

ENVISION ★ SFA  
Concept Paper

Making, Increasing, and  
Strengthening Connections

# **Strategic Planning Team**

## **Making, Increasing, and Strengthening Connections**

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#### **Introduction and Background**

Stephen F. Austin State University has traditionally been a state supported institution with limited connections to our outside supporting constituency bases (alumni, potential donors, businesses, local community, and volunteers). Given recent changes in the economy, as well as the higher education landscape, support from these constituency groups is critical. The amount of monetary support SFA receives from the state has declined steadily for a number of years. Therefore, in order to maintain or increase the university's budget, additional resources must be derived from increases in student tuition and fees, increases in enrollment, and increases in outside donations. Tuition and fees are now as high as they can be while still keeping us competitive and in line with our peer institutions, hence the need for external support is paramount.

In addition to the need for more monetary support, there is a need for support of SFA graduates as they attempt to enter the workforce and begin their careers. The willingness of our alumni base and other constituencies to support SFA through networking opportunities, service learning and community service opportunities, job sourcing, employment referrals, peer and institutional engagement is critical.

Some of the milestones during the past 10 years that have helped to illuminate this need for increased connections have included contacting local community members, as well as alumni and business representatives from across the state, regarding the university's identity and the potential to strengthen our ties with all constituencies. These groups also have been included as a part of the university's strategic planning process.

SFA has experienced success in obtaining external funding for building and renovation projects; examples include the DeWitt School of Nursing, Ina Brundrett Conservation Education Building and the renovation of the recital hall in the School of Music. In 2014, the university launched the largest marketing campaign in SFA history, and alumni/student reactions indicate approval of the concepts and the campaign. Preliminary responses have been overwhelmingly positive.

#### **Lessons Learned**

Throughout the interactions mentioned above, alumni and community members have appeared willing and eager to participate in projects to boost the university's prominence and image. We have learned that many of our alumni have had little, if any, contact with their alma mater since graduation and are consequently inadequately informed about SFA events, accomplishments and needs. Their perception of the university may not match the reality that exists on our campus.

Efforts in the past six years have helped to increase alumni engagement and connections. Some examples of this stem from new development efforts and staffing, athletic successes, expanded marketing efforts, increased use of social media, and consistent campus updates. However, more needs to be done to better utilize our alumni and other external constituents who care about SFA. Further divisional collaboration on campus between departments and personnel is vital in creating a unified front, with a consistent message and brand that we can share with all of our constituency bases.

### **National Trends and External Picture**

Electronic communication capabilities have greatly impacted the manner in which universities correspond with constituents. Through electronic communication networks, universities can contact constituents faster, more frequently, and in a more cost-effective manner. Additionally, electronic communication capabilities allow for more targeted communication with alumni in different ways throughout their life. For example, the communication networks, methods of communication, and interests of young alumni can be quite different than those of older alumni. Successful universities have found that engaging constituents, particularly alumni, in different targeted ways throughout their “lifecycle” is a better way to generate meaningful connections with alumni. The near instantaneous delivery, data-gathering, and tracking abilities of electronic communications networks is a prime facilitator of such targeted lifecycle efforts.

These targeted efforts are akin to “market segmentation” in the business world. Constituent networks must be divided into key segments so that messages and connections with each segment are meaningful. Baylor University is an example of an institution that has used such a method very successfully. Baylor has created the “Baylor Alumni Network,” ([www.baylor.edu/network/](http://www.baylor.edu/network/)) which segments Baylor alumni into the networks Baylor believes are most important to their success. These individual networks are:

- Business - “expand your working relationships and connect with other Baylor business and technical professionals.”
- Global - “Join Baylor bears flinging their green and gold globally.”
- Parents - “Linking parents with the Baylor community.”
- Special Events - “Serve, sing, pray, and play at one of our annual events.”
- Sports - “Your connection to Baylor sports fans.”
- Women - “Connect with Baylor women in your home community.”
- Young Grads - “Graduated in the past 10 years? Stay connected with other Baylor grads.”
- Army Baylor - “Graduate of the Army Baylor program? Stay connected with other graduates.”

While this network is designed to target alumni, one can see how it reaches beyond just alumni to other constituents interested in the university. For example, a business may be involved in the business network in hopes to recruit and hire recent graduates. A parent of a student can be involved through the parent network even though the parent may not be an alumnus. While the specific networks targeted by each university will be different, the national trend is clearly for more targeted outreach efforts, aided by electronic communication technology, to gain greater returns on investment (with limited resources) when reaching out to alumni and other constituents.

A related national trend is that when surveyed nationally, alumni consistently report that one of the key motivators for remaining connected to their university is to increase the reputation of their alma mater, and by extension, increase the value of their degree. When a university has greater visibility, whether through sports, the arts, research, or visible success of alumni; the value of a degree from that university is increased. By increasing connectivity with external constituents throughout their life cycles (i.e. targeting both younger and older alumni), the likelihood of increasing visibility, and thus reputation, of the university is increased. This is a cycle that can lead to greater alumni success, involvement, and giving, as well as increases in quality student recruitment.

