Alumni role identity among recent college graduates

Corynn Marcum Gilbert
Northwest Nazarene University

ABSTRACT

American universities rely on donations from alumni to balance their budgets, yet alumni giving rates and amounts have been in persistent decline despite consistently increasing numbers of college graduates. This study asked: how strongly do new alumni identify with their alma mater and the alumni role, how much do they understand about alumni role behavior expectations, and do they intend to engage in those behaviors in the future? Recent university graduates (n = 567) participated in an online survey measuring their organizational identity, alumni role identity, understanding of the alumni role, and the impact of these measures on self-reports of future alumni support behaviors. New alumni express average to above average organizational and alumni role identity, yet do not express commensurate understanding of alumni behaviors, and do not intend to engage in those behaviors in the foreseeable future. In addition, overall student engagement was the most significant predictor of all measures of identity and behavior. Efforts to increase alumni giving should be aligned with these results, with more emphasis given to educating alumni about the alumni role rather than asking them for donations upon graduation, and targeting the alumni who were most engaged as undergraduates as the most likely alumni to support the university.

Keywords: Alumni giving, alumni role identity, organizational identity, young alumni

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between a university and its graduates has historically been a lifelong one, characterized by mutual service and shared benefits. Alumni giving has always traditionally been a source of funding for colleges, but has become even more necessary to balance university budgets under existing funding models (Brown et al., 2014; Jung & Lee, 2019; Mann, 2007; McDearmon & Shirley, 2009; Wunnava & Okunade, 2013). Overall alumni giving amounts and alumni giving rates have been in consistent decline over many years, despite increasing numbers of college graduates (Lara & Johnson, 2012). Most research in alumni giving has been descriptive and retrospective, essentially trying to determine which alumni give and why do they give? Little research exists on whether new graduates will replace current alumni givers in the future (Freeland et al., 2015; Jung & Lee, 2019). The intersection between organizational identity theory from psychology, symbolic interactionism from sociology, and the emerging concept of alumni role identity can help universities understand the future of alumni giving. This quantitative study provides a unique glimpse into the ways young alumni experience their relationship with their university and how this relationship informs their behavioral intentions.

PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this research was to understand how new graduates perceive their relationship with their university at the point at which they make the transition from student to alumnus, how these perceptions inform their understanding of the alumni role, and how this understanding informs their intentions to engage in future alumni support behaviors. This study is based on the intersection of three theoretical frameworks and how they inform the relationship between identity formation and role behavior. The research was primarily exploratory and asked four questions:

How strongly do new alumni identify with their alma mater?
How strongly do new alumni identify with the alumni role?
How much do new alumni understand about alumni role behavior expectations?
Do new alumni express intention to engage in university support behaviors?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Organizational Identification

Organizational identification theory (from psychology) describes how individuals identify with an organization and make personal decisions in light of how the organization is affected by those decisions. Organizational identity becomes a face of an individual's understanding of themselves (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) and is positively correlated with an organization's prestige and distinctiveness, as well as with the level of support and communication a member receives from it (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987). Mael and Ashforth (1992) were the first to apply identity theory to alumni and found highly salient organizational identity with one's alma mater was positively correlated with how much an individual defines

themselves by the organization. The first six questions of Mael and Ashforth's (1992) research comprise the subscale for measuring organizational identity in this study. Organizational identity theory when applied to alumni giving can be explained by someone describing themselves as "I am an alumnus of _____ university" or "I am a _____ (insert university mascot here)."

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism, from the field of sociology, explains how shared expectations, symbols, and experiences within a group increases the salience of one's identity in the group and defines shared behavioral expectations (Stryker, 1968, 2002; Stryker & Vryan, 2003). Role salience is the strength of an individual's commitment to the identity and how it will inform their behavior according to the norms of that role (Callero, 1985; Hogg et al., 1995). Universities are rife with symbolic interactions which strengthen one's identity with a school and secure internationalization of the role so that they will engage in behaviors which reinforce the identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Symbolic interactionism when applied to alumni giving can be explained by the phrase "because I am an alumnus, I should _____ (insert alumni role expectations here)."

