

AN ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT CYCLE: EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
GRADUATE STUDENT INVOLVEMENT AND ALUMNI AMBASSADORSHIP THROUGH
LEARNING, LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

This research examined a functional problem facing a graduate student support division at a southeastern metropolitan business school. The impact of alumni engagement on the institution's current students, staff, and administration is highlighted in this study as institutions have become reliant on their alumni population and are finding ways to engage their former students. Traditionally, attempts to engage alumni have been financially driven and directed toward undergraduate programs.

The purpose of this research was to explore the impact of alumni involvement on a holistic cycle of engagement in public postgraduate business programs. This study reintroduced alumni to their alma mater through an alumni ambassador program geared toward developing current students. Alumni volunteer behaviors, motivations, and engagement were reviewed to determine the attributes of a robust non-monetary relationship between alumni and their graduate program. The social exchange and student involvement theories were the basis for the program's structure, as alumni interacted with current graduate students during developmental training to nurture these student leaders as the next generation of engaged alumni.

The findings in this study show that positive experience exposes graduate students to alumni influence through an alumni ambassador program. The study also found that staff participation is required to establish an effective connection between involved students and alumni. Motivating factors for alumni volunteerism were based on social exchange relationships and opportunities to pay it forward. Findings also included that strategy, vision, team skillsets, and leadership buy-in are drivers of the success of student-alumni programming development.

Conclusions from this study suggest that reciprocity should be considered in the development of alumni ambassador programs. It was also concluded that tracking student involvement through monitoring technology serves as a tool to enhance the sustainability of the alumni ambassador program. A model of engagement was introduced that creates a guide for student involvement and allows alumni to contribute to the leadership development of graduate students in the years ahead.

INDEX WORDS: social exchange theory, student involvement theory, student integration theory, alumni engagement, graduate student leadership, ambassador

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family and friends who have been a true support system during this process since the beginning. Your encouragement made this possible and has motivated me to get to this point. Throughout my time in the program, we have experienced life-changing events, but through your prayers and support, we have and will continue to overcome together. In addition, I would like to dedicate this to my colleagues and leadership that has made this journey possible through the development of the ambassador program. The support and commitment throughout the process will forever be appreciated.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND THE LITERATURE

Alumni engagement with their college or university is crucial for the institution's performance. In general, alumni enjoy being involved with their alma maters and the objectives that contribute to the institution's success (Fleming, 2019). Despite this, few institutions have programming that addresses this group consistently and provides them with multiple opportunities for engagement beyond financial assistance. Institutions can strengthen their alumni relationships and avoid a pattern of one-time requests for participation in campus events by presenting opportunities for continuous engagement (Reid et al., 2020).

Graduates of business schools are productive members of their respective industries, while graduates of postgraduate business programs are often their industry's leaders, managers, and executives. These alumni community members are an asset that can strengthen the institution if their skills are effectively utilized. Institutions focus on these talents and use them to keep their alumni population engaged and to introduce current students to a network that is easily and frequently accessible. Graduate students have been associated with dedication and a determination to succeed in their programs and in their respective fields. Offstein et al. (2004) wrote, "Graduate students are often highly committed, persevering or tenacious, attending to detail, exhibit perfectionist tendencies, hold high standards of quality, exhibit passion for their field, and are achievement oriented" (p.399). Students excel when alumni are engaged members in a strong relationship between alumni and the institution (Dollinger et al., 2019). These relationships have often been translated into more meaningful experiences for students who, in

turn, reciprocate the experience of being supported by alumni upon graduation (as shown in Figure 1.1). Snijders et al. (2019) affirmed that “Strong alumni relations can be of enormous value to a university. Alumni may assist the university from which they have graduated, resulting in non-monetary and monetary support” (p. 608). Despite the advantages of alumni engagement in the education and training of current students, many institutions still underutilize alumni talent, frustrating members of the alumni population who would like to become more involved (Fleming, 2019).

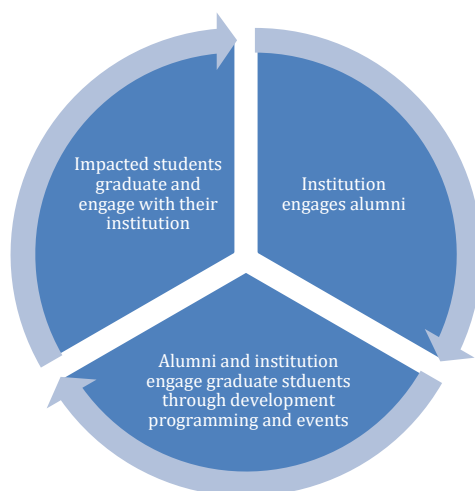


Figure 1.1. *Alumni Ambassador Program Cycle of Engagement.*

Relevance of the Problem

Beginning a graduate program can often feel like a fresh start for students. They face sifting through the mountains of new student paperwork, emails, and personal records required to begin their journey. They are also met with congratulations and warm welcomes as they officially enroll in classes. These welcomes are often the first impression from the institution’s

leadership, designed to collectively prepare the students for the first semester of their program. The support continues throughout students' enrollment as they are offered development opportunities and workshops. As the end of students' graduate program nears, the support shifts to career development and networking. Although necessary, this approach is not consistent with the excitement and support presented at the start of academic programs. A postgraduation communication plan between alumni and the institution may merely be acknowledgement of their new status in the alumni network followed by a request for a monetary contribution. Alumni are often searching for additional opportunities beyond financial engagement to support their alma mater, such as ways to contribute their skills, knowledge, and experience.

Research on the topic of alumni engagement has highlighted the importance of support to colleges and universities. For this study, I refer to the Council for Advancement and Support of Education's (CASE, 2018) definition of alumni engagement: "Activities that are valued by alumni, build enduring and mutually beneficial relationships, inspire loyalty and financial support, strengthen the institution's reputation and involve alumni in meaningful activities to advance the institution's mission" (p. 5). In particular, alumni support has become more valuable from the perspective of public universities as funding from the government has declined domestically and internationally (Snijders et al., 2019). Although essential, financial contributions by an institution's alumni are no longer the only pursuit; the level of student involvement is a growing concern for institutions, driven by increasing interest in the measurement of outcomes by government agencies and accrediting bodies, used to gauge program quality (Kahu, 2013). In addition, world events such as the COVID-19 pandemic have created obstacles for institutions, forcing them to adjust their engagement strategy and delaying previous plans for years to come (Everett, 2020, para. 3).

Public universities realize that the absence of alumni engagement could adversely affect their overall quality. As governments have become focused on student outcomes, programs that engage current students such as those supported by alumni are essential, and without engaged students, government funding tied to an institution's student engagement is at risk (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014). As leaders evolve, it is necessary to refocus their talents, attention, and time on helping others (Gentry, 2016). Creating a structure in which alumni of public postgraduate institutions receive consistent communication and opportunities to participate in college events is necessary to increase alumni engagement. Alumni believe that engagement is developed through familiarity with faculty, staff, and other alumni and constant communication regarding relevant topics (Shen & Sha, 2020). Opportunities for engagement should align with the stakeholders' interests as well. In this case, current students are stakeholders, and former students are directly associated with the university's future success. According to Shen and Sha (2020), "Alumni publics who were once internal stakeholders to universities and colleges become external stakeholders to potentially continue their vested interests in their alma maters" (p. 1). However, it is insufficient to engage only alumni; current students must also become involved, thereby creating a cycle of engagement for subsequent alumni association members. Through an alumni ambassador program, students can engage in experiential learning and social learning opportunities such as workshops, panel discussions, and development programming that also offers alumni meaningful opportunities to engage with the campus community beyond financial donations. Programming that builds these relationships creates a long-lasting resolution to the problem of underutilized alumni engagement.

Alumni Engagement as Experiential Learning

Experiential learning theory (ELT), first developed by Kolb and Plovnick (1974), is grounded in work by prominent scholars to highlight the significance of experience and its significance to human learning and development—a topic that has been pursued since the early 1900s in the education field. Initially focused on a structured approach to career planning, ELT has since evolved into a universal theory based on the process of learning from experiences. Several definitions of experiential learning have been offered, including the below by Morris and Tate (1978), who defined it as,

Learning in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied. It is contrasted with the learner who only reads about, hears about, talks about, or writes about these realities but never comes into contact with them as part of the learning process. (as cited in Kolb & Kolb, 2017, p. 14)

As explained by the ELT, the experiences of the students outside of the classroom and the knowledge obtained in the classroom go hand in hand. Active engagement between current graduate students and alumni through an ambassador program such as the one in this action research (AR) study offers students an avenue for unique, valuable experiential learning.

Social Learning Through Alumni Ambassadorship

Social learning theory (SLT), introduced by Bandura and Walters (1977), has its foundation in theories relating to human behavior. Described as a learning process, SLT starts with the introduction of a role model in a social setting. Through observation and interaction, the learner obtains and retains information that they can then demonstrate when they are motivated to put this newfound knowledge on display (Merriam & Cafferella, 2006). Although the learner does not always alter or adopt behaviors through social learning, studies have shown that the

individual can be influenced by the behavior and attitudes of the group to conform to the desired behaviors (Chuang, 2021).

The creation of programming that allows graduate students to engage with alumni in a social environment introduces a “role model” figure from whom current students can learn. Alumni who return to their alma maters to volunteer are professionals and leaders in their respective fields. Graduate students understand that alumni have traveled a path that can be emulated, and the knowledge retained from their observations can be displayed once they are presented with their own opportunities to join their respective organizations upon graduation. As one alum put it, “It’s possible to achieve the goals that we have set for ourselves currently as students because I can see that they [alumni] are doing it, and they were also at once, at one point in time, a student” (C. Matthias, personal communication, August 1, 2023). This observed behavior opens the door for students to enter a holistic cycle of engagement before graduation. Developing this cycle of student involvement to alumni ambassadorship is sustainable with the institutional support when developed with all stakeholders in mind. The evolution of engagement in higher education and its origins are evident in the literature.

Literature Review

The literature surrounding the engagement of students and alumni with their colleges and universities is vital to understanding the potential for sustainable impact within a public institution. The purpose of this research was to explore the impact of alumni involvement on a holistic cycle of engagement in public postgraduate business programs. The theories that drive this study’s purpose, including social exchange, student involvement, and student integration, make up the theoretical framework and are discussed in this literature review.

Engagement

Engagement is vital to any institution because it impacts the institution's public image, promotes brand awareness, mobilizes volunteers, enables alumni networks to expand, and can increase interactions between alumni and students (Drezner, 2013). As defined by Saks (2006), engagement is “a distinct and unique construct consisting of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components that are associated with individual role performance” (p. 602). Research on engagement has evolved from its original applications in industry to new approaches at institutions of higher learning. Early studies referencing engagement focused on its impact on employees and their organizations, examining how the ways in which individuals and teams became and stayed engaged with their organization were influenced by their emotional and cognitive well-being.

Considered by many to be the father of engagement studies, William Kahn coined the term in 1990. Kahn (1990) believed that multiple types of influence, such as individual, interpersonal, group, intergroup, and organizational, shape an employee's (dis)engagement with their role. He opposed the traditional top-down approach to management, believing that the way a person feels about their work surpasses their fit or incentive to perform. As Kahn explained, “people can use varying degrees of their selves, physically, cognitively, and emotionally, in the roles they perform, even as they maintain the integrity of the boundaries between who they are and the roles they occupy” (p. 692). Kahn's model of employee engagement, shown in Figure 1.2, highlights the psychological conditions that influence engagement in an organization.

In Kahn's model, psychological meaningfulness, safety, and availability were aligned, respectively, with a person's experiences of benefits, guarantees, and resources. Similar to social exchange relationships, meaningfulness refers to the feeling that any exerted physical, cognitive,

or emotional energy will be reciprocated through a sense of value and appreciation. Safety alludes to the ability to express feelings freely without negative consequences. Availability points to having physical, emotional, or psychological resources to engage as they see fit (Kahn, 1990). From feeling a sense of value and impact to searching for opportunities and avenues to engage, alumni exhibit similar emotions as they aspire to engage with their alma maters.

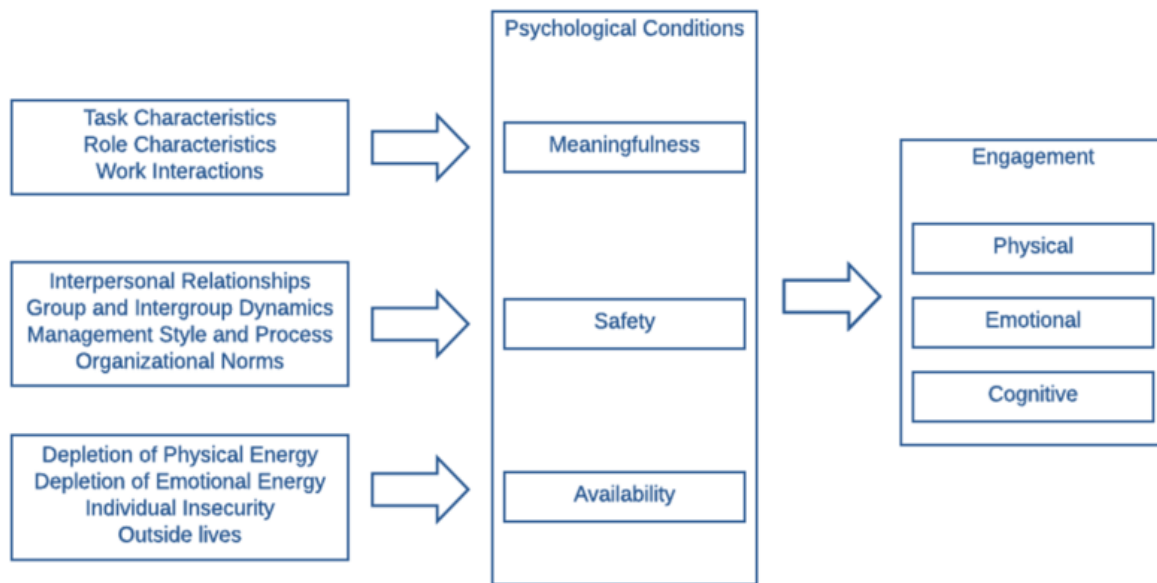


Figure 1.2. Kahn (1990) Model of Employee Engagement.

Note. This model was inspired by Kahn's (1990) study Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work, summarizing the factors influencing engagement (Kahn, 1990). From an investigation of the relationship among honesty-humility, authentic leadership, and employee engagement (Doctoral dissertation) by S. Meskelis, (2017), p.29.

Defining Alumni Engagement

Commonly, the definition of *engagement* in a college setting focuses on keeping current students interested academically, with the student's success and ultimate graduation remaining the primary goals. Research has shown that the combination of engagement and learning are critical for student success (Boulton et al., 2019). This view was supported by Fleming (2019), who defined "highly engaged" students and alumni as those "who have a highly positive affinity for their college institution or benefit university communities in ways such as volunteering, donating, leading organizations, or getting good grades" (p. 105). However, as education pioneer John Dewey (1938) asserted, "every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (p. 27). Exploring the importance of the relationship among current students, alumni, and their institution is crucial to understanding both the need for and ways to promote meaningful experiences in educational settings.

The engagement of alumni in a higher education setting has been a high priority of university advancement for several decades (Rissmeyer, 2010). As Fleming (2019) recently acknowledged, "increasingly, institutions rely on strong relationships with alumni for philanthropic, volunteer, and political advocacy amidst declining public support and investment in higher education" (p. 104). Active strategies to engage students as they move from matriculation toward becoming alumni are necessary and are also now expected by the governing bodies responsible for these institutions' funding, which often view institutional engagement as correlated with institutional quality (Zepke & Leach, 2010). Despite the importance of experience and engagement to current students' involvement after they graduate (Fleming, 2019), most research has considered alumni of undergraduate degree programs, and

there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding graduate students' later involvement as alumni. Pontius & Harper (2006) affirmed:

Many postbaccalaureate degree programs, academic departments, and graduate and professional schools offer various services and resources for students. However, divisions of student affairs, especially those at large research universities, typically focus on undergraduate students, and hence devote less effort to engaging the graduate and professional student population (p.47)

The gap in the literature reflects the void in many master's programs in the country. The student involvement team at OBC plays a significant role in providing current students connected to the resources the college and university has to offer. In this study this team will also fill the gap of alumni engagement with the graduate students that they served upon the completion of the program and the years that follow.

Engagement is complex, uniting several research areas that explain student success (Kahu, 2013). Research has considered engagement through behavioral, psychological, sociocultural, and holistic approaches focusing on various aspects of engagement, ranging from the individual's own processes to broad social influences (Kahu, 2013). Many of the most influential works to date on alumni engagement have focused on alumni's charitable donations to their alma mater (Weerts & Ronca, 2007). This focus has shifted, however, as universities have increasingly recognized the additional benefits their former students could contribute to their institution, including "access to resources through philanthropy or industry collaboration, marketing and promotion of the university, and alumni's potential to help students to support graduate employability" (Dollinger et al., 2019, p. 375). Scholars have noted the change in this dynamic, considering alumni to be critical stakeholders of their alma maters (Dollinger et al.,

2019). The literature in the area of alumni engagement has moved beyond the field's initial focus on financial commitments to one's alma mater to include assessing alumni behavior, building relationships, managing professionals' and current students' expectations, understanding the alumni population's connection to the institution, and determining how to recreate those positive experiences (Fleming, 2019).

The Council for Advancement and Support for Education (CASE) has classified alumni engagement into four categories:

1) volunteer engagement (rewarding volunteer roles that are endorsed and valued by the institution and support its mission and strategic goals); 2) experiential engagement (meaningful experiences that inspire alumni are valued by the institution, promote its mission, celebrate its achievements, and strengthen its reputation); 3) philanthropic engagement (diverse opportunities for alumni to make philanthropic investments that are meaningful to the donor and support the institution's mission and strategic goals); and 4) communication engagement (interactive, meaningful and informative communication with alumni that supports the institution's mission, strategic goals, and reputation).

(Fleming, 2019, p. 106)

This project focuses on the volunteer and communication approaches to engagement, as shown in Figure 1.3.



Figure 1.3.

CASE Categories of Alumni Engagement.

The literature supports the willingness of alumni to volunteer and contribute to their alma mater (Drezner & Pizmony-Levy, 2021). Institutions communicate their needs and the roles these alumni perform in addressing those needs, encouraging alumni to join advisory boards that lead to positive student outcomes (Reid, et al., 2020). Such communication regarding the college's mission and goals allows alumni interested in volunteering to gauge their fit and whether the current direction of the university aligns with their values. Alumni assess their fit by determining their expectations for the university, level of connection, willingness to participate, and satisfaction with their current participation (Fleming, 2019). Alumni who determine that their skills and values align well with their alma mater's needs can experience a mutually beneficial relationship between themselves and their alma mater through improved engagement.

Despite the focus on volunteerism and the communication between institutions and their alumni, there are opportunities for both the experiential and philanthropic categories to play a significant role in the interactions with alumni. These categories are all-inclusive of what is required to create and sustain a community of engagement. Experiential engagement activities, such as expert panel discussions and networking events, provide alumni with opportunities to highlight their value and enhance current students' educational experiences (CASE, 2018).

Alumni Engagement in Public and Private Institutions

Philanthropic engagement is part of the broader definition of alumni engagement defined by CASE (Fleming, 2019). Historically, alumni financially contribute to their alma mater when they are fully invested in the current and strategic direction of the institution. Private institutions rely on the wealth and contributions of their alumni for their universities to thrive. Literature in this area has pointed out that the wealth of a student body recruited at private institutions combined with greater development efforts can result in larger alumni gifts, although public

institutions traditionally see lower returns than private colleges and universities (Baade & Sundberg, 1996). Private institutions' approach to philanthropy engagement, which generally integrates the importance of giving into student programming developed by staff for solicitation as early as when the student arrives on campus, has become a model for some public institutions as government funding declines. According to Miller (2011),

a sizeable number of private colleges and universities (52%), public colleges and universities (29.4%), and community colleges (14%) report sponsoring programs designed to inform students of their future role as alumni, and 52% of institutional advancement reported having student philanthropy programs as part of staff responsibility, compared to 20% of student affairs respondents.” (pp. 22–23)

Beyond such programming, Ivy League institutions often take sophisticated approaches such as incorporating solicitation techniques within programs that focus on networking and mentoring, social programs, and senior-giving and aligning these programs with the alumni cultivation strategy (Miller, 2011).

Such approaches are necessary as the donor life cycle, introduced by Bristol (1990), indicates a pattern of philanthropic behavior among early graduates (years 1–10 postgraduation) reflecting a lack of financial engagement. This lack of financial support is a result of several factors, including income levels, alumni engagement with the institution, and the length of time removed from their program (Bristol, 1990). Because the number of graduate donors increases over time as alumni become farther out from graduation, there is an opportunity to engage young alumni using a non-monetary approach. Targeting alumni who have graduated within 10 years keeps them engaged in meaningful ways until they are prepared to become financial donors later in their donor life cycle.

Enhancing the enrolled student experience is an effective way for institutions to encourage future contributions at both private and public institutions. Alumni respond favorably to their past collegiate experiences, which increases the likelihood that they will later contribute to their alma mater's fundraising efforts (Baade & Sundberg, 1996). Although the traditional idea of financial contributions from alumni to their alma maters has been viewed by many as an effective way to contribute to student success (Chen, 2018), others have argued that institutions can and should utilize alumni talent to enhance current students' experiences (Fleming, 2019). In turn, students who experience these development opportunities provided by alumni engagement are often more eager to take advantage of the development opportunities offered within their college. It is this desire to learn and be engaged that eventually motivates students to pay service forward: "As leaders progress, they need to realign and redistribute their skills, attention, and time from focusing on helping themselves to focus on helping others" (Lawrence et al., 2018, p. 636).

Alumni Engagement in Student Leadership Development

Leadership development in graduate business schools is critical to charting the path for alumni to become key leaders in their respective fields. Lawrence et al. (2018) noted the "key role" of MBA programs in "closing the leadership gap during the [student] development cycle" (p. 635). Graduate school provides business students with a controlled environment for personal and professional development, thereby contributing to the overall experience internalized by students, which later influences their level of engagement with their alma mater. As Fleming (2019) claimed, "Student experience is another significant influence on giving, with higher satisfaction levels leading to increased alumni giving levels" (p. 107). However, many factors

can influence this experience for students, including personal values, financial status, and college actions.

Given this background context, this study sought to explore how alumni of a graduate business program respond to the formation of an intentional, reciprocal relationship in which their alma mater builds on their current relationship by offering additional potential incentives for alumni services. Data collected by the AR team from individuals and engagement groups was analyzed and used to develop the ambassador program for O'Brien Business College (OBC; pseudonym), which seeks to address the problem of lacking alumni engagement with the college by capitalizing on the population of alumni who have not yet entered a phase of their lives where financial contributions are an option. Alumni ambassadorship creates endless opportunities for current graduate business students to observe and engage in the program's activities, thereby also learning from these alumni role models and how they can contribute to their institution in the future as alumni in meaningful non-financial ways.

Theoretical Framework

The current study explored the relationship fostered between alumni and a public institution through an alumni ambassadorship program, seeking to understand the impact of this program on social exchange, student involvement, and the potential for alumni integration into current student education and development to impact motivation for students to provide nonmonetary service to their alma mater as alumni. To ground this examination, several theories connecting alumni engagement and developmental relationships among colleges and universities, current students, and alumni were employed to create a theoretical framework: social exchange theory, student involvement theory, and student integration theory. The empirical studies shown in Table 1.1 highlights literature these three theories that contribute to the study.

Table 1.1*Theoretical Framework Empirical Studies*

Author & Date	Subject/Purpose	Methodology/Theory	Findings/Implications
Sallai, Bahnson, Sanikiluaq, & Berdanier 2023	To characterize non-monetary cost of attending graduate school and how this affects student's choice to persist or leave the program.	Qualitative Expectancy–value theory Grad attrition decisions model	The biggest motivation to persist was the cost incurred (time) as opposed to the benefits of completing the degree.
Fleming, 2019	Discover the true meaning of alumni engagement and what determines the relationship between alumni and their alma maters (experiences, factors, etc.)	Qualitative Grounded Theory Social Exchange Theory Relationship Marketing Theory	Alumni engagement is influenced by personal values, perceived institutional integrity, connectedness, commitment, and a sense of fulfillment.
Jorgenson, Farrell, Fudge, & Pritchard, 2018	To explore student satisfaction with their college, uncovering the student perspective of connectedness	Mixed Method Student Involvement Theory Social Identity Theory	Students who experience better social and academic experiences feel more connected to their college/ university.
Weerts & Ronca, 2007	Predict and organize a group of alumni who are most likely willing to volunteer at their alma mater through different forms of engagement.	Quantitative Social Exchange Theory Expectancy Theory Investment Model	Distance is a key factor in whether alumni will volunteer. Motivation to volunteer is influenced by the academic experience while enrolled.
Paterson, 2007	To determine how the instruction modality affects persistence for master's degree programs.	Quantitative Student Integration Theory Theory of Student Attrition	Dropout rates were higher for online master's students versus on-campus, with age being an added factor.

Composite Theory of Student

Persistence

Huang & Chang, 2004	Determine the relationship between academic and co-curricular involvement and how much of each is needed for student growth.	Quantitative Student Involvement Theory	A balanced experience serves the student population more effectively as it relates to cognitive and affective growth.
Tinto, 1975	To distinguish between two dropout behaviors affecting persistence and integration	Qualitative Student Integration Theory	Voluntary withdrawal is related to a lack of congruency between academic and social climate in the institution

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory (SET) emphasizes relationships and the expectation of reciprocity. Homans (1958) was the first to introduce this theory, which considers any “interaction between persons [as] an exchange of goods, material and non-material” (p. 597). Homans would further refine this definition in 1961, adding that social exchange is “the exchange of activity, tangible or intangible, and more or less rewarding or costly, between at least two persons” (p. 13). Although SET has developed over time, its core concepts remain relevant to studies of human behavior, as emphasized by Fleming (2019), who claimed that “social exchange theory is founded on the belief that people are motivated to act by the reciprocal returns they expect their actions will generate from others” (p. 106). In the current project, SET was considered as a way to understand the process by which alumni determine their

current fit with their alma mater and decide whether their contribution will be a rewarding experience (i.e., exchange) for them.

Homans was influenced by the basic elements of individual behavior in developing the SET but focused specifically on explicating the basic procedures of social behavior, such as power, conformity, status, leadership, and justice (Cook & Rice, 2003). His vision was that SET would bring “sociology closer to economics—that science of man most advanced, most capable of application, and, intellectually, most isolated” since the focus of economics on “exchange carried out under special circumstances” included a “built-in numerical measure of value” that he considered “most useful” to examinations of human behavior (Homans, 1958, p. 598). Perhaps Homans’s most significant contributions to social behavior studies were his propositions regarding the incentives and deterrents within a social exchange relationship. Homans’ propositions (shown in Table 1.2) are 1) the success proposition, 2) the stimulus proposition, 3) the value proposition, 4) the deprivation-satiation proposition, and 5) the emotional reaction proposition (Cook & Rice, 2003).

Homans’ (1958) work in social behavior influenced that of Blau (1964), who is also considered an original theorist of social exchange. Blau sought to connect economic theory with social behavior, instead of relying on reinforcement principles based on the popular behaviorism of the 1960s. Blau (1964) stated, “Social exchange can be observed everywhere once we are sensitized by this conception to it, not only in market relations but also in friendship and even in love, as we have seen, as well as in many social relations between theses extremes in intimacy.” (p. 88). The exchange theory was an early effort to connect economics and social behavior.

Table 1.2*Homans' Five Propositions of Social Exchange*

Proposition name	Description
Success proposition	“Behavior that generates positive consequences is likely to be repeated”
Stimulus proposition	“Behavior that has been rewarded on occasions in the past will be performed in similar situations”.
Value proposition	“Specifies that the more valuable the result of an action is to an actor, the more likely that action is to be performed”.
Deprivation-satiation proposition	“The general ideal of diminishing marginal utility: the more often a person has recently received a particular reward for an action, the less valuable is an additional unit of that reward”.
Emotional reaction proposition	“Specifies when individuals will react emotionally to different situations”.

Note: This table was inspired by Homans' (1974) study “Social behavior and its elementary forms”, summarizing behavioral rewards influence repeat behavior (Homans, 1974) from Social Exchange Theory by Karen S. Cook & Eric Rice, (2003), p.55.

In successful social exchange, trust is necessary as it may lack a formal agreement that guarantees the favor. Molm et al. (2000) stated, "Another's trustworthiness can be demonstrated only when exchange occurs without the explicit quid pro quo of transactions that stipulate returns and without the assurance of binding agreements (p. 1397). In developing an alumni ambassador program, trust and commitment are essential to its longevity. Alumni who choose to volunteer may elect to do so not because of an expected gift but for the potential impact on the current students.

In my action research study, the commitment of alumni is vital for the success of the ambassador program. Alumni were asked to commit to events during the academic year to meet the requirements for participation in the program. Their commitment to their alma mater can be attributed to their familiarity with the institution and their experiences throughout their time as students. Cook & Emerson (1978) believed commitment between an exchange network of two or more individuals is likely to continue with someone whom there is a previous exchange relationship with as opposed to an alternative. Engaging in these relationships with a consistent partner eases the thought of that risk and creates the trust to commit long-term.

The social exchange theory is based on the concept of a reciprocated relationship. According to Weerts & Ronca (2008), "This theory suggests that relationships are thought about in economic terms and that costs and benefits are weighed to determine whether the relationship will continue" (p. 279). Throughout this study, we explored why alumni choose to volunteer and what motivates them to stay engaged. The literature reflects that alumni who have had positive experiences with their alma mater are more likely to volunteer in the future (Weerts & Ronca, 2007). As Rissmeyer (2010) noted, colleges and universities invest heavily in developing programming that makes engagement a rewarding, positive experience for alumni.

In some cases, however, the positive experiences associated with engagement for alumni can be overshadowed by life's obligations. As we consider social exchange theory and how it relates to alumni engagement, this theory implies that alumni's positive experiences during their time as students are now measured against what may be lost by volunteering, whether it is time, knowledge, or otherwise. (Weerts & Ronca, 2007). Essentially, a person's motivation to become involved and stay engaged is determined by what they are ultimately relinquishing. For some, this includes leisure time, time with family and friends, or time otherwise allocated to their

development (Weerts & Ronca, 2007). These limitations should also be considered when evaluating social exchange in the context of alumni engagement.

Student Involvement Theory

While the social exchange theory speaks to the relationship and motivation of the alumni in this study, the student involvement theory focuses on the actions of the current student body. Introduced by Alexander Astin (1984), “student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 518). Traditionally, the academic experience was confined to the classroom, but this theory includes students’ overall experience as students. In its initial stages, student involvement theory focused more on being academically involved at their institution than socially (Jorgenson et al., 2018). An involved student is not limited to being immersed in academics, it is a holistic connection with the institution through extra-curricular and co-curricular activities such as student organizations (Astin, 1984). Campus leaders such as student government or other campus organization officers are some of the most involved students at colleges and universities. As these students engage with faculty, staff, and other current and former students, it ultimately benefits their overall experience. Huang & Chang (2004) suggests that “the more involved that college students are in the academic and social aspects of campus life, the more they benefit in terms of learning and personal development” (p. 391). Student involvement at an undergraduate level has been known to have benefits that include increased learning, personal development and retention amongst others, while graduate student involvement has led to increased socialization, opportunities for mentorship, and professional development (Garder & Barnes, 2007). In this study, the development of students and their interaction with alumni strengthens their relationship with their alma mater, which will continue after graduation. Jorgenson et al. (2018)

referenced this connection, observing, "Student involvement theory presents a direct link between student involvement and students' level of institutional connectedness, indicating higher levels of involvement will develop higher levels of institutional connectedness" (p. 77).

The Student Involvement Theory's five key areas, known as "postulates" (shown in Figure 1.4), break down the theory's assumptions as initially conveyed by Astin (1984): 1) Involvement is an investment of physical and psychological energy 2) Involvement occurs continuously, 3) Involvement can be measured on both qualitatively and quantitatively, 4) Involvement proportional to learning and personal development, and 5) Involvement is related to academic performance. While exploring student involvement and its relationship to alumni engagement, there is a focus on these postulates: where a current student's energy is focused and for how long. Student involvement is measured based on the postulates of the student involvement theory to determine their involvement as graduate students.

As the graduate ambassador program is developed, we look to both the Social Exchange Theory and the Student Involvement Theory to address the common theme of experience. The client would like to enhance the student experience and build alumni relationships through the college's Graduate Ambassador Program (GAP).

