



University of Colorado Colorado Springs

University of Colorado Colorado Springs (UCCS) 2023-2024 Grant Report Exploring Alumni Affinity Programing

Grant Purpose

UCCS is a young university founded only 59 years ago and has only been a more traditional university with housing and a student life program for the last 25.....and an Alumni Office with more than one staff member for the last 9 years.

Over those last 9 years we have worked hard to understand our diverse alumni population who have had different experiences since our founding. Who and where are they? Were they traditional students, military affiliated, first in their families to attend college, coming back to finish a degree, commuter, etc.? How did they connect with UCCS?

With this data under our belt, we have been working to expand our staffing, programming and communications in each of the four engagement buckets: Experiences, Communications, Volunteering, and Philanthropy.

The next progression for our young office is to dive deeper into affinity groups and programming. How do we take the sense of belonging they had while at UCCS and extend that into the alumni experience. This grant will help us do research in this space and launch programming by the end of the fiscal year, with the goal of creating process templates that can help us craft scalable programming to different affinity populations in the future.

Scope of Grant / Alumni Relation Research

- Affinity group benchmarking and best practices
- UCCS Alumni affinity group analysis and high-level segmentations
- Data analysis from our System partners and other higher education institutions.
- Alumni & campus partner small group meetings.
- Launching of 2-3 affinity groups by the end of the FY, including targeted communications and programming.

Grant Timeline & Process

Phase 1 of Grant: July – September 2023

- Peer research and website reviews on the affinity group topic.

- Meeting with NEAT Grant POC, Robyn Stille.
- CASE Benchmarking and looking at other similar NEAT grant reports.
- Crafted a list of 40 possible affinity groups through small group meetings across division and campus.
- Met with campus partners and stakeholders to narrow the list to top 3:
Veteran & Military Affairs (23% of our campus population is military affiliated)
Athletics (strong retention rates while students)
Student Government Association (very strong student and post commencement engagement)

Phase 2 of Grant: October & November 2023

- Individual meetings with three targets to identify gaps, prioritize approach and craft a timeline.
- Several gaps and roadblocks were identified and led us to participate in more campus partner and stakeholder meetings.

Phase 3 of Grant: December 2023

- The first five-months of this grant process took us on a long and winding road. After reflection and examining manpower, we concluded that our original approach of creating a series of new engagement opportunities for the three affinity groups and to craft a template to scale future work was not going to move forward and we needed to pivot.

Why the Pivot

1. VMA: Constituent list took over 60 days to come thru from our research team. Even at that time, I didn't trust the list truly reflected the alumni we wanted to reach. In addition, after a small focus group it became clear to our team that alumni with military affiliation see their connection to UCCS as much more diverse and don't like to be pigeon-holed in that manner. The VMA team was also focusing their efforts on important access initiative during the FY, so we decided to join their efforts since they are the experts regarding that population.
2. Athletics: Didn't need our help to engage their alumni in the way we were presenting. They have a robust program in each sport where the coaches already did much of what we were proposing. They wanted us to instead search for lost athletic alumni who participated in Division 2 sports with UCCS prior to 2004 when our athletics program truly gained a standing with the university. This fell outside the scope of our grant, so we decided this wasn't a good fit.
3. Student Government Association: Had numerous staff changes in the Student Life office over the years and no standardized format for record keeping was ever initiated. This led to the realization that we were not going to be able to secure names and contact information for this alumni population. They are now working to solve that problem for future outreach and opportunities with the Alumni Office.

Phase 4 of Grant: January 2024 – The Pivot

Our pivot included three focus areas: 1) Partnering with one of our affinity targets (VMA) to fit into their access to education initiative. 2) Enhancing and elevating another affinity program (Silver and Golden Grads) that our office was already executing with 25- and 50-year graduate populations. 3) Current Faculty & Staff who are also UCCS Alumni

VETERAN & MILITARY AFFAIRS: From our conversations with our veteran and military affairs team, we found out they have been working hard over the last year to set up a new scholarship (HEROES) and educate active-duty military students about how this can support their educational goals by helping them bridge the gap between their VA tuition benefits and the cost to attend UCCS.

Twenty-three percent of UCCS's students are military affiliated and we have five military bases in Colorado Springs. The HEROES Scholarship will have a positive economic impact by continuing the commitment of building a highly skilled workforce to meet the growing community need, supporting economic development, and strengthening ties with the local military community.