Alumni Role Identity

Alumni role identity, an emerging concept developed by McDearmon (2011, 2013), combined identity theory and symbolic interactionism in an effort to measure how these two concepts shape how alumni identify with their alma mater and whether it relates to alumni support behaviors. McDearmon (2011, 2013) created the Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire to quantify the relationship between alumni role salience and subsequent alumni support behaviors such as giving, volunteering, and attending university events. Alumni role identity was higher among alumni who joined the alumni association, attended an event, or contributed to the annual fund (McDearmon, 2013). This concept can be explained by the phrase "Because I am an alumnus, I will _____ (insert alumni support behavior)." Alumni role identity has never been measured among new college graduates, therefore this study provides the first opportunity to determine alumni role salience among new graduates and its impact on future behavioral intentions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While alumni giving research covers a wide spectrum of related topics, research on the impact of student engagement and types of financial aid have direct relevance to the quantitative results reported in this research. The level of involvement in student activities has a direct impact on alumni giving behaviors. Students who participate in any extracurricular activity and/or organized campus group are more likely to make a donation (and a higher donation) than uninvolved students (Clotfelter, 2001; Gaier, 2005; Holmes, 2009; Myers et al., 2016). Students who were involved in volunteer and leadership positions on campus were more likely to make a gift (Weerts & Cabrera, 2018) and give larger gifts (Clotfelter, 2001). Students who self-reported

low levels of student engagement were also less likely to make a gift as alumni (Weerts & Cabrera, 2018). Overall student engagement is correlated with increased alumni loyalty (Snijders et al., 2019), organizational identification (Myers et al., 2016), and identity salience (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014b). Only one study found a negative association between participation in student life and alumni giving, however this study did not look at other forms of support behavior such as attending alumni events, volunteering or recommending their college to prospective students (Lara & Johnson, 2012).

Where students live during college is a proxy for engagement and impacts alumni giving. Students who lived in campus housing, especially those who live on campus during their senior year, were more likely to make a donation (Tiger & Preston, 2013). Attending social and sporting events while a student has been shown to increase organizational identification, as does participation in campus rituals and traditions (Diaz-Vidal & Pittz, 2019; Myers et al., 2016), both of which are more likely to occur when a student lives on campus.

Financial aid characteristics impact alumni giving behaviors, particularly the presence and amount of student loans and the types of scholarships a student received while a student (Marr et al., 2004). Student loans have a dampening effect on how much alumni gave (Monks, 2003) and they decreased the probability of a graduate making a gift in the first eight years after graduation (Marr et al., 2004). The mere presence of a student loan decreased an alumnus' probability of giving, and among those with debt who do give, their gift amounts are conversely related to their debt level (Meer & Rosen, 2012, 2018). Schools with larger average student loan debt per graduate have statistically lower alumni giving rates (Terry & Macy, 2007) and alumni who had student debt burdens over $15,000 were more likely to self-identify as non-donors (McDearmon & Shirley, 2009). Students with loans were also less likely to make a gift to a student philanthropy campaign (Freeland et al., 2015) or a senior class gift campaign (Chisholm-Burns & Spivey, 2015). Only one (older) study did not find a significant correlation between student loans and alumni gift giving trends (Cunningham & Cochi-Ficano, 2002).

The effect of merit scholarships on alumni giving is mixed: Cunningham and Cochi-Ficano (2002) found no positive correlation between receiving merit scholarship and alumni giving, yet other research has found it increases the likelihood of giving (Freeland et al., 2015; Marr, 2005). On the other hand, Meer and Rosen (2012, 2018) found scholarship recipients were no more or less likely to make an alumni gift, but when they gave, their gifts were smaller on average than students who had not received scholarship. In one study, scholarship recipients were more likely to contribute to a senior class gift campaign (Chisholm-Burns & Spivey, 2015) but were not more or less likely to give to a student philanthropy campaign (Freeland et al., 2015).