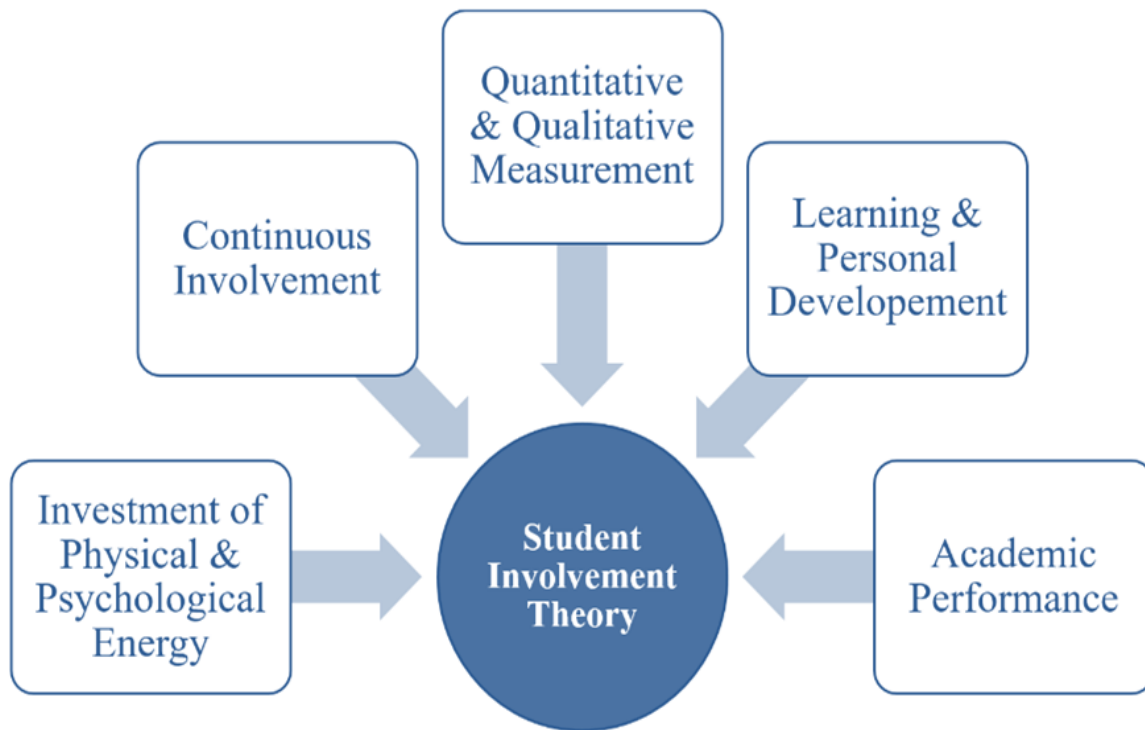


Figure 1.4

Student Involvement Theory Postulates

Student Integration Theory

Establishing a sense of commitment to the institution is important to building a long-term relationship between the student and the college. The student integration theory, introduced by Vincent Tinto in 1993, is described as a model of persistence and how it is influenced by academic and social integration (Arnekran, 2014). Similar to Astin’s work, student integration plays a significant role in a student’s persistence. Tinto (2017) defines persistence as another way of speaking of motivation. It is the quality that allows someone to continue in pursuit of a goal even when challenges arise” (p. 2)—ultimately measuring their involvement and engagement. Measuring the persistence of graduate students has been complex as there are no

official data sources to determine the attrition of graduate population, which can be attributed to the gap in colleges and universities consistently collecting that data (Bair & Haworth, 2004). The research associated with graduate student integration and how it impacts persistence has been missing from practice. Lew et al. (2020) affirms, “Research on persistence in graduate education was based on many theoretical perspectives” (p.1). As the focus moves to graduate students and their persistence the student integration theory serves as a guide for the growing population in this study.

Social and academic commitment to an institution are the main points of the student integration theory. The family background, prior schooling, and skills and abilities transform into goals and intentions for and to the college or university (as shown in Figure 1.5). The institution introduces students to both formal and informal experiences that lead to academic and social integration. Social experiences include extracurricular activities or peer interaction, while academic experiences include classroom engagement and performance. These experiences are the crux of the theory as they impact on the intentions and goals of the student as they consider their place at the institution and their new commitments versus their initial commitments. A decision is made to persist within the confines of the institution or leave for external goals (Chrysikos et al., 2017). Student support services play a significant part in the persistence of graduate students. Milton (2023) affirms the role of student support teams, “No matter the reason, improving student persistence and degree completion rates and depend largely on the institution’s commitment to provide programs and services that will satisfy the needs of today’s graduate school students” (p.41). It is important to consider both sides equally significant as the Student Integration Theory implies successful integration in one of these areas does not equate to

persistence. It is a balance of academic and extracurricular activities that enhances successful integration and persistence of the student (Tinto, 1975). (p.41)

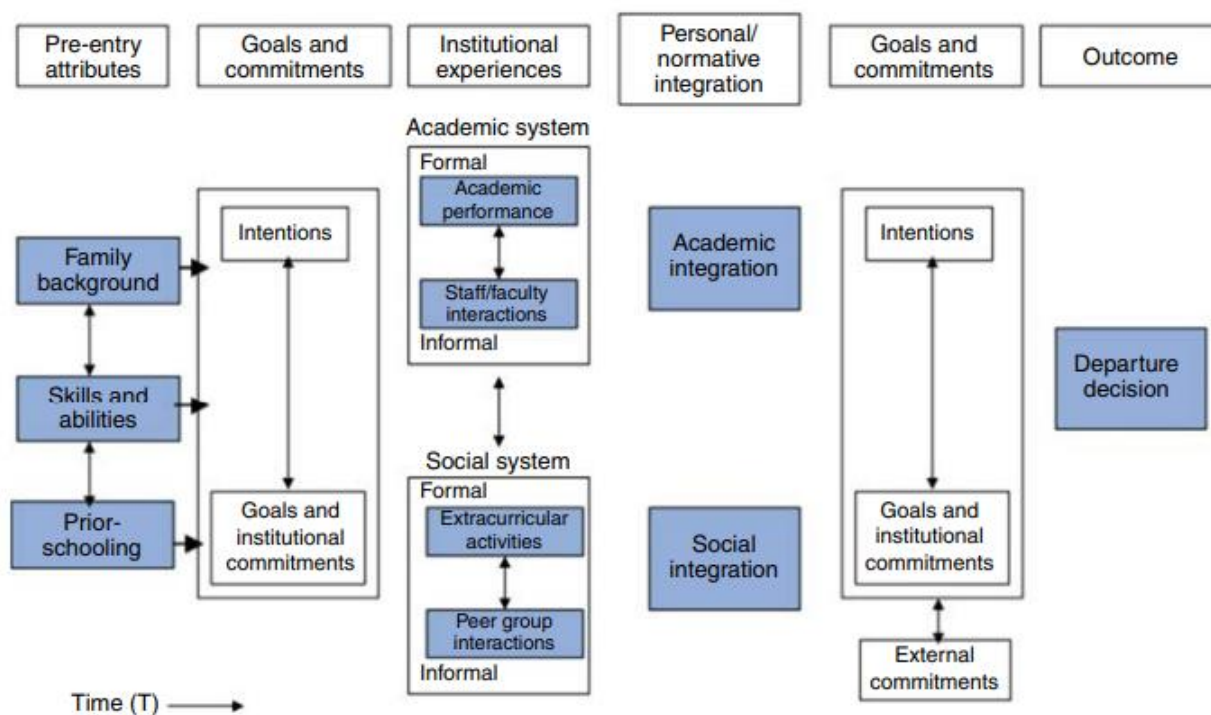


Figure 1.5

Tinto's Model of Student Integration

In this study, alumni participants who have persisted and successfully integrated volunteer to serve as a resource to current students who seek to persist. Through their involvement in extracurricular social activities such as workshops, panel discussions, and speaking engagements, alumni become a key factor in the motivation of current students. Orsuwan & Cole (2007) emphasized, “Positive interactions increase integration and reinforce student’s intention and goals, and commitments and result in desirable student outcomes” (p.65). With experiences developed by staff and alumni, students have these formal social interactions to impact their goals and establish a commitment to the institution now and years after graduation.

Chrysikos et al., (2017) wrote, “Student interaction with staff and faculty members outside the class hours can have a positive effect on student retention. Such interactions can have a normalizing effect on students’ socialization to the attitudes and values of their institution” (p.99). Ensuring students have positive experiences early on through their relationships with staff and faculty is essential the connection throughout their time with the college which will impact their engagement as alumni.

Alumni engagement results from intentional relationship building fostered through meaningful activities and developed by relationships that inspire loyalty and monetary support to advance the institution’s mission (CASE, 2018). In this study, the relationships contributed to engagement from a non-monetary perspective. Colleges and universities such as OBC have made a significant effort to enhance their alumni engagement. With a competitive landscape amongst higher education institutions, colleges and universities have become reliant on their alumni to give back and use their influence to move the institution’s goals forward. (Weerts & Ronca, 2008).

Student engagement has been a focal point for institutions as governing bodies use metrics to determine the quality of the university and its students (Zepke & Leach, 2010; Kuh, 2009). Engagement has been studied widely amongst academic professionals and practitioners, emphasizing alumni of undergraduate programs. Although there have been some studies relating to undergraduates, few studies pertain to graduate school alumni’s non-monetary contributions to their postgraduate alma maters. For student leaders, college experience is the catalyst for high-level engagement. Experiences are a means to learn for graduate students. Lindeman (1961) wrote, "The resource of the highest value in adult education is a learner’s experience" (p. 6). In

this project, the opportunity for current graduate students to learn from alumni adds to the student experience and creates a path for them to impact the journey of other adult learners.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

In Chapter 2, the research design of the study, the action research (AR) methodology, and its phases are introduced. The data collection and analysis tools and processes are described. In the last section of this chapter, the trustworthiness of the study is discussed, followed by a subjectivity statement.

The AR methodology requires the researcher to wear several hats, including the facilitator, team lead, data collector, and data analyzer. In the case of my AR project, I was responsible for leading the AR team as we developed a new alumni ambassador program, the Graduate Ambassador Program (GAP), for the university's graduate business school, the O'Brien Business College (OBC; pseudonym). Through this program, geared toward facilitating the development of current students, we sought to reintroduce alumni to their alma mater and promote alumni engagement.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to explore the impact of alumni involvement on a holistic cycle of engagement in public postgraduate business programs. The study addressed the gap in literature regarding the engagement behavior of graduate school alumni, including their motivations for service, institutional satisfaction, and loyalty. This research fills a void in both the literature and the college's alumni engagement programming. The following are the research questions that guided this study:

1. How does alumni engagement influence student attitudes toward their own future service to their alma mater?
2. Why do alumni engage in non-monetary service at their postgraduate institutions?
3. What was learned at the individual, group, and system levels that advanced the theory and practice in an action research project that explores the engagement of graduate student leadership and retained alumni support through non-monetary service contributions in postgraduate programs?

Research Design

The design for this study is grounded in qualitative research. This inductive approach allows the researcher to generate meaning based on observations of data. As Creswell and Creswell (2017) explained, the qualitative research process “involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant’s setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of data” (p. 42). In the qualitative research design of this study, the researcher (myself) utilized interviews and focus groups at OBC to produce findings. Although this study is supported primarily by qualitative data sources, some quantitative data was also collected and analyzed in generating the study findings.

Methodology Overview

The methodology that was utilized for this study is action research (AR). The AR methodology has been defined by Coghlan (2019) as “an emergent inquiry process in which applied behavioral science knowledge is integrated with existing organizational knowledge and applied to address real organizational issues” (p. 5). Action research encourages the collaboration of people in an organization as the team engages in knowledge creation (Coghlan, 2019). This

form of applied research focuses on the improvement of processes and emphasizes the reflection of participants in the study who work together to establish sustainable change (Gall et al., 2003).

Action Research Context

Colleges and universities understand the importance of keeping their alumni engaged in the affairs of the institution. An involved alumni community can enhance the experience of currently enrolled students by adding their perspective and practical vocational knowledge, thereby serving as unofficial mentors for students as they seek professional careers and liaisons to industry opportunities (Snijders et al., 2019). Alumni enjoy returning to their respective universities if they are kept aware of their alma mater's affairs. Still, when their talents are underutilized, alumni may become frustrated and not volunteer to assist in their former program's objectives (Fleming, 2019).

Business schools are no exception to the trends of education regarding student and alumni engagement. There is a direct connection between engagement and student academic success. At OBC, support staff organizes events for students to attend, including alumni panels, professional development sessions, workshops, and speaker series. These events are opportunities to engage both the current student body and the alumni of the college's graduate programs.

The AR research design was ideal to promote our desired change—increased alumni engagement, leading to potential future engagement from current students when they become alumni—due to its structure, allowing us to seek buy-in from the organization by fostering a collaborative environment that allowed the team to contribute to the development of the organization. In this study, the AR team worked through each phase of the AR cycle to establish a foundation and the purpose of the project, identify and engage stakeholders, discover issues

facing the organization, determine what needed to change, establish a plan of action, implement the plan, and evaluate its impact (Coghlan, 2019).

Action Research Cycle

The action research process follows a cycle of five phases: 1) context and purpose, 2) constructing, 3) planning, 4) taking action, and 5) evaluating action. Every phase of the action research cycle has substages that guide this change process. The study begins with the process of understanding the need for change (as shown in Figure 2.1). The dynamics of the organization must be considered in this process. Coghlan (2019) wrote that change consultants “understand the external environmental factors that shape what the organization is about and how it aims to function and perform” (p. 5). The way the organization operates, the policies by which it governs, and the disposition of the people may be considered when discovering the need for change in an organization. During this phase, the researchers explore what has motivated the desire for change in the organization and what the focus should be (W. Ruona, personal communication, 2020). The knowledge acquired creates an avenue toward discovering the outcome the organization desires from the change. This process starts with observing the organization once the change agent is first introduced.

Context & Purpose

The context and purpose phase leads the action research process, and it is where the need for change is identified and understood by the organization. A stimulus for change which can be internal or external drives the research as the rationale, timing and desired outcome are considered as goals for the change are identified. At this stage, the researcher engages in extensive research on the change topic. Questions regarding the direction of the organization, the

complexity of the issue, and the level of engagement from stakeholders must be answered during this phase (Coghlan, 2019).

As the change agent identifies a sponsor for the change process, the contracting meeting will need to occur to organize the objectives, steps, timeline and expectations for the duration of the project. Stakeholders are also identified as you create an outline for educating them and encouraging their participation. In addition to the stakeholders the action research team is selected during this phase.

Constructing

The constructing phase is where the action research team (AR Team) begins to have conversations regarding the issues that may occur including the driving forces and restraining forces that can impede the progress of the change project. Through these conversations the AR Team formulates a vision based on the understanding of the desired future state and how it differs from the current state, confirming what needs to change to get from the now until the future. A theory of change is collaboratively developed to illustrate the process and from the stated problem through the outcomes.

Planning Action

After the constructing phase, the AR Team begins to create thorough solutions through the development of a macro intervention plan. Interventions are planned activities or tasks designed for organizations to improve their effectiveness and that of the stakeholders. An intervention plan should ignite change by disrupting the current state and effectively change the issue or concern (Anderson, 2020). As the AR team develops the plan, they must also discuss and come to a resolution of how that plan will be evaluated and ensure this assessment occurs.

Taking Action

At this phase the interventions are executed, and the AR Team's role begins to shift to managing and maintenance of the project as the change is integrated into the organization. Teams focus on monitoring progress and pivoting where needed to stay on track. In this phase there may also be resistance as the change is adopted, so the AR team will be expected to continue to build support needed from stakeholders to push the project forward.

Evaluating Action

The evaluating action phase is essential to the improvement of the action research project. It is a continuous review of the process that allows for new data to be collected, analyzed and adjusted accordingly. The action research team will create reports during this time to share with the stakeholders and begin to make improvements for the next cycle (W. Ruona, personal communication, 2020). In this study, there are three cycles that focus on the program's development, growth and sustainability. Chapter 3 details the development of these cycles.

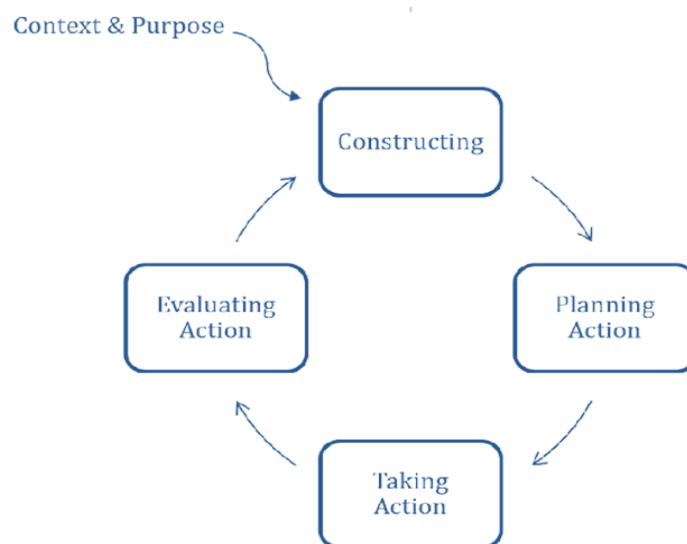


Figure 2.1.

The Action Research Cycle

Study Participants

The purpose of this research was to explore the impact of alumni involvement on a holistic cycle of engagement in public postgraduate business programs. Given this purpose, participants of the study included the AR team, alumni of the institution's business school, graduate students, and graduate student support staff. The number of participants is provided by the group in Table 2.1. These participant groups were selected based on their involvement with the development and execution of the alumni ambassador program, which aligns with the purpose and addresses the study's research questions:

1. How does alumni engagement influence student attitudes toward their own future service to their alma mater?
2. Why do alumni engage in nonmonetary service at their post-graduate institutions?
3. What was learned at the individual, group, and system levels that advanced the theory and practice in an action research project that explores the engagement of graduate student leadership and retained alumni support through non-monetary service contributions in postgraduate programs?

Table 2.1

Action Research Study Participants

Participant group	Number	Data collection methods
Action research team	6	Observations, interviews, meeting recordings & notes
Alumni/ambassadors	52	Focus group, surveys, interview
Graduate students	100-150	Surveys, focus group, interviews
Graduate support staff	7	Observation, critical incident technique (CIT)

Action Research Team

The main stakeholders for this project included the director, associate director, and assistant directors of student engagement, who were all recruited for and accepted positions on the AR team. A summary of each team member's position and role responsibilities is provided in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2

Action Research Team Breakdown

Team member	Position	Description
Laura Early	Director of Graduate Student Involvement	Leads a team of nine student engagement professionals, in charge of programming, events, and extracurricular activities.
Whitney Casey	Assistant Director of Graduate Student Involvement III	Responsible for designing programming, events, and extracurricular activities. Leads team of graduate assistants.
Rachel Askew	Assistant Director of Graduate Student Involvement II	Responsible for designing programming, events, and extracurricular activities.
Matthew Jones	Assistant Director of Graduate Student Involvement I	Responsible for designing programming, events, and extracurricular activities. Lead facilitator and change agent.
Beverley Smith	Program Coordinator	Responsible for program facilitation, workshop, planning, and data collection/ analysis.
John Rinehart	Associate Director of Recruitment	Leads team of college graduate student recruiters. Responsible for all recruitment activities and programming.

These AR team members were selected because they “were willing to learn new skills, embraced change, actively listened, contributed ideas, and were trusted by others” (Wheeler & Holmes, 2017, p. 277).

Laura, the director of the student involvement team and the project's sponsor, was the first to be approached by the myself, represented by the pseudonym, Matthew Jones, to create an ambassador program. Laura held the director role since 2017 and was responsible for leading a group of 9 that consists of Associate Directors, Assistant Directors and a coordinator. The Graduate Student Involvement team is tasked with creating a positive experience for students in the 15 graduate programs at OBC. This can be a challenge of graduate support teams as they compete for their students' discretionary time. In comparison to traditional undergraduate student support offices that serve students who have fully integrated with their institution, graduate students face competing factors that graduate students experience that result in internal conflicts. Offstein et al. (2004) affirms:

Graduate students experience many sources of internal conflict. Internal conflicts may result from competing demands, the compromise of personal principles and standards, unrealized expectations, a sense of responsibility to "significant others", classmates, and employers, other concerns and commitments, incongruence of graduate experiences with past experiences or knowledge, a conflict between student's passion and (perceived) irrelevant degree requirements, and guilt (which is both a conflict and a result of internal conflict) (p.400).

Laura was selected for the AR team to bridge the gap between OBC's upper-level leadership and the AR team's new initiative. Laura also said that there is a void in OBC's alumni engagement due to the absence of an alumni relations office at the college, which drove her interest in supporting the study and becoming a key member of the AR team.

Whitney and Rachel serve as assistant directors on the involvement team and are both responsible for engaging current students in extracurricular and co-curricular programs. Their

role is multifaceted and requires extensive communication and coordination with faculty, program directors and staff across the university to ensure seamless integration, engagement and completion for graduate students while providing them with the necessary resources during their tenure at OBC. I recommended their selection for the AR team in conjunction with Laura after interest was expressed by both Rachel and Whitney. Whitney's work with cohort students and event planning, matched with Rachel's support of the part-time MBA program added a compliment to the diversity in the students that OBC serves. They were both motivated to address the problem that was causing a strain on the area of their work relating to alumni engagement.

Beverly Smith, the program coordinator, worked solely with the college's analytics program. Her role focused on supporting the assistant director of the program with student services, event planning, as well as scheduling and planning workshops for the program's students. After accepting an open call for an initial focus group, Beverly was selected to the AR team as an administrative resource that would be able to assist with the research and planning around the development of the program.

John served as the associate director for the recruitment team. The recruitment team identifies perspective graduate students and guides them to submit applications for admission to OBC. John's expertise in this area was considered an essential strength as I developed a team that is familiar with the entire student life cycle.

Alumni Ambassadors

The alumni recruitment plan was designed based on feedback from an alumni focus group session facilitated by the AR team, which will be discussed in more detail later. Alumni participants in this group emphasized the importance of relationships in their programs when it

came to the staff. Accordingly, we asked each graduate student support team member to compile a list of 10–20 alumni who they believed would be willing to serve in this capacity, there selections were compiled and shared in an Excel spreadsheet I provided.

The purposive sampling process embedded in the initial stages of our recruitment plan. Purposive sampling is described by Magnone & Yezierski (2024) as:

“Purposive sampling involves intentionally selecting participants based on some predefined criteria. The two most common types of purposive sampling are heterogeneous case (also known as maximum variation) wherein the researcher attempts to select sample participants from a population to maximize their differences in some trait, and homogeneous case, wherein the research attempts to select for minimal variation in some trait among the population. (p.718)

During this process both heterogeneous and homogeneous sampling was used as the action research team ensured a diverse group from its various graduate programs were represented while considering the drive of alumni who have shown interest in giving back to OBC. The action research team narrowed down the alumni group in four phases. These phases included gathering and organizing the applicant data in phase 1, reviewing the application in phase 2 as the AR team members individually reviewed their segment of applicants, which was followed by group discussions in phase 3, and a final decision of ambassadors to select in phase 4.

In action research studies, bias can occur as AR teams navigate change. Cronemyr and Huge-Brodin (2024) expressed the possibility, “Unlike traditional research, action research can quickly uncover hidden problems and test solutions in context. However, results may not be generalizable and could be biased” (p.2). In attempts to avoid selection bias, each member of the

action research team reviewed the application data to select the final group of alumni that would be selected for their role as ambassadors in the inaugural group.

Graduate Students

Graduate student participants were selected based on selected based on their active status as students in OBC's graduate business programs. The focus was on student leadership groups, such as the student government officers, to serve as a base for the first group of ambassadors. The development of this group of ambassadors was trained through a two-part session. The first session gave ambassadors details about the structure of the program, while the second session was the first of a series of diversity, equity, and inclusion training. These training sessions focused on the vision of the program, onboarding objectives, the college's core ideology, values, mission, expectations, events, and workshops that appeal to the diverse graduate student population with the common theme of leadership through engagement in your community. Given their lack of decision-making power regarding the development of the program, the role of these participants in the AR project was limited. The primary role of the graduate student sample was as participants in focus groups and programming events.

Graduate Support Staff

The graduate support staff at OBC was comprised of the student involvement, admissions, and recruitment teams. Support staff from the rest of the student involvement team were utilized early on as a resource considering the limited assistance from the college's fundraising team when attempting to acquire list of alumni to invite to the program. The team provided their own respective lists that would serve as the initial call out to alumni to join the program. The remaining support staff were introduced to the program through brainstorming sessions for OBC's strategic plan, discussed in Chapter 3. Their buy-in would allow for the

program to expand in its second year as the program's size increased and the staff promoted the impact of alumni when working with current and perspective students.

Data Collection Methods

Data from the OBC, including public data and statistics, was used to frame the institution's scope. Focus groups, interviews, and preliminary surveys were used to define the problem from the organization's perspective. The AR team was tasked with the review and analysis of focus groups and surveys in the weeks leading to and during their respective meetings.

Qualitative data and some quantitative data (in the form of surveys) were collected and analyzed for this study. The data types that were qualitatively analyzed included observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual digital materials. Data were collected through action research meetings, surveys, interviews, and focus groups involving alumni and current students served as opportunities to discover motivating factors for engagement and the potential for a long-lasting relationship with their graduate alma mater.

Precautions were taken throughout the study to protect the identity and privacy of the participants. All information was protected by password-locked equipment and will be stored for three years after the conclusion of the study, as required by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI). In addition to this security measure, all personal and institutional names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Contract Meeting Data

Contracting is a recurring process that requires constant oversight by the consultant to manage validation checkpoints and negotiate expectations (Anderson, 2020). In an official contract meeting, the need for change is acknowledged, and the expectations for the client—

consultant relationship are established. Additional sessions may be held as needed to address modifications along the way. These meetings help me identify the organization's overall commitment and determine the next step toward building the necessary relationships internally to accomplish the client's goals (Anderson, 2020).

In the initial contract meeting for this project, we discussed the goals and objectives of the change process and set expectations. Areas of focus (see Table 2.3) included identifying the problem, setting goals, establishing a check-in schedule, and conducting an informational interview with the client using the questions in Table 2.4 (Appendix A). The client's responses to these questions served as the foundation for our AR team selection and the next steps.

Table 2.3

Client Entry Activity and Data Collection Strategy

Activity	Description	Data collection
Client meeting	Introduction to the client, organization	Video and audio recordings, transcripts
Problem identification	Understanding the problem from the client's and staff's perspective.	Video and audio recordings, transcripts, observations, interviews
Goals & objective identification	Driving forces, current vs. desired state	Transcripts, observations, interviews
Check-in schedule	Establish meeting schedule for continuity purposes	Transcripts
Client interview/questions	The full list of questions is found in Table 2.4 (Appendix A)	Video and audio recordings, transcripts, observations, interview

Action Research Team Meeting Data

The AR team was formed based on the participants' direct engagement with current students and past engagement with alumni. At the end of the initial meeting, which was held on Zoom, the team agreed to biweekly meetings, which I scheduled through outlook calendar invite. Data from these meetings were recorded in different formats (video, written, etc.) for my analysis. In addition to discussion, the AR team used a few main tools to generate this data, which are described below.

A total of 47 AR team meetings were held on the Zoom meeting platform and recorded with the permission of the AR team between July 2021 and August 2023. Recordings were used to create a transcription of each meeting's highlights in the form of a comprehensive summary, which was then used by the facilitator to plan the next meeting. The recordings were saved to a password-protected computer, along with meeting agendas and summaries, which were analyzed in NVIVO to identify codes and other trends. These findings were revisited at the conclusion of the 8-month ambassador program cycle to address the research questions.

Miro

Miro is an online collaboration platform that the AR team used as an in-meeting activity to generate ideas simultaneously on the same platform. Miro was used in early team meetings to brainstorm ideas and focus on components of the program that would provide data for the planning and implementation of our program. An example Miro board is shown in Figure 2.2.

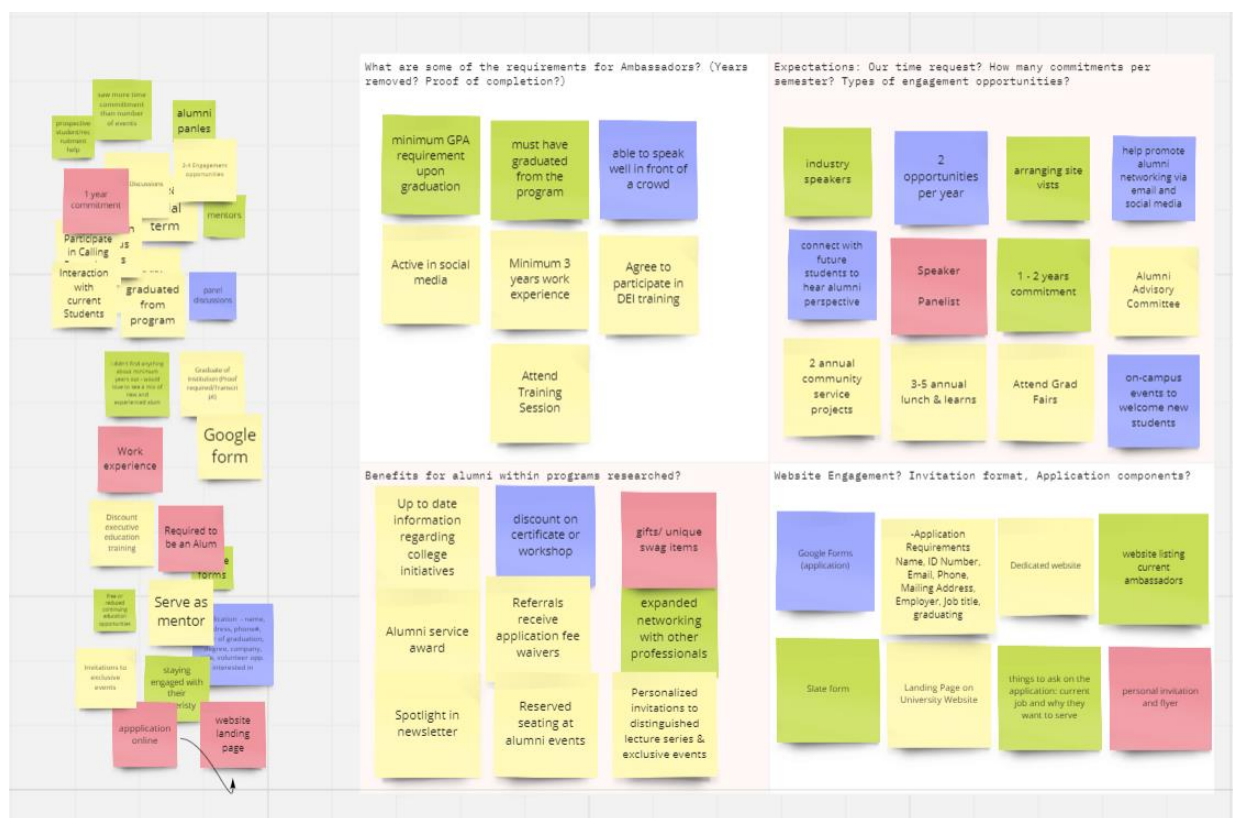


Figure 2.2.

Action Research Team Miro Session Board.

Dayal and Thomas (1968) Negotiation Activity

At the start of the action research cycle, role negotiation and role analysis approaches were introduced for staff to discuss responsibilities diplomatically without oversight from leadership. Dayal and Thomas's (1968) four-step negotiation activity was used to help the team clarify their roles and simplify what each member of the team was responsible for. As part of this activity, a role analysis chart (see Table 2.5) was generated through breaking the change team into small groups, each of which planned its activities strategy. Once goals were established by the AR team and confirmed by me, the activity (as shown in Table 2.2) was the focus of the newly established committee for that task. The first designated member of each committee

worked toward completing their task and reporting in each meeting as progress was made until the task was complete.

Table 2.5

Role Analysis Chart

Activity/Task	Member 1	Member 2	Member 3
Policy & Handbook	Assist Director SI 1	Assoc Director Recruit	Director
Alumni Recruit Plan	Assist Director SI 2	Assistant Director SE 3	Director
Alumni Invitation	Assist Director SI 1	Director	Assist Director SI 2
Ambassador Training	Assoc Director Recruit	Assistant Director SI 1	Director

Graduate Ambassador Application Data

This application was created by the AR team over the course of several team meetings and was used to measure alumni motivation to participate in the program. Qualtrics was used to distribute the survey to 110 alumni. In addition to collecting basic demographic data, such as age range and ethnicity, contact information, previous academic program from which they graduated, current employment, and specific interest areas of engagement (networking, workshops, panel discussions, etc.), the application required alumni to write a statement describing their motivation for becoming an ambassador. After screening applications, the action research team confirmed that 29 ambassadors would be a part of the inaugural group.

Surveys

Surveys were developed by the AR team and designed in Qualtrics to gain demographic data to address motivations for volunteerism and institutional impact referenced in research questions one and two. Surveys allow for a quantitative account of trends, ideas, and perspectives of participants by identifying commonalities among variables within the designated group (Creswell, 2017).

GAP Impact Surveys

Current graduate students were asked to complete Qualtrics surveys after each alumni ambassador-facilitated event. The GAP impact survey sought to capture student attendees' perspectives and insights of the session, the direct impact of alumni on their perceived development, and whether it would influence them to become involved as alumni when they completed their respective programs. Each survey asked current graduate students several questions to determine if each of these interactions and experiences would make them more likely to volunteer as alumni in the future. The survey items were as follows:

- 1) Program content has met your expectations.
- 2) Program presenters/alumni panelists provided information that assists in your academic development.
- 3) Program presenters/alumni panelists provided information that assists in your career development.
- 4) Your engagement with OBC Alumni Ambassadors was beneficial to your current and future personal development.
- 5) Based on this engagement, you are likely to volunteer for similar OCB programming upon graduation

Students rated their answers using a 5-item Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

Alumni Surveys

The AR team created and provided alumni with a closing survey in order to evaluate their experience. Survey results were analyzed for areas of improvement, and necessary adjustments

to the ambassador program's structure, format, and recruitment were determined based on alumni and student feedback. The following questions were asked as a part of this survey:

1. Describe your experience in the Alumni Ambassador Program?
2. What has been your favorite experience(s) volunteering in the Alumni Ambassador Program?
3. What has been your least favorite experience(s) volunteering in the Alumni Ambassador Program?
4. Has the Alumni Ambassador Program met your overall expectations?
5. What areas of improvement would you like to see from this program in the future?
6. Which new volunteer roles interest you the most for next year's Alumni Ambassador Program?
7. Please share any additional comments regarding your experience in the Alumni Ambassador Program.

These questions were completed by 13 alumni ambassadors, and the results were analyzed by the AR team and used to improve the program in its second year.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were used to inform the planning of the ambassador program. Anderson (2020) defined focus groups as “groups of the usually small number of organizational members facilitated by a consultant who poses questions and then allows for group discussion” (p. 153). Focus groups enlightened the AR team on what alumni and current graduate students would like to see as they engaged within the scope of the program.

Alumni Focus Group

An Alumni focus group session aimed to hear how alumni would like to stay engaged in the college's initiatives, programming, and student success. This focus group was facilitated by Laura Early and I on September 23, 2021. Topics included (as shown in Table 2.6: Appendix B) alumni motivations and incentives for engagement, 2) comfort with virtual versus in-person engagement events, 3) prospective participation over time and alumni expectations, and 4) level of commitment preferred by alumni, and the best forms of involvement. The focus group took place via a recorded Zoom meeting that used the poll function to present questions on these topics for discussion. The focus group data collection method was selected in order to gain diverse perspectives from alumni in an interactive and low-pressure environment. In this environment participants' perspectives are unique to each contributor. Gall et al., 2003 affirms,

“Researchers are finding that the interactions among the participants stimulate them to state feelings, perceptions, and beliefs that they would not express if interviewed individually. Also, the focus group technique avoids putting the interviewers in a directive role. They ask questions to initiate discussion but then allow participants to take major responsibility for stating their views and drawing out the view of others in the group” (p. 238).

