

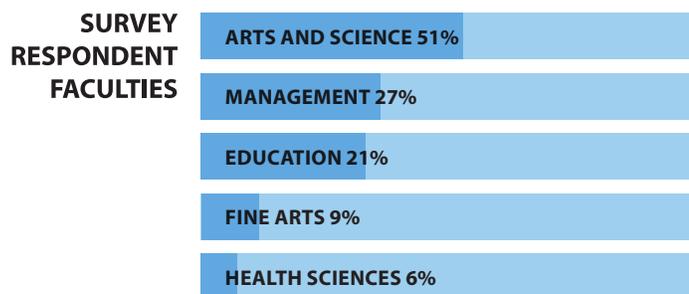
# Alumni Needs Assessment 2017

In 2017, Alumni Relations conducted the largest alumni needs assessment in the history of the University of Lethbridge. Over the course of several months, 85 senior students and alumni participated in 16 focus groups held in various cities (Lethbridge, Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver, and Ottawa). In addition to this, 2,019 participants responded to an online survey. Using this data, the needs of senior students and alumni were assessed in order to better plan and implement future programming at the U of L.

Keeping future implementation in mind, a distinction was made in the classification between General Alumni (GA) and Young Alumni (YA). The group identified as YA have graduated recently, within a period of five years. The group identified as GA are alums that graduated outside of this five-year period. Notable differences exist between these groups, especially pertaining to their needs. Further, there are distinctions between the needs of students and alumni in terms of the engagement efforts directed towards them.

## The following themes have been identified

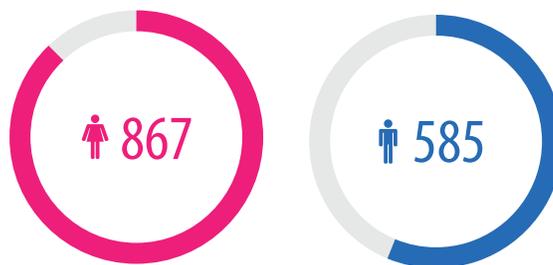
- Alumni Community
- Alumni Programming
- Career and Professional Development
- Communications
- Giving Back



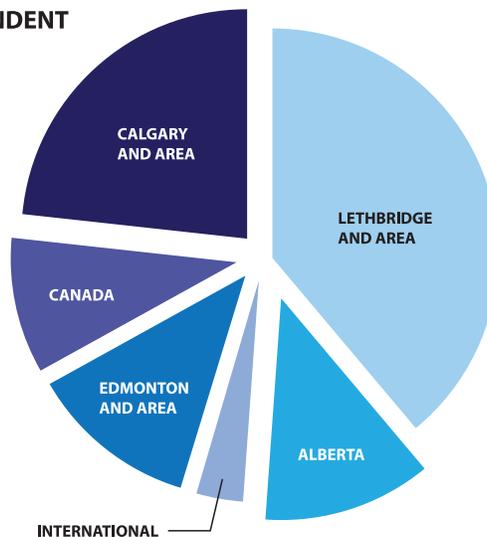
## A TOTAL OF 82 SENIOR STUDENTS AND ALUMNI PARTICIPATED IN 16 FOCUS GROUPS

(Lethbridge, Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver, Ottawa)

## A TOTAL OF 2019 ONLINE SURVEY RESPONDENTS



## SURVEY RESPONDENT LOCATIONS:



# Alumni Community

Both young alumni and general alumni commented on the perception of a cold and unwelcoming alumni culture. However, it is evident that there is a desire for the creation of an alumni community. This community would play a large role in cultivating the idea that alumni are valued members of the U of L community. Ideas about how this might be done include highlighting what everyday alums are doing in their own communities and emphasizing the value in their accomplishments, as some were unsure if they were 'successful' enough to be considered an alum.

Respondents in the GA group revealed that an important opportunity to cultivate a relationship has been missed. Many alumni have established careers, started families, and built their lives, all while distancing themselves from the University. As it stands, many of these respondents find their existing relationship to be almost entirely transactional, as they can expect their primary contact with the institution to be when they are called and asked for donations. One focus group participant stated that we "need to break the assumption that the U of L is only contacting me for my money."

It is important that the opportunity for a relationship with students and the YA group does not slip through the cracks. Many have already expressed a concern that they have not felt welcomed into the alumni community. Further, there are currently not enough supports in place to aid those who are transitioning from student life to alumni life, and young alums feel the repercussions of that. Addressing this includes placing a stronger focus on offering those supports right out of university and ensuring that the alumni community is welcoming for those transitioning from being a student.

In the face of this lack of connection, many alumni have created their own networks outside of the University's framework. Others, however, still have a desire to create the kinds of lasting relationships that will benefit individuals and the institution alike. Many expressed a desire to build an alumni identity, specifically around what it means to be a University of Lethbridge alumni member. For some, this meant highlighting the accomplishments of other alumni. This was something brought up in various focus groups as well as something desired by 43% of survey respondents. Others were interested in maintaining connections with specific affinity groups, including clubs, faculties, and sports teams.

# Alumni Programming

Accounting for the varying stages of life, from student to alumni, is crucial for successful programming. One survey respondent noted that "alumni experience is different for those who are older and established in careers as opposed to those who have just graduated." Experiences do vary, and the programming that is put into place will look at what has been said from each life stage to best implement effective relations.