METHODOLOGY

Instrument

The researcher built a quantitative survey which included 26 Likert-scale questions of beliefs and behaviors, and 18 demographic questions (both binary and multiple choice) in order to answer the four research questions. The survey was evaluated by expert reviewers and the

Content Validity Index (CVI) was calculated for both item-level content validity (I-CVI) and scale-level content validity (S-CVI). The results of both validity measures affirmed the use of each survey question (as written) as an accurate measure of the related research question. Out of the 26 questions, 24 had an I-CVI score of 1.0 and the two remaining had an I-CVI of .98. Three of the five scales had an S-CVI of 1.0 and the remaining had S-CVI scores of .98. It was determined the instrument had acceptable content validity and the researcher subsequently launched a pilot study. The pilot study added an additional layer of validity and reliability to the survey. It was conducted by surveying 23 recent graduates of undergraduate programs from small, private, faith-based colleges similar to those targeted for the research pool. The pilot study did not raise any concerns and confirmed the questions were applicable, easy to understand, and administered appropriately.

Data Collection

The target population sample was graduates of the Class of 2021 from traditional undergraduate programs from private, faith-based universities in the West. In total, eight schools opted to participate in the study, with seven schools sharing the emails of their recent graduates with the researcher and one school distributing the survey directly to their graduates on the researcher's behalf. The survey was distributed through a confidential online survey platform (Qualtrics) and ultimately sent to active email addresses of 2,035 graduates approximately in the summer after their graduation. All surveys were uniquely branded by institution and were anonymous. All recipients had to agree to an informed consent clause, had to complete all the questions to be included in the research, and could only submit their responses one time. Respondents received no compensation for participation in the survey, however the survey was incentivized with a drawing for a cash gift card if the participant shared their email address through a branch survey (in order to retain survey anonymity). The survey was open for a total of five weeks and prospective participants received an initial invitation followed by several reminders of the closing date. Data from each university's group of graduates was compiled into one large sample for data analysis.

Participants

In total, 27.9% of the survey recipients completed the entire survey, resulting in a sample population of 567 participants. Of the 567 respondents, 62.8% were men and 35.4% were women. The majority were under the age of 25 (78.3%), with the remaining 21.7% over the age of 25. The majority of the applicants self-identified as white (71.6%), 10.9% as bi- or mult-racial, and less than 10% identified in each of the remaining race/ethnicity categories (Latinx, Asian, Black or African-American, Native American, and Pacific Islander). Nearly 60% were the first child in their immediate family to graduate from college, and 38.6% were first generation college graduates (did not have either a parent or a grandparent with a college degree). The majority of the participants (81%) had received scholarships based on academic merit or performance, and 63% had received need-based financial aid (with 40% as Pell Grant-eligible). Over two-thirds (67.5%) had taken out federal student loans to pay for their undergraduate

education. Student engagement level was measured by the number of activities a student participated in on campus, and the population sample included 14.5% who were involved in over five activities (high engagement), 26.6% who were involved in 3-4 activities (medium engagement), 38.4% who were involved in 1-2 activities (low engagement), and 20.5% were reported no campus involvement. Two-thirds (67%) of the students lived on campus for at least one year, with 86% of those students residing on campus two years or more.

Data Analysis

The survey instrument was also subject to scrutiny for reliability. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for each subscale as reported in Table 1 (Appendix) was considered acceptable. Each of the five subscales measured at or above the base acceptability level of .70 (with four of them measuring over .80), indicating the questions in each subscale were internally consistent with one another. The combined Cronbach's alpha coefficient for all five subscales was .94, indicating high construct reliability between the subscales, thereby confirming that using these subscales in concert with one another was validated.