There were alumni from various graduate programs who participated in this focus group. Their insights are highlighted in table 2.10.

Each member of the AR team was tasked with identifying alumni for the focus group. I worked with the director to create an invitation to participate in the focus group. Then, the team reviewed the invitation and sent it to their respective alumni. A shared spreadsheet was used to store the comprehensive list of the participants who had been accepted on the AR team's

Microsoft Teams Application page. The participants in the alumni focus groups were sent an email thanking them for agreeing to participate and providing information on how to prepare for the focus group and outlining the four topics.

Graduate Student Focus Groups

The graduate student focus group session was held on November 4, 2021, on the Zoom video meeting platform. The focus group session guided the AR team in understanding how students would like to connect with alumni in the form of programming, workshops, and other developmental events. Students were polled in the Zoom video meeting to gain their insights as shown in Table 2.7, the poll topics included: 1) types of engagement events current students would like to see involving alumni, 2) motivations for attending these events, 3) comfort with virtual versus in-person engagement events, and 4) type of alumni they would like to engage with (CEO, c-suite, entrepreneurs, etc.). The result of these focus group sessions also allowed the graduate student support team to develop programming that meets the expressed needs of the session participants. The focus group included four current graduate students from 4 OBC programs who have unique perspectives based on their involvement with the college as graduate assistants, student government officers, or full-time international student status.

Table 2.7

Graduate Student Focus Group Insights

Focus Group Question	Poll Options	Student Comments
What kind of engagement events with alumni did you want to see?	Building an alumni relationship with the college/university	These types of events connect students with a mix of alumni and faculty members, sharing useful knowledge.

	Assist as a resource for students.	Casual meet and greet gives you an opportunity to get to know other alumni and get their perspectives.
	Giving back to my program	Develop a personal connection and opportunity to get to know them yourself.
	Other	
What would motivate you to engage with alumni? (Program, company, title of alumni speaking, etc.)	One Semester	Learn what was needed to learn before applying for a job, what skills are needed, how they deal with the challenges.
	One Academic Year (2-4 events)	Learn how they apply the knowledge they learned at RCB to their work to find out what I need to do to be prepared.
	Multiple Years (4-8 Events)	Hear from professionals who are more established in their industry so that they are prepared for that next level.
	Other	
What types of alumni would you like to see? (CEOs, Entrepreneurs, etc.)	Lower-Level Manager	A lower because I don't have a lot of working experience so alumni can share more related to how they got there, less removed.
	Mid-Level Manager	
	Director Level	Executive-level alumni can help to expand my network. They have seen a lot and know a lot so they can give some direction
	Executive Level	
	Entrepreneur Level	
What type of engagement do you prefer with alumni?	In Person	Students have been dealing with Zoom for 20 months (zoom fatigue)
	Virtual	Student participation has suffered due to the virtual format.
		People are more engaged virtually, and able to ask questions even after the event allows for more learning.
		Organizing 3-4 events is efficient for planning and participation.
How often would you like to see alumni engaged in events?		Realistically, too many may have less involvement.
	1-2 Events per semester	Fewer events will make each event more meaningful.
	3-4 Events per semester	The more opportunities the better.
	5-6 Events per semester	Right before classes, it allows for more attendance.

	7-8 Events per semester	The afternoon is still a good time for many students. Any time after 5pm makes them feel like its overtime. Served as a part of the Graduate Student Association
What time of day would you like to attend alumni engagement events? (Assuming if they are in-person)	Weekday morning Weekday afternoons Weekday evening Weekend mornings & afternoons.	No comments
Have you ever been a part of or participated as an ambassador?	Yes No	
What has been your experience with the university?	Great experience Good experience Average Below Average	No comments

Interviews

As the change agent, I was responsible for conducting interviews for the action research team throughout the duration of the study. Interviews took place on a one-on-one basis and (as shown in Table 2.8) explored the problem of sustainable engagement, their thoughts on the process, and opportunities to improve. These post-program structured interviews were an opportunity for action research team members to reflect on the success and challenges of the program. The researcher developed the questions for the interview to reach the full scope of the team's remaining members, as the action research team had lost three members to other

employment opportunities between 2021 and 2022. It also addressed research question three, “What is learned at the individual, group, and system levels that advance the theory and practice in an action research project that explores the engagement of graduate student leadership and retained alumni support through non-monetary service contributions in postgraduate programs?.” The insights collected and analyzed from these interviews are later discussed in Chapter 4.

Student Post-Program Interviews

Students participated in structured interviews led by the researcher at the end of the first year of the alumni ambassador program to capture their perspectives and experiences with the institution, staff, and alumni. Developed with the question, “How does alumni engagement influence student attitudes toward their own future service to their alma mater?” in mind, current students who have a history of involvement through their roles as graduate assistants (2) and a graduate student government president. There were several common themes that emerged from student interviews, including 1) students expressed a positive experience with OBC, staff, and faculty, 2) overall university lacks effective communication with students, 3) Involved students have more exposure to opportunities and alumni interactions, 4) GAP was not initially recognized as an opportunity through OBC, 5) students interviewed expressed the positive influence as a result of the GAP, 6) 66% of interviewed students confirmed positive interactions with alumni influenced their desire to volunteer in the future, while 100% confirmed that planned to join the program upon graduation.

Table 2.8*Student Post-Program Interviews*

Interview question	Key Insights
Please tell me how you describe your experience, both positive and negative, here at the college.	Positive experience with faculty and staff throughout the academic program. Negative experiences with communication from the university. Leads to confusion for students. Opportunities to stay involved are available but not always evident.
Describe your interactions with alumni during your time in the program. How has it affected your time at the college?	Interactions with alumni are plentiful, impactful, helpful, and can be translated into the classroom. Personal connections between alumni and students are lacking, mostly with professional emphasis. Exposure to alumni in various industries to network and build professional relationships.
Do you believe your time as a graduate/student leader assistant has increased your exposure to alumni? If so, how?	A slight difference, not a considerable amount of change in the amount of exposure. Yes, involvement gave added exposure. As a graduate assistant (GA). I was more aware of opportunities than if I was not a GA OBC, which is a close-knit community. Event timing can make it hard to engage, but lunchtime seems to be reasonable.
How have your interactions with alumni affected your perception of the institution and the resources available to you?	Alumni show how good resources are at OBC but do not change my view of the college. Interactions with alumni show that it is possible to achieve goals but has not changed my positive perspective of OBC. Alumni interactions changed my perception of the reputation and the notoriety of OBC across the business world.

Were you aware of the alumni ambassador program that was launched this year?	GAP was not initially recognizable and distinguishable from university-wide alumni program. Early communication lacking Became aware due to my involvement with GSG
Would you ever consider participating in the alumni ambassador program?	Would participate in GAP after graduation, based on the effectiveness of the program would spark my interest to continue the trend. Would pay it forward, barring any employment restrictions. Would participate based on previous values

Critical Incident Interviews

The critical incident technique is traditionally administered during semi-structured interviews where specific events are the focus. The questions are pointed and attempt to reveal experiences that tell the story of problems the individual or the organization may have faced. The data collected using this technique allows the researcher to discover themes relating to the problem that the organization is trying to overcome. The purpose of organizing this data was affirmed by Butterfield et al. (2005), "Data analysis is conducted by determining the frame of reference, forming categories that emerge from the data, and determining the specificity or generality of the categories" (p.483). The themes that appear in the preliminary stages of a change project can create direction for the work that should follow.

The purpose of this research was to explore the impact of alumni involvement on a holistic cycle of engagement in public postgraduate business programs. Understanding this scope of the action research project, the critical incident technique was used to interview key stakeholders who have experienced incidents involving alumni participation, such as the action

research team members. These incidents explore their interaction with alumni from the perspective of staff members responsible for the onboarding and experiences of their respective student populations. In this process, I can uncover what challenges these staff members have faced and its connection to the gap in engagement. Discovering common themes through these interviews encouraged the action research team to address these areas and create a strategy to fill the void in engagement.

The CIT process for this study was done in person and virtually through the Zoom platform. Respondents are asked to 1) Think about a time when you needed alumni participation to host a development/workshop event, and you could not receive support. 2) What occurred? 3) Who was involved? 4) How were you able to fill the gap? 5) What happened? 6) What was your role? 7) What did you say or do? 8) What conclusions did you draw from this incident? All interviews were also recorded and transcribed through the Otter transcription application. These interviews were then analyzed and summarized in the form of poetry and short stories.

Critical Incident Session: Taking Matters into My Own Hands. When working with the recruitment manager on informational sessions for incoming student groups, there is often a place on the agenda for those students to engage with the program's alumni. Assistant directors are tasked with finding the best alumni to participate. Alumni are asked to share their experiences while in the program and lessons upon graduation. There are times when we are not able to secure an alumnus to commit to the session. There is a gap in the communication between alumni development and other offices. There is also a need for an "official ambassador program" to strengthen relationships with alumni. In the meantime, I have taken the role of alumni relations to build my relationships with current students, hoping these connections continue in the future after graduation.

Critical Incident Session: Mindful Resource.

When they say no, we feel stuck.

No resource to fall back on

Often, we are out of luck.

How do we persevere?

We are resilient, but that may not work here

More is needed, what can be developed

A resource that allows us to focus on other responsibilities

Open up our space, time, and energy to create

Support for program development is a necessity

It will allow staff to actively facilitate

Leave unnecessary steps behind

Fill the gap, as we are tired of the scramble

The hustle and bustle wastes time

Often adapting as the problems arise

As the cycle continues, the problematic thoughts fade

Pausing to address this now will free our minds

Competing Commitments Equals Involvement Restricted

In times of need, he relies on a familiar face

Commitment is the ask

Students are welcomed in this next phase

Alumni create a vision for the future

Willing to help, but conflicts arise

There is no contest in this competition

Home takes precedent

Their time is valuable and requires an even exchange

What is a recruiter to do?

The star of the show does not show

There is no commitment when time is conflicted

Their involvement is restricted

Critical Incident Session: Diversity- A Necessary Request. I am a recruiter. During the recruitment cycle, there are opportunities to generate excitement amongst your new cohort of students. Involving alumni is a way to give students insight into what their journey can look like in the future. To see their future, students must see themselves in our alumni. With such a diverse student body, we seek out our diverse alumni population. We often fall short of this goal due to cancellations and mishaps in our planning. How can they see the vision if they do not see themselves in those who came before them? Inspiration driven by that feeling of representation goes a long way. That's my job. Having something to make this job easier and consistent will provide the support needed; otherwise, programming will be left out. Compensating for this gap through statistical affirmation becomes the way to cope. The importance of organization and communication allows you to plan to gain the necessary participation from alumni across the board. Hearing their experiences makes all the difference.

Thematic Analysis

The critical incident technique used in these interviews with the institution's staff has highlighted the need for structural change related to alumni engagement. Each respondent explained that it would be beneficial to have a consistent resource such as an ambassador

program with a steady relationship with alumni that can be leveraged as they prepare events and other opportunities to engage the current students. Amy expressed, "I do believe that every college should have more resources or better support when it comes to outreach to alumni." These interviews also uncovered a few assertions and themes that will guide the direction of a change that will implement the ambassador program.

The consistency of alumni availability and engagement due to competing factors emerged as a recurring theme. Jill asserted a general expectation that she would always fill potential slots for events based on a list of reliable graduates that she had compiled. She then acknowledged the inconsistency in this process while reflecting on an incident where she had to rely on her team to fill in the gap left by her former student due to his feeling of being unqualified for the engagement opportunity. Despite this incident, Jill still expressed the importance of building relationships to increase the likelihood of receiving responses from former students. Jill stated, "Because of the relationships that I build with my students while they are in their programs, I tend to get an excellent response." The respondents also understood that this was not an answer for an undefined process.

The lack of processes or practical resources for engaging alumni (as shown in Table 2.9) served as a consistent theme with Amy, John, and Jill. When planning events, respondents found themselves left in a position where they were forced to adapt to alumni scheduling barriers due to a lack of advanced notice and an effective system that would prepare alumni for involvement. When asked what conclusion he could draw from his inability to secure diverse alumni panelists for recruitment events, John responded, "Have a backup plan." This statement gave credence to the belief that there was no system to support their engagement efforts, forcing individual staff to adapt to unpredictable incidents involving event placement.

Traces of social exchange were also noticed while conducting these interviews. In the context of alumni engagement, social exchange theory suggests that the opportunity cost of volunteering time, knowledge, and connections are evaluated versus the number of benefits they have received from their alma mater in the past or present (Weerts & Ronca, 2007). Incentives for alumni participation were mentioned as an approach to secure a consistent and diverse group in the future. John explained, "Most alumni are going to do it (participate) out of the goodness of their heart, but what helps make that commitment stick knows that they are going to also receive some acknowledgment by participating in the event." The implication is that to establish a sustainable program; there would have to be a way to recognize these dedicated alumni community members.

Analysis Process

As I consider the data collected for this action research study since 2021, I am reminded of Ruona's (2005) approach to analyzing qualitative data. The four stages associated with this method are data preparation, familiarization, coding, and generating meaning. These stages served as a guide to how I would approach the analysis of my data. The data collected in this study (as shown in Figure 2.3) is vast and includes a variety of surveys, action research meeting transcripts, interviews, and focus groups.

As I began the analysis process, the transcripts from the staff, students, and alumni focus groups were prepared using the NVIVO platform to organize the data in one place. The capabilities of platforms such as NVIVO have been highlighted by Yin (2018), who stated, "Essentially, the tools and guidance can help you code and categorize large amounts of data. Such data, when taking the form of narrative text, may have been collected from open-ended interviews or from large volumes of written materials" (p.240).

Table 2.9*Critical Incident Interview Assertions*

Respondent	Title	Assertion	Themes
Jill	Engagement consistency not what it used to be	There is an expectation that alumni will be readily available for student-facing events.	Inconsistency, Availability & Unreliable process
Jill	Building relationships for personal engagement	Building a relationship with alumni offers benefits and more likelihood of responses.	Authentic Connections
Amy	Taking matters into my own hands	If you do not receive the resources from your institution, you then must rely on your own	Adaptation & Unpredictability
Amy	Mindful Resource	A program or process is needed when reliable alumni are not able to engage with students.	Lacking processes
John	Competing commitments equal involvement restricted	Asking for an alumnus's time requires an incentive to compete with the responsibilities that consume their time	Social Exchange & Incentives
John	Diversity: A necessary request	Instability affects the diverse nature of the alumni population, which leads to misrepresentation in events and workshops.	Diversity & Representation

To add focus group video data to NVIVO, it first had to be transcribed in Otter Ai, which converted my mp4 videos recorded in Zoom to a Microsoft Word document. The Word

documents for staff, student, and alumni focus groups were individually added to NVIVO. Once added, each file was classified into a focus group folder and manually color-coded.

Familiarization with the data was my next step. Ruona (2005) stated familiarization includes but is not limited to “immersing in the data much more deeply. It typically involves listening to tapes, reading and rereading data, and jotting notes and memos about what you see and what you think is going on in the data” (p.240) To familiarize myself with this focus group data, I watched the videos while reviewing the transcript simultaneously. This process allowed me to prepare for the next stage, coding.

Coding

The coding process was essential to understanding my data both in its current state and in the future as I looked toward making meaning. Miles et al. (2020) emphasized,

Coding is not just something you do to ‘get the data ready’ for analysis; rather, as we have said several times, it is a form of early and continuing analysis that drives the ongoing data analysis collection. It typically leads to a reshaping of your perspective and instrumentation for the next round.

Coding my data has helped me identify the remaining data I am missing from my study. There are still questions that need to be asked of students, staff, and alumni that helped me identify the themes in my research that are missing in my initial data analysis.

Coding a substantial amount of data can be overwhelming. After uploading transcripts, videos, meeting notes, and interviews, I decided to revert back to a subgroup of data, focus group transcripts. To identify codes or concepts in the data, I referred back to the research questions in the study. The research questions associated with this study include the following:

1. How does alumni engagement influence student attitudes toward their own future service to their alma mater?
2. Why do alumni engage in non-monetary service at their post-graduate institutions?
3. What is learned at the individual, group, and system levels that advance the theory and practice in an action research project that explores the engagement of graduate student leaders and alumni through non-monetary service contributions in postgraduate programs?

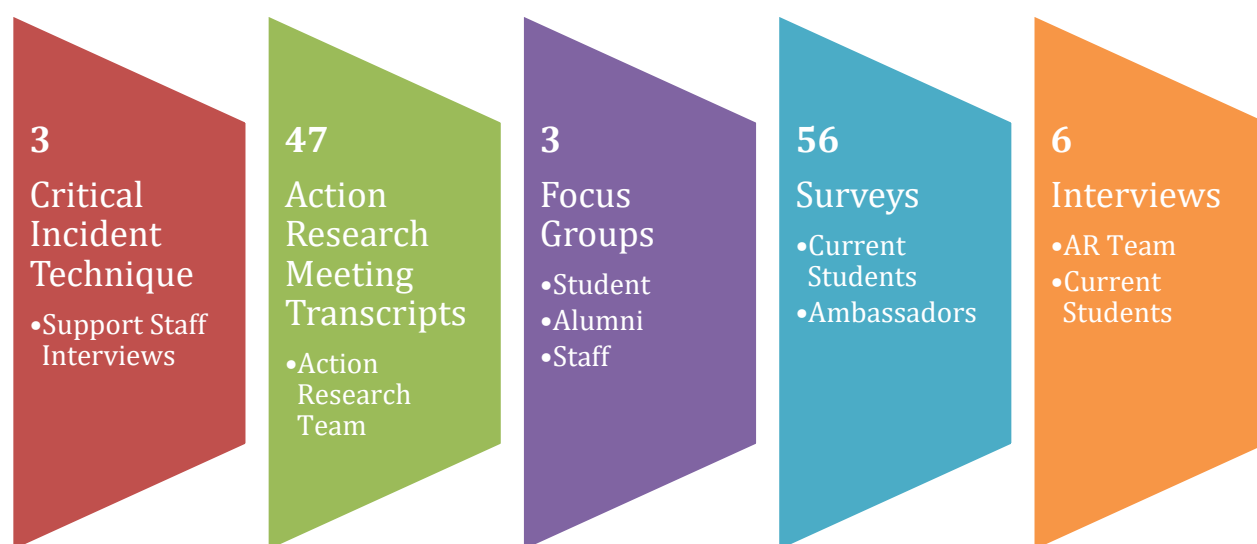


Figure 2.3

Data Collection Components

These questions provided guidance with my initial codes. These codes include Alumni Engagement, Student Engagement, Learning, Relationships, and Service. Other codes that were considered and later added due to their relevance to my study were service and relationships. The data source for these codes, as displayed in Table 2.10 (Appendix C), included an alumni focus group, and a staff focus group.

The source material for the Alumni Engagement: Motivation code captures quotes from the alumni focus group transcript. The alumni highlighted were asked to answer polls live via Zoom and discuss their alumni motivations and incentives for engagement. These responses to the poll allowed staff to use these as topic areas for a more extensive conversation. The student engagement code focuses on the conversation related to research question 1, "How does alumni engagement influence student attitudes toward their own future service to their alma mater?". Using both staff and alumni focus group transcripts, I could see a connection between the graduate student government and ambassadors, which is further discussed in my findings.

The analysis coding strategies I identified through a review of Miles et al. (2020) include process, holistic, and hypothesis coding. Process coding is qualified by alumni's actions with the progression of time, such as their motivations and relationships. Holistic coding refers to applying a single code to a vast amount of data, similar to the relationships, service, or motivation codes derived from the focus group transcripts. Hypothesis coding was initiated by myself as the researcher to assess elements of my research questions and theory (Miles et al., 2020).

Coding Scheme

My coding scheme incorporates Alumni Engagement, Student Engagement, Learning, Relationships, and Service. The sub-codes that fall under each of these codes connect additional themes as new data is introduced. New data includes action research meeting transcripts and student, alumni, and staff interview transcripts. Survey data from student attendees over the course of various events were added as automatically generated reports from the Qualtrics platform.

Code Book

10000 Alumni Engagement

10100 Motivation

10200 Communication

10300 Campus Engagement

13000 Relationships

13100 Staff-student

13200 Staff-alumni

13300 Alumni-student

11000 Student Engagement

11100 Integration

11200 Involvement

11300 Student Organizations

14000 Service

14100 Volunteerism

14200 Knowledge Sharing

12000 Learning

12100 Individual

12200 Group

12300 System

Trustworthiness and Credibility

The trustworthiness and credibility of this data is supported by various forms of the data mentioned above that reflect credible criteria such as process validity, catalytic validity, and democratic validity. Process validity in an action research project involves examining the effectiveness of the processes used throughout the project. In terms of Catalytic validity, we examine whether an action research project reorients, focuses, and energizes participants such that they are open to transforming their view of reality. The Democratic validity of an action research project refers to how closely it is conducted with all stakeholders (Gall et al., 2003).

Triangulation

The validity of this study can also be confirmed through the triangulation of the data. Triangulation is described as a qualitative strategy used in research practices to test the validity of data through the combination of information from various sources (Carter et al., 2014). There are four forms of triangulation: data, methods, investigator, and theory triangulation.

Data source triangulation is defined by Lemon and Hayes (2020) as the “inclusion of individuals with varying backgrounds, diverse groups of participants, or documents in the study” (p.3). The participants of this study represent gender and racially diverse groups that enhance the credibility and transferability of this study to other colleges across the country. Specifically, for this study, this diversity allows the action researcher to explore any trends or disparities between groups and individuals to explore assumptions and findings.

Method triangulation refers to the use of a variety of data collection methods. In this study, the use of interviews, surveys, focus groups, and meeting transcript summaries create opportunities to analyze the impact alumni engagement has on the future service of graduate business school students to their alma mater. The data collected from current students also examined how non-monetary contributions of alumni affect graduate student engagement in a postgraduate setting.

Investigator triangulation is defined by Carter et al. (2014) as “the participation of two or more researchers in the same study to provide multiple observations and conclusions” (p. 545). There are multiple observations by the action research team and the graduate support team through their interview responses and feedback. As the action researcher of this study, although my observations include other researchers as a part of the action research team, my conclusions were only produced individually.

Theory triangulation depends on the use of multiple theories when analyzing data. The theoretical framework of this study includes social exchange theory, student involvement theory, and student integration theory, all of which are used throughout the study to support the data. Each theory can be used independently or collectively to ensure the validity of the data that is collected from staff, alumni, and current students.

Subjectivity Statement

Navigating a change process can be complex for any individual contributor on an action research team. As the facilitator, change agent, and contributing member of the team, I experience challenges that have tested my leadership and the ability and the capability to execute tasks simultaneously. These tasks have included the preliminary work for each meeting, which includes 1) watching the recording of the previous meetings to summarize its highlights, 2) use the summary to create the agenda, 3) determine which activities or strategy needs to be incorporated into the agenda to ensure engagement amongst the team.

In the initial phases of the project, the action research team agreed that meeting twice a month for one hour each meeting would suffice as we discussed the purpose and the problem at hand. Although this schedule continued for eight months, the shift from the construction phase to the planning and action phase resulted in a recommendation to move the meetings to a weekly schedule. The rationale was the amount of planning needed between now and the launch of the program. Although the team agreed this was necessary, as the action researcher, I understood that my load and responsibilities would increase due to preparation time being cut in half. As a facilitator I recognize that the quality of the meetings may have suffered as less time for activity planning has taken a toll on the engagement of the group. In addition, the number of meetings cancelled has increased as the frequency of the meetings has caused some conflict with team members' schedules.

Educating members on the action research cycle was essential to the process. As the change agent, I wanted to create a sense of understanding and direction. As the assistant director with the least number of years on the graduate support team, transitioning to a leadership role for the project left uncertainty as to how the team would view the project and how invested they

would be despite the direct effect on their roles. I prepared for each meeting with that in mind, strategizing how to make the lessons regarding the action research cycle and its steps less academic as it was introduced and referenced. Powerpoint presentations and Miro activities yielded positive results as members became more engaged with content relating to the strides we have taken as a team while following our process.

Summary

The action research methodology was introduced as the foundation and guide for managing the change process. I have observed things such as the action research team's goal alignment, university support, and alumni interest in volunteerism. The external goal of our ambassador program was clarified and expressed through our vision of making a meaningful impact through alumni relationship building, networking, and community engagement and while enhancing the market-readiness of our students. Our team collectively believes that creating the ambassador program would help our students as they advance in their programs.

Qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and surveys were used to answer the study's research questions. Significant steps to ensure the trustworthiness of the collection and analysis of the data. The findings produced from the data collection and analysis will be uncovered in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 3: THE ACTION RESEARCH STORY

A New Path Opens Institutional Doors

As a new journey approaches, those who take on the challenge of travelling on the unbeaten path endure unforeseen obstacles. Whether the terrain is clear or obstructed by the fog that is the unknown, the preparation of the travelers serves as the compass that directs their next move. Each traveler serves a purpose that is essential to the progress of the group. The dedication of the team reflects the endurance needed to embark upon the purpose of this study; to explore the impact of alumni involvement on a holistic cycle of engagement through non-monetary service contributions in public postgraduate business programs.

Graduate programs are training grounds for students to enhance their skills through a specialized curriculum tailored to the best practices of their respective industries. Traditionally, business schools with programs such as a Master of Business Administration (MBA) program train their students for leading roles as managers and executives. Once they become leaders in their respective fields, it is not common for them to return unless formally invited. Instead, there are attempts from development offices to reach out to graduates for alumni monetary contributions (Rissmeyer, 2010).

In 2020-2021, colleges, like many other higher education institutions, have been affected by the country's economic standing. There is a trend of increasing enrollment amongst the graduate student population, but external financial cutbacks are now restraining factors that can hinder (Chen, 2018). Table 16 shows the positive effect that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on

graduate school enrollment as opposed to other segments of the academic population, such as 4-year and 2-year degrees (National, 2021).

Table 3.1

National Student Clearinghouse Estimated National Enrollment: 2019 to 2021

Semester	Spring 2021		Spring 2020		Spring 2019	
Program Level	Enrollment	% Change from Previous Year	Enrollment	% Change from Previous Year	Enrollment	% Change from Previous Year
Undergraduate	14,005,856	-4.9%	14,732,976	-0.5%	14,813,493	-2.3%
Associate degree-Seeking	4,235,492	-10.6%	4,738,695	-2.0%	4,833,949	-2.4%
Bachelor's Degree-Seeking	7,912,210	-2.5%	8,118,936	-0.5%	8,161,576	-1.7%
Other Undergraduate	1,858,154	-0.9%	1,875,345	3.2%	1,817,967	-4.5%
Graduate Professional	2,849,445	4.6%	2,725,330	-0.1%	2,728,616	2.0%

Creating a structured plan where alumni of postgraduate business programs receive consistent communication and opportunities to participate in college events is necessary for increasing engagement (Fleming, 2019). As universities provide constant communication regarding information perceived as relevant to the alumni community, these alumni desire to become more engaged and develop a postgraduate relationship with faculty and staff (Harrison, 2018). The desired outcome for engagement aligns with the stakeholders' (alumni and staff) interests.

Problem Framing

This action research project was conducted at O'Brien Business College (OBC), a southeastern metropolitan university with a reputation for diversity. As of the spring of 2023, the MBA program at its business school recorded a 39% Black or African American, 36% White, 16% Asian, 9% Hispanic/Latinx, and a 7% Multiracial population. The average age was thirty-one years old, with the youngest students in their 20s and the most senior students in their 60s. The gender ratio is 1:1 woman to men, with a 54% to 46% split, respectively, which has increased as the institution makes a concerted effort to balance the graduate program population in subsequent years. The domestic-to-international population reflected 66% to 34% of domestic-to-international students, respectively.

Before meeting with the client for contracting, getting familiar with the institution, its members, and the social environment is essential (Anderson, 2020). Objectively observing the operations and staff interactions gives an outside, unbiased perspective. It can also explain who the primary and intermediate clients are before the contracting meeting—knowing who presents and what capacity allows me to develop an approach to the contracting process.

The graduate student support team would like to create a program that addresses the college's lack of alumni engagement. Funding deficiencies due to the pandemic have forced outside sponsorships of alumni-based programming to discontinue at the college. With very few structured programs for alumni to become involved, the client urgency regarding the development of new programming has been amplified as graduates inquire about new ways to volunteer at their former institution. There is little attempt to keep a pool of diverse professionals that can contribute to the overall success of the student population from a non-monetary perspective.

The graduate student support team is one of few departments that directly connect alumni with current students through speaker engagements, recruitment events, and panel discussions. When organizing these events, securing reliable alumni lacks efficiency and consistency, which leads to a gap in engagement.

Stakeholder Analysis & Action Research Team Identification

This change intends to transform how the staff develops its student leadership and creates a group of underutilized alumni community members. Several stakeholders contribute to the change process. The Graduate Student Government officers contribute to focus groups and ambassador program events. The director served as the client and the sponsor where the program's activities are hosted. The Assistant Directors work closely with the student government and graduate assistants regarding the needs of the students and the promotion of programming.

As the change agent, I identified and selected the action research team based on high power and high interest. The power of these stakeholders may positively impact the urgency of the ambassador program. Figure 3.1 reflects the completed grid and refers to how the I should engage with the listed stakeholders based on where they are classified. The completed grid is an example of organization stakeholders for a change project potentially falling on the grid.

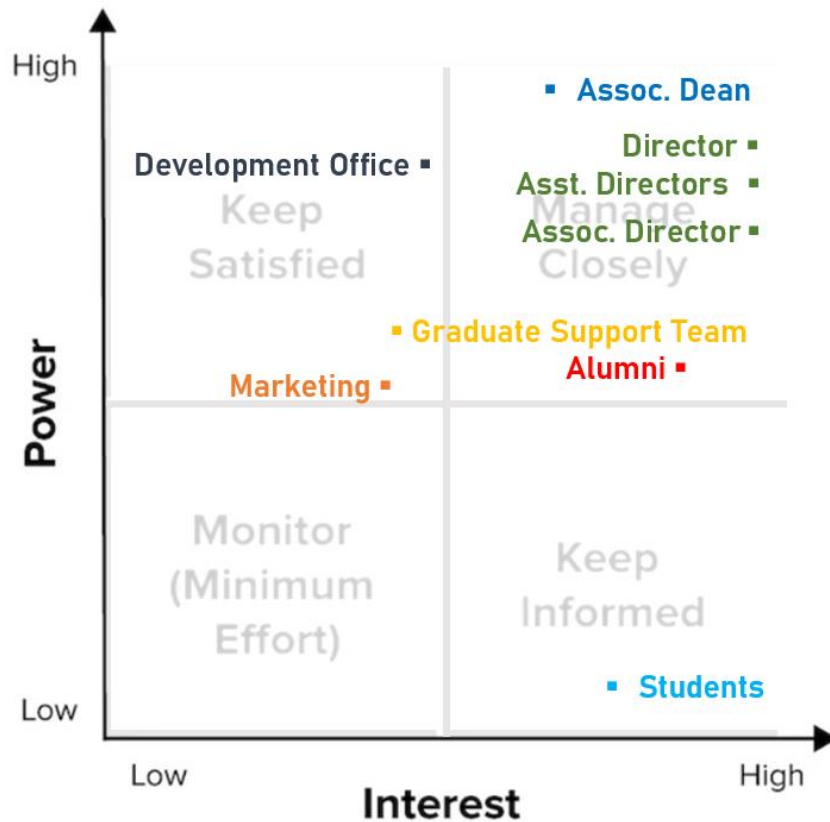


Figure 3.1

Stakeholder Grid

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to explore the impact of alumni involvement on a holistic cycle of engagement in public postgraduate business programs. The following are the research questions that guided this study:

1. How does alumni engagement influence student attitudes toward their own future service to their alma mater?
2. Why do alumni engage in non-monetary service at their postgraduate institutions?
3. What was learned at the individual, group, and system levels that advanced the theory and practice in an action research project that explores the engagement of graduate

student leadership and retained alumni support through non-monetary service contributions in postgraduate programs?

The action research team comprises six department staff members (as shown in Table 3.2) with a wide range of professional experience and areas of expertise. Key responsibilities, as mentioned in the invitation to define the project's direction, were to:

1. Participate in the planning and development of the institution's ambassador program.
2. Document interactions with internal and external participants and reflect on findings.
3. Work closely to collect and analyze program data.
4. Engage in collaborative training sessions designed to implement program components strategically.
5. Conduct and participate in interviews and focus groups with internal and external program participants.

Table 3.2

Action Research Team Breakdown

Action Research Team Member	Position	Description
Laura Early	Director of Student Involvement	Leads a team of nine student involvement professionals, in charge of programming, events, and extracurricular activities.
Whitney Casey	Assistant Director of Student Involvement III	Responsible for designing programming, events, and extracurricular activities. Leads team of graduate assistants.
Rachel Askew	Assistant Director of Student Involvement II	Responsible for designing programming, events, and extracurricular activities.

Matthew Jones	Assistant Director of Student Involvement I	Responsible for designing programming, events, and extracurricular activities. Lead facilitator and change agent.
Beverley Smith	Program Coordinator	Responsible for program facilitation, workshop, planning, and data collection/ analysis.
John Rinehart	Associate Director of Recruitment	Leads team of college graduate student recruiters. Responsible for all recruitment activities and programming.

This list of responsibilities introduced the initial requirements for joining the team. It also outlines the basic needs expected of all members involved and sets a clear expectation. All invitations to join the Graduate Ambassador Program (action research team) were accepted and followed by a poll tool scheduling dates and times for availability. Once a consensus was reached for the meeting date, I followed the poll with a meeting and an invitation with an attached agenda.

Action Research Cycle Overview

In this study, there were three completed cycles over the course of three semesters: Fall 2022, Spring 2023, and Fall 2023 (as shown in Figure 3.2). Programming for GAP is suspended for the summer 2023 semester for recruitment and planning for the next year.

