

Alumni Perceptions of Their Alma Mater of a Public University in

Ghana

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to examine alumni perceptions of their alma mater, thus University of Education, Winneba – Kumasi Campus (UEW-K) in Ghana. The study was a cross-sectional survey of 750 respondents using structured questionnaire personally administered. A usable 408 questionnaire were returned, representing 54.5% response rate and analysed using SPSS Version 20.0. The study found six (6) items highly rated by the alumni as activities carried out by their alma mater, with the highest being academic programs. Additionally, the alumni rated highly four (4) items they perceived as values they received from the university, with the highest being the qualification they obtained from the university. Furthermore, three (3) items were highly rated by the alumni as their willingness to give to their alma mater, with the highest being the desire to give. Recommendations are also made to management of the university to put in place the necessary measures to improve their activities. This paper contributes to the body of knowledge in the area of management and administration in higher education.

Keywords: Alma Mater, Alumni, Giving, Higher Education, Management, Perception, University

1. Introduction

Education at all levels has never been more essential to the well-being of the global community. Yet, educational institutions face an increasing challenging environment in which to attract students, faculty and benefactors as well as to earn alumni allegiance, government support and public respect. Today, higher education milieu demands attention to specific ways that college activities influence those who attend. Thus, the effects of college experiences on students have long been of interest to educational researchers and higher education administrators.

There is increased pressure on educational institutions to assess their program effectiveness (Richter & Ruebling, 2003, p.179). Consequently, the impact of higher education on our society is vast and includes many stakeholders such as legislators, policy makers, students, parents, faculty, employers, industry representatives, accrediting bodies, and the general public (Borden, 2005). These stakeholders have a vested interest in the outcomes produced by higher education and the success of graduates, and they are also demanding a greater degree of accountability (Escobar, 2008). One of the most important groups of stakeholders is alumni because they are able to provide feedback on their perceptions and satisfaction with a college or university activities, which can be used to gauge the effectiveness of the College or university.

The word alumni mean an institution's graduates and former students (Ransdell, 1989). The concept of alumni relations dates back to 1792 when Yale alumni designed an organization tied to class structures to communicate and inform alumni (Webb, 1989). Since then, alumni programs have continued to remain a viable part of higher education institutions while evolving into their present day form (McAdoo, 2010). Alumni relations with their colleges and universities seek to generate interest that eventually translates into financial contributions and volunteer service, which means giving back to their alma mater what it has invested in them. Sun, Hoffman and Grady (2007) explained that US higher education institutions improved fund raising results overall in 2006 by 9.4 percent or \$ 2.4 billion increase from that of 2005.

Earlier researchers (Bauer & Bennett, 2001; Cavazos, 2000; Landrum, Hettich & Wilner, 2010; McAdoo, 2010) from Universities in developed countries, especially, U.S have conducted research on the perception of alumni in relation to their alma mater. Bauer and Bennett (2001) studied the alumni perceptions used to assess undergraduate research experience at the University of Delaware. Cavazos (2000) studied “gauging alumni perceptions of the effectiveness of the masters of public administration program” at South Texas University. Landrum *et al.* (2010) investigated the alumni perceptions of workforce readiness at Boise State University. McAdoo (2010) determined the factors affecting the institutional perception of alumni at the University of Arkansas. However, not many studies have being conducted in Universities of developing countries context, especially, in Ghana where University of Education, Winneba (UEW) is no exception.

UEW was established by the University of Education, Winneba, Act 672 on May 14, 2004. It was originally established by PNDC Law 322 (1992) as the University College of Education of Winneba (UCEW) through the

amalgamation of seven diploma awarding institutions, *viz*: the Specialist Training College, the Advanced Teacher Training College, the National Academy of Music - all located at Winneba; the School of Ghana Languages, Ajumako; College of Special Education, Mampong-Akwapim; St. Andrews Training College, Mampong-Ashanti and the Advanced Technical Teacher College, Kumasi. The University has four Campuses: the Winneba Campus, the Kumasi Campus, the Mampong- Ashanti Campus and the Ajumako Campus. This study focused on the alumni perceptions of their alma mater at Kumasi Campus.