This research was primarily exploratory, therefore correlational analysis was the quantitative analysis method chosen to evaluate the survey data. Only one predictor variable was studied at a time, therefore the Pearson product correlation coefficient served as a useful measure to identify meaningful relationships (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Only significance levels above $p < .05$ are reported, assuring there is a 95% likelihood that the observed effect is due to the predictor variable (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

RESULTS

Research Questions

Research Question 1 asked how strongly do new alumni identify with their alma mater? The question was answered by six questions measuring organizational identity developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992). These questions asked new graduates about how a school's reputation and successes make them feel about themselves and their affiliation with the university. Strong agreement with each question suggests high organizational identification. Figure 1 (Appendix) illustrates the degree of organizational identification among the survey respondents. The responses for this subscale were normally distributed across the sample population. Overall, new graduates expressed average to above-average organizational identification with their alma mater.

Research Question 2 asked how strongly do new alumni identify with their alumni role? The question was answered by two five-item subscales from McDearmon's (2011, 2013) Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire measuring role salience and social expectations. These questions asked new graduates how they feel about being an alumnus and how much other peoples' view of their alumni status makes them feel. Strong agreement with each positively-worded item and strong disagreement with each negatively-worded item indicated high identification with the alumni role. Figure 2 (Appendix) illustrates the degree of alumni role identification among the

survey respondents. The survey responses for these two subscales (both independently calculated and combined) were normally distributed across the sample population. Overall, new graduates expressed average identification with the alumni role.

Research Question 3 asked how much do new alumni understand about alumni role behavior expectations? The question was answered by a five-item subscale from McDearmon's (2011, 2013) Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire measuring alumni role behavior expectations. Strong agreement with each question suggests high understanding of the typical alumni role behaviors as defined by colleges and universities. These questions asked new graduates about whether they believe they have a duty to support the university through financial contributions, volunteering, and attending alumni or athletic events. Figure 3 (Appendix) illustrates the degree of understanding of alumni role behavior expectations among the survey respondents. The responses for this subscale were not normally distributed across the sample population. Overall, more than half of the respondents reported very low (33.2%) and low (37.%) levels of agreement and understanding of the alumni role behaviors expected of them, and only 7% reported high or very high levels.

Research Question 4 asked do new alumni express intention to engage in future university support behaviors? The question was answered by a five-item subscale developed by the researcher based on a modification of McDearmon's (2011, 2013) subscale on alumni role behavior expectations from the Alumni Role Identity Questionnaire. In this subscale, behavioral intention was measured by immediacy of intent to engage in the alumni support behaviors listed. These questions asked new graduates if they intended to engage in each behavior in the next year, 5 years, 10 years, 20 years, or never. Figure 4 (Appendix) illustrates the immediacy of behavioral intentions by the participants. The responses for this subscale were not normally distributed across the population sample. Most new alumni reported very distant (49.4%, never to the next 20 years) and distant (31.6%, within the next 10-20 years) levels of intent to engage in alumni support behaviors, with only 18.7% expressing intent to engage within the first ten years after graduation.

Key Correlations

Key correlations provide overall insight into the population sample. While gender had no statistical relevance the population, age was a key factor in several variables. Age was negatively correlated with parents' ($r = -.23, p < .001$) and grandparents' college education level ($r = -.27, p < .001$), legacy status ($r = -.16, p < .001$), merit scholarship status ($r = -.54, p < .001$), level student engagement ($r = -.39, p < .001$), having an on-campus job ($r = -.37, p < .001$), and living on-campus ($r = -.43, p < .001$). Age was also positively correlated with Pell Grant status ($r = .15, p < .001$), taking out a federal student loan ($r = .10, p < .05$), having an off-campus job ($r = .21, p < .001$), and living at home or with family ($r = .28, p < .001$). Finally, age was positively correlated with alumni role expectations ($r = .08, p < .05$).