Cycle 1: Action Research Context & Purpose

The need to build developmental relationships between alumni and current students through meaningful experiences has become evident as graduating classes complete their respective programs and move into their careers. As students graduate, they are often faced with whether their ties with their graduate institution will dissolve. In some cases, this question is initially answered with solicitation by a trained college representative, but one the alumnus has

never encountered during their graduate program. The reluctance of alumni to make a financial contribution in these circumstances can often be misunderstood. These former students are looking for a more meaningful way to contribute, and the development of these relationships and the creation of an ambassador program address these issues.

Alumni participation decreased by 50% in the summer of 2021 as the graduate student support team attempts to reserve time with their alumni. Competing factors have caused several cancellations over the three months. Factors such as pre-planned vacations and employment obligations expressed through email have forced the client to acknowledge the requisite planning to avoid these missed opportunities for student engagement. These interactions with alumni, who also function as industry professionals, are beneficial to graduate students as they prepare them for their next steps once they have enrolled.

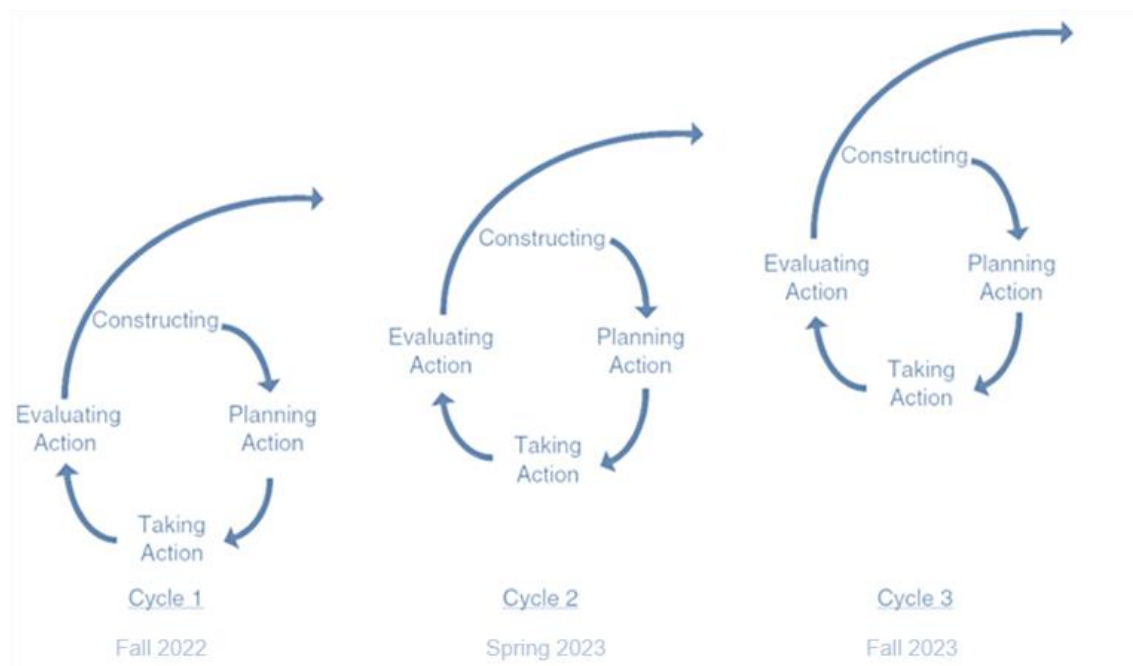


Figure 3.2

Ruona's Action Research Cycle

Like many colleges and universities, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced faculty, staff, and students to change how they operate in the academic and co-curricular environment. Courses and university programming had changed to a virtual format, altering the interaction between staff, students, and alumni. Virtual interactions forced a shift in how the college's student support team has engaged with the student population. This shift has also affected future planning as the college embraces a return to in-person interaction.

The college has taken steps to move into a post-covid era. The college's strategic plan was revealed earlier in the year. As the transition to normal operations progressed, meetings focused on how the college's initiatives could be fulfilled upon returning to campus. Meetings for the strategic plan divided all initiatives and assigned team leads were charged with guiding their team through brainstorming activities. The purpose of these meetings was to develop innovative ideas that would answer how to prepare current students for industry upon their entrance into their postgraduate careers.

The ambassador program was introduced as the initiative that would allow all of the other initiatives to flourish to benefit the college's graduate students. These initiatives focus on the development of the students through industry networking, experiential opportunities, leadership opportunities, and an ambassador program. The ambassador program is being used to fulfill all other initiatives by leveraging the talents and expertise of the alumni ambassadors. Alumni were considered to be an underutilized resource and an opportunity for OBC to serve its student body at scale.

In the brainstorming session for the ambassador program, five initiative groups, including stakeholders from across the college, generated ideas of how an ambassador program can prepare

graduate students to impact the market. Initial thoughts were analyzed and synthesized to remove duplicate ideas while selecting ideas to consider when developing the program. These ideas were passed along to the director and selected the team members responsible for forming the development of the program.

Understanding the problem, the action research team met in the constructing phase of the action research cycle. It began by defining the purpose, researching, and collecting data from other programs with similar scope, conducting focus groups, and expressing desired outcomes. The action research team was exposed to examples of theories of change and coached by the change agent to develop short-term, mid-term, and long-term outcomes. Resources such as videos were provided to assist in the development of outcomes. Outcomes were reviewed in subsequent meetings and added to a shared file in the Microsoft Teams group formed by the change agent. The researcher designed the theory of change flowchart (shown in Figure 3.4) to reflect the outcomes provided.

Cycle 1: Constructing Phase

Formulating the Vision

To address the need for change, the action research team began to discuss how alumni can be leveraged to serve a resource to current graduate students. The goal of change process, established in the context and purpose phase, uncovered the university's current state as a college that lacks a centralized form of non-monetary alumni engagement that can be used consistently to benefit student leadership development, networking, professional advancement, and other university initiatives.

As the change agent, I opened the discussion, establishing that a vision for the desired state would need to be constructed. The components of what the vision should include were

conveyed as 1) it needs to be persuasive and influential, 2) it must appeal to stakeholders (i.e., current students, recent students, and staff), it should consider the aspirations stakeholders, 4) and must be focused, flexible, communicable, achievable, simple, and creates a picture.

Examples of different vision statements from institutions from across the country that have established a program involving alumni were listed within a PowerPoint slide and used as a guide. The team was then asked to take time to capture their thoughts using a Miro Board (as shown in Figure 3.3). The topics included: 1) Persuasive and Influencing components of the program. 2) Considers the aspirations of Stakeholders. 3) Appealing to Stakeholders? 4) Write your best Vision Statement. At the end of the allotted ideation time, the change agent asked the team if anyone was interested in sharing their vision statement. There was a bit of hesitation as two of the four team members expressed that they needed more time. The department's director stated, "I didn't officially write one [vision statement]; I just put in a bunch of ideas of what I believe it should encompass. It felt kind of overwhelming to try to write one right now". The sentiment was echoed by the remaining team members. The change agent took the time to reiterate that this was only the beginning of this process, and the exercise was designed to stretch the team's thoughts about the vision and get something written from each person to bring to the next meeting, where the contributions to the board can create a holistic vision from the group.

In the following meeting, the team focused its efforts on the vision and the components they viewed as the most important for the ambassador program. Additional examples of visions from departments across the college and from outside instructions were reviewed. The emphasis on appointed alumni and community building was highlighted as potential terminology to include in the statement. The recommendation was made that the action research team begin to create the vision on the slide. The team began to group ideas together influenced by the Miro

exercise and examples until a draft was completed. The team agreed that “The O’Brien Business College has a long history of cultivating innovative leaders and helping students achieve their personal and professional goals. The Graduate Ambassador Program is a group of selected alumni leaders who connect with students to provide a meaningful impact through relationship building, networking, and community engagement. By sharing their experience and knowledge, the alumni ambassadors will play an integral role in student market-ready development”. Each member gave additional critiques to evaluate its clarity and ensure the message would align with the university’s strategic plan. The action research team agreed the vision constructed at the meeting would serve as the comprehensive draft that would later be finalized for the launch of the program.

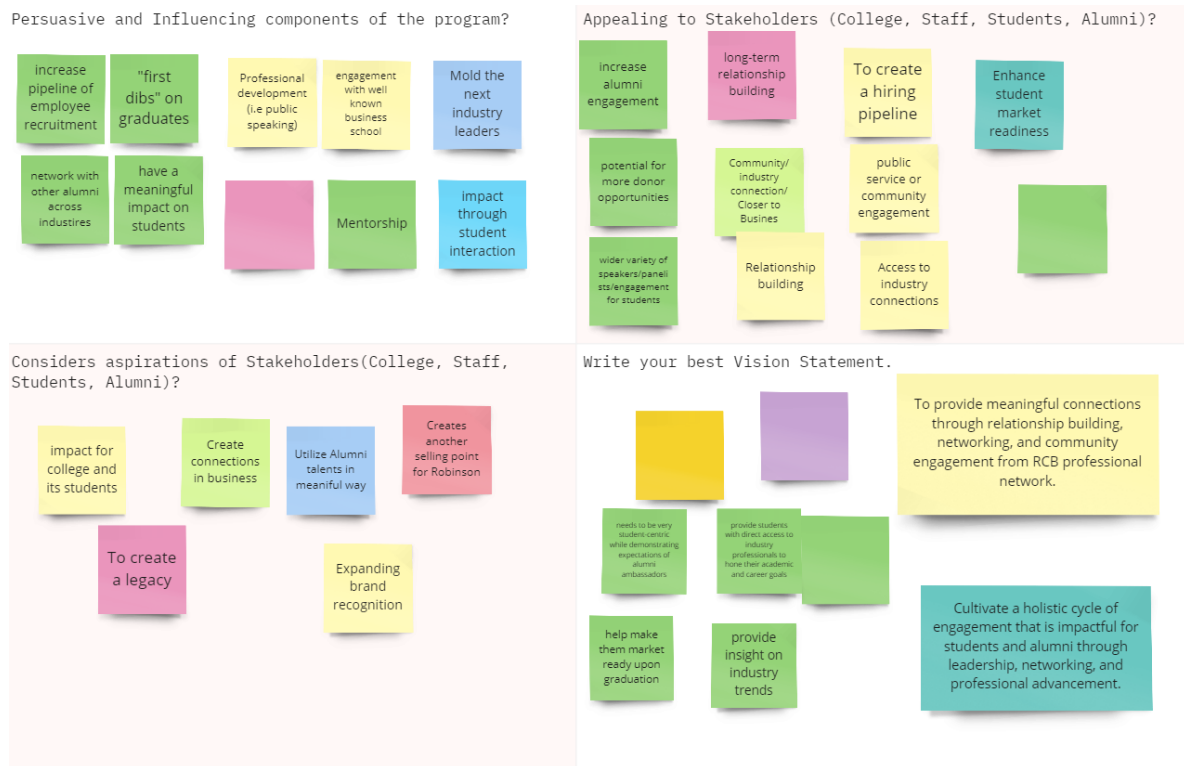


Figure 3.3

Vision Construction Exercise

Theory of Change

Considering the purpose of this study, the research questions serve as a guide for the study, while the theory of change (shown in Figure 3.4) guides and illustrates how the change process was executed. The United Nations Development Group (n.d.) defined a theory of change as “a method that explains how a given intervention, or set of interventions, are expected to lead to a specific development change, drawing on a causal analysis based on available evidence” (p.4). The theory of change starts with the problem in this study: the process of securing committed alumni as consistent sources of volunteers is fundamentally flawed. Alumni are seeking to become engaged, but they need a path to contribute/ volunteer.

The basis of the problem in this study addresses an undeveloped process regarding the relationship gap between current students, alumni, and institutions. The client has recognized the inconsistency in how alumni are approached for volunteering in official college events such as workshops, panel discussions, orientations, etc. The desire to have an established process for which the college can notify, invite, and encourage its alumni population to interact and engage with the current graduate student population has created a significant opportunity for change.

In the meetings following the construction of the vision statement, the action research team reviewed what was accomplished to this point. Upon the completion of the takeaways from the previous 8 meetings, the construction phase was reintroduced. The team was reminded by the change agent of the two major components of formulating the idea of the future state, including the vision and the theory of change. The question was posed to the action research team: “What will I have to do from now until next summer to get to the point where our vision is realized?”. This was followed by an example of a theory of change flow chart, which left the team in silence. The change agent sensed that the group was overwhelmed by the flowchart and

reassured them that there would be a draft completed for the group to critique, but the team would not be tasked with creating one by scratch. The exchange left the change agent to think of ways to keep the team engaged throughout the meeting when they encounter topics and new concepts that may be more academic in nature.

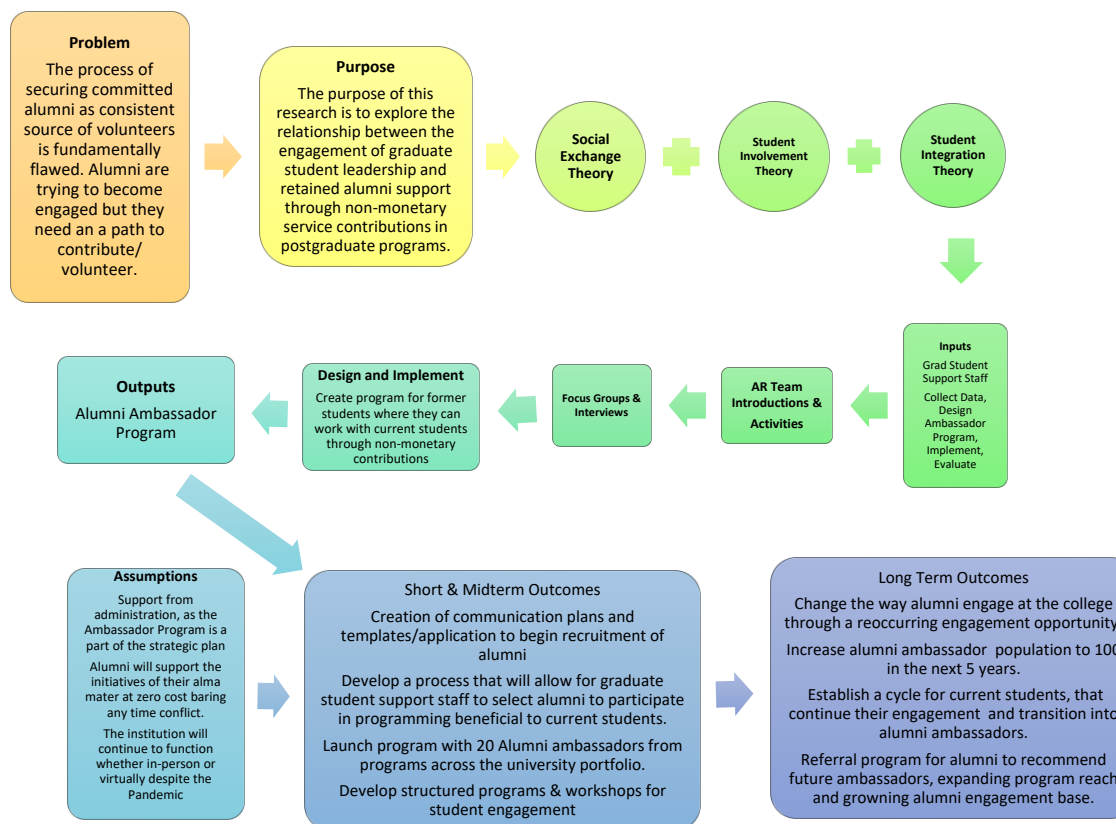


Figure 3.4

Alumni Engagement Theory of Change

Cycle 1: Planning Action Phase

In this study, the organization's need for change is influenced by underutilized alumni talent, and their desire to become engaged. Through the alumni ambassador program, the action research team would like to create a new resource and process that they can utilize for student

programming, recruitment efforts, career advancement, and university initiatives. An ambassador program allows alumni to interact with students and provided an opportunity for development and engagement.

Interventions

Developing interventions with the action research team involved planning and implementing an action that helped the team progress as they worked toward a solution or change (Anderson, 2020). The macro intervention plan shown in Figure 3.5 illustrates the team's path for interventions and implementation. It focuses on critical points of progress over time, starting with the design of the graduate ambassador program application through the evaluation of the program and its potential to improve.

In our process, the action research team has explored opportunities to implement change through the development of our ambassador program. These steps include investigating ways to reintroduce alumni ambassador program participants to the institution by 1) developing a recruitment plan inviting alumni to become engaged with the graduate student body and, 2) creating a training program that develops the participants in key areas, preparing them to engage responsibly with students.

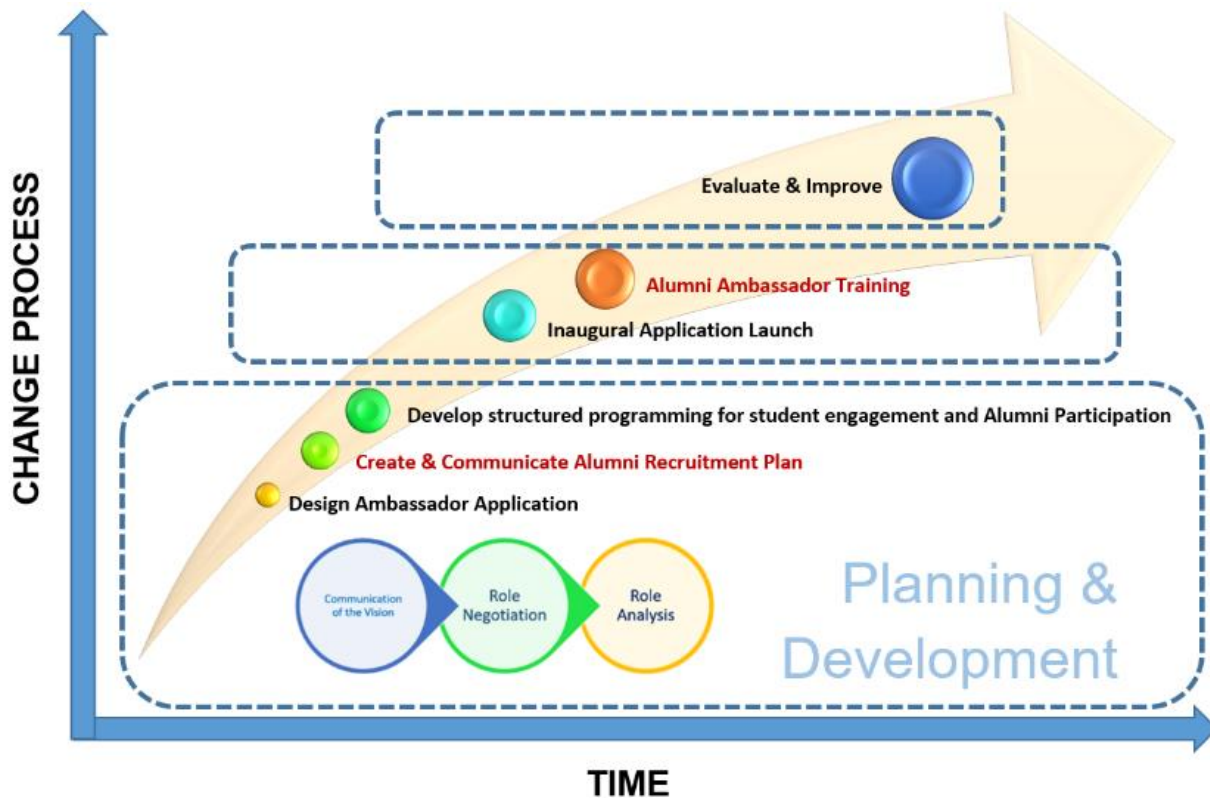


Figure 3.5

Macro Intervention Plan

The approach to designing an application was a significant step as we approached the development of our recruitment plan. It required the team to design an electronic application that would include the necessary information needed to evaluate the eligibility of the alumni who applied. Eligibility includes graduating from one of the business school's graduate programs and having professional work experience. The application also required demographic information, the type(s) of graduate program that was completed, current place of employment, events they were interested in engaging in, how they heard about the program, and an opportunity to share why they were interested in being a part of the program and a place to upload their resume. The

application was developed in Qualtrics by the director and the change agent and then reviewed in subsequent meetings by the action research team.

Intervention 1: Recruitment Plan. As a selected intervention, the recruitment plan was designed to follow the creation of the application. When creating a recruitment plan for the alumni ambassador program, several things were considered. Qualitative data from meeting summaries from July 2021 to May 2022 were reviewed and evaluated to determine who the participants would be, how we would approach initial contact with these selected alumni, and how we would evaluate the reach and improve our second attempt to draw in participants. As a result, a ten-step plan shown in Figure 3.6 was established to keep the action research team on track. The action research team unanimously agreed upon these steps, serving as the approach to our participant recruitment.

The action research team discussed the importance of creating programming for the ambassadors to participate. These programming ideas were focused on but not limited to a panel discussion, development workshops, networking events, recruiting sessions, and career advancement events. Alumni were tasked with meeting a 4-event minimum requirement over the fall and spring semesters but are not limited to that number of engagement opportunities. The action research team expressed collective concern about whether the program would offer enough events for alumni to participate. The team agreed that this would be further evaluated once the number of ambassadors was confirmed in July.

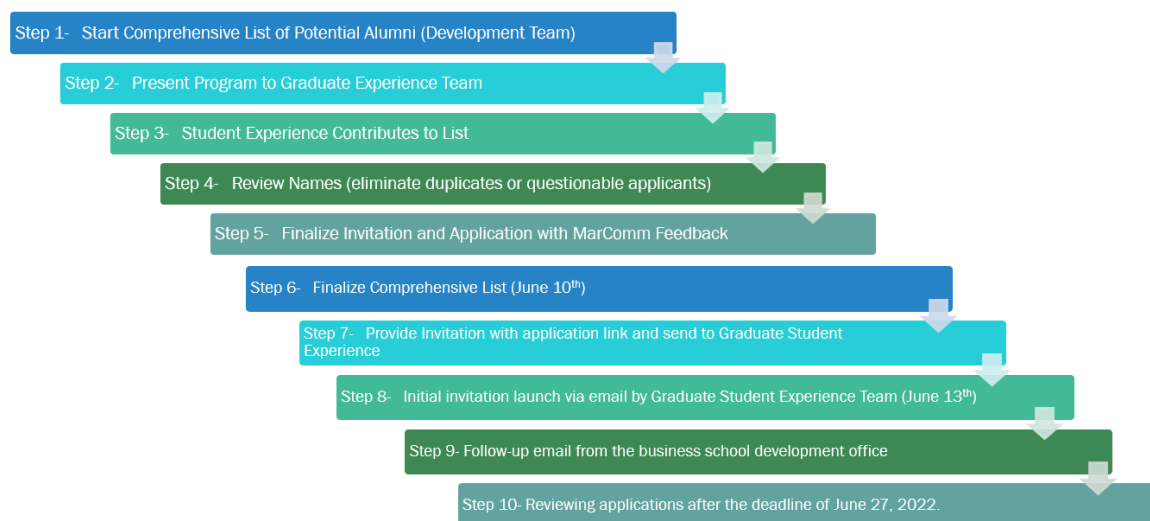


Figure 3.6

Alumni Ambassador Recruitment Plan

Change Readiness Strategy. The organization’s reputation for its massive alumni community has been a major selling point for the college’s graduate programs. The opportunity to utilize them as a resource for their current graduate students but was not yet explored with a centralized approach. The action research team understood stakeholders and the organization overall would need to be ready for such a change in the way they engaged their alumni population. The organization’s readiness is described by Anderson (2020) as the “involvement, willingness, energy, time, capability, and motivation of the organization to change” p.214 (multiple sources). The college’s leadership expressed the organization’s plans to support and develop an ambassador program that would leverage the college’s initiatives during the presentation of its strategic plan. The action research team uses this as the anchor of its change readiness strategy. The strategy included: 1) reintroduction of the program, 2) reinforcing the vision, and 3) gathering support from stakeholders.

The Graduate Ambassador Program (GAP) was initially introduced to faculty and staff during a brainstorming session as leadership explored how universities could execute the initiatives of the strategic plan. The action research team discussed the importance of buy-in from their stakeholders and the importance of reintroducing the program, its structure, and its vision to the graduate support staff, since it has been over 10 months since it was first introduced. It was agreed that this would happen at the weekly meeting and would be presented by the change agent and supported by members of the action research team.

The presentation of the program introduced 1) the problem that sparked the change process of the organizations current state and desired state, 2) the program description and vision, 3) the action research process, 4) the action research team's progress over the course of the last nine months 5) program structure and alumni eligibility, 6) program goals, 7) ways the program will impact the student population. The program's reintroduction allowed the graduate support team to understand the direction of the action research team's planning while providing incite as to how their students would benefit from the program.

The vision developed by the action research team during the construction phase was visible throughout the action research process. The change agent ensured the visibility of the vision in each correspondence involving GAP and the action research team, including meeting notifications and presentations. Kotter (1996) wrote: A great vision can serve a useful purpose even if it is understood by just a few key people. However, the real power of a vision is unleashed only when most of those involved in an enterprise or activity have a collective understanding of its goals and direction (p.4). This mindset was adopted by the change agent, the action research team, and the alumni, as the vision was included in the training presentation throughout the program.

Stakeholder Engagement. Stakeholder support of the graduate student support team was identified early in the construction phase as the action research team recognized the recruitment plan would need to involve each graduate program support contact. The team understood that alumni would be more receptive to a familiar name as they receive notification of GAP's launch. With this in mind, efforts to include the graduate support team started with a staff focus group. Staff members from the graduate student support were encouraged to attend to share their thoughts about how the department could improve alumni engagement so it could benefit students. This focus group allowed the change agent to explore the problem with the staff who volunteered.

An alumni focus group was initiated by members of the action research team with the goal of bringing back our alumni in a meaningful way to get an idea of what alumni value and what motivates them to be involved so the feedback can be considered as our graduate ambassador program is developed. Six alumni representing the Master of Data Analytics, Business Administration, Information Systems, and International Business programs from across the country met with all members of the action research team to discuss 1) Alumni motivations and incentives for engagement and 2) Comfort with virtual versus in-person engagement events, 3) Prospective participation over time and alumni expectations 4) Level of commitment preferred by alumni and the best forms of involvement. These topics were constructed by the action research team with the purpose of identifying opportunities to appeal to alumni during the development of the program.

The need for a student focus group was discovered in the construction phase as the action research team identified the stakeholders that could give a clear view of what would be needed to construct an ambassador program. The action research team sent invitations to nine current

students who were recommended by the graduate student support team for the Zoom meeting. An introduction to the session was delivered by assistant director Matthew Jones, who opened the meeting by explaining to the students in attendance the objective; Jones stated:

This is an opportunity for us to hear you or hear from you, current students, as we put together an alumni ambassador program that will benefit the student body. We hope to get some insight as to what type of interactions you want to see and use that to build our O'Brien Business College graduate ambassador program. And, of course, this program will be geared towards graduate students to start; I do not know if it'll expand outside of that, but we're still in the initial phases.

Students from four graduate programs, including Marketing, Data Analytics, Accounting, and Business Administration, shared their preferences on 1) Types of engagement events you would like to see involving Robinson alumni, 2) Motivations for engaging with alumni, 3) Comfort with virtual versus in-person engagement events 4) Alumni you would like to see (CEO, Entrepreneurs, etc.). The session allowed students to vote in a poll for each topic, and the action research team spent 5-10 minutes hearing each of the confirmations of the responses and additional insights throughout the hour-long session. Engaging current students by establishing their needs and preferences as they interact with alumni allowed the action research team to pinpoint the aspects of the student-alumni relationship that matter the most.

Communications Strategy. The action research team used several forms of communication throughout the change process. These opportunities to communicate included email, Microsoft Teams, zoom, and individual meetings in-person. In the case of the recruitment plan, there was a need to share spreadsheets as the team worked with graduate student support to compile a list of alumni who would be notified via email and introduced to the program so

alumni could get involved. The list of alumni was held in the action research team's Microsoft Teams group as an Excel spreadsheet where names could be reviewed and edited, leading to the initial recruitment launch.

Two months prior to the launch of the program, the graduate student support team was tasked with adding the names of alumni who had been involved as students and have continued to stay connected to the shared spreadsheet. The task was reinforced with the support of the director as the team participated in its weekly meeting. The meeting gave student support an opportunity to ask necessary questions as the change agent explained the process and the purpose of the task. The initial communication was crafted and reviewed by the action research team and included the application. The graduate support team received instructions that would be followed by an email once the application's language was reviewed by the OBS communications department.

The OBC communications department served as the driving force in the process of recruiting alumni. The action research team scheduled separate meetings for each office to discuss the program and garner support as the team attempted to limit its restraining forces. The communication office served as an editor of the communication of the vision and assisted with the language that was consistent with the institution's message. After edits were provided, members of the action research team reviewed the results and confirmed the language for the invitation and application, which included the description of the program and the vision.

Ground Campaign Strategy. Creating awareness about the ambassador program recruitment plan with stakeholders was necessary for the program's future success. Understanding this, members of the action research team collectively and individually communicated plans for the program's recruitment to the graduate student support team and the

department's leadership in the weeks leading to the program's launch. The first opportunity to communicate the importance of the program and its initial recruitment was addressed with a weekly update during the graduate support team meeting. These updates ensured the team would be on the same page as the steps of the recruitment plan were executed. Meeting updates were followed by individual check-in with the members of the student support team members, to ensure there were no further questions. In final preparation for the launch, the change agent sent the invitation email and application for distribution.

Learning and Development Strategy. To gain an understanding of OBC alumni from a wide lens, the team was tasked with researching and producing notes ambassador programs from around the country, highlighting the design of the application and structure and report back to the AR team. Identifying the institutions most closely aligned with OBC would be discussed to determine if the size, functionality, and mission of the program was comparable to GAP, were essential to the development of the program.

The AR team would then schedule time to meet with the marketing department and the development office to ensure there would be alignment with the introduction of the program. The action research team invited the alumni development office to their meeting to discuss the program and provide insight into alumni communications. The action research team wanted to gain additional insight into the alumni population and what practices would be most effective as they prepared to launch the program. In addition, there was an effort to obtain a list of alumni from the development office, but it was met with opposition, and an alternative was offered. Laura explained, "When we met with the donor offer, they made it clear that they could not give us lists, but if we give them the information, it can go out. So, I think any email finding we have

to do, would be on our own”. The team discussed the importance of keeping the donor office aware of GAP in the initial cycle to ensure their support.

In addition to scheduling time to gain knowledge needed to develop the program we also aligned our meeting schedule with stakeholder focus groups. AR team members were assigned tasks based on their level of expertise. For example, Whitney’s experience in event planning would lead to me assigning her the lead in planning the program launch dinner, while Laura’s communication skills and positioning as Director would be assigned tasks that involved communicating with upper level-leadership.

Intervention 2: Alumni Ambassador Training. The alumni ambassador training, selected as the second intervention, was vital to the action research team’s goal of creating a centralized system where alumni talents and professional experience can be utilized to assist in the development of graduate students at OBC. It prepares the alumni ambassadors to engage with current graduate students responsibly. Volunteers formed a training committee within the action research team. The committee is responsible for proposing training initiatives. It approaches developing an onboarding process to establish communication grounds, diversity training, expectations, safety procedures, cultural awareness, and a reintroduction to the college, its stakeholders, and core ideology. As shown in Table 9, the committee is tasked with finding resources, creating training guidelines, and bringing them back to the action research team for feedback. The training took place in August of 2022 and required the action research team members to lead the session with the inaugural ambassador group.

Change Readiness Strategy. In order to ensure that the training was effective, the action research agreed during the Planning Phase that ambassadors would need to be trained on how to interact with the graduate student population as the university transitioned back to in-person

coursework and activities previously impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The training was assigned to action research team member John Rinehart from the college's recruitment team to develop the components of the training and report back to the group with recommendations.

The diverse nature of OBC is a staple for the institution, which the action research team wanted to emphasize through the training. The team agreed that alumni would have two days dedicated to training. The plan was established for the first day of training to be led by the action research team and the second led by the Diversity and Inclusion office. John organized communications with the diversity office to ensure their willingness to train the alumni group. To serve as a benefit GAP member, in addition to the initial training, the diversity office agreed to provide a Diversity in the Workplace certification. Alumni were offered three courses in addition to the required session from day two of the training to earn the certification. The certificate was also offered to the support staff who were interested in completing the certificate.

The action research team was asked to select the courses alumni would complete to fulfill the requirements of the certificate. In order to decide the courses that would most align with the GAP program's participants, the diversity office provided a list of diversity, inclusion, and belonging course curricula for the upcoming academic year for the team to choose from. The team selected courses that focused on 1) Managing Yourself in a Diverse Workplace, 2) Gender & Sexuality Minorities in the Workplace + Pronouns, 3) Managing Bias & Microaggressions in the Workplace 4) Courageous Conversations, all designed to assist ambassadors develop skills and gain knowledge that would benefit them in both the workplace and in their interaction with OBC students.

Change Leadership and Stakeholder Engagement. During the development of training for GAP, the action research team discussed who would participate as presenters throughout the

session. The engagement of leadership throughout the change process has been key to the success of the ambassador program, and inaugural training was another opportunity to keep leadership engaged and provide a first-hand opportunity to see the result of the planning by the action research team since the initial introduction of the project. The associate dean, director, associate director, and assistant director were assigned as presenters for the first day of training. The second day of training included an introduction by the change agent and a presentation by the director of the inclusion office.

Communications Strategy. Communicating the importance of training to ambassadors started the development of the training's content. Led by John the training the planning of GAP training, which included the program vision, onboarding objectives, OBC Core Ideology: Values and Mission, college demographic information, expectations, events, policies, procedures, and the introduction of diversity training. Ambassadors were notified about the training dates and times during the onboarding process as a statement included on a required form developed in Qualtrics. The training disclaimer stated, "Training Alumni Ambassador training will be Wednesday, August 3, and Thursday, August 4, from 12:00 p.m. - 1:00 p.m. each day. These sessions will be virtual via Zoom and cover important topics like policies and procedures, talking points about the program, sign-up for fall events, and diversity, equity, and inclusion". The notice was the introduction of the training dates and the content they could expect. This notice was followed by an Outlook calendar invitation that was sent to each ambassador who completed their respective onboarding form.

