



NATURAL

Understanding
the four alumni personas—
Eagles, Hummingbirds,
Cheetahs, and Koalas—
and how to keep
them connected

INSTINCTS

BY DAVID WEERTS AND ALBERTO CABRERA

It is the first week of a new school year. The student union is adorned with brightly decorated tables promoting the vast array of student clubs and opportunities on campus. Students enter the union with anticipation as they think about their upcoming year and how to get plugged in on campus. While strolling through the student union, you might see students scooping up promotional materials while some are signing up for volunteering at the next table. Nearby, other students are scanning the bulletin boards for activism opportunities while their classmates are looking for school clubs to join. Amid this flurry of activity, most students are just walking by on their way to class.

Sound familiar? This scene not only describes the different pathways for students—it also describes the ways your alumni engage. Our decades-long research sheds light on how this typical fall day at your student union is instructive to understanding your segments of alumni and what you can learn about them to keep them connected.

Alumni Engagement Trajectory

We are professors in the field of higher education who study a broad range of topics, including college outcomes and alumni engagement. Our orientation to this work is both practical and theoretical. David served for four years as a major gifts officer at two large research institutions in the United States, and he now serves as a professor in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, U.S. During his 30-year faculty career, Alberto has examined pathways to college, the impact of college on students, and predictors of student success. He is now a professor at the University of Maryland, U.S.

We began our collaboration in the early 2000s at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, U.S., where we discovered our shared interests in examining the relationship between student experiences and future engagement as alumni.

Over the years, we have relied on quantitative data from American College Testing and a large U.S. research university to explore the trajectory of alumni engagement. We have posed a variety of research questions and have used multiple analytic techniques to answer our questions. We were fortunate (and are grateful) to be recognized for this work in 2010 and 2016 with CASE's H.S. Warwick Research Award in Alumni Relations for Educational Advancement.

What did we learn from this decades-long work? The seeds of alumni support are sown even prior to enrolling in college. We find that formative precollege experiences play an important role in shaping “pro-social” inclinations to help others or to serve the broader society—habits, mindsets, and dispositions that predict later support for one’s alma mater. Based on these early experiences, college students begin to sort themselves into four distinct categories that define their postcollege engagement (or disengagement) as alumni. We have termed these four categories Eagles, Cheetahs, Hummingbirds, and Koalas.

Eagles make up a small but powerful category of “super alumni” who are involved in college and later with their alma mater through a full range of volunteer and political advocacy activities.

Meanwhile, Cheetahs are heavily involved in political organizations in college and stay true to this work by supporting their alma mater through political advocacy.

Unlike Cheetahs, Hummingbirds stayed clear of politics both in and after college. As students, and now alumni, they put their energies into nonpolitical volunteer activities.

Koalas—like the final group of students described at the student union—were content to keep walking by in college and remain content to keep walking by after college.

Becoming Eagles, Hummingbirds, Cheetahs, and Koalas

Among the most important variables in predicting the most robust forms of engagement (Eagles and Hummingbirds) versus non-engagement (Koalas) is an individual’s early involvement in religious organizations. Another precollege marker that distinguishes



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between the engaged versus disengaged is whether the alumni were involved in leadership activities while in high school. We find that these two variables—involvement in religious organizations and leadership in high school—are pivotal experiences that predict involvement as college students and later as alumni. From these foundational experiences, we begin to see how the various animal types emerged in our data and were predicted by a variety of factors.

Eagles. Eagles are super-engaged students who turn into super-engaged alumni. In our opening scenario, they are the students at the union who signed up for every activity. As alumni, they are most likely to be involved in a full range of supportive behaviors on behalf of their alma maters, including political advocacy, volunteering as club leaders, recruiting students, mentoring, and making charitable gifts. Building on their early involvement in faith organizations and high school leadership, Eagles are likely to be involved in student government, political organizations, and a full range of volunteer activities in college. They are most likely to pursue



social majors such as psychology, education, and journalism, which the late psychologist John Holland suggested are the best fit for students who are collaborative, connected, and caring. Interestingly, we note that individuals in this group are not necessarily academic superstars. Eagles are shown to have lower scores on the ACT standardized test compared to the other categories. Yet our studies also suggest that this group tends to report the highest levels of income after graduation. Men are most likely to be categorized into this group.

Hummingbirds. Hummingbirds are “roll-up-your-sleeves” alumni eager to be alumni club officers, mentors, and recruiters. They fall just behind Eagles in their likelihood of giving to their alma maters. An interesting aspect of Hummingbirds is that they delib-

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erately stay clear of politics. Rather, they choose to focus their engagement on nonpolitical volunteerism such as community service.