Where a student lived and worked had statistical relevance for the population. Living on campus was positively correlated with higher levels of alumni role social expectations ($r = .11, p < .01$). Living off-campus was negatively correlated with role salience ($r = -.09, p < .05$), social expectations ($r = -.11, p < .01$), overall alumni role identification ($r = -.11, p < .01$) and

behavioral intentions ($r = -.09$, $p < .05$). Working on campus was positively correlated with higher levels of alumni social expectations ($r = .11$, $p < .01$) and overall alumni role identification ($r = .09$, $p < .05$). Working off-campus was negatively correlated with role salience ($r = -.10$, $p < .01$), overall alumni role identification ($r = -.10$, $p < .05$), and role expectations ($r = -.09$, $p < .05$).

The type of financial aid students received had statistical relevance for the population. Receiving a merit scholarship was positively correlated with social expectations ($r = .10$, $p < .05$). Taking out a federal student loan was negatively correlated with organizational identity ($r = -.10$, $p < .05$).

The level of student engagement (as defined by the number of activities students participated in on campus) was positively correlated (at the $p < .01$ level) with all subscale measures of organizational identification, alumni role identification, alumni role behavioral expectations, and behavioral intentions (see chart of all significant correlations in Table 2 found in the Appendix).

DISCUSSION

Impact of Organizational Identity

Organizational identity correlates to favorable attitudes and behaviors towards an organization (Garvey & Drezner, 2016; Kim et al., 2010; Mann, 2007; Myers et al., 2016) and is therefore an important precursor to understanding how new alumni feel about their university upon graduation. The survey participants in this study reported higher average organizational identity than in the landmark study by Mael and Ashforth (1992). Since graduation represents a positive interaction with the organization (Myers et al., 2016), above average organizational identification was anticipated. Organizational identification is positively correlated with alumni role identification, alumni role behavior expectations, and intent to engage in future alumni support behaviors. Organizational identification is negatively impacted by taking out federal student loans, but positively impacted by increasing levels of student engagement.

Impact of Alumni Role Identity

Identification with the alumni role means the alumnus has integrated the alumni role into their sense of self and represents how much it matters to their identity (McDearmon, 2011, 2013). The majority of participants reported medium to very high role salience as well as medium to very high social expectations, indicating these new graduates have internalized the alumni role at the point of graduation. Since graduation was still a very recent experience for the participants, above average alumni role identification was anticipated. Alumni role identification is positively correlated with organizational identification, alumni role behavior expectations, and intent to engage in future alumni support behaviors. Alumni role identification is positively correlated with increasing levels of student engagement as well as working on campus, but negatively impacted by working off-campus.

Understanding of Alumni Role Behavior Expectations

Whether or not new graduates understand the behaviors typically associated with the alumni role was based in symbolic interactionism and how group behavior is internalized within an individual (Stryker, 1968, 2002; Stryker & Vryan, 2003). Despite high organizational identity and identification with the alumni role, these new graduates had very low understanding of the alumni role behaviors expected by their university. Colleges and universities are replete with experiences and traditions designed to reinforce in-group behaviors while students are enrolled (Diaz-Vidal & Pittz, 2019; Myers et al., 2016), yet new graduates are still unclear about what being an alumnus actual means and how they should act out the role. Alumni role behavior expectations are positively correlated with organizational identification, alumni role identification, and intent to engage in future alumni support behaviors. Alumni role behavior expectations are positively correlated with increasing levels of student engagement, but negatively impacted by working off-campus.

Intent to Engage in Alumni Support Behaviors

Whether or not new graduates express intention to engage in alumni support behaviors has critical implications for the field of alumni giving research. The majority of new graduates in this survey do not intend to volunteer, attend a university event, or make a financial donation for at least a decade after graduation, and nearly half do not intend to do so for twenty years or more (if ever). Among this sample population, there is a disconnect between the student experience and the alumni role: new graduates do not know what is expected of them nor do they plan to act out the behaviors when directly asked. Behavioral intentions are positively correlated with organizational identification, alumni role identification, and alumni role behavior expectations. Behavioral intentions are positively correlated with increasing levels of student engagement, but negatively impacted by living off-campus.