The University of Education, Winneba – Kumasi Campus (UEW-K) has produced thousands of graduates who are contributing at different sectors of Ghana’s economy, especially in education. There is therefore the need to find out their perceptions and desire to give to their alma mater. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to examine the alumni perceptions of their alma mater. This study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To determine the experiences of the alumni on the activities of the University.
2. To find out the perception of the alumni about what they received from the University.
3. To find out the willingness of the alumni to give to their alma mater.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Alumni experience

Alumni experience is alumni perceptions of their interactions with their alma maters after graduation (Sun *et al.*, 2007). Alumni programs bring alumni input to campus for assessing quality and effectiveness in addition to relaying alumni interests and needs to campus leadership (Miles & Miller, 2000). Alumni experience is relevant in assessing the quality of services provided by their alma mater, as also expressed by Bauer and Bennett (2001) that colleges and universities are increasingly calling upon alumni to provide critical assessments of the institution’s performance in preparing students to lead productive and rewarding lives. Dellow and Romano (2002) postulate that the outcomes approach to alumni assessment rests on the assumption that institutional quality and effectiveness can be appraised on what alumni have accomplished in the years following degree completion.

Escobar (2008) opined that alumni can give an institution useful feedback on how well it is doing its job and their satisfaction with the school. Parkyn (1991) notes that a continued effort at measuring the perceptions of alumni shows them that they are still a valued constituent for the college and permits current students to benefit from the insights gathered via such a study. In addition, Purezer and Rooney (2002) assert that alumni surveys are utilized to refine the goals, and methods in the educational enterprise. Furthermore, alumni surveys are commonly used to determine postgraduate outcomes, to obtain feedback on program effectiveness, and to fulfill accreditation requirements (Borden 2005). Alumni feedback is important because it can highlight an institution’s strengths and weaknesses in order to promote and improve performance, make students and the general public see what graduates of the institution experienced while in school, and ensure transparency in the institution.

Finding the relationship between college experiences and alumni behaviour could provide insight into community participation, charitable and other behaviour desired for college alumni and citizens in general. This insight could be used by colleges and universities to promote experience related to positive behaviour outcomes. Thus, better understanding the relationship between college experience and alumni behaviours is very important both to management of higher education and to the public at large.

2.2 Alumni giving

College and university alumni play important roles in supporting higher education. This support is most visible in the area of charitable giving (Weerts, Cabrera & Sanford, 2010). In 2007, U.S colleges and universities raised an estimated \$29 billion in private gifts, and approximately 28% of this total came from alumni (Council for Aid to Education, 2008). Charitable giving for higher education is increasingly important as the share of state support for public colleges and universities continues to decline. Due to the pressure to increase philanthropic support for higher education, research on alumni has focused almost exclusively on giving (Lofton, 2005; Shim, 2001; Patouillet, 2000).

An argument exists that alumni who were treated favorably as students, who were satisfied with their academic experiences, and who believe their college education contributed to their career success are more inclined to give as alumni than those with less favorable feelings and beliefs (Sun *et al.*, 2007). Alumni, who are satisfied with their educational experiences or feel a positive emotional attachment to the institution, will be more likely to contribute, as evidence by several studies (Patouillet, 2000). When examining alumni in a fundraising context, a higher education institution undoubtedly has a pre-established relationship with the donor and does not face some of the challenges other organization may face (McAdoo, 2010). As people identify themselves by their association with an organization they will be more inclined to support fundraising activities and be motivated to be a donor (Mann, 2007).

The reasons for alumni giving include ideals of helping the next generation, improving the community,

desiring to make a positive impact, feeling obligated to help, or grateful to the institution with a desire to give back, among others. It is logical that one would desire to give to worthy causes that get results. Alumni, who give to their alma mater, generally believe that their donations will make a difference, meet an institutional need and be used in an effective manner (Diamond & Kashyap, 1997). Quality student affairs services (Graham & Gisi, 2000), social involvement and fulfilling peer relationships (Volkwein & Carbone, 1994), and quality faculty interaction and instruction (Graham & Gisi, 2000) are additional reasons for alumni giving.