Learning and Development Strategy. As the action research team considered what components should be a part of the inaugural GAP training session, the team considered the

incentives expressed by alumni during the September 9, 2021, focus group session, where an alumnus expressed,

I was selected to be on a Texas college advisory board for their school of business, and it's a short-term seat. And, of course, it supposedly comes with a swag bag, which I have not received, but I don't. I haven't really. I don't care about that, honestly, for the same reason we've got enough things to keep us going, but what I did like about what they offered as a thank you was The first thing they do is they provide you with a certification class offered through Bauer, so on the 29th of this month, I'm going to go do a leadership certification course offered through the university, and that's fantastic. For me, that's something I can absolutely use in my work, you know, in my daily life. It's something I could put on a resume for any future, you know, positions that become available.

Using previously collected data to make informed decisions about what is important to alumni was explored throughout the development of the training. Understanding alumni through this data was necessary to achieve the research team's idea of a desired state.

Cycle 1: Taking Action Phase

The Taking Action phase of this study focused on the implementation of the interventions developed during the planning phase. The action research team followed the steps of the recruitment plan while making significant adjustments when facing resistance. Training presented its own challenges as the action research collaborated with an outside department.

Recruitment Plan Implementation

As the action research team prepared for the initial execution of the recruitment plan, a key stakeholder would cause the team to reevaluate our approach. During a meeting with the fundraising team, discussions regarding access to the alumni list were explored. A representative

from the fundraising office indicated that our department could not have access to send the invitations independently, but advertisements for GAP can be sent by their office. The action research team was faced with the decision of whether we would include the alumni fundraising office in our recruitment plan moving forward. As discussions continued, the reality that we would have to rely on the list from the graduate student support team would suffice. Laura, the project's sponsor and AR team member reflected on the lack of access to the college's list, "They made it pretty clear that they wouldn't be able to give us lists." Yes. But if we give them the information, it can go out. So, you know, I think any email finding that we're going to have to do would have to be internal, like what we can find on our own" (L. Early, personal communication, September 2, 2023). The action research team moved forward with the recruitment plan with an alternative to step one, relying only on an internal list instead of a list provided by the fundraising office, and Step 9: Follow up communication from the fundraising office. With this change, the action research team kept full ownership of the process as the application launch approached.

GAP Training Implementation. The implementation of training for GAP began with the finalization of the presentation for part one of the training. The presentation was created by John Rinehart and was reviewed by members of the action research team for edits. Once final edits were complete, a final review of the powerpoint presentation and a draft of the ambassador handbook were sent to the director of the graduate student support team.

Next, in order to execute the delivery of the training content, the action research team focused on ensuring participants were informed about the training. A week prior to the first training, alumni were informed with a message that communicated the two-part training along

with the ambassador handbook and a flyer of upcoming events included in the email. As a final reminder, an email was sent to alumni prior to the first day of training.

The first day of GAP training was led by the change agent, who opened the session with an introduction of the program's vision and the objectives of onboarding, which included getting grounded in the program. Becoming Grounded referenced reviewing ambassador expectations and the group's first opportunity to interact with OBC's associate dean, who shared the college's mission and core values, including trust, curiosity, boundlessness, solidarity, and relevance. Demographic information for OBC was accompanied by the college's rankings, achievements, and the alumni community that exists in the metropolitan area. Ambassadors are a part of this exclusive community that would not have opportunities to engage and impact students directly across OBC.

In the final portion of day one, John introduced safety procedures and levels of escalation if ambassadors find themselves in an uncomfortable situation with a student. John, associate director of recruiting stated,

OBC envisions a safe place for alumni ambassadors to interact with current and prospective students through online and in-person events. As an ambassador, we want you to be comfortable interacting in both mediums. It is vital to be aware and utilize precautions when necessary when sharing personal or social media information. If you find yourself in an uncomfortable situation, utilize the options listed in sequence: Level 1: Polite warning to students, Level 2: Escalate to the GAP Chair.

Giving alumni an outlet to report their concerns was also emphasized in detail in the Ambassador handbook, distributed to them electronically in the first week leading to training.

The action research team also cautioned newly inducted ambassadors to avoid misleading conversations with graduate students; John emphasized this during an ambassador training, he stated:

“It is important for you, as ambassadors, not to make false or exaggerated claims about RCB, which could mislead prospective or current students. Topics of Graduate Research Assistant positions, scholarships, or admission should be limited to general information. The sort of information you might want to be careful of are things like scholarships, professional accreditation, employment statistics, and access to visas because these areas frequently change. You should speak from your own experience but avoid definitively saying what a prospective student will get in these areas”.

The action research team emphasized that students would ask alumni a series of questions during their encounters that they may be unfamiliar with. In cases such as these, they were encouraged to avoid using language that can initiate a problem for students down the line.

The implementation of the recruitment plan and the ambassador training were essential to the start of GAP’s first year. The execution of these interventions initiated the launch of the program and its ambassadors.

Cycle 1: Evaluating Action Phase

The final stage of the action research study’s first cycle aligned with the college’s fall 2022 semester. At the conclusion of the program’s first semester, the action research team was forced to adjust to its third member moving on from OBC to pursue a role in another institution. Laura Early was an essential member of the team as she served as the graduate support team’s director, the project’s sponsor, and liaison to the college’s leadership. Although the news of these announcements did not cause setbacks with alumni and their preparation for the semester, it was

vital for the action research team's meeting schedule. The team took three months off from December to March. There was a failure to meet as the change agent took the time to evaluate the climate of the organization as the new OBC interim director.

Surveys. At the conclusion of the fall semester, the program experience survey was closed as the action research team prepared for a new semester. The result of this survey would be used to have an initial idea of how students were impacted by their attendance on the program involving GAP alumni. The results of the following questions were considered, reviewed, and shared with the action research team: 1) Program content has met your expectations 2) Program presenters/alumni panelists provided information that assists in your academic development.

3) Program presenters/alumni panelists provided information that assists in your career development 4) Your engagement with OBC GAP Ambassadors was beneficial to your current and future personal development 5) Based on this engagement, you are likely to volunteer for similar OBC programming upon graduation. A bar graph of the results, as shown in Figure 3.7, was introduced at the action research team meeting as members of the team reviewed programming and outstanding items for the spring semester. Based on student feedback, 100% of students agreed that the program was meeting their expectations and alumni provided information that helped in their career development, 90% percent agreed alumni provided information that aided in their academic development, while 93% agreed that both their engagement with GAP was beneficial to their current and future personal development as well as confirming they would be likely to volunteer in the college's program upon graduation. The action research team expressed satisfaction with the results and decided to avoid drastic changes to the program structure prior to the completion of the academic year.

Program Development & Event Planning

In the months leading to the spring semester, members of the action research team developed programming for the semester that would be hosted by the graduate student support team. As a part of this list of events, leadership and developmental programming was created with GAP in mind, scheduling ten of thirteen programs to involve alumni from the GAP program. In addition to developing programs for alumni participation, GAP members were also encouraged to create topics and content and facilitate three events.

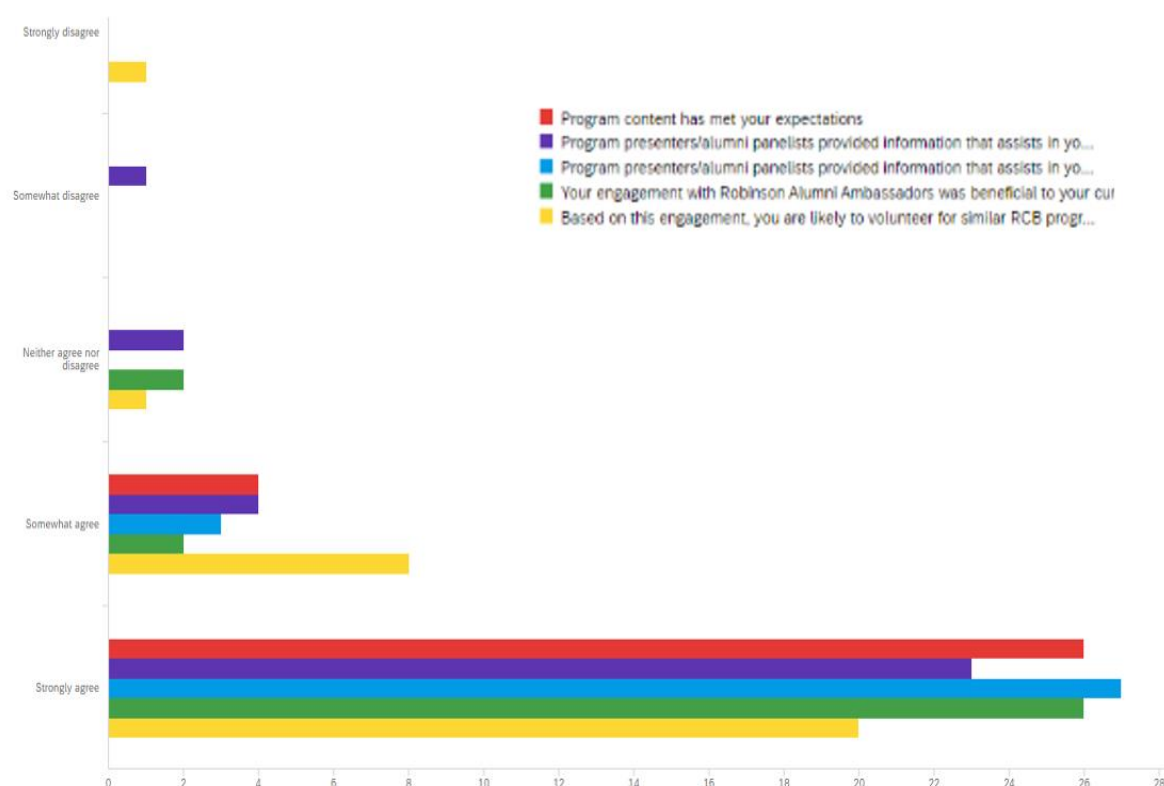


Figure 3.7

Fall 2022 GAP Experience Survey Results

Event Selection. Once the scheduling of events was complete, a Qualtrics form was distributed to GAP alumni to sign up for the programming. An email went out to alumni

encouraging them to sign up for the events weeks before the winter break. The collection and organization of the sign-ups were completed by Laura Early and transferred to the change agent upon their departure from her role at OBC. The change agent finalized the list and submitted a final copy to the GAP alumni as an attachment in the semester recap.

Event Feedback Data Preparation. In preparation for the spring semester, the action research team used Qualtrics to create a copy of the program impact survey that was used throughout the fall semester to record the feedback and measure the impact on the current student attendees. The survey will be provided to each program attendee in the upcoming semester's six virtual workshops and events. The change agent was responsible for managing the data and providing updates throughout the semester for the action research team.

Cycle 2: Taking Action Phase

The beginning of the Taking Action phase challenged the action research team as a 3rd member was lost since its inception and the 2nd member in the year. This would follow a national trend as many organizations faced the reality of professionals leaving their roles behind at a high rate following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Schmiedehaus et al. (2023) gave emphasis to this phenomenon:

In April of 2021, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Survey recorded more than 4 million resignations, spanning a broad range of industries, including education services. Findings from the BLS survey indicate that the total number of resignations within the education services sector - a labor category representing faculty from schools, colleges, universities, and other training centers topped out at 54,000, a steadily increasing trend witnessed throughout 2021. The rising number of resignations in education services has

continued to trend upwards, as evidenced by the 68,000 resignations recorded in April 2022, an increase of nearly 26% from the previous year (p.1).

The loss of Laura as the project's sponsor and director of the student involvement team would also affect the role of the change agent. The change agent would assume duties such as alumni workshop prep facilitation, meeting scheduling, event selection, etc.

Although the programming was set for the year, the action research team would face schedule conflicts as the reduced number of staff left many team members with increased workloads. As a result, the action research team did not meet until 12 weeks after the winter holiday break, with the first meeting of 2023 occurring in March. During the first meeting back, there was a recap of the programming that had been completed thus far and upcoming events, including GAP's inaugural year's closing event.

Closing event

At the opening of the year's planning, the action research team acknowledged the importance of an official opening of GAP's inaugural year in the first full month of the semester, September, and a closing event in the month following the ambassador program's official ending close at the end of the semester in June. These events would serve as the official kickoff for the program and an opportunity for the action research team and alumni to reset and evaluate the successes and areas for improvement in its first year.

In March 2023, the action research team was added to assist with the development of programming for GAP in addition to the needs of graduate student support teams across the department. Led by the change agent, who would now serve as an interim director for the graduate support team, Brandy Smith would work with Matthew to ensure that the closing program represented GAP's impact on students while including all stakeholders, such as OBC

graduate students, staff, and leadership to share in their experiences. In addition, the event gave the committee an opportunity to award certificates for a general completion of service and another for ambassadors who completed their four required diversity training for their inclusive professional certification.

The event, which was hosted less than a quarter mile from OBC, was promoted to all 29 ambassadors as a professional social-gathering style closing event. The change agent, who also served as the chair for GAP, opened the event and served as the master of ceremony, introducing the alumni speaker, student leader representative, the training lead, action research team, and the associate dean of OBC before closing the event with a reflection of the program's impact and a charge to continue by joining the program again in the fall.

Cycle 2: Evaluating Action Phase

Evaluating action for cycle two began the action research team and the change agent engaging in interviews to discuss the effects of the Graduate Ambassador Program (GAP) as they relate to the alumni engagement's influence student attitudes toward their own future service to their alma mater, and the lessons learned at the individual, group, and system levels that advance the theory and practice in an action research project that explores the engagement of graduate student leadership and retained alumni support through non-monetary service contributions in postgraduate programs. These interviews would include the perspectives of three current students and three members of the action research team.

Student Interviews

Interviews were conducted involving three students who were selected by the change agent based on their interaction with GAP and their level of involvement at OBC. Calvin Cameron, Oliva Ainge, and Carlene Mills were invited to an interview by the change agent by

email, where they were given a description of the interview, the questions that would be asked, and an academic study acknowledgment with a consent form to be signed prior to the interview. Students selected for this interview participated in two events that involved alumni from the ambassador program. Interviews were completed in 30 minutes or less and included the following questions provided prior to each session: 1) Please tell me how you describe your experience, both positive and negative, here at the college. 2) Describe your interactions with alumni during your time in the program. How has it affected your time at the college? 3) Do you believe your time as a student leader has increased your exposure to alumni? If so, how? 4) How have your interactions with alumni affected your perception of the institution and the resources available to you? 5) Were you aware of the alumni ambassador program that was launched this year? 6) Would you ever consider participating in the alumni ambassador program? Each student interview was recorded and transcribed in Zoom and summarized by the change agent, as shown in Table 18.

Calvin Cameron Interview. As an MBA student in his final semester, Calvin Cameron was a student leader at the O'Brien Business College. As the president of the Graduate Student Association (GSA) at OBC, his involvement at the institution is twofold. Starting his program in the Fall of 2021, he experienced the university from a different lens as the COVID-19 pandemic's Delta variant was introduced into the world. At this time, the college was entering its "next normal" phase of program format and delivery, offering more opportunities for online coursework and student engagement programming.

Calvin took his first steps in becoming an involved student through an opportunity to participate in a virtual case study competition while applying to become the next leader of the GSA, where he was exposed to alumni and other student organizations. Having alumni who have

served in similar roles gives a sense of community in staying involved while meeting new alumni in the process. Calvin affirmed, “I’ll take [GSA alumni] connections with me, right? But then you also have others [alumni connections] to fall back on. That we’re not specific to GSA. I go back to those coffee chats because I met a couple of people there, and it’s great just to have those connections. That was a great opportunity to meet them in that was not connected to GSA in any way”. As a student leader, Calvin was introduced to alumni, but his experience with GAP events opened his exposure to other OBC alumni. Calvin highlighted this point when asked about their initial knowledge of the program, “Started off not really knowing a lot. Then through communications with [staff], with GSA, with the school as well as the email blast, learned a lot more about it, and was able to meet alumni”. Student leadership has become a gateway for many students to be introduced to alumni in GAP.

Calvin has participated in several programs at OBC. The combination of these opportunities to stay involved has contributed to his intention to give back to OBC as an alumnus upon graduation. When asked to describe his interactions with alumni during his time in the program and whether he would have been involved without this involvement, Calvin stated:

I had GSA, had the meetings were involved. I’m also doing the MBA mentorship. So, if you take all of that away and all of that you know connections, then it probably would be no. I’ll be honest, I don’t know how much I would have [been involved], being honest. Bringing all that back in with the mentorship, being involved, and knowing that it definitely has changed that viewpoint. So, whether it’s giving back time resources, whether it’s coming back speaking, whatever that might be, being on some of those calls has been very effective, and so definitely in the future, would be something I would be interested in the opportunity. I had mentors in the past, and I really liked the mentorship

program, which is great, and then meeting people throughout. Whether it was professional organizations or different networking events, it was great. So, I think, having, and seeing that from a student side was really great, and that would kind of sparked my interest to continue that to have people come back to, so I think if you're just a student, you're just kind of going through without doing anything, and there's not a connection. I think [being involved] builds a good community. So, to have that community and continue that would be something I would like to continue to do. (C. Cameron, personal communication, May 1, 2023).

As the interview came to a close, Calvin continued to affirm the impact that his time with alumni had on him during the program as he compared his connection with his undergraduate alma mater. Although he enjoyed that time, he has since settled in the community just outside of where OBC is located, which has added to his intention to continue to come back and serve his OBC community.

Olivia Ainge Interview. Olivia is a graduate student who serves as a graduate assistant for the graduate support office of Science in Science. Her student involvement at OBC included her participation as a graduate program mentee who frequently attends events for career and leadership development. As an out-of-state student who has a history of being involved in her undergraduate years as a student ambassador, she has integrated herself into the OBC community.

Olivia opened the interview by expressing her positive experience with her cohort, coursework, and faculty. "I enjoy the curriculum, and that's one of the reasons I chose to come down here, and I really like most of my professors. I really enjoyed working with a lot of them. I think that they are knowledgeable" (O. Ainge, personal communication, July 17, 2023). Her

expectations prior to attending OBC were initially based on the opportunity to attend an in-person program regardless of the pandemic that was still affecting the institution's traditional modality of class. Despite the obstacles introduced by COVID-19, Olivia found a connection with alumni through her engagement at OBC.

Olivia's access to the graduate support office opened the door for her to connect with the college's alumni, which uncovered untapped resources that she was not aware she had upon traveling out of her home state for graduate school. She believed that schools local to her hometown carried a notable reputation that did not necessarily translate to her knowledge of OBC's reputation.

I thought that I was giving up reputation, but the more I was in the program. I didn't know anything about the state, but once I moved down here, I realized how widespread the university is, and it's all over the city. I also realized through these alumni interactions that we work with really big companies. Even just looking at the university on LinkedIn, seeing all of the different companies that alumni are involved in is huge, and it really helps seeing really big names like Microsoft and Nike because those are like dream companies for a lot of students. So, interacting with the alumni has helped me, I guess, realize the reputation that OBC has and how widespread they are throughout the city (O. Ainge, personal communication, July 17, 2023).

Olivia's interactions with alumni have affected her perception of the institution and the resources available to her as she has gained frequent exposure to alumni of her graduate program due to her role as a graduate assistant. As a part of the graduate student support staff, her knowledge of events was emphasized through team meetings. When asked if she believed her time as a student leader or graduate assistant had increased your exposure to alumni?, she replied, "Absolutely, I

feel like this is not something I think I necessarily would have picked up on it; I was just a regular student.” As a student that has been involved with her graduate institution, the term “regular student” was used to describe students that were less involved and attended classes but not so many events.

Alumni’s influence and impact on Olivia was uncovered throughout the interview, especially when the question of whether she would consider participating in the program upon graduation, Olivia responded,

Yeah, absolutely, I definitely will. I have seen the way that the alumni have helped me see myself working in a career. They’ve really been giving a lot of their time back to students, helping them prepare for the real world and prepare to find careers and do stuff like that and know what to expect. Being able to connect with them and grow my network on LinkedIn has helped me a lot. So, that’s something that I would want to be able to do once I find a position (O. Ainge, personal communication, July 17, 2023).

Olivia continues to discuss the connection between her undergraduate and graduate experience. Her level of involvement at her undergraduate institution over a longer period of time has contributed to her connection, but her experience through the lens of a graduate assistant who has been exposed to alumni in the Graduate Ambassador Program has shifted her perspective. Olivia explained:

When I started the program and along way through the program, [I thought to myself], Okay, this is the one-year program. I don’t necessarily feel as connected as I do undergrad. Because I was there for 4 years, I was extremely involved. I put my heart and soul into the school, so that’s a school that I’m definitely giving back to. So, going to OBC, yes, it has only been a year, but a lot of the things that I’ve been involved with and

interacting with alumni has helped, I think, make that connection for me, that it is not just an in-and-out school.

Olivia's interactions have made a difference in her overall perspective of the institution, from its reputation to the resources and opportunities available to her as a student, and her participation in GAP events, along with her connections with its alumni, has effectively shaped her thoughts of giving back to the OBC community upon graduation.

Carlene Mills. Interview. Carlene is a dual program student pursuing a Master of Business Administration and a Master of Analytics. With a heavy workload, she also serves as a graduate assistant in the student engagement office while working a part-time role off campus. The interview began with Carlene's perspective of the community environment at OBC, which is a sharp contrast to her undergraduate experience:

I took advantage of a lot of opportunities, but I know my peers did not, but full of transparency. I was involved on campus [as an undergrad], and I was very involved with the business school. So, I saw opportunities that were available that other people wouldn't necessarily have noticed. I also went to a large university for undergrad as well. So, I think those problems are pretty standard across the board. It's just hard to get information to a lot of people, but I think that during my graduate studies, more people, I guess, receive more information because we are so much more close-knit rather than hearing about something in the student center (C.Mills, personal communication, August 1, 2023).

As a dual degree student, Carlene has experienced both non-cohort and cohort classes. Her sense of community at OBC is in part due to a vast network and peer support system.

Carlene has been exposed to alumni who have participated in GAP events in its inaugural year. Her interactions have been described as professional based on the events for which they contribute to graduate programming, such as workshops and panel discussions. While she was able to connect on a professional level, Carlene expressed a lack of personal connection with alumni in GAP but was able to build a relationship with the ambassador program's sister program, the Graduate Mentoring Program. Carlene affirmed:

I don't think I have many connections with alumni on a personal level other than my mentor that I have from the mentoring program. But of course, that grew to [a personal relationship]. That wasn't necessarily something that was organic. Very professional. Not necessarily saying that I plan to meet my best friend, but I think the work is being done to expose this to alumni who are working in our field with years of experience (C. Mills, personal communication, August 1, 2023).

The desire to be connected personally and professionally has not been available to all students due to the limited opportunities to be engaged with an alumni mentor. Carlene's involvement as a graduate assistant exposed her to several opportunities to engage with alumni. She goes on to explain, "I think being a graduate assistant, has opened the doors for me to be in those spaces where programs are happening, that students who are traditionally enrolled or do not have a graduate research position probably would not see" (C.Mills, personal communication, August 1, 2023).

Carlene's interactions with alumni have been inspirational as she admits it is possible to achieve similar goals to those alumni who have had alike experiences just a few years prior. Although alumni's impact was felt in this way, the influence of alumni has not changed Carlene's perspective of the institution overall. She has a similar perspective on whether she

would contribute in the way that alumni have given to the college; Whitney stated, “Yes, I would I because I’ve seen, I guess, what comes from the program. I actually participate in something similar from the university I attended in undergrad, so I don’t see myself not participating when I already do it” (C. Mills, personal communication, August 1, 2023).

During student interviews, student leaders shared overwhelmingly positive feedback about their experience with faculty, staff, and alumni at OBC. Although the communication from the institution was a notable needed improvement for the entire graduate student population, the student that was most involved expressed their enhanced exposure to leadership development, workshops, and panel discussions at the college. The influence and impact from alumni were evident among the students interviewed, who confirmed that each of them would volunteer at OBC in a similar capacity to GAP, with two of three expressing their interactions with alumni having influenced their new perspective on volunteering at their post-graduate alma mater.

Table 3.3

Student Interviews Summary

Question	Student	Responses
Please tell me how you describe your experience, both positive and negative, here at the college.	Calvin Cameron	It was really positive. Overall, very good experience, I would recommend it to other people.
	Olivia Ainge	I mean, it has been a relatively positive experience. I really enjoyed my time here. Negative about my experience, I wouldn’t say like or, but it hasn’t been great is, the communication at the university has been relatively.
	Carlene Mills	I feel like we have a great sense of community here, especially in a graduate school. I guess, an opportunity for improvement, I don’t think information is dissipated as quickly as it should be.

Describe your interactions with alumni during your time in the program. How has it affected your time at the college?	Calvin Cameron	Different occasions been very good. I think they bring a very good viewpoint to add in for the cause. I think the school sets you up so well. They really help with that next step.
	Olivia Ainge	I really enjoyed interacting with the alumni. I've gone to a bunch of events. I've gone to other events that they might have been hosting, like networking events.
	Carlene Mills	I will say I see our alumni, and more so a professional like, because in the settings that I see them, they're speaking about their careers or speaking about their time during their program while they were here.
Do you believe your time as a student leader or graduate assistant has increased your exposure to alumni? If so, how?	Calvin Cameron	Yeah. And I definitely like some of the things that they say. I'll go back to class and kind of think about what they've had to say whether it's an occurring class, past or whatnot, and actually think it has a little bit more meaning.
	Olivia Ainge	Absolutely. I feel like this is not something I think I necessarily would have picked up on if I was just a regular student. I think it's been very beneficial that I have been going to them, but I don't know that I would go to as many as I have.
	Carlene Mills	Oh, yes, I would definitely agree. Yes, I think being a graduate assistant, has opened the doors for me to be in those spaces, or be in those rooms where those programs are happening
How have your interactions with alumni affected your perception of the institution and the resources available to you?	Calvin Cameron	I think in one or 2 cases, yes. I think there's been a little bit of difference. But it's not like a considerable amount.
	Olivia Ainge	I'm from the North, and a lot of people don't really know about OBC. I realize [now] how widespread OBC is, and it's all over the city. I also realized through these alumni interactions that we work with really big companies.
	Carlene Mills	My interactions with alumni show that is it would it's possible to achieve the goals that we have set for ourselves currently as students, because I can see that they are doing it, and they were also at once, at one point in time, a student

Were you aware of the alumni ambassador program that was launched this year?	Calvin Cameron	I started off not really knowing a lot. Then, through communications with yourself, with GSA, with the school, as well as the email blast, I learned a lot more about it and was able to meet alumni.
	Olivia Ainge	My extent of the alumni program are the panel discussions that we have had. When I was an undergrad. I worked with my student alumni ambassadors. so, I have an awareness of what that encompasses. But I don't know that it was super aware that there is a like a set group of alumni at the college.
	Carlene Mills	I was aware when I was notified during our graduate assistant meetings
Would you ever consider participating in the alumni ambassador program?	Calvin Cameron	Definitely in the future it would be something I would be interested in the opportunity. To have that community and continue that would be something I would like to continue to do.
	Olivia Ainge	Yeah, absolutely, I definitely will. I have seen the way that the alumni have helped me see myself working in a career. They've really been giving a lot of their time back to students, helping them prepare for the real world.
	Carlene Mills	I've seen, I like what comes from the program, so I don't see myself not participating when I kind of already do it.
How did your engagement with alumni influence your attitude towards your future service?	Calvin Cameron	I'll be honest, but I don't know how much I would [give back] being honest. Being involved, and with knowing that it definitely has changed that viewpoint.
	Olivia Ainge	Yeah. When I started the program and a long way through the program, I was like, okay, this is the one-year program. I don't necessarily feel as connected as I do undergrad. Because I was there for 4 years I was extremely involved. I put my heart and soul into the school, so that's a school that I'm definitely on giving back to a lot of the things that I've been involved with and interacting with alumni has helped, I think, make that connection for me.
	Carlene Mills	I don't think that it necessarily has impacted my viewpoint of it. and like, I said, maybe it's because it's just me. And it's something that I already find value in.

Action Research Team Interviews

The action research team originally comprised of six members was reduced to four with the inclusion of the change agent. The remaining members of the action research team were interviewed at the end of the second cycle. The interview conducted by the change agent was scheduled for 20-30 minutes. Each team member was sent an email explaining the purpose of the interview and the GAP vision statement, “The O’Brien Business College has a long history of cultivating innovative leaders and helping students achieve their professional goals. The Graduate Ambassador Program is comprised of a group of selected alumni leaders who connect with current and prospective students to provide a meaningful impact through relationship building, networking, and community engagement. Through sharing their knowledge and experience, alumni ambassadors will enhance the market-readiness of students”. A PowerPoint presentation with the action research process and the theory of change as a refresher in preparation for the interview was also reintroduced in preparation for the interview in addition to the following questions: 1) Describe your experience on the action research team. 2) What have you learned personally through our action research process while developing the alumni ambassador program? 3) How would you describe the team’s role in developing the alumni ambassador program? 4) What do you believe was learned at a department level during the change process? 5) What would you say was learned about the college during this process? Opening each interview, the change agent reviewed the purpose of the interview and ensured the team member was aware that it was a volunteer interview. The highlights and answers, as shown in Table 19, from each interview question explore the experience of each action research team member.

Laura Early Interview. As the director of the student involvement team, Laura was the sponsor of the action research project. Her involvement in the development of the program started in 2020 when she served as the liaison between the action research team and the college's leadership. As the leader of the graduate student support team, she worked closely with the change agent on how the ambassador program can serve as a resource for the team and the department. The interview opened with Laura agreeing that the questions that would be asked are to be answered from the perspective of an action research team member.

In the first of three interviews, Laura explored the history of the team and the progress from the context and purpose stage through the end of cycle one. From the collaboration to the loss of members due to the great resignation, Laura offers a unique perspective as the team's original member. L. Early (personal communication, September 1, 2023) reflected, "It was a more formal way to work closely with the [recruiting] team. [Graduate Support Team] was just a good team to work with within those that were within the student involvement side as well. Then we had to kind of see it as we shifted, you know. First, Beverly left, and then Rachel left, so as we kind of had to shift, everybody came together to work on this as a unifying project that benefited the department as a whole". The members who left OBC as the new phase of the pandemic required staff to come back into the office, introduced new challenges to the action research team, and stretched the remaining members to increase their respective roles. The team leaned into the skillsets of the remaining members to ensure that aspects of the program were covered by those who were most interested and skilled in an area of operation. L. Early (personal communication, September 1, 2023) explains this experience from her perspective, "Everybody kind of took different parts of it. I feel like Matthew, and I were more on the logistical side and communicating more directly with the ambassadors. Whitney was more on the events side and

liked making sure that everything that we did was running smoothly. John was on the back end supporting any of those items, including training”. The organization of the action research process became more vital as resources declined. The phases of the action research cycle contributed to the organization of each step as the team worked to carry out the GAP vision. L. Early (personal communication, September 1, 2023) emphasized the intentional nature of the action research process from a personal perspective, “I really appreciated how intentional so much of [the planning] was versus, we’ll just kind of throw and see what sticks to the wall. It didn’t feel quite like that. It felt very much like we’re going with these with Plan X, Y, and Z, so that way we can hope to get these results”. The urge to act on programs and opportunities before exploring such processes that were introduced through the action research cycle was explained as common and even preferred by action research team members. The introduction of action research opened a new way of approaching projects in the future. The value of the ambassador program from a department level was evident through the newfound reach that was established in its programming. L. Early (personal communication, September 1, 2023) described this reach as, “The scope, things that it allowed us to do a little bit more outside of what we’ve been able to do previously. So, anytime we were trying to previously come up with workshops or things that we could do. It was either having to rely on our own skill sets of things that we felt comfortable leading workshops on or having the money to bring in an outside person”. Reducing the departmental strain of developing and leading all programming allowed staff to focus on new ways to engage students. The importance of the action research team’s reallocation of its own skill sets to develop the GAP structure has opened up the department to new opportunities for the department to enhance the development programming with its students.

As the conversation shifted to the lessons learned from a system level, the emphasis on leadership buy-in was introduced, “We had a high level of support from the Associate Dean. This was something that he felt a lot of value in, so much so that it was one of those pillars [in the OBC 2025 Strategic Plan], just that program alone was a stand-alone pillar. The graduate support team’s organizational structure is led by the Associate Dean of Graduate Programs, whom Laura reported to as Director. L. Early (personal communication, September 1, 2023) continued to discuss the value of the program from a leadership perspective, “If you can get buy-in from your higher leadership, then it’s going to be so much easier to get things done because the associate dean saw the value and what you wanted to do, then not only was it just like, Okay, yeah, you have my support, but no, let’s bring in other people. How can how else can we grow this? It made it very clear that if you can get that buy-in, then that’s how you’re going to actually be able to move things forward”. As the interview closed with what was learned at a system level, Laura continued to reflect on the two years of work that started with the idea of the program into the vision statement through the outcomes that were proactive instead of reactive, which was appreciated as a member of the action research team.

John Rinehart Interview. John is the longest-serving member of the committee, with almost three years since its initial session. Specializing in graduate student recruiting, he serves as the associate director of OBC’s graduate recruitment team. John’s ability to focus on the details and establish guidelines and processes led him to his interest in developing the training for GAP and introducing a Diversity Equity and Inclusion certification program for each interested alumnus in GAP.

John opened by describing his experience of being on the action research team as a positive experience that has been in many ways challenging and rewarding as it allowed him to

collaborate with a team that was working on a common goal to create something that was sustainable and has the scale to be impactful and beneficial to alumni and the college. John highlights the uniqueness of the program:

I don't really see that we had anything that was holistic in nature from a recruitment aspect and from just a current student experience like there's not a department or a program that we've established that really allowed our alumni to engage from my perspective the full student journey from prospect all the way up until right before they graduate.

John's reflection echoes an underlying desired outcome of the Graduate Ambassador Program (GAP) becoming the driving force when it comes to the holistic engagement of graduate students and alumni.