Impact of Student Engagement

Student engagement remains the most significant predictor of all forms of identification with the university, the alumni role, and future alumni behaviors. Student engagement questions included participation in athletics, music, volunteering, campus clubs, residential life, student activities, student leadership, and campus ministry. Living on campus and working on campus were also proxies for student engagement and had the same effect. Student engagement was highest among traditionally aged first-time undergraduates who did not live with their families.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The population was limited to first time college graduates of private, faith-based, liberal arts universities in one region of the country. These students share some commonalities based on their school choice, and their collegiate experiences were likely similar. These students were more likely to be white and middle-class since these schools are, on average, more expensive to attend. Despite a robust sample size and strong response rate, the study would benefit from

replication using different populations of new graduates among a variety of institution types and academic programs. The study could be replicated among alumni who obtained their degree through alternative course delivery methods such as online or hybrid programs. The study could be replicated with graduate students or the results of non-traditional, older first-time undergraduates could be studied independently. Finally, the study would benefit from replication among private colleges with no faith heritage to determine how a religious campus culture impacts the constructs studied. Future questions could explore the impact of student participation in alumni programs and student philanthropy efforts on the constructs studied.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

New graduates feel positively toward their university and their alumni role at the point of graduation, yet this study provides convincing evidence that the transition to the alumni role must be reinforced for future alumni support behaviors to take place. Colleges need to model alumni support behaviors by creating opportunities for student to learn the impact of alumni support and what alumni service looks like by bringing alumni back to campus to interact with students. Colleges need to educate students on what the alumni role means, both while they are enrolled and in the years after graduation. Colleges need to communicate the value of being an alumnus through communications prior to expecting new alumni to give back.

Colleges and universities must continue to invest in opportunities for students to engage in campus life and seek to encourage all students to participate. This study is an argument for encouraging more students to live in campus housing and work on campus. All forms of student engagement are valuable in shaping future supportive alumni. Online and adult learners can still develop high organizational and alumni role identity if they are part of cohort models and hybrid programs which provide opportunities for these students to interact with their peers and professors, visit campus, meet alumni, or take advantage of campus resources. Reducing student loan debt burdens and increasing merit aid opportunities may impact future alumni giving behaviors. Merit aid recipients would benefit from opportunities to meet their donors, and all students should be better educated about how their education is partially funded by donors.

CONCLUSION

There is little evidence indicating any change of course from the continued reliance on donations from alumni to balance university budgets, therefore ensuring a pipeline of future alumni givers is critical for ongoing fundraising success. Even young alumni who feel great about their alma mater do not seem to know what it means to be an alumnus and do not express intentions to engage in alumni support behaviors in the near future. Increasing organizational identity, alumni role identity, and knowledge of alumni role behavior expectations will encourage and reinforce alumni support behaviors in the future. This research argues for the need to expand efforts at educating students on the alumni role, segmenting and differentiating alumni outreach based on years from graduation, encouraging alumni to return to campus, and expanding student engagement opportunities.