3. Methodology

The design used for this study was that of survey which relied on questionnaire to generate data for the analysis. The study was to examine the alumni perceptions of their alma mater. The population of the study consisted of all alumni of UEW-K who came to the academic section of the University campus in 2011/2012 academic year to collect document such as certificate, transcript, result slip, letter of introduction, attestation, among others. A self-administered, structured questionnaire was developed and pre-tested to a sample of twenty five (25) alumni. Adjustments were made based on the pre-test to get a more effective instrument. After that the questionnaire was finally administered to the alumni through personal contact by researchers for nearly one year. The researchers assured the respondents of anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. Since high predictive validity was a major concern, a five-point Likert scale was used. The Likert scale ranged from very poor to very good for alumni rating on activities of their university, and Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree for alumni rating on what they received from their alma mater and alumni rating on their willingness to give to their alma mater, which were rated 1 to 5 respectively. In all, the measurement items for the three constructs had 20 items that were derived from previous studies and modified within the context of developing country as shown in Table 1. The questionnaire also contained respondents' demographic data: gender, age group, programme studied, mode of study offered and year of completion. Out of 750 questionnaires distributed, 408 were returned representing 54.4% returning rate. The reliability co-efficient (Cronbach's alpha) determined to be 0.732. Such a reliability value, according to Livingstone (1985), was a fair indication of a good internal consistency and that the instrument was fairly reliable.

Table 1: Constructs and measurement items

Constructs	Code	Measurement items	No. of Items
Activities of the University	AU1	Sporting activities	8
	AU2	Preparation for future academic study	
	AU3	Staff attitude towards students	
	AU4	Social interaction	
	AU5	Examination conduct	
	AU6	Instruction quality	
	AU7	Processing of document	
	AU8	Academic programs	
What alumni received from the university	FA9	I felt valued as an individual in the college	6
	FA10	I felt the university took an interest in me	
	FA11	Am satisfied with services I received when processing my document	
	FA12	I felt part of the university community	
	FA13	I am proud of the qualification I obtained	
	FA14	The college really prepared me for the world of work	
Alumni readiness to give to their alma mater	AD15	I consider it important to give to my alma mater	6
	AD16	My alma mater has other sources, they do not need my money	
	AD17	I am not currently able to give to my alma mater	
	AD18	I have the desire to give to my alma mater	
	AD19	My alma mater needs my giving to support its' activities	
	AD20	I might give to my alma mater in the future	

The responses from the structured questionnaire were analysed using SPSS 16.0 version to determine the perceptions of alumni concerning their experiences and willingness to give to their alma mater. The mean rating of each of the three sub-groups (construct) for each item and the corresponding resultant mean rating were computed. Thereafter, the computed mean ratings were compared with the theoretical mean rating (assuming normal distribution of responses) of 4.000 to determine the level of agreement or otherwise of what the alumni

received from their university and their willingness to give to their alma were favourable or not. Any computed mean of an item relating to the activities of the university exceeding 4.000 indicated expression of highly rated activity. Similarly, any computed mean of an item exceeding 4.000 indicated an expression of positive perception, while mean values below 4.000 indicated expression of low rated perception.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Respondents' demographics

The characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic profile of respondents (n = 408)

Category	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	262	64.2
Female	146	35.8
<i>Age</i>		
≤ 25 years	12	2.9
26 – 35 years	262	64.2
36 – 45 years	112	27.5
46 – 55 years	20	4.9
≥ 56 years	2	0.5
<i>Programme Studied</i>		
Technology/Voctech	76	18.7
ICT	26	6.4
Accounting Studies	78	19.1
Secretarial Management	52	12.7
Diploma in Education	176	43.1
<i>Mode of Study Offered</i>		
Full Time	134	32.9
Part-Time/Evening	98	24.0
Sandwich	176	43.1
<i>Year of Completion</i>		
≤ 2008	52	12.7
2009	18	4.4
2010	66	16.2
2011	226	55.4
2012	46	11.3