John's individual lessons learned during the program focused on his opportunities to grow his skill set as a leader for his team by leveraging alumni insights on the recruitment process. The opportunity to work closely with alumni enhanced John's understanding of how alumni think. According to J. Rinehart (personal communication, August 30, 2023), "I obtained personally a lot of valuable insight into things that our alumni are comfortable doing with the recruitment process. Right? And how to better utilize them in those features. But I think it also some of the things, some of the skills that I've learned can be applied both in a professional a personal context. He continued to reflect on the opportunity the experience gave him to become a better communicator, analyze complex problems, and grow as a critical thinker. J. Rinehart (personal communication, August 30, 2023) shares," The team dynamic explored during John's interview focused on the collaborative effort and strategic collection of data and interpreting data, described as intricate and allowed the team to make data-driven decisions". The importance

of the program's constant evaluation was introduced, J. Rinehart (personal communication, August 30, 2023) continues, "we have this ongoing evaluation and reflection so that we're able to communicate that with the college's leadership team, so that they on board, and they will continue to support". He believes the team's planning and execution were pivotal to the success of the program; J. Rinehart shared (personal communication, August 30, 2023), "I don't think it could have happened without the strategic vision and plan that was put in place.

As the interview shifted toward what was learned at a department level, John began to reflect on the past practices at OBC; J. Rinehart stated (personal communication, August 30, 2023), "We knew that we should probably have alumni involved in some of the stuff that we do, but I don't necessarily know that we had a vision or a plan on how to do that". The initial approach to keeping alumni engaged was simplistic and did not do much to ensure that we were aligned with the college's strategic plan and building a community with alumni included. John continued with additional lessons learned by the department; he expounds, "I think the department as well. I think we learned a lot, really, in 5 areas. 1. How to enhance our outreach and recruitment efforts, you know, by utilizing the alumni, I think we were able to put alumni in positions that they were comfortable in. So, it's almost like, you know, you're selling the program, but you're not selling the program because all they're doing is talking about their experience, and those insights are very valuable to prospective students. I also think it helped the department to really create that sense of belonging and connection between our current students and our alumni. We talk about how we have 70,000 alumni out there, but how often are they getting a chance to engage with those alumni? Seeing some of the events that we were able to organize really gave the current students more opportunities to build a relationship. The department also learned how to best support our alumni. What kind of professional development

that they're looking for? Even that adult learner journey for them, and kind of what things? most beneficial to them at this point of their career. Then I think we learned on a more program level. Things that our alumni didn't necessarily receive while they were in the program that they wish there, those program enhancements. Providing those insights really helped the department in curating the curriculum, what the student experience is going to look like, and what are some of the activities that they're going have in the program. The last thing that I think the department learned was the overall program visibility and reputation. I think it says a lot about the college when we have alumni that are in the community and sharing stories and posting on social media. It just kind of reinforces what the O'Brien brand is and what we stand for. So, from a departmental level, I would say ongoing support. So, creating that sense of belonging and connection, I think, the department learned a lot from that".

John addressed lessons learned about the system by highlighting the way the college operates and the constraints that come with the execution of initiatives. From budget constraints to who would be involved, there was concern that the project would be derailed without the proper support of senior leadership. Ultimately, John understood it would come down to the value OBC sees in its alumni; J.Rinehart (personal communication, August 30, 2023), affirms, "I think I learned that the college values or recognizes the expertise that the alumni can offer, and supporting current students, promoting the programs providing feedback the way the college came about these efforts to affirm appreciation for alumni". John learned the college is willing to put its support behind the initiative it values. The long-term investment in the opportunities for engagement, commitment, and professional development for the alumni has shown John there is an effort by the college to sustain alumni relationships.

Whitney Casey Interview. As the most senior member of the action research team with over 16 years at the university, Whitney joined the action research team at the time of its inception in 2021. With expertise in graduate student support, she has been responsible for the engagement for graduate students in OBC's cohort programs. As a part of the action research team, Whitney was tasked with research on the ambassador program best practices, alumni recruiting, and event planning associated with the program's launch and closing event.

The interview opened with Whitney's expression of gratitude for being selected to become a part of the initiative and an initial reflection on the process. W. Casey (personal communication, August 30, 2023) stated, "Thank you for giving me this opportunity to be a part of this initiative startup for the Ambassador program the first year. As far as my recollection was just pretty much it was the research phase and discovery and figuring out what was going to be the best approach and process to establish the Ambassador program, which has not been done before overall with the University, but specifically in the O'Brien Business College".

The strategic nature of the action research project stood out to Whitney as she discussed the importance of initial research, developing the vision, and aligning them with the goals and objectives of the program and the department, which was vital to the implementation and success of the program. With an emphasis on the intentionality and collaboration of the action research team W. Casey (personal communication, August 30, 2023) highlighted, "You were asking for our input for everything you know, as far as okay. Well, you know, let's be specific about the wording for the mission statement. Let's be specific about what type of applicants we are looking for. And let's be specific about, you know, listing all of the objectives in and goals, and whether they were something we could obtain and be able to accomplish".

The excitement and pride associated with the program and its participants opened the door for alumni to network among them self and impact current students.

Table 3.4

Action Research Team Interview Summary

Question	Student	Responses
Describe your experience on the action research team.	Laura Early	It was a way a more formal way to work closely with the [recruiting] team. [Graduate Support Team] was just a good team to work with within those that were within the student involvement side as well. Then we had to kind of see it as we shifted, you know. First Beverly left and then Rachel left so we kind of had to shift, everybody came together to work on this as a unifying project that benefited the department as a whole.
	John Rinehart	It's been a very positive experience, you know. I think being a part of this research team gave me an opportunity to collaborate to do some problem-solving to do some general optical, or to obtain some general practical knowledge.
	Whitney Casey	It was the research phase and discovery and figuring out what was going to be the best approach and process to establish the ambassador program, which has not been done before.
What have you learned personally through our action research process while developing the alumni ambassador program?	Laura Early	I really appreciated how intentional so much of that was versus, we'll just kind of throw and see what sticks to the wall. It didn't feel quite like that. It felt very much like we're going with these with Plan XY and Z, so that way we can hope to get these results.
	John Rinehart	I obtained personally a lot of valuable insight into things that our alumni are comfortable doing with the recruitment process. Right? And so how to better utilize them in in those features. But II think it also some of the things, some of the skills that I've learned can be applied both in a professional a personal context
	Whitney Casey	Being strategic definitely has its benefits. I'm an impatient person at times. I have much respect for the overall aspect of let's just take our time with this. Just be strategic about what we want to do. It definitely goes a long way.

How would you describe the team's role in developing the alumni ambassador program?	Laura Early	Everybody kind of took different parts of it. I feel like Matthew, and I were more on the logistical side, and communicating more directly with the ambassadors. And Whitney was more on the events side and liked making sure that everything that we did was running smoothly. John was on the back end supporting any of those items, including training.
	John Rinehart	When I look at the team and the role that I played, I really felt that it was intricate in one just narrowing down the purpose, like what we are trying to achieve, so that that it could be communicated to the broader community. I think the team was very pivotal in the planning and execution of this program. I don't think it could have happened without the strategic vision and plan that was put in place.
	Whitney Casey	You picked the team based on skill sets and I think everyone uses their skill set their passion for what they wanted to do and what they were possibly good at. And so that's one thing I appreciate
What do you believe was learned at a department level during the change process?	Laura Early	I think one of the things that I took away from it, as you know from my position, was the scope that it a lot like the things that it allowed us to do a little bit more outside of what we've been able to do previously.
	John Rinehart	We learned a lot, really, in 5 areas (Outreach, Belonging/Connection, Supporting Alumni Journey, Program enhancements, Program Insight, and Reputation). I guess in the first year, no one probably knew that we were trying to.
	Whitney Casey	They are probably only a few people who knew, right? But once we launched it. I think that was when everybody wanted to get on board.
What would you say was learned about the college during this process?	Laura Early	If you can get buy-in from your higher leadership, then it's going to be so much easier to get things done.
	John Rinehart	I think I learned that the college values or recognizes the expertise that the alumni can offer, and supporting current students, promoting the programs providing feedback on the way the college came about these efforts to affirm appreciation for alumni.
	Whitney Casey	It's a process, you had those that were definitely ready and willing to participate, and then you had those that were slow to react. And then you had the process overall, which was, you know, the red tape, we know is one of the drawbacks, as far as a state university and getting things done.

The personal impact on Whitney was evident as the importance of strategy and patience was reiterated, W. Casey (personal communication, August 30, 2023) emphasizes “Being strategic definitely has its benefits. I’m an impatient person at times. I have much respect for the overall aspect of let’s just take our time with this”. As a person who would like to act fast, Whitney was challenged to approach each step with a strategy that was intentional as the team moved forward toward reaching the goals developed along with the vision of the project.

As for lessons learned as a team, Whitney highlighted the skillsets associated with the team and the cohesion that was achieved based on the strategic selection of who would be on the action research team. W. Casey (personal communication, August 30, 2023) continued to reflect on the thought process of selecting the team from her perspective, “You picked the team based on skill sets, and I think everyone used their skill set and their passion on what they wanted to do and what they were possibly good at. So, that’s one thing I appreciate. John, he likes to get into the weeds, then you have me. I’m more of the event, Planner, and I want to get certain things done, get ready for the event. Then you had Laura, at that time, as a director, and she wants to make sure she goes through the processes. So, I think you had a nice blend and cohesiveness within our team”. I discussed that there was a strategic approach to selecting the team, which has been shared previously.

As the interview continued there was an exploration of the group and lessons learned from Whitney’s perspective. She noticed the change in the behavior of the college’s departments and leadership upon the launch of the program. The demand of alumni from GAP began to grow at teams in recruiting and career development began to inquire about how this resource could be used across these teams; W. Casey (personal communication, August 30, 2023) stated, “You had the career development team who wanted to get on board and to utilize the ambassadors. Our

associate, Dean, overall definitely was ready to showcase this and show exactly how important it is because it keeps it consistent with having a group, an ambassador group, versus having to call alumni, using the manual and homemade method of calling people, and have them come and do this when you already have something in place. You have people who are properly trained, and they want to be involved”. Reflecting on this response by OBC teams and staff was a welcome change as it expedited the return on the time the action research team invested in developing this resource for the student involvement team but also for all graduate student support teams and the college.

The college’s support began with the endorsement of GAP by OBC leadership. Aligning the program with OBC’s strategic plan. W. Casey (personal communication, August 30, 2023) discussed her perspective of the system, “It’s a process, you had those that were definitely ready and willing to participate, and then you had those that were slow to react. And then you had the process overall, which was, you know, the red tape which we know is one of the drawbacks, as far as a state university and getting things done” The guidelines associated with institutions of higher learning within the state has been a point of frustration for Whitney and the research team. W. Casey (personal communication, August 30, 2023) stated, “I just think the process [of receiving finance approval] was frustrating. I mean, even the launch. You know us knowing at the last, down to the last hour whether we could do something or not was, you know, like we had already set this in place earlier. But to get things approved and all those things is just ridiculous. So, that’s the part that’s always frustrating, and I don’t want to say that it’s just a state school thing. I don’t know, but I can just tell you. That’s the part that’s really frustrating at times. It makes you not want to do these initiatives because you don’t know if it’s going to be supported.”

The uncertainty of how the program would survive with a change in leadership was also a concern based on the perception of its value, an ambassador program, Whitney explains, “it doesn’t necessarily generate money directly, but it does generate money indirectly. GAP helps with retention, recruitment, and a lot of different things. Since we are in business school, then other things take priority, and get more support”. Support in a financial context is important for the growth of the program in its second year and beyond.

Thematic Analysis

During the interview process, the presence of themes became evident as students and members of the action research team expressed the area’s most impactful during their interaction with the ambassador program. The data collected from each student and action research team interview was transcribed in Zoom and manually edited for errors. In order to identify themes in the data, I watched each recording of the Zoom interviews at three separate stages in my analysis to 1) manually code themes in the interviews, 2) ensure the transcript was accurate, and 3) confirm the tables accurately reflected the answers and sentiments of each interviewee.

Analysis Process

The analysis of the student and action research team interviews began as a manual process involving dry-erase boards/walls to capture initial notes from each question asked during the interview. This approach was an opportunity to become immersed in each interview before importing the data into NVIVO. By listening and watching each interview consecutively, I was able to identify common themes in the recording and the transcripts.

Student Interviews

Student interviews were comprised of students who were leaders and graduate assistants in the college. Their participation and the data collected during the interview were broken down

by each question and the student's answer in each interview, then moved to a list of common themes from across all three student interviews. The list of common themes, as shown in Figure 3.8, addresses the first research question in this study, "How does alumni engagement influence student attitudes toward their own future service to their alma mater?". The duration of these interviews spanned between 13-23 minutes as each student leader expressed their interaction with alumni and the impact that resulted from their interaction in the program's first year.

As students with diverse types of extracurricular and co-curricular involvement experiences in their respective OBC programs, each interviewee expressed positive experiences with staff, faculty, institution, and alumni. Negative experiences stemmed from the university's overall communication, as shown in Figure 3.8, which was cited as an area where the university did not meet the expectations of graduate students in the study.

Action Research Team Interviews

The action research team interviews were a final opportunity for both the participants and me to debrief while collecting the necessary data that would be analyzed to connect the experiences that would answer the question "What is learned at the individual, group, and system levels that advance the theory and practice in an action research project that explores the engagement of graduate student leadership and retained alumni support through non-monetary service contributions in postgraduate programs?". The duration of each video was between 12 and 19 minutes. To ensure structure and organization, answers were categorized into five topics (overall, individual, team learning, department learning, and college learning) and color-coded.

Data from the interviewees' experience was recorded on the dry-erase board. Items that were mentioned multiple times across the process of multiple interviews were classified as a potential theme, and a star was added to the term or description. These frequently mentioned

topics and shared experiences were synthesized to form a summary of common themes that were labeled Individual, Group, and System and later added to the respective “Learning” section of the code book. Table 3.5 illustrates the common themes from action research team interviews.

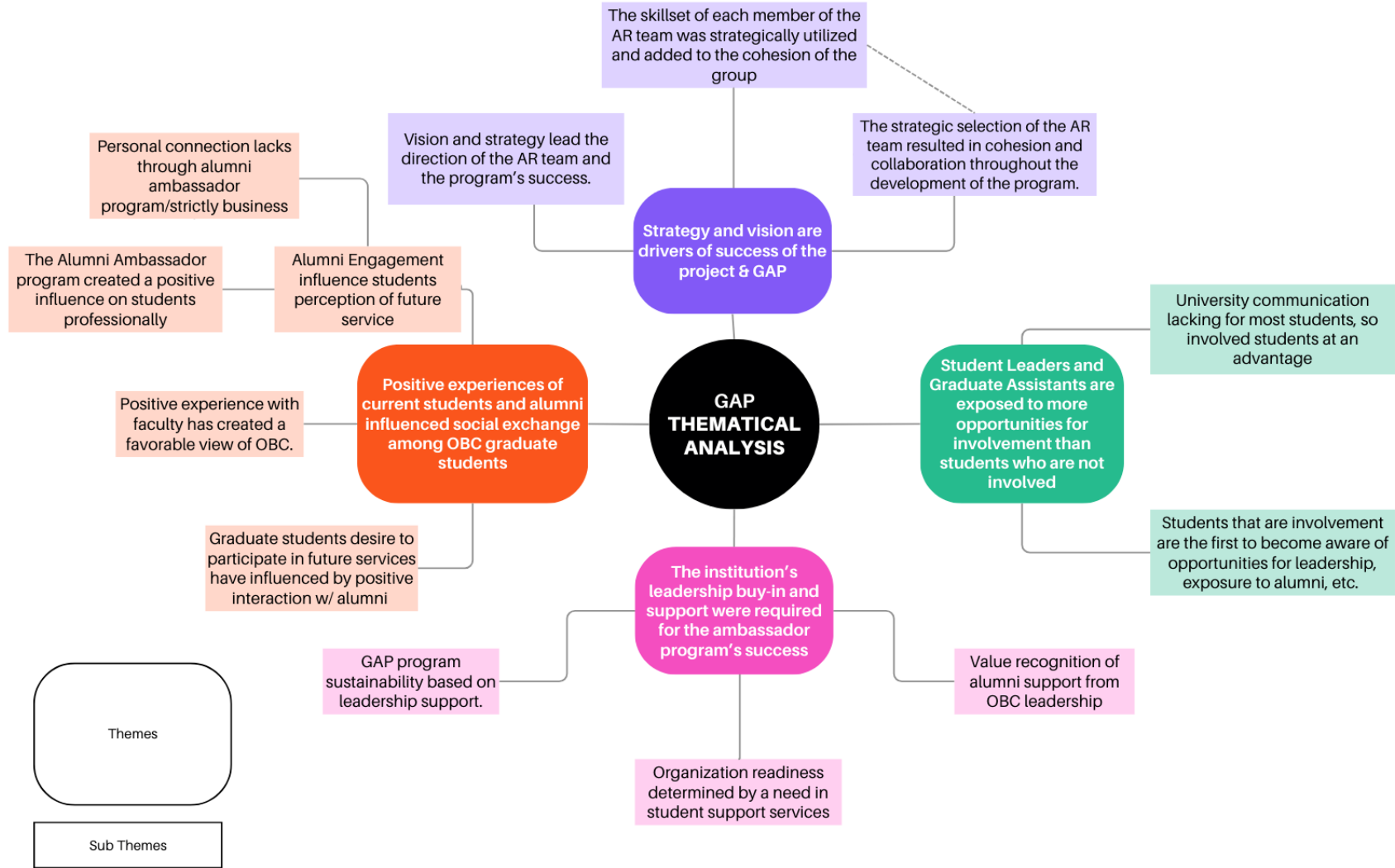
The learning code in this section categorizes the buy-in that was required from leadership for the ambassador program to be a success. In this study there were a few levels of buy-in needed to ensure effective change from staff, department leadership and senior leadership. In order for staff to have the enthusiasm to support a project, they will have to see the commitment to the project from leadership (Sirkin et al., 2005). The departmental leadership, Laura Early, was a driving force in the first phases of GAP’s development. Buy-in was needed to approve the added work from the staff required to see the program launched. Laura’s role also included communication with senior leadership to approve the budget for GAP as the action research team developed the program. It is that buy-in at departmental level and the senior level that allowed the initial success and continued sustainability of the ambassador program.

Table 3.5

Interview Common Themes

Interview Type	Code	Sub code	Research Question (RQ#)	Themes
Student	Student Engagement	Involvement	RQ1	Student Leaders and Graduate Assistants are exposed to more opportunities for involvement than students who are not involved.
Focus Groups	Relationships	Alumni-Student	RQ2	Positive experiences of current students and alumni influenced social exchange among OBC graduate students.
		Group	RQ3	Strategy and vision are drivers of the

success of the project & GAP.				
Action Research Team	Learning	Individual Group System	RQ3	The institution's leadership buy-in and support were required for the ambassador program's success

**Figure 3.8***Thematic Analysis Map*

Summary

Embarking on an unbeaten path presents several challenges. A team of higher education professionals are selected to address the process of securing committed alumni as a consistent source of volunteers for the O'Brien Business College. The loss of half of the team to the "Great Resignation" phenomenon due to the effects of a global pandemic forces its remaining members to adapt. Participants in this study, including current graduate students and the action research team, were interviewed to uncover their experiences at OBC, alumni influence on current students, motivation for non-monetary service, and what was learned at an individual, group, and system level.

CHAPTER 4

INSIGHTS AND ACTIONABLE KNOWLEDGE

Chapter 4 serves as an overview of insights that were uncovered due to the action research methodology. The purpose of this research was to explore the impact of alumni involvement on a holistic cycle of engagement in public postgraduate business programs. Insights and actionable knowledge in this chapter explore 1) Developing positive experiences for involved students exposes them to staff, faculty, and alumni influences that are consistent with their desire to engage in non-monetary service. 2) Revealing Alumni motivations to give back to their alma mater are attributed to their impetus to pay it forward, including the social exchange relationship between the institution's staff and alumni, and 3) Applying lessons learned in this study such as growth through strategic planning and developing a vision, distribution of roles and skillsets, and establishing value and the support of leadership of an alumni ambassador program from an individual, group, and system perspective. The findings in this chapter developed as a result of the change process that includes the construction, planning action, taking action, and evaluation, addressed the study's research questions:

1. How does alumni engagement influence student attitudes toward their own future service to their alma mater?
2. Why do alumni engage in non-monetary service at their post-graduate institutions?
3. What was learned at the individual, group, and system levels that advanced the theory and practice in an action research project that explores the engagement of graduate

student leadership and retained alumni support through non-monetary service contributions in postgraduate programs?

This chapter examines outcomes derived from the action research process. Chapter 4 also introduces ways that this actionable knowledge could be referenced in future studies to impact alumni engagement.

Findings Overview

The findings in this study were discovered during the change process throughout the action research project which included the analysis of observations, focus groups, surveys, and interviews. There are eight findings that address the study's research questions relating to student experiences and its influence toward their attitudes, alumni's motivations for service, and what was learned during the development of the ambassador alumni program, summarized in Table 4.1. These findings include:

Individual

Finding 1: Developing positive experiences exposes graduate students to alumni influence.

Finding 2: Establishing a connection between involved students and alumni requires staff participation.

Finding 3: Engaging alumni introduces new opportunities for graduate student involvement.

Group

Finding 4: Motivating alumni to volunteer requires establishing opportunities to impact students.

Finding 5: Incentivizing alumni does not inspire volunteerism.

System

Finding 6: Establishing a strategic plan and vision drives program development.

Finding 7: Determining team roles based on skillset fosters a cohesive team environment.

Finding 8: Leadership support must be affirmed for the successful development of an alumni ambassador program.

Table 4.1

Summary of Findings

Research Question	Level of the System and Finding Topics	Findings
RQ1: How does alumni engagement influence student attitudes toward their own future service to their alma mater?	Individual	Developing positive experiences exposes graduate students to alumni influence. Establishing a connection between involved students and alumni requires staff participation. Engaging alumni introduces new opportunities for graduate student involvement.
RQ2: Why do alumni engage in non-monetary service at their post-graduate institutions?	Group	Motivating alumni to volunteer requires establishing opportunities to impact students. Incentivizing alumni does not inspire volunteerism.
RQ3: What is learned at the individual, group, and system levels that advance the theory and practice in an action research project that explores the engagement of graduate student leadership and retained alumni support through non-monetary service contributions in postgraduate programs?	Individual	Establishing a strategic plan and vision drives program development.
	Group	Determining team roles based on skillset fosters a cohesive team environment.
	System	Leadership support must be affirmed for the successful development of an alumni ambassador program.

Individual Findings

Finding 1: Developing positive experiences exposes graduate students to alumni influence.

In the initial phase of this study, the importance of creating a holistic cycle of engagement through the social exchange between alumni and staff was established. Graduate students are often isolated due to a lack of extracurricular support and resources from their institutions. At the graduate level institutions rely on their academic departments which are not designed to address the needs of the students outside of the classroom (Pontius & Harper, 2006). Creating a positive experience for graduate students is essential to their future engagement as alumni. Student experiences, both academic and non-academic, have been explored through focus groups, interviews, and surveys, which have resulted in the discovery of the following insights.

Graduate Student Experience Insights

Current graduate students shared their experiences and feedback during interviews at the conclusion of the program's first year. When asked to share insights about her time at OBC Olivia described her experience:

It has been a relatively positive experience. I really enjoyed my time here. So far, it's been quick. I moved here from around the Philly area. So, I moved a long way. It started somewhere new. So, a lot of the staff are really welcoming. My co-workers are very, very close. We've gotten really close over the past year. So, it's been relatively an easy adjustment in that sense. in terms of classes. It is a fast program. My classes, I enjoy them. I enjoy the curriculum, and that's one of the reasons I chose to come down here and I really like most of my professors. For the most part I really enjoyed working with a

lot of them. I think that they are very knowledgeable (O. Ainge, personal communication, [August, 29, 2023]).

Calvin shared his initial experiences and how having the opportunity to meet fellow students, and staff from the start has affected his overall program:

It was really positive; I think orientation started off on a good note. Just thinking back to going to campus for the first time. It was very good to have an orientation that was in-depth, and as good as it was, networking with people and meeting classmates.

I really liked a lot of the teachers. I think a lot of them did have very good credentials, and I learned a lot. I think a lot of teachers and professors have that credibility. I think that definitely shown in the last class, ranking or school ranking, which is great.

(C.Cameron, personal communication, [August, 29, 2023]).

The sense of belonging that alumni have for their institution is a key factor when determining why they volunteer at their respective alma maters. Drezner and Pizmony-Levy (2021) wrote, “Alumni with a higher Sense of Belonging are also more likely to engage with their graduate alma mater through helping students, participating in events, and volunteering time” (p. 769). As a current graduate student who will become an alumnus of OBC, Carlene discussed the importance the belonging to the community she was able to build at OBC, Carlene expressed,

I feel like we have a great sense of community here, especially in graduate school. I think because we are, I guess, getting the same degree or some way in the same concentration. It has a wide network and a pretty good support system for peers. And of course, professors and professional staff. So, I really appreciate that. I think that’s

something that is a different experience than what I received for my undergrad studies.

(C. Mills, personal communication, [September 2, 2023]).

As a graduate assistant entering her second year, this perspective was valuable to the action research team during the evaluation phase. The action research team understood that it was important to expose the most involved student leaders and graduate assistants to positive experiences that included opportunities to engage directly with alumni.

Finding 2: Establishing a connection between involved students and alumni requires staff participation.

The action research team responsible for developing the ambassador program was comprised of the student involvement and recruitment teams. The student involvement team designed leadership development programming that would connect students to resources outside the classroom including alumni. Students who were most involved were connected to the student involvement team through assistantships, student leadership board positions, and campus programming interactions.

Olivia's initial involvement as a graduate assistant introduced her to opportunities to get involved with programming and alumni. She highlighted her level of involvement, stating,

Because you and Whitney run a lot of these sessions, I hear about it from you guys more.

This is not something I think I necessarily would have picked up on if I was just a regular student or didn't have a position with you guys. That has influenced my attendance a lot.

(O. Ainge, personal communication, [August, 29, 2023]).

Carlene was asked if she believes she had an advantage as it relates to exposure to opportunities due to her work as a graduate assistant, she expressed,

Oh, yes, I would agree. Even the insight into programs. Yes, I think being a graduate assistant has opened the doors for me to be in those spaces or be in those rooms where those programs are happening that students who are traditionally enrolled or do not have a graduate research position they probably would not see and then also not be able to take advantage of it. (C. Mills, personal communication, [September, 2, 2023])

The student involvement team ensured these students received communication through university channels, such as email and internal communication systems. Graduate assistants were tasked with promotion through flyers and social media and were expected to work and participate in student involvement team events, establishing consistent exposure and exclusive access.

Finding 3: Engaging alumni introduces new opportunities for graduate student involvement.

Alumni were reintroduced to students in the form of an ambassador program that would create new opportunities for student involvement. Students attended programming that was facilitated by alumni and allowed students to develop new relationships that would further connect them to the institution. During their interviews, each participant described their experience with alumni because of the program. Olivia began with how alumni impacted her view of OBC, she indicated,

I didn't know anything about the southeast, but once I moved down here I realized how widespread OBC is, and it's all over the city. I also realized through these alumni interactions that we work with really big companies. Even just looking at the university on LinkedIn, seeing all of the different companies that alumni are involved in is huge and it really helps seeing really big names like Microsoft and Nike, because those are like

dream companies for a lot of students. So, interacting with the alumni has helped me realize the reputation that OBC has, and how widespread they are throughout the city.

(O. Ainge, personal communication, [August, 29, 2023]).

Calvin attributes his interactions with alumni as an indicator of the level of quality resources the institution has, he expressed,

I think when I talk to alumni it shows how good the resources are. Some of the things that you have access to, whether it's the professors, whether it's school, whether it's whatever we might have pinpointed, I'll go back and say, there's a lot of really good resources here. I think, having the understanding of talking to people and the alumni saying that "I really like this resource for this professor", they can still talk to that. (C. Cameron, personal communication, [September 2, 2023]).

Alumni Influence on Future Service

The predictability of whether a current graduate student will consider embracing a long-term relationship of volunteering with the university was examined when interviewing current graduate students. This reciprocated behavior is explained by the social exchange theory, as students tend to equate their level of service to their beneficial experiences and social connections made at the institution (Weerts et al., 2010). Olivia shares the benefits of her interactions with alumni and their influence on whether she would consider serving in a similar role upon graduation. She stated,

I have seen the way that the alumni have helped me see myself working in a career and we've talked a lot in the sessions about things like work-life balance. They've really been giving a lot of their time back to students and helping them prepare for the real world and prepare to go find careers and do stuff like that and know what to expect. Being able to

connect with them and grow my network on LinkedIn has helped me a lot. So, that's something that I would want to be able to do once I find a position.

(O. Ainge, personal communication, [August, 29, 2023]).

When asked about whether he would have considered giving back to OBC had he not interacted with alumni, Calvin replied,

So, I had the Graduate Student Association meetings, I was involved. I'm also doing the MBA mentorship [with alumni], so I'm in that as well. If you take all of that away and all the connections, I'll be honest, I don't know how much I would have [considered giving back]. Bringing all that back in with the mentorship, with being involved, and with knowing that it definitely has changed that viewpoint. So, whether it's giving back time resources, whether it's coming back speaking whatever that might be being on some of those calls has been very effective, so definitely in the future would be something I would be interested in the opportunity. (C. Cameron, personal communication, [September 3, 2023]).

A new normal at OBC was established with students as alumni begin to be spotlighted as facilitators of a several new workshops designed to address topics central to the current and future needs of students. These events introduced new opportunities for students to become involved in events as hosts, and moderators of virtual alumni panels. This exposure also introduced OBC graduate students to the possibility of serving in a similar capacity upon graduation.

Group Level Findings

Finding 4: Motivating alumni to volunteer require establishing opportunities to impact students.

In this study, the opportunity for alumni to engage with OBC students in a new, clear, and concise way was developed with the social exchange theory as the foundation and driving force of their participation in the ambassador program. In many cases alumni find volunteerism as their response to the benefits that they received as a result of their time at the institution.

Weerts et al. (2010) affirmed:

Alumni get involved, in part, based on whether they have a positive impression of the institution (past and present), believe that their service will make a difference, and feel a connection to that institution over time. These factors also shape the type of service activities that alumni will undertake. (p. 353)

OBC alumni participated in a focus group where six participants shared their experiences and reasons for engaging as alumni. There were several topics that were introduced to give the action research team an understanding of alumni preferences, experiences, and motivations for engagement. Polling questions were introduced for each area, and alumni were given the option to speak in detail about their selection in the poll.

Motivation for Alumni Engagement

A student's quality of relationship with their institution can be a predictor of their loyalty to its alma mater upon graduation (Snijders et al., 2019). In this study, determining what drives alumni once they have spent time away from OBC was key to constructing a program that would appeal to these drivers. The driving factors of alumni engagement were explored during the alumni focus group. During this session the topic of motivation was addressed, which in this

study focuses on why alumni are driven to return and volunteer at their graduate alma mater.

When asked “what your biggest motivation for volunteering at OBC was as an alumnus,” 50% selected to “assist as a resource to students,” while one indicated giving back to the program was his reason, and the other indicated a want to build an alumni relationship with the college, while the final vote indicated other which explained by alumnus 3. Alumnus 1 stated:

I'd say definitely acting as a resource to students is really important because it's valuable for me to share my personal experiences and any mistakes that I've made along the way that I hope that they would learn from and not make the same mistakes as well. And then also just picking up the resources that are available to them that they might not know about, if they're just a commuter student, you know, just in and out. They're not really engaging with the wonderful departments that are there at OBC or the university at large as well. So, I've been on a few panels and a few different virtual events, and that's always been really valuable to me is being able to impart my knowledge to the students and set them up for greater success down the road (Alumnus 1, personal communication, [September 9, 2021]).

Assisting students in their journey by giving them a head start based on alumni's own experience was a way for them to give back to their alma mater by paying their knowledge forward to the new generation. The sentiment of sharing knowledge that will help current students was echoed by Alumnus 2, who affirmed:

I agree. And I think that it would be most advantageous, especially to minority male students just for them to be able to see how successful one could be working on a full-time job and be able to successfully complete the program, I too, have been on several panel discussions and have enjoyed it. And even after completing the program, I am also

continuing to participate in discussions and matter of fact, I received a request last week to participate in something else to speak to young men about communication skills and how it can help them along the way. So, my personal experience with the program has just helped me to continue to be a light to individuals, and I believe that it will continue, and I just believe that continuing that, along that space will just help individuals. I just think that your own personal experience is the best way that you can help shed light (Alumnus 2, personal communication, [September 9, 2021]).

Alumni understood that it takes those who have experienced what current students are going through firsthand to effectively help them navigate their journey. Alumnus 3 highlights this point:

I do feel in the same way that it's vital to have somebody that's been through the program to be able to engage with the students or the people that are so in mesh and the daily, you know, minutiae of the program to be able to reach out and discuss and debrief what's working, what's not working, what, could be enhanced, so from an administrative level or even an academic perspective, I think it's great to have these conversations to see what could be added or removed or enhanced or built on and how we as alumni can, can take active steps and providing ways to fill those gaps or even weighing in on how to fill those gaps (Alumnus 3, personal communication, [September 9, 2021]).

Experience Reflection at OBC

As we considered the social exchange relationship between OBC and its alumni, the element of their experiences as a student and as an alumnus has been uncovered during this alumnus focus group. When asked about whether their experience implored them to volunteer,

there were several separate accounts to support how a positive experience has affected them and their relationship with OBC in a positive way. Alumnus 3 acknowledged:

I will say, you know, passionately it was an appreciation, this comorbidity of a complete appreciation of the experience. Our cohort was fantastic. Our teachers or professors were fantastic. And also seeing the need for spaces where it could be a bit more robust, and perhaps even more of a marquee program of the OBC, because we believed in it, I believed in it so much. And I still do, and I think it has the possibility to have some organic growth and ways that offer these add-ons that maybe aren't seen or recognized yet, because we just haven't gotten there. So whatever voice I can lend to advocating for the program or building out just a more robust experience for OBC grad students, I'm all in very passionate about that (Alumnus 3, personal communication, [September 9, 2021]).