APPENDIX

Table 1

Reliabilities for All Measures in the Study

Subscales Measured	Cronbach's alpha
Organizational Identification	.85
Alumni Role Identification	.87
Alumni Role Behavior Expectations	.88
Behavioral Intentions	.77
All Subscales Combined	.94

Table 2

Summary of Significant Correlations Within Key Measures

	Variable	Correlation	r-squared	p-value
Organizational Identification (OI)				
	Student engagement	Positive	$r = .13$	$p < .01$
	Federal loans	Negative	$r = -.10$	$p < .05$
Alumni Role Identification (AR)				
	Student engagement	Positive	$r = .18$	$p < .01$
	Working on campus	Positive	$r = .09$	$p < .05$
	Working off-campus	Negative	$r = -.11$	$p < .01$
Role Salience (RS) Subscale				
	Student engagement	Positive	$r = .15$	$p < .01$
	Living off-campus	Negative	$r = -.09$	$p < .05$
	Working off-campus	Negative	$r = -.10$	$p < .05$
Social Expectations (SE) Subscale				
	Student engagement	Positive	$r = .17$	$p < .01$
	Living on campus	Positive	$r = .11$	$p < .01$
	Working on campus	Positive	$r = .11$	$p < .01$
	Living off-campus	Negative	$r = -.11$	$p < .01$
	Merit aid	Positive	$r = .10$	$p < .05$
Alumni Role Behavior Expectations (RE)				
	Student engagement	Positive	$r = .14$	$p < .01$
	Working off-campus	Negative	$r = -.09$	$p < .05$
Behavioral Intentions (BI)				
	Student engagement	Positive	$r = .21$	$p < .01$
	Living off-campus	Negative	$r = -.09$	$p < .05$