For the characteristics of the respondents, in terms of gender, 64.2% of the respondents were males and 35.8% were females, implying that majority of the respondents were males. 2.9% of the respondents were equal or below 25 years, 64.2% were between the ages of 26 and 35 years, 27.5% were between 36 and 45 years, 4.9% were between 46 and 55 while 0.5% were equal or above 56 years. This implies that majority (91.7%) of the respondents were between the ages of 26 and 45 years. In terms of program of study, 18.7% studied technology and vocational technical related courses, 6.4% studied information and communication technology (ICT) related courses, 19.1% studied accounting study related courses, 12.7% studied secretarial management related courses while 43.1% studied diploma in education. This means that most of the respondents who participated in the study were diploma in education graduates. For the mode of study the respondents offered, 32.9% were full time students, 24% were part-time or evening students while 43.1% were sandwich students. 12.7% of the respondents completed their study in 2008 and below, 4.4% completed in 2009, 16.2% completed in 2010, 55.4% completed in 2011 while 11.3% completed in 2012.

4.2 Alumni experiences on the activities of the university

In addressing the first objective, respondents were asked to rate the activities/items of the university on the scale of very poor to very good in the Table 3, base on their experience during the period of their study. The results obtained are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Alumni rating on activities of their university

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Ranking
Academic programs	4.441	0.587	1 st
Instruction quality	4.250	0.544	2 nd
Examination conduct	4.235	0.776	3 rd
Social interaction	4.176	0.633	4 th
Staff attitude towards students	4.166	0.729	5 th
Preparation for future academic study	4.078	0.675	6 th
Processing of document	3.750	0.925	7 th
Sporting activities	3.549	0.888	8 th

With reference to Table 2, academic programs was ranked at first (1st) position with mean rating of 4.441 as the activity the university placed much attention on and handled very well during the period of their study. This was followed by instruction quality which was ranked second (2nd) position with mean rating of 4.250. Examination conduct was ranked third (3rd) with mean rating of 4.235, and at the fourth (4th) ranked position was social interaction with mean rating of 4.176. Next was staff attitude towards students which was ranked fifth (5th) with mean rating of 4.166, followed by preparation for future academic study at sixth (6th) position with mean rating of 4.078. These were the activities that were rated by the alumni. However, activities such as processing of students' document and sporting events were given low rating with mean ratings of 3.750 at seventh (7th) and 3.549 at eight (8th) positions respectively. These ratings were based on the past students' experience during the period of their study in the university.

Academic program is one of the important activities of any college or university; it forms part of faculty's activities that are assessed for the purpose of accreditation. Faculty performance is therefore an area that is frequently addressed in the accreditation process for many programs. This means academic program is relevant in the assessment of alumni perceptions of their alma mater, and thus, received the highest rating by the alumni. This is in line with Escobar (2008) assertion that faculty performance is a component typically mentioned in alumni surveys as well as in mission statements. Another issue that drives the performance of a faculty and seen as relevant activity of any college or university is instruction quality. The quality of instruction is underpinned by the quality of teaching staff, availability of resources such as well equipped library, laboratory, workshops, quality classrooms, computer and internet access, among others. In the view of Escobar (2008), faculty have a big influence in shaping the education of college students; they are supposed to be knowledgeable of the material that they teach, and have an interest in students' academic success.

Examination conduct determines the credibility of the certificate issued by any college or university and also predicts the performance of the graduates in their future world of work. If the conduct of examination of any institution is compromised, the image of the institutions is also compromised. For example if the conduct of examination is poor, a student who obtained a first class honors in one institution when employed by an organization, may perform poorly than those with lower class from other institution. This situation will raise questions about the credibility of the institution's certificate and quality of academic work.