These patterns of engagement are formed early on: Hummingbirds avoid political action in college and continue to avoid it as alumni. Hummingbirds are most likely to be enrolled in college majors such as accounting, economics, and mathematics. Related to Holland’s theory of vocational personalities, these



majors are the best fit for students who are efficient, well-organized, and methodical. Hummingbirds are more likely to be women, and they have the highest grade point averages across the four categories. They are also more likely to be involved with religious organizations after college.

Cheetahs. Cheetahs are a small group of alumni who limit their engagement to the sphere of political action. Among all alumni, they are most likely to write to a governor or legislators and to be involved on a political action team. Like the other animal groups, early experiences among Cheetahs are shown to be strong predictors of later engagement. While in college, Cheetahs are highly likely to be involved in student government, partisan political groups, and organizations that take a stand on political issues such as environmental organizations. As opposites to Hummingbirds, Cheetahs are very unlikely to be involved in nonpolitical volunteer or service activities.

Applied to our story of students at the union, Cheetahs were the students who were glued to the social activism opportunities. Cheetahs remain



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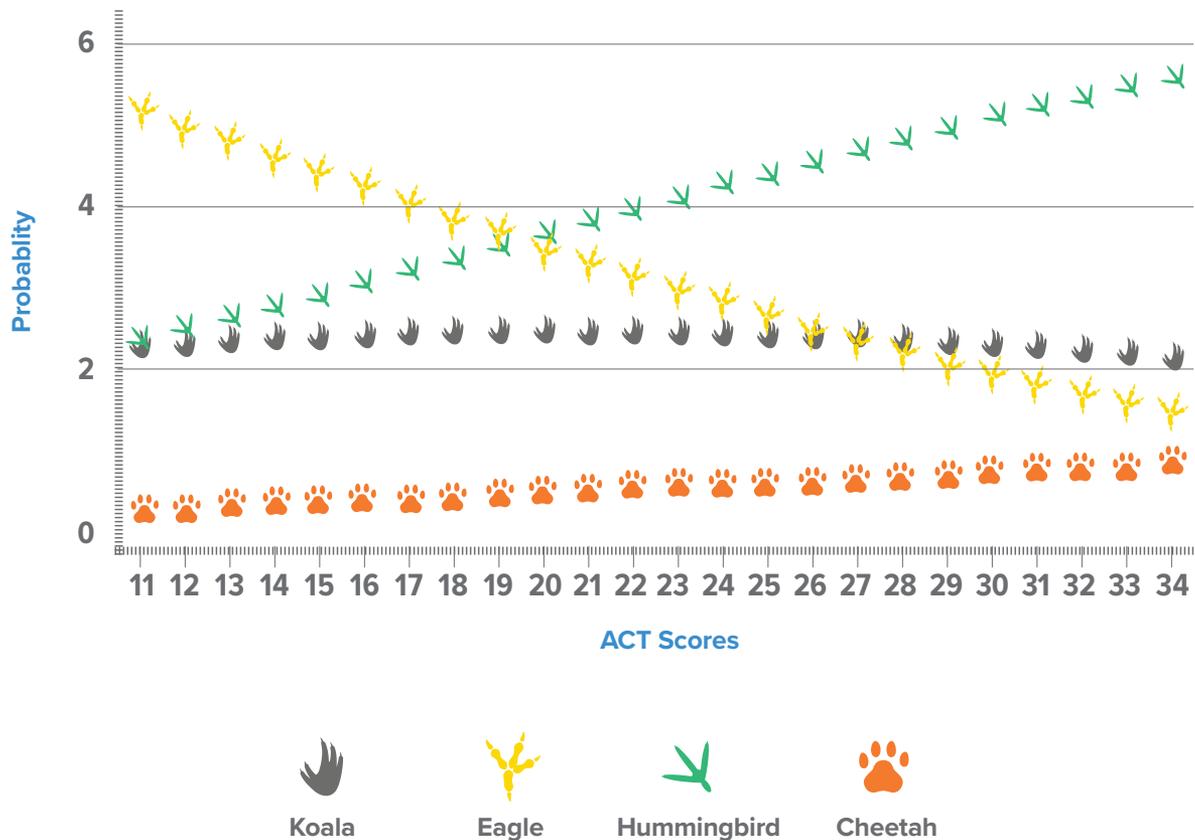


somewhat of a mystery in our research, since we are unable to predict them by college major, ACT score, and/or gender. However, their unique pattern of student and alumni involvement is clear and distinctive, suggesting that we need more research on Cheetahs.