Considering the reflections that made their student experience a positive one, there were also key references to their brief time as alumni that have continued their perspective of how they have stayed connected to the institution and has impacted their need to give back. Alumnus 1 further explained his perspective, when asked to describe his time as an alumnus:

Mine was above excellent. I have nothing but good things to say about my experience as an alumnus, I mean, even after graduating, my communication and engagement with just, I'm not going to start calling names, but just certain individuals who know who they are just have been encouraging and just the opportunities afforded to me on a professional level, and just even with my professional advancement, just remaining abreast and communication with me and just continuing to be in contact with me as I continue to excel in my professional journey, and continuing to remain just in constant contact with

me as I continue in my quest has just been most encouraging. So, it's just been above excellence for me (Alumnus 1, personal communication, [September 9, 2021]).

Relationships have also played a part in the experience of these alumni and their engagement, Alumnus 4 affirmed:

I've maintained close relationships with OBC pretty much since I graduated. So, I definitely would say it's been above excellent just because I have that connection to not only the university but also the individuals that are in there (Alumnus 4, personal communication, [September 9, 2021]).

The alumni focus group held in the early development stages of the program gave the action research team a foundation of what drives alumni to stay close to OBC, and what keeps them motivated to come back and pay it forward to current OBC graduate students. There was also an emphasis on improving the programs and institutions based on their experience which was expressed with the passion alumni have gained from their time at OBC. The relationships that have been established with staff continue to be a factor in alumni's motivation in staying connected with OBC, as staff and familiar faces combined with recollection of positive experiences strengthened the exchange relationship.

Finding 5: Incentivizing alumni does not inspire volunteerism.

During the construction phase of the action research process, the idea of incentives for alumni to stay engaged was introduced. The idea of ensuring that there was a benefit to alumni was the driving force in this thinking. Story (2018) described the contrast to this way of thinking; she wrote, "Intrinsic motivation can be negatively affected when an external reward is offered, for example, by changing the way the situation is perceived or by changing the individual's self-perception as being controlled by the reward" (p. 87). During the focus group, the possibility of

incentives was presented and met with candid rejection of items or gifts being a determining factor in their motivation to volunteer. Alumnus 4 explained:

I can speak for myself; the reason why I didn't select it is because I feel like I get that stuff anyway, from just being on panels. So, like, I have copious amounts of swag that I get, like water bottles, and all this other stuff that just being a guest panel gets me, so I just felt like, no more water bottles. I have a cabinet. It's not really a main draw for me. I do like the idea of exclusive events. It's just for me, I'm just a natural, helpful person. So, I like to be helpful to the students. And that's the number one priority for me. Whereas any incentives would just be secondary to what I would like, but it's not like my main component (Alumnus 4, personal communication, [September 9, 2021]).

The idea of contributing to the institution and affecting change moving forward continued to be a theme in the motivation and disassociating alumni engagement with incentivized behavior.

Alumnus 3 attested:

I feel like incentivizing is, it's such a, it's such a gray space, because you just don't know what inspires people to do this. And I think probably what you're going to find is the one the alumni that are the most committed to doing this work or being part of the shape-shifting and change-making of the future or are already going to be wanting to participate, for reasons that are probably more innate, wanting to just continue to be affiliated with, with the program in some kind of space that, that they're, they're making change (Alumnus 3, personal communication, [September 9, 2021]).

The idea of the social exchange between current students and alumni was discussed in the form of employment opportunities. This exchange, although seen as selfish by Alumnus 5, was an

opportunity for the recruitment of current graduate students in the hospitality space. Alumnus 5 described his motivation:

I look at this kind of holistic thing if I can add value to the program that adds value to my degree. So, the more I give back, the more it's worth it; I want the degree to be successful, I want the program to be successful, and I want to see other people get out of it. Part of it's a little more selfish than everybody else; I'd like to use it as a recruiting source and as an advocate for my industry (Alumnus 5, personal communication, [September 9, 2021]).

The student involvement team's practice of incentivizing guests or providing gifts for alumni was discussed during the construction phase, which inspired the topic of whether incentives were a motivator in whether alumni continued to volunteer their time. We found that alumni motivations were mostly intrinsic as they expressed a pure desire to add value to their alma mater. Alumni believed that adding value would increase the overall value of their degree and continue to grow their respective programs.

System-Level Findings

Finding 6: Establishing a strategic plan and vision drives program development.

Strategic Planning & Vision

In this study, the action research team was introduced to the change process under the phases of the action research methodology, which began with understanding the context and purpose, and was followed by the constructing, planning-action, taking-action and evaluating action. During post program interviews members of the research team reflected on their involvement, specifically the strategy and the way it made for a seamless change management

experience. When asked how he would describe the team's role in developing the ambassador program, John explained:

I think the team was very pivotal in the planning and execution of this program. I don't think it could have happened without the strategic vision and plan that was put in place.

(J. Rinehart, personal communication, [August, 30, 2023]).

Whitney reflected on her tendency to push forward and act on projects right away. The planning process forced her to take a step back and plan the next steps in order to be effective. Whitney stated:

Being strategic definitely has its benefits. I'm an impatient person at times. So, the process of it to me, I can't wait to get it started. Let's just get it started. But I understand.

I have much respect for the overall aspect of, let's just take our time with this and let's overall just be strategic about what we want to do, and that goes a long way (W. Casey, personal communication, [August, 30, 2023])

John emphasized the importance of vision on the experience both personally and of the development team, he stated:

If for no other reason other than the fact that we've been able to double our support almost in this second year of the program. I think that's a true testament of your ability, your vision and things that you're doing. So, without your leadership I don't think my experience would have been as positive as it's been. So, I'm really excited about doing this for another year and seeing where this goes (J. Rinehart, personal communication, [August, 30, 2023]).

Laura was also asked about her participation and described how structure and planning positively affected her experience as a member of the action research team. Laura said:

It was a cool experience watching the development of a well-planned and well-executed overall thought. When we really sat down and brainstormed all of this and laid on our initial ideas, they then developed into a mission, vision, outcomes, and how do we get to that? How do we make these outcomes happen? So, it was really cool to see how all that was laid out in a linear way. I felt like everything was very proactive instead of reactive (L. Early, personal communication, [September, 2, 2023]).

The strategic execution of the action research team's vision, was key to the program's launch and continued success. There was an earlier emphasis in following the action research phases, which laid a foundation and direction for the team. As a result, collectively the team understood their roles and the expectations as well as the ultimate goal. In some cases, it changed the way that members of the team viewed change management and sustainability.

Finding 7: Determining team roles based on skillset fosters cohesive team environment.

In this study, the action research team was comprised of members of several areas of the OBC's student support staff. From the first meeting in July of 2021, there was an emphasis on the importance of collaboration during the action research process. Schrujier (2006) wrote, "In action research, the client system and researcher jointly define and analyze the problems. It is based on a collaborative relationship" (p.226). Members of the research team highlighted the team's collaborative nature and how it has affected their role as a member of the team. John highlighted the AR team's impact:

It's been a very positive experience. I think being a part of this research team gave me an opportunity to kind of collaborate to do some problem solving, do some general optical, or to obtain some general practical knowledge. It was challenging and at the same time it was rewarding. As we were trying to find, you know, the balance between creating

something that that's sustainable, but also has the scale to be impactful so that it can reach other areas of the whole O'Brien community in essence. Because it's like we want something that's beneficial for our alumni, but also beneficial to the college. And so, it was very positive for me just being a part of an action research team. It gave me some dynamic learning opportunities. I was humbled to be able to contribute (J. Rinehart, personal communication, [August, 30, 2023]).

Laura described her experience as an opportunity to work across teams in a structured way. The strategic decision to select relevant staff and leadership across the student support department was necessary for the success of the program's development. Schruijer describes, "Relevant parties are those who can influence the process and outcomes of the collaboration or are influenced by it" (p.234). The collaboration between these areas enhanced the overall experience as a member of the action research team. Laura shared her perspective,

Obviously, we were on that with our colleagues within OBC, and it was a lot of fun in that capacity because we had John was over from the recruiting side. I really enjoyed what we had. It was a way a more formal way to work closely with that team. I really enjoyed that part, and it was just a good team to work with those that were within the student involvement side as well (L. Early, personal communication, [September, 2, 2023]).

Whitney also expresses the importance of picking the relevant members of the action research team and its effect on her experience and the project's success. She affirmed:

I just think you picked the team based on skill sets, and I think everyone used their skills and their passion for what they wanted to do and what they were possibly good at. So,

that's one thing I appreciate, that particular process (W. Casey, personal communication, [August, 30, 2023]).

Building a collaborative team can be a complex endeavor. For this project the skillsets of the team were a deciding factor of who would assist in the creation of GAP. I wanted to ensure that the team could execute most of the tasks required for the development of the ambassador program without excessive outsourcing. The passion for the work and collaborative nature of the individuals on the team created a naturally cohesive environment.

Finding 8: Leadership support must be affirmed for the successful development of an alumni ambassador program.

As interviews ensued, members of the action research team highlighted the development and growth of the program. For the program to continue to grow, the buy-in of leadership and key stakeholders is essential. The research team reflected on the importance of leadership support during the change process. Laura discussed the support of leadership that the ambassador development team received from the start of the program's construction:

We had a high level of support from the associate dean. This was something that he felt a lot of value in, so much so that it was one of those pillars [in the college's strategic plan]. I definitely could see the value. If you can get buy-in from your higher leadership, then it's going to be so much easier to get things done, because the associate dean saw the value and what you wanted to do, then not only was it just like, Okay, you have my support, but, no, let's bring in other people. How can how else can we grow this? It made it very clear that you can get that buy-in (L. Early, personal communication, [September, 2, 2023]).

Whitney expressed a hopeful but cautious perspective on the support of leadership:

I would say from the first year, it really started to look as if we had something that could potentially last for a long time. Hoping that the leadership will be consistent and be just as passionate in reference to the Ambassador program (W. Casey, personal communication, [August, 30, 2023])

As one of the original members of the alumni ambassador development team, John had a holistic view:

I was a little nervous about it earlier on when we started. We weren't really sure what the budget was going to be, and we didn't really know who was going to be involved. If we were going to have that support from the senior leadership? But I think as things progressed, I started to learn that the college really values and appreciates the contributions of their alumni, beyond just their time as a student. And I think that was manifested in the support that was given (J. Rinehart, personal communication, [August, 30, 2023]).

The initial support of the ambassador program was necessary to gain the buy-in of the student services department and OBC. From its introduction as a part of the college's strategic plan, to the launch and completion of its first year, the ambassador program's success was partially due to the support of leadership. Leadership support enhances performance of innovative programming like GAP and encourages the dedication of its staff (Mokhber, 2018). The continued success of the program will rely on consistent support from leadership as it expands.

Table 4.2*Summary of Conclusions*

Conclusions	Research Questions	Findings
Social Exchange Theory should be at the forefront of graduate student co-curricular and extra-curricular program development.	RQ1: How does alumni engagement influence student attitudes toward their own future service to their alma mater? RQ2: Why do alumni engage in non-monetary service at their post-graduate institutions?	Developing positive experiences exposes graduate students to alumni influence. Establishing a connection between involved students and alumni requires staff participation. Engaging alumni introduces new opportunities for graduate student involvement.
Student involvement must be tracked to predict alumni engagement at a post-graduate level.	RQ1: How does alumni engagement influence student attitudes toward their own future service to their alma mater?	Motivating alumni to volunteer requires establishing opportunities to impact students. Incentivizing alumni does not inspire volunteerism.
Student integration theory must be considered at a post-graduate level when designing programming for students to account for factors that can determine the potential for future engagement.	RQ1: How does alumni engagement influence student attitudes toward their own future service to their alma mater? RQ3: What is learned at the individual, group, and system levels that advance the theory and practice in an action research project that explores the engagement of graduate student leadership and retained alumni support through non-monetary service contributions in postgraduate programs?	Establishing a strategic plan and vision drives program development. Determining team roles based on skillset fosters a cohesive team environment. Leadership support must be affirmed for the successful development of an alumni ambassador program.

Conclusion

During this study, the AR team set out to develop an opportunity for staff to have access and secure committed alumni as a consistent source of volunteers at the O'Brien Business

College (OBC). Alumni were looking for ways to become engaged with their graduate program but had no structured program to join or consistently participate in at OBC. These factors left graduate students without significant opportunities to build connections with the alumni during their integration into the college. The development of an alumni ambassador program by support staff at OBC was an opportunity to fill a void and utilize alumni as a means of inspiring a cycle of engagement that included staff establishing new relationships between current students and alumni that would be mutually beneficial and influence them to stay engaged at OBC.

Alumni's time at OBC was expressed as a rewarding one throughout the study. Through interviews and focus groups, the action research team discovered that alumni appreciated all they gained from OBC and believed they could reciprocate these experiences with current students. There was an altruistic motivation when it came to their contribution to OBC, Alumni's experience with staff at the college is attributed to their strong relationship with the college even after graduation. The strength of an alum's connection with their alma mater is based on their satisfaction and opportunities to engage in programs such as the ambassador program, which influences the social exchange relationship and the likelihood that they will volunteer (Weerts & Ronca, 2007). An emphasis on giving back to the college with hopes of strengthening its programs was revealed throughout the study.

The value of alumni and their contributions to the college was recognized by staff and leadership early on in the study. The collaboration amongst the action research team and support from leadership allowed stakeholders to buy into the vision of the centralized approach to alumni engagement while equally benefiting our students by integrating them into OBC. The collaboration across different departments created an opportunity for a variety of ideas that would be inspired by the research done in preparation for the program development. The

cohesion amongst the group due to their intentional selection based on their skills set the stage for the successful construction, planning, and implementation of the ambassador program.

In this section, the following research question was addressed by conclusion statements that answer 1) How does alumni engagement influence student attitudes toward their own future service to their alma mater? 2) Why do alumni engage in non-monetary service at their postgraduate institutions? 3) What is learned at the individual, group, and system levels that advance the theory and practice in an action research project that explores the engagement of graduate student leadership and retained alumni support through non-monetary service contributions in postgraduate programs? The 8 findings in this study were examined to develop the following three conclusive statements below:

1. Social exchange (reciprocity) needs to be considered in the creation of student-alumni programming to establish a holistic cycle of engagement that fosters sustainability.
2. Student involvement must be systematically monitored using an engagement tracking system to effectively measure activity and enhance sustainability.
3. Colleges must implement a model of engagement that will be a guide for student involvement and integration into the institution.

Conclusion 1: Social exchange (reciprocity) needs to be considered in the creation of student-alumni programming to establish a holistic cycle of engagement that fosters sustainability.

This study has highlighted the student experience at a postgraduate level, specifically the current relationship between graduate students and alumni. Finding 1 indicates that involved students are exposed to positive experiences with alumni influences that are consistent with the intention of exchange for future non-monetary service to their graduating institution.

Understanding the connection between a student and their satisfaction with their institution will drive social exchange relationships and the success of alumni-engaging programming.

Current students at OBC have embraced the addition of alumni to leadership development workshops, panels, and mentorship. These development opportunities were strategically integrated into extra-curricular and co-curricular events in GAP's first year. Ainge O. Ainge (personal communication, August 29, 2023) expressed how these opportunities have expanded her professional network, "Being able to connect with [alumni] and grow my network on LinkedIn has helped me a lot. So, that's something that I would want to be able to do once I find a position.". Interview responses such as this address our first and second research questions 1) How does alumni engagement influence student attitudes toward their future service to their alma mater? and "Why do alumni engage in non-monetary service at their post-graduate institutions?" Further support of this was reflected in post-leadership development workshop surveys indicated that 91% of 56 students surveyed in the first year of GAP agreed based on their engagement with alumni, they were likely to volunteer for similar OBC programming upon graduation.

Research question two in this study was addressed during the focus groups as alumni highlighted their motivations for remaining active with OBC. "It's valuable for me to share my personal experiences and any mistakes that I've made along the way. I hope that they would learn from them and not make the same mistakes as well" (Alumnus 1, personal communication, September 9, 2021). Their behavior toward their alma mater was impacted by their experiences as a student. Social exchange theory was developed based on the determination that motivation to act is influenced by returns. Colleges have applied this to benefit the standing of the

institution, by attaching alumni success to the institution as a form of exchange. Fleming (2019) affirms:

“Social exchange theory is founded on the belief that people are motivated to act by the reciprocal returns they expect their actions will generate from others, and both individual and institutional characteristics have been found to shape the degree of organizational identification of alumni with their alma mater” (p.106).

Although this is easily identified at an undergraduate level, post-graduate programs should begin to embrace this theory as a part of their framework when developing their student involvement programming. Creating an expectation of volunteerism and service contributes to the integration process that is likely to carry through graduation and beyond.

Current and former graduate students at OBC have already affirmed that their involvement with alumni has influenced their decision to volunteer in the future. Although it is not the only factor, a centralized alumni ambassador program does create an opportunity for alumni to get engaged, stay active, and influence current students in an impactful way.

Conclusion 2: Student involvement must be systematically monitored using an engagement tracking system to effectively measure activity and enhance sustainability.

Institutions often overlook graduate student involvement, as studies have focused on undergraduate involvement regarding data on how students engage at their universities. Onorato-Hughes (2019) wrote, “Researchers have frequently referenced the extensive literature regarding undergraduate student involvement and lack comparable research for graduate students” (p.34). To use the student involvement theory within post-graduate settings, more co-curricular and extra-curricular data needs to be available to measure involvement amongst this population, allowing institutions to forecast the long-term impact of graduate student involvement as a

predictor of alumni engagement. Alumni want to give back to their alma mater to reciprocate the benefits of attending OBC based on their experience at the institution and with faculty and staff during their time at the college.

Throughout the study students, alumni, staff, and leadership had an opportunity to share their insights about their experiences. Current students' holistic involvement has been uncovered as a determining factor in their desire to volunteer as alumni. Astin (1999) characterizes student involvement as a theory that "refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience" (p. 518). Each student's level of involvement varied as they expressed their experience in the classroom, through leadership development events, alumni engagement, etc. These experiences can shift for graduate students due to competing obligations, such as family responsibilities and full-time work. Astin (1984) stated, "Regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum, that is different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same student manifests different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times" (p.519) Participants extracurricular experiences with alumni matched with what has been a positive experience in the classroom have filled a void that was missing from students at OBC. Weerts & Ronca (2007) wrote, "Beyond extracurricular activities, the quality of the academic experience itself is associated with alumni support" (p.23). The addition of the ambassador program assisted in the integration of students by exposing them to both the academic system and social systems that developed their skills and aided in their success during their time in the program (Chrysikos et al., 2017). The ambassador program gave OBC graduate students more opportunities to be active by fostering new relationships with alumni that influenced how they perceived their overall experience. The formation of these relationships and their impact calls back to research

question one, answering How does alumni engagement influence student attitudes toward their future service to their alma mater? The influence is evident when relationships between alumni and current OBC graduate students are introduced by staff who have developed a level of trust and their own relationships. The progress and the opportunities for graduate students to become more involved is important to OBC, but it is equally important to develop a way to track and measure this activity.

Involvement Tracking Platform

As colleges and universities receive recognition through reputable publications such as the U.S. News & World Report, research funding, and fundraising opportunities, the importance of tracking engagement data has become popular across institutions of higher education (Rosing, 2015). Tracking the activity of current student engagement also gives the student involvement team at OBC and others across the country insights into how the student involvement theory at the post-graduate level can be executed and what resources are most relevant to building a sustainable alumni relationship.

The value of a tracking system is in its ability to justify decisions in the way students get involved and are integrated into the college. Rosing (2015) wrote:

“An authentic tracking practice will require a different kind of data analytics; one where the conclusions drawn will allow for better decision-making, for verification of models or theories of engagement at the institutional level, and for comparative analysis across institutions about successful and challenging engagement practices.” (p. 161)

Colleges must invest in an outcome data platform like PeopleGrove or 12Twenty that can capture a wide range of information such as program registration, attendance trends, student-

alumni connections and analytics that will create comprehensive reports for student involvement teams to use a strategic tool for future planning for student involvement and alumni engagement.

Implementation

Implementing a program will require several steps to establish buy-in from the leadership and staff that will be using the platform. This process would start with initial meetings with the department, senior leadership, and finance department for an initial contracting discussion. Leadership support would be needed to explore whether it would be a potential fit for the campus environment and department operations. Senior leaders support is essential to the promotion of change, with a commitment to innovative ideas, they can influence the decisions within the organization (Prasad & Junni, 2016). The next meetings would include the department's student involvement and career development teams to discuss how the program's capabilities and benefits will be necessary for staff to adopt the platform for everyday use. A demonstration by the platform's administrators would lead these sessions and answer the questions of the team.

With the support of the next step would require a negotiation with the platform's representatives to develop a package suitable for OBC. During the negotiation process the customization and integration of the system will determine the funding that will be needed to fully integrate the system. At this stage the chief operation officer will be more involved as the college works to keep all necessary resources within budget. Once the final financial and leadership approvals are confirmed, a campaign will be needed to introduce the product to graduate students and alumni as the new portal and digital hub their involvement at OBC.

Once the program is fully implemented, students will need to be educated on the new system and how to use it for their student involvement and alumni engagement opportunities. Communication through email, digital signage, newsletters and verbal announcements during

live and virtual events will begin to shift the minds of current students. New students will be encouraged to use this portal as the only platform that will allow them to receive notifications, development opportunities, and event signups throughout their time at OBC. A full academic cycle (fall, spring and summer) may be required for a full implementation of the platform, but once completed, it will allow teams within the department to learn more about student patterns, trends, and interests through the data that the platform will ultimately provide.

Conclusion 3: Colleges must implement a model of engagement that will be a guide for student involvement and integration into the institution.

O'Brien Business College has over 1400 graduate students that are enrolled in 15 programs. With a diverse collection of programs, each student's experience is unique, which has made it a challenge to create ways to engage them all in a centralized way. As a part of the university's commitment to keeping its students connected and involved with alumni and each other, OBC will need to create a sense of community across the portfolio that would get current students involved and integrate incoming students. Similar to the structure of GAP, current students also will require structure as the college finds new ways to redefine the culture. To form a new culture based on involvement through a model of engagement, OBC graduate students must be exposed to all the opportunities that the college is able to provide across the portfolio of programs. The model of engagement (as shown in Figure 4.1) with five components that serve as a structure for students to become involved in the college can be used to expose students to a way to get and stay involved. As shown in Figure 4.2, these components included 1) Culture & Community, 2) Leadership Development, 3) Applied Knowledge, 4) Service, and 5) Students (C.L.A.S.S). Through this new model students are encouraged to get involved with one or more

of the opportunities in each of the first four components to ensure that they have had the standard and holistic student experience at OBC.

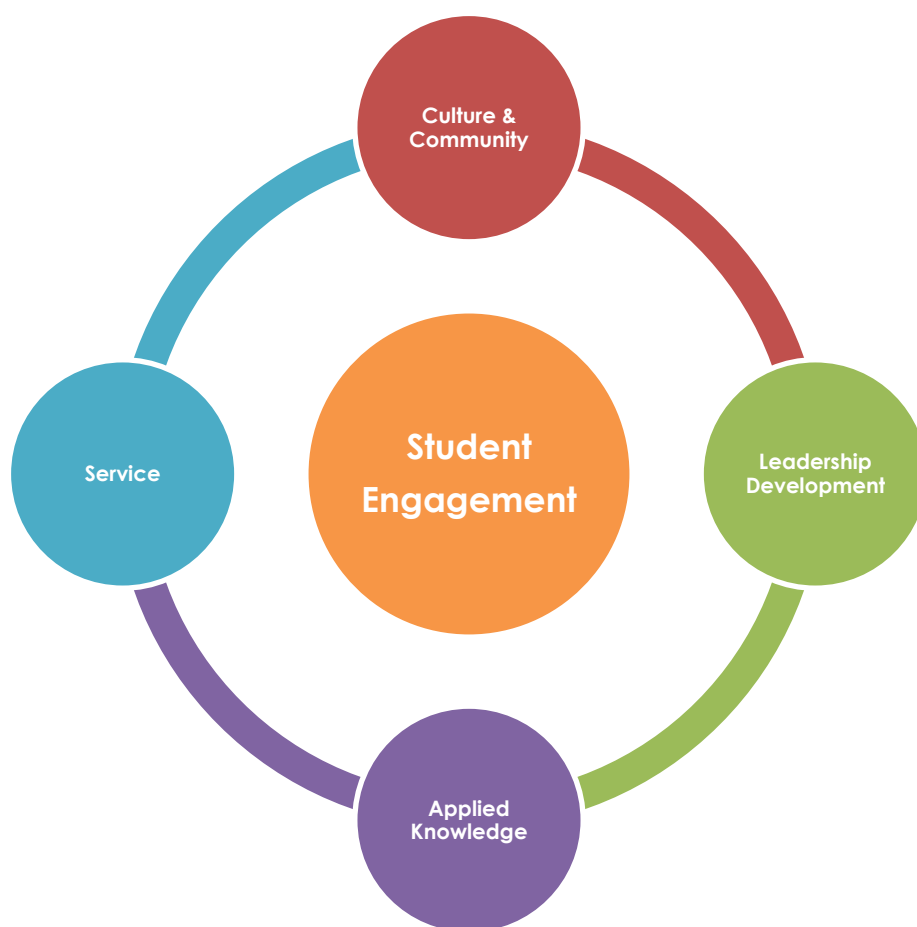


Figure 4.1

C.L.A.S.S. Model of Engagement

Culture and Community

Culture and community are the first priority of this model as OBC has focused on defining the collective identity outside of its academic reputation as a research-one (R1) institution. With a diverse population of students that resemble business across the globe, OBC leadership understood that the strength of the college was in its ability to provide experiences

that bring its students from different backgrounds and programs together and developing and sense of community. Museus et al. (2012) stated, “When postsecondary institutions engage the cultural backgrounds and identities of students in an academic or social sphere of college life, they create environments characterized by greater inclusivity than when those cultural backgrounds and identities are not engaged” (p.108). OBC’s diverse community was not just limited to fellow students but also included their engagement with alumni who have experienced many of the components of the model. The culture and community component describes a collection of signature events, networking opportunities, campus organization memberships, and social events that will students from each of OBCs graduate academic programs can attend and participate in as the student involvement team developments programming to address each area of the model.



Figure 4.2

C.L.A.S.S. Model Components

Leadership Development

The focus of leadership development as a part of this model allows ambassadors to engage directly with students through workshops, panel discussions, mentoring opportunities and other ambassador events. Students relate to alumni in a learning environment during these sessions where they ask questions on various topics regarding alumni's experience and ways they have advanced in their industry upon their departure from the institution. Alumni are able to engage with students both one-on-one and in a group setting while students are using this knowledge to develop as leaders.

Applied Knowledge

Students at OBC have a unique opportunity to participate in multiple conferences and symposiums, professional organizations, immersion programs, study abroad programs and case competitions for graduate students that are fully supported by OBC and in the case of a few programs funded through scholarships at a college and university level. These experiential learning opportunities, such as case competitions, benefit students in several areas of development. Foltz et al. (2011) wrote, "Students are required to apply many skills and knowledge in case competitions. These settings provide an exceptional environment for students to practice critical thinking, teamwork, division of labor, research, decision making – all occurring with a definitive deadline" (p.46). These experiences allow students to use what they have learned in the class and during their connection with alumni in real world situations that can result in positive career outcomes.

Service

As a part of a large business school in a metropolitan area, OBC graduate students are able to impact their surrounding community through service. In addition, to impacting the

community outside of the institution, students have an opportunity to build a stronger sense community at OBC and even within themselves. Jones & Hill (2003) affirmed, “Involvement in community service engaged students in developing greater knowledge of self through meaningful work with others, which resulted in the development of both a personal and collective identity” (p.518). Incorporating service into this model is an opportunity to promote the stewardship that extends through the college’s newly established culture.

Students

Students that engage in each area of this model will share a common but unique experience amongst the other students in the programs across the OBC portfolio. As a new culture of engagement is being formed, students are integrated into the college community, which gives them the full OBC graduate experience. Graduate students gain unparalleled opportunities within the college which positions them to make a lasting impact far beyond graduation.

C.L.A.S.S. Model Implementation

Implementing the new model would be the responsibility of the student involvement team as it will serve as the philosophy for which they engage students at OBC. The process mirrors the implementation of the tracking platform discussed in conclusion two, which included the support of leadership, staff buy-in and educating students about the model as the way they can get involved and benefit from OBC’s resources and events during their time in the program. Educating current and incoming students of the will take a full academic year to establish the new culture that exists at OBC where students are not siloed in their respective programs but are encouraged to embrace the students in other programs. These students have skills that

complement their expertise, culture that creates a stronger community, and a network with alumni across these programs that have volunteered and are dedicated to support them.

Learning Outcomes

What was learned at an individual level?

Beneficial Experiences & Volunteerism

As we explored the individual lessons learned during this study, there was a consistent message from student participants that reflected their positive experiences with faculty, staff, and alumni have attributed to their desire to contribute as future alumni. The connection formed between student participants and alumni was primarily focused on the benefit of the student's professional aspirations. This social exchange made a way for consistent student interactions that would drive the connection back to whether the students who experienced the exchange would consider volunteering in the future. Olivia, an involved graduate student affirms, "Being able to connect with them [alumni] and grow my network on LinkedIn has helped me a lot. So, that's something that I would want to be able to do once I find a position". She directly connected her ability to volunteer as an alumni ambassador to the benefit and success result of her interactions with alumni. Weerts and Ronca (2007) explained, "social exchange theory suggests that the "cost" of financial or volunteer support for an institution is weighed against the benefits the alum has received from the university in the past or present (p.23). The exposure to alumni opened the opportunity for a new relationship and added benefit that would further connect current graduate students to the institution.

Authentic Connections Builds Alumni Relationships

In addition to professional development and benefits associated with their future success as professionals in their respective industries, students often consider the authentic relationships

formed during their time at their institution. Interview participants indicated that without familiar alumni, staff, and relationships built organically through their involvement at OBC, it would not be likely that they would contribute to the overall success of students. Calvin, student leader expressed, “Whether it’s giving back time resources, whether it’s coming back speaking whatever that might be being on some of those calls has been very effective, so definitely in the future would be something I would be interested in the opportunity”. When present alumni can drive the experiences that translate to future service. In Shen and Sha’s (2020) study focused on conceptualizing and operationalizing alumni engagement, they emphasized, “a high-quality program and good experience in school could cultivate alumni interest in engaging with their alma mater” (p.5). The alumni’s impact on OBC students was evident in their interviews, through each student’s reference to lessons learned and appreciated from their interactions.

Opportunities for Future Success

Colleges such as OBC have an opportunity to strategically invest in their future success through an alumni ambassador program. Expanding the reach of the program through financial support and marketing efforts is essential to strengthening the connection between students, alumni and the institution. These efforts would be designed to attract more alumni to volunteer over the next 3-5 years until the culture is firmly established. The increase in alumni participation will expose more graduate students to the experience of connecting with alumni ambassadors. Throughout this study the data collected from students and alumni affirmed the connection between positive experiences with alumni and current students desire to stay connected with the institutions and impact students upon graduation.

What was learned at a group level?

Alumni Impact on Current Graduate Students

Alumni engagement at OBC before this study was decentralized and it was unclear the role that alumni played in their overall experience at the college. The focus group conducted while gathering initial study data introduced the action research team to the underlying motivations for alumni engagement. Two themes that emerged as a defining factor in their aspirations to be alumni ambassadors were the ability to improve the trajectory of current students by sharing their knowledge and expertise, and the desire to see their respective programs become stronger and more impactful based on their positive experiences.

Alumni expressed their excitement about the potential of an ambassador program. Their experiences during their time in the program increased their credibility and expertise when referencing how they successfully navigated and completed their respective programs. One alumnus and focus group participant stated, “Acting as a resource to students is important because it’s valuable for me to share my personal experiences and any mistakes that I’ve made along the way that I would hope that they would learn from and not make the same mistakes as well”. Although their experiences were generally positive there are areas of improvement in the way they approached their program that they can employ on students to eliminate unnecessary shortcomings. Alumni motivations will often vary but it is almost always an individual decision. Fleming (2019) affirms “Whatever motivates alumni actions within the relationship with the institution are determined by the individual, and this framework recognizes that different alumni may be differentially affected by intrinsic and extrinsic motivations” (p.125). Alumni from the focus group referenced the room for enhancement in their program as a motivating factor. The

belief in OBC and each program surfaced in the focus group discussion as a key motivation factor for alumni engagement as alumni ambassadors.

Opportunities for Program Impact

Alumni's affinity for their respective programs presents an opportunity to grow stronger support from alumni when incorporating their master's program. The number of alumni ambassadors has almost doubled in its first year from 27 to 52 ambassadors. This has created a challenge for the AR team to develop new ways for ambassadors to connect with students. Although there was an addition to the programming with recruiting and career development events, there are more opportunities to engage more alumni through their program specific service at OBC. These opportunities can include class visits, company site visits, and program specific recruitment events, where alumni can share their overall experience at OBC while providing advice to those graduate students in their field of study.

What was learned at a system level?

Vision & Strategy Development

The action research team was interviewed during the evaluation phase, during which their experience on the team was open for discussion. A common theme during these interviews was the effect that the development of the vision and strategy was critical in the change project and how the department and college approached it. John stated, "I think the team was very pivotal in the planning and execution of this program. I don't think it could have happened without the strategic vision and plan that was put in place". The team learned that in order for the system to change, a new structure needed to be established, and this would happen through the implementation of the ambassador program, which would be used to leverage all other pillars of the OBC 5-year strategic plan. The strategic plan would include several components with an

emphasis on career and leadership development while the ambassadors would allow the college to scale these efforts as it experiences growth.

During the implementation process, staff openly expressed the desire to move quickly on this initiative, but understood the process was necessary for long-term sustainability. Whitney shared her perspective,

“Being strategic has its benefits. I’m an impatient person at times. I have much respect for the overall aspect of let’s just take our time with this. Just be strategic about what we want to do. It goes a long way”.

The process was intentional as it followed the action research phase components, which was a new process for all staff and stakeholders. Communication regarding the vision, and the strategic direction of the study was reinforced throughout the process.