We used some of the grant money to support these efforts:

- Our marketing and communications team is supporting the efforts for website development, videos, a series of e-communications, paid social campaign, and a brochure.
- Through this grant, we purchased military challenge coins to be used at a kick-off event on August 1, 2024, and for supporters who help us launch this education and scholarship program. This gave the initiative a tangible memento that spoke the language of our military partners and supporters.



SILVER & GOLDEN GRADUATE PROGRAM: Since 2012, UCCS has been engaging two very special groups of alumni – Silver and Golden Graduates. These alumni graduated 25 and 50 years ago, respectively, and helped build the foundation of what UCCS has become today. This program included inviting these population to lead our graduates on to the floor in our December and May Commencement activities each semester.

Because of budget constraints, these invitations were mainly distributed by email and social media. This had limited success because of the age of the records and us not having a high percentage of email addresses with this population. With support from the grant, we were able to create and send a postal invitation, provide a pre-event luncheon, and décor for the room.

Attached personalized note from our Chancellor to invitation with UCCS paperclip:

FROM THE OFFICE OF CHANCELLOR JENNIFER SOBANET

First Name,

Congratulations on the 50th anniversary of your graduation from the University of Colorado Colorado Springs!

As you reflect on this milestone, I hope you take pride in all that you have accomplished since graduating from UCCS.

This special gathering for the Class of 1974 will be a memorable occasion you won't want to miss. Please join us at the May 10th Commencement ceremony to honor you and to celebrate this milestone.

Warm regards,

UCCS University of Colorado
Colorado Springs



This high touch program was attended by several development officers, our planned giving director, and our new Chancellor who gave a short message. In addition to those who attended, we also did extensive outreach to the entire population to offer them meaningful ways to connect/reconnect to UCCS. The added outreach was well received both internally and with the Silver and Golden Graduates. This is even more meaningful because our campus is so young and most of these constituents had a commuter and more transactional relationship with us as they attended and graduated.



We have also crafted a printed Save the Date Pennant that will now be send 6+ month prior to the Commencement ceremony. In addition to the special Silver or Golden UCCS pennant, it will highlight ways for these populations to connect/reconnect in the coming months. Offerings will include special campus tours, continuing education, volunteering opportunities that will connect them to current graduating students, and more!



FACULTY & STAFF ALUMNI: Our final efforts centered around uplifting an often-underappreciated alumni group – current faculty and staff. About one quarter of our current faculty and staff are UCCS alumni. We used this grant to provide a fun and celebratory free breakfast, which included short program, Kahoot trivia contest, special swag item just for them (phone stand for their desk), and a short message from leadership about the important perspective they bring to their work.

List Project Budget

Challenge Coins	\$1136.25	
Silver Grad Save the Date Pennant	\$1829.50	(includes printing and postage)
Silver Printed Initiations	\$1320.48	
Golden Printed Invitation	\$286.00	
New event tabletop signs (2)	\$214.90	
UCCS Paperclips (400 @ .90/ea)	\$360.00	
Golden Luncheon Décor	\$58.54	
Student Worker (20 hrs @ \$15/hr)	\$300	(phone calls, meetings and research)
Golden Luncheon	\$598.50	
Golden Cap & Gowns	\$111.75	
Faculty & Staff Alumni Breakfast	\$1597.00	
Total	\$7812.92	

Brief Summary of Findings

Originally, we hoped to provide affinity programming to 2-3 alumni groups and use these examples to craft a scalable template for future affinity work in the alumni office. We found several roadblocks that included:

1. Alumni not wanting to be pigeonholed into a single affinity group.
2. Data that didn't exist or was questionable, so hard to base programming on.
3. Campus partners who needed our help, but with initiatives that fell outside of our grant.
4. High turnover in many campus partner offices, that made staffing support very difficult.

Because of these findings from the first few months of our grant, we decided to pivot to a more customized and collaborative affinity approach which centered around collaboration of existing campus partner work and enhancements to current alumni office driven work.

Conclusions and Impact on Future Alumni Programming

In summary, our one-size-fits-all 'template' approach to our work wasn't the right path for UCCS. This grant allowed us to focus on this topic and we gained valuable insight into our alumni populations, campus partners, and integrity and access to data.

As we move into the next fiscal year that will include budget and staff cuts, it is vital that more collaboration happens between our office and campus partners. This 12-month exercise really highlighted the collaborative nature of our work and gave us permission to pause and think about 2.0 versions and enhancements to current programming and to be even more collaborative with campus partners as we move forward with new initiatives in the future.