The change in funding models for public universities, which was previously mentioned, is a very important national trend that increases the importance of effective communication with constituents. The cost of education is rising, and due to economic pressures state and federal resources are declining. This environment is not likely to change in the near future. Tuition costs have rapidly outpaced inflation for many years, and thus the burden for these increased costs cannot merely be shifted to students via tuition increases. The reality is that maintaining strong connections with alumni and other external constituents in order to increase the likelihood of receiving private funds is critical for growing and maintaining a quality university, even one that is publicly funded.

### **Strategic Themes**

These national trends and the external picture of higher education lead to a few strategic themes that are critical to SFA increasing connections with external constituents:

- Alumni – electronic communication capabilities must be used to maintain contact with graduates immediately upon graduation (or even before) in order to track their success and begin the connection “life cycle.” Alumni are more likely to stay engaged with the university throughout their life if their connection immediately after graduation is strong and remains so. Additionally, the value of the degree to our alumni is potentially increased when a strong network of engaged, proud SFA alumni is created.
- Potential donors (alumni and others) - due to increasing needs for private funding, securing funds from donors is critical. Strategies for doing so are vitally important, and this includes development training to those in academic departments (such as deans and department chairs) who intend to interact with potential donors. An additional consideration is how to best target donors. Traditionally, many schools focus on securing large donations from certain wealthy alum. With the availability and cost-effectiveness of contacting alumni electronically,

consideration should be given to whether a more concerted focus on securing small donations from a large number of donors might be a more effective strategy for securing a stream of private funds.

- **Businesses** - developing relationships with businesses that will employ students is one of the most important external connections and is directly related to alumni relations and career services. If alumni (particularly young alumni) are better connected with and tracked more closely, better data can be gathered regarding what businesses/industries are employing our alumni. This can aid student services in targeting their efforts toward finding internships and other employment opportunities for students. Forming relationships with businesses can also be to their benefit. For example, strong connections with the business community gives these organizations access to the research and expertise of our faculty, which can in turn fuel faculty research productivity.
- **Student recruitment (junior colleges/transfers/high school students)** - targeted and more effective student recruitment can be achieved by utilizing connections with alumni and other external constituents. When alumni are more engaged, they are more likely to feel connected to the university and recommend it to others. When alumni success is more visible to the outside world, better students will be more likely to choose SFA. Strategic use of these connections needs to be explored.
- **Internal Organization** - because connections with all stakeholders (both internal and external) are interrelated, a key strategic consideration is whether the internal organization of SFA is optimally designed to take advantage of these connections. All internal groups that contact stakeholders must work toward a common goal and understand how their efforts positively and negatively impact others, but each group still needs some level of autonomy to do their job. Thus, an important consideration is how centralized/decentralized the organizational structure needs to be with respect to alumni contact, career services, marketing, donor engagement, etc.
- **External Agencies/ Government - State and Federal** - Continue to strengthen our partnerships with both state and federal agencies to help drive not only funding opportunities but also prominence and name recognition for the institution on a national stage. Additionally, majors in many departments will be seeking internship and employment opportunities in a government agency or non-profit setting rather than in a for-profit business environment.
- **Social Media** - utilizing social media well involves more than simply having a Facebook page or a Twitter feed. A robust communication strategy must take into account which social media networks are being heavily used by particular alumni networks. For example, alumni engaged in business, as well as businesses that may hire alumni, might be best reached by ensuring SFA has a strong presence on LinkedIn. All social media channels must be explored to reach the most number of constituents. Also, the need to maintain these channels of social media

communication is full time job. It is critical all SFA social media sites stay relevant and are delivering the most up to date information possible.

- Capital campaign – as SFA approaches its 100th anniversary, this is a key time to consider launching a capital campaign. The increased visibility that has been created by the current marketing campaign and a festive 100th-anniversary celebration could create a tremendous opportunity for an ambitious fundraising goal that would put SFA on solid footing for its next 100 years.
- Campus access - easy access to the SFA campus is important not only to the local community and other university guests, but for recruiting students and quality employees. With current parking arrangements, when someone is invited to campus, or just decides to visit, it is often difficult to find any type of visitor parking. During our data-gathering process for the strategic plan and the recent identity study, SFA's beautiful campus was consistently identified by stakeholders as an important asset. Consideration should be given to making the campus more easily accessible to all external constituents.
- Website - as the online "front door" to the university, a functional and appealing website is vital to the university. As a part of the current marketing campaign, a new content management system is being selected, and a unified web presence for the university will be created that will project a consistent visual identity for SFA. Each academic, research and service unit that comprises SFA plays a role in shaping the university's reputation, but the reputation and even the existence of these entities also is dependent upon SFA. The visual identity projected to our many varied constituents must reflect the strength that results from our collected association.
- Overall Engagement - We need an office or individual(s) to spearhead and lead the efforts on many of the partnerships listed above. While many of these already fall into one existing office or another, we sometimes overlap or duplicate efforts. It is often confusing who takes the lead on a particular engagement strategy. More often than not, the engagement strategy might take a back seat to other priorities of the office.
- Ask - We need to reach out to all of the above constituency groups, the leaders of these areas (business leaders, superintendents, faculty, staff, community leaders, etc.) for input and advice on how we can best accomplish our need for more engagement. How can we do better? What do we need to do but aren't doing?