Koalas. Koalas are alumni who are unlikely to support their alma maters in any form. Koalas are unlikely to be involved in religious organizations. However, we found two unique strands within the Koala category. One strand is prone to be involved in social and cultural activities in college and tends to have higher ACT scores than Eagles. Yet these attributes do not have staying power in predicting later-life engagement as alumni.

The other group of Koalas stay completely on the sidelines throughout their high school and college years. They are unlikely to be involved in pro-social experiences of any kind. While these two subgroups of Koalas are somewhat distinct in college, the end result is the same. Neither strand of Koala is likely to stay engaged with its alma mater in any form.

Probabilities of Class Membership Across ACT Scores



The Making of Engaged Alumni: Challenging Past Assumptions

As our animal groups emerged in our research, we saw some important findings that challenge conventional thinking in advancement practices. Most importantly, patterns of support and associated predictors may be more powerful indicators than motivations to give back to an institution where a graduate may have had a very positive experience (more formally known as social exchange theory). We make this claim from our early research with our UW-Madison colleague Justin Ronca, showing that many alumni reported having a positive experience in college, but far fewer actually supported their alma maters after graduation.

This finding indicates that early formative experiences that are pro-social in nature (as depicted by involvement in religious organizations in this study) may be critical to nurturing later-life support for one's alma mater.

A particularly important and encouraging finding is that the animal patterns that emerged were not predicted by socioeconomic status. We might guess that Eagles came from more affluent backgrounds than the other groups, and thus have more time and resources to be engaged. However, we found no evidence of income disparities across groups. Instead, disparities in engagement levels seemed most related to whether students had early exposure to organizations and experiences that gave them the mindsets, habits, skills, and confidence to engage in pro-social activities such as religious organizations, high schools, and colleges.

This finding relates to our research with Ronca showing that individuals who volunteer across multiple venues are the same people who are most likely to volunteer for their alma mater. In other words, certain groups of people develop an "other-centered" lifestyle (in contrast to a "self-centered" lifestyle) that manifests throughout their lifetimes. While our data did not

capture the influence of parents in these processes, previous literature tells us that family and peer influences are critical in forming pro-social dispositions and habits.

We were surprised to find that high flying Eagles actually had lower ACT scores than the other three groups. As depicted in Figure 1 (to the left), the probability of being an Eagle declines with increases in ACT score. We observed the opposite phenomenon among Hummingbirds. These findings raise questions about standardized testing as it relates to recruiting students who may make important contributions to your college, unrelated to their academic aptitude.

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In an era where institutions are increasingly driven by rankings connected to academic selectivity, how might higher education leaders think about the contributions of students who may not perform well on standardized tests?

Institutions help form citizens who are inclined to contribute to society in a variety of ways. Ultimately, these institutions form citizens who are also likely to be the most supportive and engaged alumni. In a time of declining confidence in institutions of all types, we advocate for making institutions stronger. Colleges and universities instill values, skills, and dispositions of other-centeredness. To be sure, we don't propose this focus as an underhanded scheme to increase alumni support for institutions, but rather to build strong institutions that build a better world for everyone. We suggest that colleges of all kinds could be transformed with these broader ideals in mind.

DAVID WEERTS is a professor at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities and ALBERTO CABRERA is a professor at the University of Maryland.

Looking to learn more about alumni engagement? Check out the CASE Global Alumni Engagement Metrics Key Findings at case.org/amatlas. ➔

What Should We Do About Our Koalas?

ONE QUESTION that we often hear when we present this research is, “What should we do about the Koalas?” Our analysis of Koalas poses some dilemmas from both alumni relations and student development perspectives.

On one hand, scarce resources in alumni relations programs compel advancement professionals to concentrate their efforts on those individuals who have the capacity and inclination to stay engaged. From this perspective, one would suggest, let Koalas be Koalas. In other words, focus your precious time on engaging the other groups.

On the other hand, these disparities prompt questions about the role of colleges and universities in helping students develop skills, passions, and dispositions for broader service in society. The point is not to create an army of new alumni volunteers, but rather to help students who may not have had early formative experiences discover their gifts and passions in broader service to the world.

We suggest that early college interventions might enrich the collegiate experience, with a secondary benefit of cultivating engaged and supportive alumni. For example, one might consider how first-year experience programs could be developed in collaboration with alumni relations offices to put forth examples of how alumni have formed lives of deep service. A pool of alumni speakers might be made available to speak to students and mentor them as they reflect on the larger purpose of their college education. ●