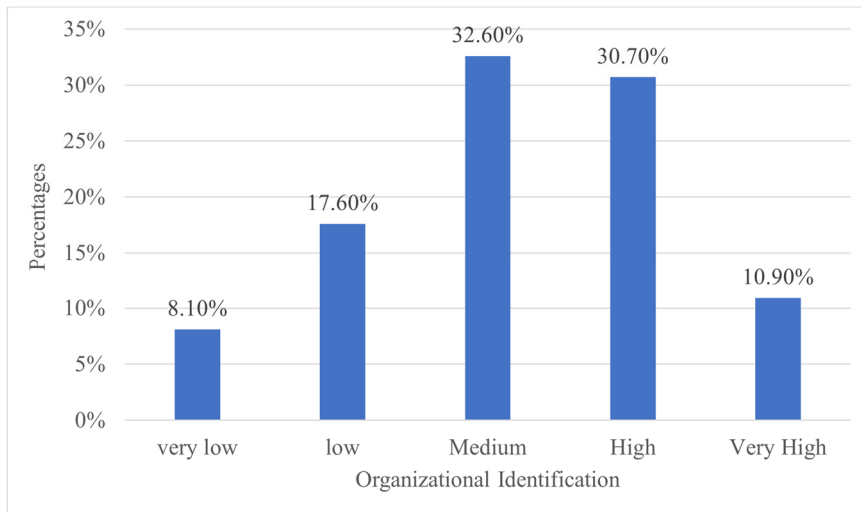**Figure 1**

Organizational Identification

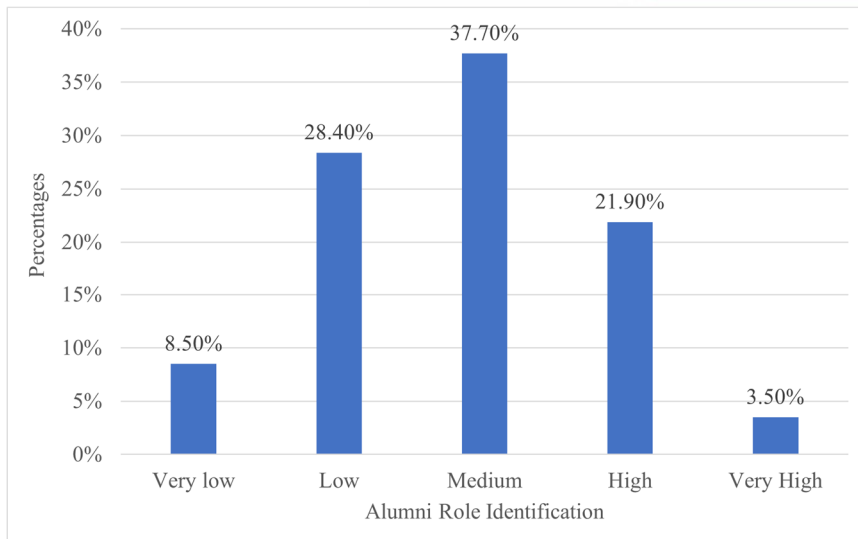**Figure 2**

Alumni Role Identification

Figure 3

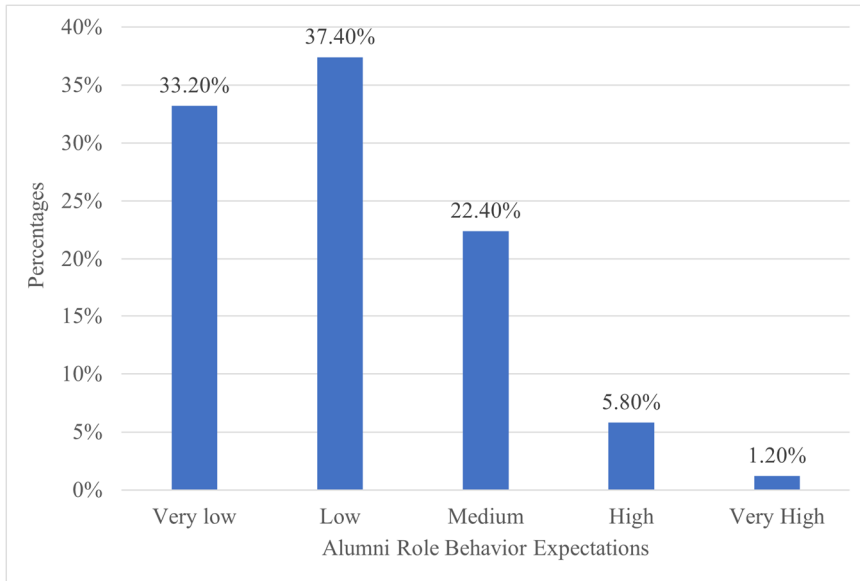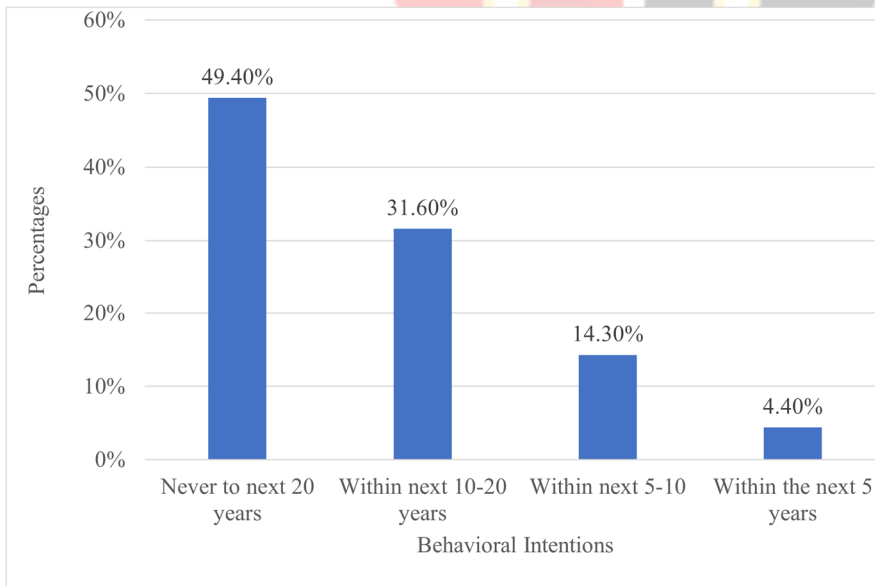*Alumni Role Behavior Expectations*

Figure 4

Behavioral Intentions

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