Social interaction is another issue of the activities of any institution due to the fact that students not only supposed to acquire the skills in their chosen field of study but also to acquire the skills of interacting with their environment and the elements in it. Understanding people we interact with and being able to coexist with them harmoniously are part of the skills and knowledge institutions impart onto their graduates. Therefore, social or extracurricular activities should be promoted by colleges and universities. Pascarella and Terrenzini (1991) opined that student involvement in extracurricular activities during college years is seen by many as an integral part of a college education, associated with degree completion and increased student learning.

However, in this study, the alumni rated sporting activities in the university low, which means the promotion of sporting activities in the university is below the expectation of the students. Indeed sports is one social activity that most student are involved directly or indirectly, and also helps to raise fund from the alumni and other organizations for any college or university. Another item that was rated low by the alumni was processing of document, thus, the time for which student have to wait to receive document such as certificate, attestation, letter of recommendation, result slip, letter of introduction, among others after they have applied for it. Some of the respondents expressed that sometimes it takes about two to four weeks to receive such documents from the university. The delays in processing and issuing document to students can really be frustrating, especially when those documents are needed urgently for employment, promotion or application for further studies.

4.3 Alumni perception about what they received from the university

The ratings of the respondents on their perception about what they received from the university are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Alumni rating what they received from their university

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Ranking
I am proud of the qualification I obtained from the university	4.504	0.638	1 st
The university really prepared me for the world of work	4.451	0.571	2 nd
I felt valued as an individual in the university	4.279	0.623	3 rd
I felt part of the university community	4.264	0.663	4 th
Am satisfied with services I receive when processing my document	3.999	0.832	5 th
I felt the university took an interest in me	3.921	0.703	6 th

From the responses of the respondents in Table 4 on how the past students perceived what they received from the university, the first (1st) ranked item with mean rating of 4.504 was being proud of the qualification they obtained from the university. This was followed by how the university prepared them for the world of work which was ranked second (2nd) with means of 4.451. The next was how they felt valued in the university at third (3rd) position with mean of 4.279, and at fourth (4th) position with mean rating of 4.264 was how they felt part of the university community. These were the items the past students rated highly that they received from the university. On the other hand, the respondents rated their satisfaction with the service they received when processing their documents low at fifth (5th) position with mean rating of 3.999. This was followed by how the university took interest in them, which was ranked low at sixth (6th) position with mean rating of 3.921. These were alumni rating on what they received from their university.

Being proud of the certificate one received from any institution is a sign of satisfaction and value the institution has imparted onto the graduate. This item was the highest ranked on alumni perception on what they received from their alma mater. This is consistent with McAdoo (2010) assertion that the product of a higher education institution is the degree that certifies the credentials of its graduates. Any regret on the part of students for insufficient knowledge and skills acquired from their institution paints a negative impression on the image and credibility of that institution. In the view of Bauer and Bennett (2001), a common consensus of the measure for quality of such an education is the value added approach in which the capabilities and knowledge of the students as a result of education is the measure of quality. Another important issue is the graduates perceiving that their institution really prepared them sufficiently for the world of work. This depicts that the graduates are able to fit into their work position after graduation due to the knowledge and preparation they obtained from their college or university. After all, the colleges or the universities exist to prepare the students who attend it for the world of work. This is the core mandate of any educational training institution. It is therefore not out of order for the alumni to rate highly that they felt valued as individuals in the university and also felt part of the university community.

On the other hand, the alumni rated low the services they receive when processing their documents. This reinforces the earlier issue of delays in processing and issuing to students the documents they request from the university, be it certificate, attestation, letter of recommendation, result slip, letter of introduction, among others. Because of alumni dissatisfaction on this issue they further rated low the issue of the university taking interest in them. They have a genuine case that if the university has interest in them, they will see to the speedily responding to their request of any information they need from the university.