Collaborative Environments

In selecting the action research team there was an intentional approach to who would be included on the team. I needed to select team members with diverse backgrounds and specialty areas, while still keeping a team that would quickly become cohesive. The passion for alumni engagement was another driving force in the team. The team recognized the intentionality of the selection process and acknowledged the importance of having a collaborative environment that started with the selection of each member of the action research team. Whitney expressed, “Roles were selected by team members based on their passion and skill sets. The team was cohesive based on familiarity”. We quickly learned as a team that flow, and collaboration was key as we lost members one by one to “the great resignation”, where the COVID-19 pandemic ignited a wave of resignations of staff from various industries who decided to pivot to new

industries or roles. The cohesion of the team's core 4 members allowed for the successful execution of the final three phases of the action research cycle.

Leadership & Staff Buy-In

Stakeholder management is necessary in the implementation of any project or management process. Lawrence et al. (2018) affirmed:

“Future studies on the value of leadership assessment and coaching as students are embarking on their MBA or other graduate studies should include additional sources for measuring outcomes. These measures could include feedback from other stakeholders, including co-workers and managers.” (p.648)

In this study, the leadership at OBC were significant stakeholders, due to their influence on department operations and the overall support of staff. The buy-in by OBC leadership gave the ambassador program validity as staff members at the college it was necessary to get the buy-in of both leadership and staff at the beginning of the study. The action research project received support from leadership at the department level and the college level. The action research team learned the value of the ambassador program from the leadership's perspective and its importance currently and in the future support. John emphasized:

I started to learn that the college really values and appreciates the contributions of their alumni, beyond just their time as students. And I think that was manifested in the support that was given. (J. Rinehart, personal communication, [August, 30, 2023]).

As the director, Laura also learned that the support of the college's leadership drove the project toward initial success. Laura stated:

If you can get buy-in from your higher leadership, then it's going to be so much easier to get things done because, you know, the associate dean saw the value and what you

wanted to do. (L. Early, personal communication, [September, 2, 2023]).

Full support from leadership also allowed for funding opportunities for ambassador events, and an alumni welcome package for the year. These events allowed alumni to connect with each other build relationships and hear directly from leadership about the value that alumni bring to OBC.

Table 4.3

Summary of Learning Outcomes

Finding	Participant	Quote	Learning Outcomes
Engaging alumni introduces new opportunities for graduate student involvement.	Graduate Student	Being able to connect with them and grow my network on LinkedIn has helped me a lot. So, that's something that I would want to be able to do once I find a position.	Beneficial experiences and results translate into a desire to give back.
Engaging alumni introduces new opportunities for graduate student involvement.	Graduate Student	Whether it's giving back time resources, whether it's coming back speaking whatever that might be being on some of those calls has been very effective, so definitely in the future there would be something I would be interested in the opportunity.	Authentic Connections build long-term relationships with alumni.
Motivating alumni to volunteer requires establishing opportunities to impact students.	Alumnus	Acting as a resource to students is important because it's valuable for me to share my personal experiences and any mistakes that I've made along the way that I would hope that they would learn from and not make the same mistakes as well.	Alumni believe their experiences can improve the trajectory of current students.
Motivating alumni to volunteer requires establishing opportunities to	Alumnus	I will say, passionately it was an appreciation, this comorbidity of a complete appreciation of the experience. Our cohort was fantastic. Our teachers and professors were fantastic. And also see the need for spaces where it could be a bit more robust, and perhaps even	Desire for enhancement of programs based on experience.

impact students.		more of a marquee program of the OBC, because we believed it, I believed in it so much.	
Establishing a strategic plan and vision drives program development.	Action Research Team	I think the team was very pivotal in the planning and execution of this program. I don't think it could have happened without the strategic vision and plan that was put in place.	The development of a vision and strategy to execute is necessary for success.
Determining team roles based on skillset fosters a cohesive team environment.	Action Research Team	I just think you picked the team based on skill sets, and I think everyone used their skills and their passion for what they wanted to do and what they were possibly good at. So, that's one thing I appreciate, that particular process.	Creating a collaborative environment begins with team selections.
Leadership support must be affirmed for the successful development of an alumni ambassador program.	Leadership	We had a high level of support from the associate dean. This was something that he felt a lot of value in, so much so that it was one of those pillars [in the college's strategic plan]. I definitely could see the value. If you can get buy-in from your higher leadership, then it's going to be so much easier to get things done because, you know, the associate dean saw the value and what you wanted to do.	Leadership buy-in is necessary for successful implementation.
Leadership support must be affirmed for the successful development of an alumni ambassador program.	Action Research Team	I was a little nervous about it earlier on when we started. We weren't sure what the budget was going to be, and we didn't know who was going to be involved. If we were going to have that support from the senior leadership? But I think as things progressed, I started to learn that the college really values and appreciates the contributions of their alumni, beyond just their time as a student. And I think that was manifested in the support that was given.	Leadership support can drive the success and perception of staff buy-in

Graduate Ambassador Program (GAP) Sustainability

Leadership Support & Sustainability

The connection between leadership support and sustainability has become more evident in innovative organizations. Sarros et al. (2011) affirmed, “transformational leadership has been shown to support and promote innovation, which in turn ensures the long-term survival of an organization” (p.295) as the graduate ambassador program grows and becomes a part of the graduate student service structure at OBC. This began in the early stages of the study as the creation of the action research team comprised of the student involvement and recruitment teams would discuss their needs in the respective teams, such as panelists for recruitment events or facilitators for workshops. The program’s first year addressed the student involvement’s team’s problem of navigating a flawed process of securing committed alumni as consistent sources of volunteers. By the end of the first year of the program there was a need by the career development team which allowed the team consider the expansion of the AR team but most important, address the need of each team within the department, enhancing the areas of impact and increasing the ways alumni were utilized through recruitment, student involvement and career development, marketing to prospective students as they make the decision to apply to OBC.

The promise of access to alumni has been highlighted since the program’s launch in 2022. Leadership such as deans and directors pledged support for the program which is now a part of the way programming is driven by alumni contribution. The graduate ambassador program was featured in recruitment, student involvement, career advancement information sessions, and event establishing the program’s place in OBC’s strategic plan. Expectations were set with the start of each semester as incoming and continuing students were introduced to the

opportunity to engage with alumni. These expectations set a new standard of how students and alumni would engage with one another throughout their time in their respective programs, adding to their sustainability.

Financial Support & Sustainability

The sustainability of the Graduate Ambassador Program is tied to the operations of the graduate student services division of the O'Brien Business College. With continued support from leadership, these programs have and will continue to add to the quality of programming and OBC overall. However, the program would see sustainability issues if there were a reduction of financial support and operational support from leadership in OBC and the university. The ambassador program was not developed to have significant budgetary constraints in its first year, however with the success of the program it has also set an expectation from alumni to be more connected amongst each other, with calls for more alumni focused events that foster connection among the ambassadors. With an expansion of programming comes an increase in the overall operation budget for the program.

OBC Fundraising Team & GAP Sustainability

During the development of GAP, the action research team discussed opportunities for collaboration across the college's departments. The OBC fundraising team is responsible for organizing opportunities for alumni to give back to the college through campaigns and other soliciting efforts. Despite missed opportunities to work together at the initial phase of the project, the addition of new staff creates the potential for future partnerships that can contribute to GAP's resources. While a partnership is not required to sustain GAP, additional support will reduce the need for internal fundraising efforts by the AR team as the program continues to see consistent and substantial growth.

Action Research Team & GAP Sustainability

The sustainability of the action research team was also a challenge as the core of the program's team resigned from their role in the graduate services department and in some cases the university. The remaining members of the group would fill the gap in the programs until the conclusion of the project, reducing the total AR team from 6 to 3 members at the project's conclusion. To address the sustainability of the program the remaining members discussed who would join the team. The discussion allowed us to address the areas of expertise that could strengthen the program moving forward. Understanding that we could not hire staff specifically for a role on the GAP development team, we focused on existing staff from key areas of the student support department. The addition of career development and another member of student involvement staff would complement the current construct of the AR team. The addition of these staff members reenergized the group and allowed the AR team to explore more programming options such as the addition of a mentoring program and a student ambassador program.

Implications for Research and Theory

As I consider the theoretical framework and the implications for research it is evident that social exchange, student involvement, and student integration theories will be pivotal in the evolution of graduate program development and studies that advance the development of these theories.

Recommendation 1: Universities should explore how graduate students and alumni view social exchange from a non-monetary engagement lens.

Student experiences during this study have explored the impact of relationships with faculty, staff, and alumni's influence on their desire to return upon graduation and contribute to their alma mater. The social exchange relationship established between students and their

institutions should be nurtured through support services teams such as the student involvement team at OBC. With the proper financial support and leadership buy-in development programming such as the alumni ambassador program can be constructed using social exchange to guide the planning of the team.

The importance of collaboration across teams is vital to ensure that all parts of the experience from entering the college through graduation and beyond are addressed to enhance the overall of students. As a leading factor in alumni's motivation to volunteer, the focus on how they spent their tenure in their graduate programs will have a lasting impact on whether the university will receive support. For many institutions, the ability to enhance the experience of students before they depart from the university is an investment that can be reciprocated through alumni donations and volunteerism.

Recommendation 2: Business school support services must continue to build programs that foster student involvement through alumni engagement.

Business graduate programs are a training ground for tomorrow's leaders and executives. The training exists within the classroom and through co-curricular and extracurricular activities. Through university development programming students are able to build essential skills, engage with professional staff and learn from their classmates through peer-to-peer programming. The creation of the alumni ambassador program in this study has opened the door for other programming to follow a similar structure that can be utilized to benefit populations across the college's portfolio. An example of this includes a student ambassador program and the redesign of the college's alumni mentoring program. Business schools have a unique opportunity to develop similar programs that will expose students to alumni and support them from a unique perspective, one that has experienced the environment they encounter daily at the institution.

Alumni are motivated to engage with students with the right structure in place and often feel underutilized if they are not included in programming where their expertise or experience can be used. Business schools must consider this as they find ways to keep their students engaged and prepare them to enter their professional fields. These programs are time consuming to start but ultimately can reduce the stress and pressure of producing programming led only by the college's staff. Alumni from GAP are an example of professionals that are willing to brainstorm, facilitate and present in leadership development series that reduces the strain on smaller teams.

Recommendations for Future Research

The future research associated with alumni engagement through the lens of social exchange, student involvement and student integration has had its limitations. Through this study there is an opportunity to expand literature from a graduate perspective. Researchers should examine the impact outcomes, such as career development, as well as volunteer burnout have on institutions and the development of their relationships with alumni.

Recommendation 1: Student integration must be studied at a post-graduate level when exploring factors for students that can determine the potential for alumni engagement.

Student integration has traditionally been considered as a model used for retaining undergraduates, as it explores the effects of academic and social systems to determine a student's persistence at the institution. The model considers values and factors that the student possesses before their arrival on campus such as family background, skills and abilities, and prior schools, from these attributes goals and commitments are developed. It is also important to examine how elements before they arrive at OBC affect how graduate students enter and progress through their

programs. To ensure a strong and successful alumni base institutions must consider this model in their student services planning.

As I consider research question 3 and what was learned at the individual, group, and system levels, I think about the role that the action research team and OBC staff play in integrating graduate students and the alumni ambassador program's affect their ability to persist toward graduation where that can then become alumni. The active planning of the program gave the AR team the chance to look at key touch points where the program can be introduced or utilized to boost student persistence, promote self-efficacy, and promote the community to create a sense of belonging that will complement positive experiences from development programming.

When OBC recruits students, there is an opportunity to consider factors that will add a holistic perspective of the student outside of the academic scope, such as leadership training or experience, community service, or community engagement. Understanding characteristics of students that fall outside the traditional academic merits. Identifying the students who want to be involved and belong to a community based on their past experiences in undergraduate study and professional experiences can serve as a predictor of future behavior. Tinto (2017) discusses, "the result of a sense of belonging is often expressed as a commitment that serves to bind the individual to the group or community even when challenges arise (p.4). Graduate students will often face academic, financial, and time commitment challenges, but it is the support from alumni and OBC staff that keeps them connected to the institution through graduation.

The student involvement team, which begins working with students from acceptance through enrollment, has the attention of students to promote the college's culture of involvement through community, leadership development, applied knowledge, and service. Within that structure there are engagement opportunities with alumni that add to developing the positive

experiences that will influence their attitudes toward their future service to OBC, as stated in research question 1. This gives incoming students a framework from which they are integrated into OBC and supported. Early support is key to the successful persistence of students, Tinto (2017) affirms, “To be effective, support must be early before student struggles undermine their motivation to persist and be structured so as to enhance student uptake of support” (p.3). Based on this sentiment students’ early experiences contribute to later experiences, which ultimately affects their level of engagement as alumni.

Finding 6 affirms that post-graduate Alumni engagement requires strategic planning, collaboration, and effective stakeholder management for sustainability. Teams such as the action research team in this study that are responsible for developing integrative programming require collaborative environments, in planning the extra-curricular and co-curricular experiences to ensure positive outcomes. Participation in academic and social systems correlates with the study’s emphasis on creating experiences that will impact students throughout their program, influencing their desire to become active alumni. Students have the attributes that influence them to be involved and should be further nurtured through structured and developed programs, as they are the best candidates for early adoption of student leadership roles as students and ambassadors as alumni.

Recommendation 2: Action researchers should explore the causes of post-graduate alumni volunteer burnout and its impact on ambassador program sustainability.

In this study, social exchange relationships amongst staff and alumni were highlighted as one of many reasons for alumni volunteerism. Alumni who were interviewed also indicated that the desire to volunteer was intrinsic and did not require much external motivation. With the start of GAP many alumni have expressed their energy surrounding the events throughout the first

year. As ambassadors return for subsequent years, the question of burnout for these volunteers needs to be explored to avoid losing a productive group of ambassadors.

Burnout is often associated with fatigue due to continuous minor forms of stress that accumulate overtime. Although burnout is not typically associated with volunteerism, this type of exhaustion can occur under a variety of environments and circumstances (Morse et al., 2020). Alumni ambassador programs are active with social events, workshops, panel discussions and many other opportunities for alumni to get engaged with current students. If this is not managed correctly these programs combined with ambassadors' work, and personal responsibilities can contribute to scenarios of burnout and other negative outcomes.

Exploring the causes of burnout is significant to researchers who plan to continue the work of this study. Future action research teams have a unique opportunity to examine the factors of burnout in an alumni ambassador program, where factors of traditional burnout may differ from the experiences within industry and community service. Understanding the impact of motivation and satisfaction in volunteer can lead in the design of future programs. Morse (2020) wrote, "In theory, when volunteers' motivations for volunteering are satisfied by their volunteer experience, they experience better outcomes and are more likely to be protected from experiencing burnout from stressors they encounter volunteering" (p.237). In the development of new ambassador programs, researchers can take a balanced approach to developing these programs.

The value of active alumni that mentor students has been studied at an undergraduate and is linked to future donors to the institution (Weerts & Ronca, 2007). If not examined by researchers and managed by staff, burnout can result in alumni stepping away and becoming less

connected to the institution overall. There are still opportunities to research this relationship with graduate business programs like those at OBC.

Recommendation 3: Further studies could consider career outcomes of graduate students and their influence on alumni engagement.

As researchers consider influences that determine alumni's engagement and its relationship with graduate student success, career outcomes must also be studied. There are several factors that can attribute to graduate student success such as faculty interaction, financial support, and even a sense of connectedness to the institution (Bain et al., 2020). This connection with the institution, its staff, and alumni are essential to the career decisions students will make upon the completion of their degree. Students have credited improvements in their career discernment and development to alumni influence (Larsson et al., 2022). Understanding this connection, researchers' future studies will need to include this part of the exchange relationship to ensure the full story is being communicated.

Exploring career development amongst current students and alumni continues a connection with the institution. OBC provides career development services to alumni for free for its alumni, which allows for alumni to take advantage of the resources that are available to the students. This partnership builds connections with the alumni's professional organizations and network. Studies that expand the benefits of these types of alumni engagement in business schools further expand the literature.

Action Research Team Recommendations

Recommendation 1: O'Brien Business College should incorporate social exchange theory to connect them with alumni and form long-lasting relationships.

As students enter OBC, they are often first introduced to support staff, college leadership, and faculty as their team of professionals that will assist in guiding them throughout the program, curate experiences, and provide opportunities for advancement in their careers. The action research team understands that there is an opportunity to strengthen the connection between alumni and current students to form long-term relationships. Action research team member John Rinehart expressed:

Seeing some of the events that we were able to organize, from the coffee and conversations to the fireside chats to the career advancement, it really gave the current students more opportunities to build a relationship because you can't just build that relationship from a one-off kind of event. It's ongoing support, creating that sense of belonging and connection (J.Rinehart, personal communication, [August, 30, 2023]).

The social exchange theory leads the thinking of this team and the study as we considered ways to enhance the experience of students and how these experiences could lead to future service by alumni.

Alumni have a unique perspective; they have experience of what it means to be a student, and they have seen the result of dedicating themselves academically and socially in the OBC setting. During focus groups, alumni express the importance of having a positive experience at OBC. They acknowledge relationships formed with staff, leadership, faculty, and alumni were meaningful and are a part of the reason they have chosen to stay active as alumni. Giving back to

the institution based on these experiences is aligned with the action research team's efforts to continue these results with a more targeted and centralized program at scale.

Recommendation 2: Collaborate across departments to develop strategic visions that are supported by research to drive effective change.

Creating a new program requires collaboration, strategy, and vision. This feedback became more evident during the action research team interviews. Each team member expressed how these three components were necessary for the success of the project. The cohesiveness of the team based on areas of skill combined with a diverse team was highlighted. Adding teams such as representatives from our career development team, marketing, and fundraising team should be considered as the program continues into future years.

Support from stakeholders is necessary, while support from leadership is required. This sentiment was clear during the evaluation phase. From the beginning of the project, the sponsor was an advocate for the project within the department's leadership team. Although support was evident early on, the sustainability of the ambassador program will require continued support from the college's leadership. Support includes financial support which can fluctuate yearly. The action research team is cognizant of what has been the stance of leadership and believes to achieve continued success, support is required.

Although there was time taken in the early phases of the project to educate the team on the phases that would come with the change process, the action research team was initially apprehensive and uncertain due to the unfamiliarity of the methodology. Once the team began researching past programs individually, and then collaboratively, through data collection and analysis, the level of comfort and confidence grew as we continued to develop the program. This

approach to the research and understanding the most effective approach to drive change toward consistent and dependable alumni engagement was emphasized as a new best practice at OBC.

Recommendation 3: Utilize alumni skills to add value and drive the initiatives for post-graduate programs.

Alumni are eager to get involved and give back to their program. Using the skills acquired and the experiences gained, there are opportunities to further utilize them in different ways that can be more fulfilling for them and have a tremendous impact on the students. The action research team has already begun to consider how the ambassador program can further utilize these skills and talents of alumni as the program scales up with the anticipated growth of the college. The recommendation approaches the distribution of talents amongst macro and micro efforts while maintaining the things that the program already does well such as development workshops.

From a micro perspective, utilizing alumni's professional experiences in a one-on-one format where they can engage in knowledge-sharing was recommended as a way to expand the impact of current students. Through mentoring and virtual chat options on the OBC website, students can have opportunities to build individual relationships with students throughout their time in the program. During student interviews, participants expressed that there was a lack of personal connection to the alumni. Alumni also acknowledged a desire to become mentors during their time in the program. The action research team believes this is a significant value add for the department, students, and the college.

The first year of the ambassador program was focused on engaging current students. The team took a closer look at areas where ambassadors could be involved in recruiting prospective students. While still utilizing their experience as a point of reference, ambassadors would begin

to share their knowledge and expertise with prospective students. Prospective student information sessions are held weekly and are hosted by the recruitment team. These events expose students to what they can expect from the university and how they would be supported early on before arriving at the college and in many cases, for our international students, the country.

When exploring the macro approach to utilizing alumni skills to add value and drive program initiatives the recommendation is to include career development efforts to ambassador responsibilities. This would be done in the form of career fairs, and career recruitment events. Adding career events as an official option for alumni to engage further captures the interests of students as career exploration is one of the most popular resources available to current students at OBC. Graduate students at OBC engage in these events with hopes of starting new careers, elevating in current roles, and even if international, achieving sponsorships that will allow them to work in the United States permanently.

Implications for Practice

Recommendation 1: Post-graduate Institutions Should Establish a Model for Graduate Student Involvement.

The next step in creating a vibrant alumni ambassador community is to create an engagement structure at a graduate level. This engagement model would introduce an environment for graduate students that intentionally connects them to the current alumni ambassador program through the categorical association of areas such as community building, leadership development, applied knowledge, and service that exposes graduate students across the program portfolio to a unique but signature experience. Developing this structure will build a culture that is exclusive to students at OBC.

Establishing a cultural identity with students in the 12-24 months that they have to connect with the institution is a challenge, but necessary for students to connect to the culture. Lewis et al. (2015) wrote, “Students who were involved and engaged with their institution were able to identify with the institution they were attending. Further, it was easier for students to become involved when they identified with the college environment.” (p.10). Establishing this early in onboarding events such as orientation allows students to successfully integrate into the community.

Recommendation 2: Create a student ambassador program that can be a direct line to alumni volunteerism.

Throughout this study graduate students at OBC have indicated through interviews and surveys that their involvement and interaction with alumni have influenced their plans to give back to the institution. The opportunity to develop a new community of current students who experience serving their community before they graduate can create a natural transition into their service as an alumni ambassador. The benefit to graduate students who lack social skills and leadership experience amongst peers will have new experiences that will impact them post-graduation. Student ambassador programs equip current students with confidence, communication, and interpersonal skills while enrolled and post-graduation (Gannon, et al., 2018).

Implementing a student ambassador program would include teams from across departments, including the student involvement team, career resources team, and recruiting. The development of this program should follow the action research methodology ensuring that there is a collaborative effort that allows each area to address the areas of need that will assist in the integration of the students at OBC. These events include leadership development workshops,

orientations, student panels, etc. The buy-in of stakeholders is also essential to the program's sustainability. The research team, with support from leadership, can serve programs that can also provide programming across the graduate student population.

Study Limitations

The limitations presented in this study are common to the action research methodology and higher education. As the team action research team was formed, several resisting forces were acknowledged during the construction phase and planning phase that limited the reach and analysis of the study. Access to existing data, financial support, staff turnover, and time constraints were key factors during the project.

University data is often a sensitive topic in colleges and universities as alumni information is protected by the institution in advancement offices for solicitation efforts. In this study, the action research team established a relationship with the fundraising office and received confirmation that there was support for the development of an alumni ambassador program at OBC. This support was limited to promotion, without releasing a list of alumni to invite to the program. During implementation, staff turnover left the advancement office with vacancies that made it difficult to deviate from internal tasks, which forced the AR team to rely on its forms of communication and self-generated data for an effective launch of the program.

Staff turnover is described as the great resignation, due to the increase in the labor force that has quit their positions or industries during the Covid-19 pandemic (Schmiedehaus et al., 2023). OBC staff and the action research team reflected this trend as 50 percent of the team resigned in the project's first year. Although the AR team found replacements from a variety of student service department teams, the initial cohesion that was established during cycles 1 and 2, needed to be reconstructed.

With the departure of the student involvement team director and action research team member, the development of the ambassador program experienced a shift in financial support as the program grew from 27 ambassadors to 70 ambassadors at the start of its third year.

Budgetary constraints and multiple organizational structure changes have indirectly affected the ambassador program, with the new team organizing a different approach to engaging alumni in cost-efficient ways. The quality of the program and its effect on current students may be impacted significantly without additional support from the college's fundraising office.

Final Reflections

As I approach the end of this dissertation, I reflect on structure and the importance of following a process. The beginning of the study was introduced at an unprecedented time, during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although it was an unfamiliar environment in higher education, my familiarity with OCB and the system allowed me to construct a project that could withstand restraining forces that may be presented during the study.

The design of the ambassador program was influenced by stakeholders, the overall environment, and the action research team. The team organically came together to create a sustainable program that would impact our students and our alumni. The structure of that action research cycle allowed me to guide the team once the vision was collectively developed. There was apprehension from the group at points in the study due to a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment. The pace of the cycle phases and the research techniques associated with the construction of the project were also a hurdle that would influence me to approach the delivery of the project tasks practically.

The theories associated with this project, social exchange, student involvement, and student integration theories, created the necessary framework to explore the relationship between current

graduate business students and alumni. There have already been members of the study and former participants who have come back and volunteered as alumni. Their journey from their respective graduate programs to becoming active alumni is still a developing story that can be told as they advance in their industry.

The opportunity to lead this effort has allowed me to grow professionally. While developing the program I was promoted within the department, which resulted in selecting and leading the student involvement team. This team continues to be responsible for the direction and evolution of the program, as two of the remaining four members of the program's development team are instrumental in the program's success. Although the need for an ambassador program was evident, the realization of this resource has benefited all teams in the department and continues to empower alumni to stay engaged while influencing our students to stay involved during their program and as alumni.

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APPENDIX A

Table 2.4

Contract Meeting Questions and Client Responses

Contracting questions	Client responses
What do you think the problem is related to alumni engagement?	Two-fold. There's no official way to connect students to alumni. Nothing at all. No set way that we can connect. No staff position and alumni relations person. No way to keep alumni engaged. No good database, what they are doing for work, etc. We need to get our students in front of alumni.
Do you foresee any resistance to addressing this issue?	The stakeholders we will need to engage with are the development office. It doesn't have an alumni relations office.
What would you like me to do?	

How do you see yourself being involved?	Creating a large database of alumni to constantly contribute. Set program-specific programs for alumni. Ambassador program. Incentives for alumni. We cannot be an alumni relations team.
What are your expectations of me and how we work toward the solution of this issue?	The overall execution of this project, the liaison with other offices. Project manager
If you disagree with any of the approaches of the team, how do you want to address it?	The project manager, along with everyone involved, knows what they need. Zoom calls and meetings and talking it out.
What level of confidentiality is expected?	We would stay FERPA compliant by using our own data.
How do you want to approach how my role in this project is communicated to the team?	Set aside in the team meeting time framework proposal. Then, make sure administration (Brian) and development are looped in.
How do we know when we have succeeded?	A selection process of how we get them or open it up. 50% of the total alumni enrolled in the program participate in the ask of student services.

APPENDIX B

Table 2.6

Alumni Focus Group Insights

Focus Group Question	Aligned Research Question	Poll Options	Alumni Comments
What is your biggest motivation for volunteering as an alumnus?	RQ2	Building an alumni relationship with the college/university Assist as a resource for students.	Valuable to share personal experiences, helping them to avoid mistakes and use resources

		Giving back to my program	
		Other	
If you were asked to join the Graduate Ambassador Program, how long would you expect to commit to participating?	RQ3	One Semester	Committing on a yearly basis makes it more flexible, but potentially, it has an option for both.
		One Academic Year (2-4 events)	
		Multiple Years (4-8 Events)	
		Other	
In what capacity would you like to volunteer your time?	RQ3	Speaking engagements (Panel, Event Host, Guest Speaker, etc.)	Workshop facilitator gives an understanding of what opportunities exist. i.e., highlight how a subject matter may show up in ways you least expect
		Student Interaction (Networking, Resource/Career Fair, etc.)	
		Workshop facilitator (Software, Professional Development, etc.)	
		Other	
How would you describe your experience as an alumnus of OCB?	RQ3	Active- Good Experience	I've had a really exceptional experience as well. I've always felt really appreciated that I do keep getting these invitations to come back and return.
		Somewhat Active- More Engagement Experiences Desired	
		Not Active	
What is your comfort level with virtual vs in-person events?	RQ3	In-person	Based more on distance, the most impactful large events can be in-person
		Virtually Only	
		Comfortable with either or both formats	

APPENDIX C

Table 2.10*Data Sources and Themes*

Codes	Data Source	Source Material
Alumni Engagement: Motivation	Alumni Focus Group Transcript	Alumnus 1: It's valuable for me to share my personal experiences and any mistakes that I've made along the way. I hope that they would learn from them and not make the same mistakes as well. Alumnus 2: It would be most advantageous, especially to

Student Engagement

Alumni Focus Group Transcript

Staff Focus Group Transcript

minority male students, just for them to be able to see how successful one could be working on a full-time job and be able to successfully complete the program.

Alumnus 3: It's vital to have somebody that's been through the program to be able to engage with the students or the people that are so in the mash and the daily, you know, minutiae of the program to be able to reach out and discuss and debrief what's working, what's not working.

Matthew: Were you introduced to graduate student government (GSG) while you were in the MBA program? Or did you know about it prior?

Alumnus 4: Yes, it was in the MBA program. So, I think it was one of the student engagement newsletters that went out advertising that, you know, positions were open. And so, I just submitted it.

Alumnus 2: And I'll just say (Alumnus 4) was the president right before I came on board on GSG. So yes, he was the president, then (Alumnus 5) became the president.

Laura: It sounds like student government is our head-hunting ground for you.

Alumnus 2: GSG, that's how I began; I'm telling you all the speaking engagements, it was really prepared by GSG. It catapulted me into many opportunities

John: It's something that I

Learning (Individual, Group,
Organization)

Staff Focus Group Transcript

talked about in the recruitment phase, and kind of setting that expectation that there is involvement and then maybe that we can utilize those people that we've already identified as case competition participants, student organization participants, you know if they are on GSG, all these organizations across the graduate portfolio

Matthew: So, what is our biggest problem when it comes to alumni engagement?

Iris: Organizationally, I think on top of that, there are silos. So, we haven't figured out, like, what's the common value to come together to work together on this issue, to break down some of those silos in terms of who's protecting that data that we need to be effective.

Whitney: It just looked as if we didn't value [alumni engagement], or we just did an oversight of thinking, well, do we really need it? So that's one thing. I'm curious about why leadership didn't feel as if we should have an alumni segment within our college.

Matthew: Do you think [the problem] is that alumni haven't been approached?

John: I've had several alumni reach out to me on LinkedIn, and I think it's the approach and what you're asking for or how you frame that so that you set a clear expectation. And I think as long as there's a clear expectation, I haven't had one person to turn me down.

Relationship

Staff Focus Group Transcript

Alumni Focus Group Transcript

Whitney: My initial thing would be we're just we don't ask; we just don't ask [alumni to participate].

Alumnus 2: I have nothing but good things to say about my experience as an alumnus. I mean, just even after graduating my communication and engagement with just, I'm not going to start calling names, but just certain individuals who know who they are just have been encouraging and just the opportunities afforded to me on a professional level, and just even with my professional advancement, just remaining abreast and communication with me and just continuing to be in contact with me as I continue to excel in my professional journey, and continuing to remain just in constant contact with me as I continue in my quest has just been most encouraging.

Alumnus 4: I would say the same I think maybe I'm in a little bit more of a special position as well because of being President of the GSG and everything like that. I've maintained a lot of connections in that way. And, of course, Rachel is a friend of mine. So, I've maintained close relationships with OBC pretty much since I graduated. So, I definitely would say it's been above excellent just because I have that connection to not only the university but also the individuals that are in there.

Service

Staff Focus Group Transcript

Matthew: We never really had a strong [alumni] pool to choose from. And I was wondering why that was because since I've been here, O'Brien Business School, we always had over 1000 Students enrolled every year. And now it's grown too close to 1400.

Beverley Smith: We reached out to them. Like someone else said about the younger alumni are the ones are still kind of busy trying to get settled in their position. So, some of them were like, *well, I would, but I don't I have this other obligation, so they can't*. So that is kind of a barrier for them.

Matthew: Two things. So do we think that it's because we're so sporadic and non-ask that we don't allow enough time for, you know, recent alumni to, to really engage like, you know, we may reach out, so say in three weeks, we need you, but three weeks, is hectic.

Also, the pride that was mentioned, does that exist with graduate program graduates?

Beverly Smith: I think more of undergrad, I think more undergrad students probably have their pride of their school in the alma mater. But for me, even when I reached out, I tried to do it at least a month in advance. But even you know, in corporate you can have meetings put on your calendar the same day? If not, you know. So that's kind of the issue, I think, with them. But I mean, I think a month is a good

enough time in advance. But I don't know.

APPENDIX D

Table 3.6

Action Research Team Post-Program Interviews

Interview question	Team Member	Key Insights
Describe your experience on the action research team.	John Rinehart	Rewarding and collaborative experience. Opportunities for Problem-solving and creating something sustainable and impactful.
	Laura Early	Project encouraged collaboration throughout the process. Team member departures caused a shift in the overall execution of the process.
	Whitney Casey	Collaboration on the team with great synergy from vision to launch. Strategic process that created an impact on students

What have you learned personally through our action research process while developing the alumni ambassador program?	John Rinehart	Valuable insight from alumni regarding what they are comfortable with, and how to better utilize them in the recruitment process.
	Laura Early	Effective planning and strategy. The process was intentional, and the goals were clear with a path that would lead to results.
	Whitney Casey	A strategic and patient approach to the process is beneficial to the team.
How would you describe the team's role in developing the alumni ambassador program?	John Rinehart	Identifying the purpose so it can be communicated to alumni, students, and staff. Intricate data collection and interpretation through surveys and focus groups. Creating a plan of action. Team execution is possible with strategy, vision, and plan.
	Laura Early	Established roles based on individual strengths. Effective communication and execution
	Whitney Casey	Roles were selected by team members based on their passion and skill sets. The team was cohesive based on familiarity.
What do you believe was learned at a department level during the change process?	John Rinehart	OBC lacked a vision about how to engage alumni before GAP. The program helped the department create that sense of belonging and connection between our current students and our alumni. Program visibility and reputation are essential.
	Laura Early	Knowing the value of a graduate ambassador program for alumni and students. Cost-efficient way to keep students engaged (volunteering for alumni). Scope, potential of growth.
	Whitney Casey	The department learned the scope of the program and how it could be beneficial to each team's initiatives (Recruitment, Student Involvement, Career development).
What would you say you learned about the college during this process?	John Rinehart	Support from leadership exists for students even after they graduate and transition to alumni. There is a long-term investment by the institution in its students and alumni.
	Laura Early	A linear process developed into a mission, into a vision, into outcomes. The action research process

was proactive instead of reactive.

Whitney Casey Red tape still exists in public institutions. Buy-in from across different teams was vital to the development of the program. Support from leadership is necessary to cut through the red tape.
