford10:

- Is it better to ensure the responsibilities of committee members are well-defined or is it better to be flexible?
- Oxford10 committee comprises busy active people used to committee work as undergraduates. The group's first dinner attracted 145 alumni.

Ian Gordon – Secretary, Geneva Oxford & Cambridge Dining Club:

- The Club has 3 officers and 5 committee members.
- They recommend people serving for a three-year term on the committee.
- The group has the advantage of having a formal constitution, adapted from the Alumni Office's format.
- Beware of new members joining the committee, becoming disillusioned and trying to form a splinter group.

Christine Fairchild – Director of Alumni Relations, University of Oxford Alumni Office:

- The committee needs to be a stable structure that will last and be flexible enough to accommodate different styles.
- Some senior members might be guarded of their position as it 'defines them'.
- Think of jump-starting your group with a new audience. Aim for 'fun' events to attract new audiences, don't start with the AGM!
- Encourage experimental 'out of the box' events – this may not appeal to the 'old guard' but younger committee members react well to such challenges.
- Committee members should have an end date to their role – use of emeritus role in situations where there are difficulties with long-standing members who will not step down – ***handle with respect and honour those who may be less willing to step down!***
- Length of term is important also – is one year of service too short?
- Groups should not get into a rigid 'black or white' way of thinking in terms of committee structure.
- Empower others to help with the running of the group within the core of their capabilities.
- Part of the incentive for young people to be involved is to have a **tangible** activity with **clear** goals – give them the room to do what they want to do.
- Use Survey Monkey or other survey building programmes to ask members/potential members what they want from the group.
- Do a canvas for the 'best idea event' for the year to the committee with an incentive (that they get to organise the event?!) to spark ideas.
- Members may be able to contribute a talk on careers – 'how I got here'.
- For a branch to be defined as active it needs to organise a minimum of two events per year.
- Proactively ask people to help with the group – people generally tend to be naturally reticent to take on more responsibility but if you present them with a compelling task then. they will be more inclined to step forward.

João Coutinho – OUS Portugal:

- The group is relatively new and just getting off the ground.
- They have about 40 members and a committee of three.
- They are currently checking which nationals and ex-pats wish to join.
- Organised a dinner event with Niall Ferguson, and also join with other groups, e.g.: British/Portuguese Alliance.

Peggy Rimmer – OUS Switzerland:

- The group has a committee based upon anyone who is keen to organise an event.
- There is no structure in place about how long someone serves, etc. – this can be awkward.

Carl Wells – Careers Secretary, OUS Oxfordshire:

- Offer a diary of events from which alumni can choose – and get them to pay in advance.

Emefa Amoako – Ghana Oxford area contact:

- Starting an active new group can revive dormant groups in the area.

General discussion:

- Not all groups see the need for an Annual General Meeting.

Summary:

- Committee structures vary from branch to branch – 'one size doesn't fit all'.
- Should have a written constitution.
- There is a need for core roles, but there should be more flexibility in relation to event planning.
- Each appointment should have an end-date.
- Know who your members are – they may have had fascinating career paths which you can draw upon.
- The Alumni Office can help recruit committee members via the electronic newsletter (*OT Extra)* sent to alumni*,* etc*.*
- Have focus groups/ think tanks within your committee for event ideas in particular – to 'test the water'.