4.4 Alumni willingness to give to their alma mater

In soliciting the desire of the alumni to give to their alma mater, the respondents were asked to rate their opinion on the items in Table 5. The responses of the respondents are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Alumni rating of their willingness to give to their alma mater

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Ranking
I have the desire to give to my alma mater	4.308	0.867	1 st
I might give to my alma mater in the future	4.264	0.692	2 nd
My alma mater needs my giving to support its' activities	4.044	0.756	3 rd
I consider it important to give to my alma mater	3.975	0.711	4 th
I am not currently able to give to my alma mater	3.696	0.927	5 th
My alma mater has other sources, they do not need my money	3.225	0.825	6 th

From Table 5, it can be seen that respondents want to give to their alma mater was ranked first (1st) with mean rating of 4.308, which was followed by might give to alma mater in future at second (2nd) position with mean rating of 4.264. Next, was my alma mater needs my giving to support its' activities at third (3rd) position with mean rating of 4.044. These items received high rating from the alumni having mean ratings higher than 4.000. However, the respondents considering it important to give to their alma mater was ranked fourth (4th) with mean rating of 3.975. At the fifth (5th) position was the respondent not currently able to give to their alma mater, which received mean rating of 3.696, and at the sixth (6th) position with mean rating of 3.225 was respondent view that their alma mater has other sources to generate income and therefore do not need their money. These items received low rating from the respondents.

The alumni want to give to their alma mater was the highest rated item of the alumni willingness to give. This is an indication that the alumni have the mind of giving to the support of the university. The intention to give is the initial stage of giving in support of any worthy course, however, not all those who have the intention to give will carry out their intention. This is confirmed by the second highest rated item that the alumni opined they might give to their alma mater in the future, implying it is not conclusive they will all give. As expressed by Bila (1999), alumni who feel that their educational experience was vital in their present success and have a sense of pride in their degree will more likely invest their time and money back in the institution. The recognition of the alumni that their alma mater needs their giving to support its' activities is a good perception that could encourage the graduates to give in support of their alma mater. The above are indication of willingness of the alumni to give to their university. Higher education institutions' reliance on fundraising activities and endowment proceeds has moved beyond being additional support for excellence, to being an essential part of funding for survival (Bila, 1999).

In contrast, what seems to be a threat of alumni giving to their alma mater is the alumni perceiving that their alma mater has other sources, and therefore do not need their money. When the graduates have such perception, hardly will they give to support the activities of the institution they attended. This might be due to the fact that the graduates are currently not able to give to their alma mater because they are not employed, and therefore not in position to contribute financially to support the institution. In other vein, there is the possibility of the graduates to give in future when they gain employment.

5. Recommendation

Based on the above findings and discussion, the researchers recommend that the university management should see to the promotion of sporting activities in the institution since the alumni perceived the promotion of sporting activities in the university to be low. This is important because sport is one of the socialization activities which are dear to the heart of students. In addition, the university management and staff should put in place the necessary measures to fast track the process involved in preparing and issuing documents such as certificate, attestation, letter of recommendation, result slip, letter of introduction, among others to students. This is because the alumni perceived that there are delays in receiving the document(s) they apply for from the university. Timely receipt of documents by graduates from the university is of essence, and therefore, should be improved. Finally, we recommend that future researchers should consider investigating the alumni perceptions on programs, course structure and content of their alma mater.

6. Conclusion

Assessment of alumni perceptions of the institution they attended is very important in appraising and evaluating the performance of the institution for improvement, and must be encouraged. The purpose of this study was to examine the alumni perceptions of their alma mater (UEW-K). The study found academic programs, instruction quality, examination conduct, social interaction, staff attitude towards students and preparation for future academic study as highly rated activities carried out by their alma mater. Additionally, the alumni rated highly

the qualification they obtained from the university, preparation for the world of work, feeling valuable as individuals and being part of the university community as perceived values they received from the university. Furthermore, desire to give, might give in the future and the need to give in support of the activities of their alma mater were highly rated by the alumni as their willingness to give to the university. However, the alumni rated low items such as time for processing of document, sporting activities, not able to currently give, and their alma mater having other sources of funding and therefore do not need their money to support the activities of the university.

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