Current alumni programming is only reaching a limited demographic. This demographic is one that is affluent enough to be financially involved as well as one that is within Lethbridge and area. Once again, The U of L boasts a broad alumni base, and programming needs to work more thoroughly to address that. Many alumni desire lifelong learning opportunities and want to be able to access those opportunities wherever they live. Access may include hosting alumni events outside of Lethbridge or even expanding the use of technology to accommodate for those who are a substantial distance away. Additionally, respondents were interested in widening the types of events to appeal to introverts as well, rather than just social activities. This includes incorporating informal gatherings with minimal commitment, perhaps even just reaching out to these groups for their input on alumni services.

# Career and Professional Development

The focus group data revealed that the YA group was largely comprised of two categories: those who had found work in their field and those who had not yet found work in their field. The needs between these groups varied.

For those who had not yet found sustainable employment, their priorities were career-centered. This included a focus on career planning services, professional development and career mentorship. People were interested in learning about the career paths of other graduates in their field, options for non-

“...no matter where you are, you still belong and you still matter” – FOCUS GROUP RESPONDENT

typical career paths and attending workshops to cultivate their skills or build up their resumes. In addition to this, it was about staying connected after graduation, with a new place in the university community.

The needs of those who had already attained sustainable employment differed. In many instances, these individuals had already found mentors in their field and were creating their professional identities in their chosen workforce. As such, many were interested in being aware of the services available for career planning but did not feel as though they would access these resources. Rather, they were interested in cultivating an alumni identity and being welcomed into the alumni community, tying back to the needs expressed by the GA group.

Those with already established careers were, however, interested in participating in professional development programs. These programs include:

- Attending professional development events for alumni (60%)
- Attending industry or profession based alumni events (52%)
- Career development and business skills training (49%)
- Public speaking project management, facilitation (52%)
- Leadership training (54%)
- Participating in mentoring – receiving or giving (44%)

## Communications

Many alumni do not understand the potential benefit of staying connected, making communications efforts all the more important going forward. Alumni have stated that they like hearing about the changes on campus as

well as what is happening with the students attending. Placing a focus on communications efforts that share this type of information may be beneficial not only in keeping in contact with alumni, but also in cultivating the alumni community that many express interest in further developing.

### WAYS THAT ALUMNI GET U OF L INFORMATION AND NEWS:

1. SAM (48%)
2. Aperture (43%)
3. Emailed event invitations (42%)
4. Social media (35%)
5. Friends, relatives, students and other alumni (28%)

Students and YA respondents expressed similar concerns. Students were primarily concerned with being aware of what it would be like to transition from a student to a member of the alumni community in addition to resources they would have access to. Further, this group wanted a greater focus on making the presence of alumni and alumni relations more widely known on campus.

### WHAT ALUMNI WANT TO HEAR ABOUT:

1. What's happening at the U of L (43%)
2. Research (17%)
3. Events (16%)
4. Success of fellow alumni (15%)

Elevated communications efforts are an effective way for ensuring that the connection between the institution and its people is both ongoing and present. However, it is important to consider the strategies behind these communications. Many of the YA focus group

participants stated that their first point of contact with the University after graduation was from the Call Centre, when they were called and asked to donate. Having recently completed their degree, this was too soon for many of these participants, as they could not afford to give back. There was strong interest in finding ways to give back to the University that did not involve donating.

## Giving Back

Despite not being in a position where they could give in a monetary way to the University, many YA were interested in volunteering their time, skills and experiences.

Highlight in the side bar: 68% of survey respondents preferred occasional, short commitments to account for their busy schedules.

When asked why they would like to volunteer, survey respondents (composed of both YA and GA) responded:

- To feel useful by sharing experience (39%)
- To make a difference in the lives of students (38%)
- To have fun and trying new things (37%)

Ways of giving back include offering support to students or young alumni and using a particular skillset when engaging in volunteer opportunities. For those alumni that donate monetarily, there was a desire to know what specific action that donation was supporting.

## (Overcoming) Barriers to Engagement

Respondents also offered indications as to why they had not been sufficiently involved in the past. One important issue faced by alumni is the geographical distance between them and Lethbridge. When asked why they had never attended an alumni event, almost 40% of respondents stated that it was because they were too far away. Creating other opportunities for engagement that transcend the hurdle of distance will ensure that alumni from across the globe continue to be engaged with the University of Lethbridge. These types of engagement opportunities include:

- having online access to university resources (52%)
- webinars (46%)
- podcasts (40%)
- live feeds of events (23%)

Further to this, creating opportunities in cities that have a substantial U of L alumni presence, such as Calgary, would be an effective tool for engagement. Connecting with chapters in these regions provides the opportunity for professional development workshops, speaker events, or opportunities for alumni in other cities to connect.

Alumni want to be more than just a number. There is a desire for the faces, names and accomplishments of alumni to be at the forefront. Respondents are eager to engage in community building aspect of being an alumni by showcasing and celebrating who they are as people and how they contribute to their communities. Despite not having been engaged in the past, alumni have a desire to foster pride in their U of L identity.

## Conclusion

Alumni have shown that they are interested in remaining engaged, yet many remain uncertain about what role alumni relations has in their lives. As alumni go down their respective life paths, it is important that their connections with the University be maintained. Those who participated in this needs assessment have expressed their desire to remain connected to the University of Lethbridge, making the programming that follows all the more crucial.

The programming that comes out of this needs assessment must be sustainable, and many participants were eager to offer future feedback on the efforts of Alumni Relations. With this feedback, the process may be continually checked and improved, ensuring that the programming put into place will continue to meet the needs of alumni as well as the institutional goals.

From this assessment, the voices of respondents will be at the forefront for implementing the necessary changes. This includes work to create an engaged alumni community and promote the supports available for University of Lethbridge alumni across the globe. Promoting the alumni identity and the value of continuing a relationship between the University of Lethbridge and its alumni base will create a more connected community.