



OPPORTUNITY

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Drive public innovation by reigniting civil society

HOW TO GROW AND SUSTAIN AN ACTIVE ALUMNI NETWORK

Alumni networks are effective tools for social impact that are traditionally associated with universities and private schools. However, alumni networks have grown into effective tools for social impact far beyond academia. The relationships built among alumni can contribute to their success by providing a mix of access to networks, resources, ideas and social capital. Growing and sustaining an active alumni network requires constant innovation and adaption, but the rewards can be significant – for the alumni, their community and the country. In this brief, we look at why and how public benefit organisations (PBOs) have established alumni networks and what they’ve learnt along the way.

Why do fellowship programmes have alumni networks? “Our alumni network and programming is how we ensure regular interaction amongst the fellows across cohorts and that the work they do is sustained through the various alumni opportunities,” explains Patronella Nqaba, Associate Director of **Atlantic Fellows for Racial Equity (AFRE)**, a network of changemakers from South Africa and the United States building solidarity and working towards a more equitable future. Trevor Langat, Alumni Engagement Associate at **African Leadership Academy (ALA)**, which seeks to transform Africa by developing a powerful network of young leaders, says alumni serve as important role models for current students.

Alumni Networks are also a way of maximising impact. Abi Nokes, CEO of **inHive**, a UK-based PBO that serves as an advisor and technical partner for school networks, leadership programmes, fellowship programmes and scholarship programmes around their alumni networks, explains: “You can only achieve a limited amount in a one- to two-year programme, and the impact of

a fellowship may only really take place in the long term and the years after. An alumni network becomes a way to fuel that, but also to embed a longer-term feedback mechanism for the foundation/organisation.”

The **Kellogg Fellows Alumni Network** is a global network representing different Kellogg leadership programmes that ran over nine decades in countries across Latin America and the Caribbean, the United States (US) and Southern Africa. Currently, fellowships are only running in the US, but the Kellogg Foundation has an active alumni network. Mary Hlalele, a Kellogg International Leadership Programme 1 fellow, currently serving as the Southern Africa Alumni Liaison, says the alumni network allows fellows to use their collective leadership skills and values to affect a positive change in society. “The goal of the network has, over the years, been about identifying ways to keep the network of fellows alive; to facilitate collaborative action in the communities where fellows live and serve, creating a space for learning, leading, and promoting positive action.”

This learning brief was developed by Daniella Horwitz and draws on [Evaluating leadership fellowship programmes: Report on challenges and lessons shared among South Africa-based initiatives](#), by Barbara Klugman, published by Tekano: Atlantic Fellows for Health Equity, Cape Town, September 2021, as well as direct interviews conducted by Daniella.

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WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF AN ALUMNI NETWORK?

Active alumni networks have a number of benefits at the individual, community and national levels. For example:

- > Members of the ACTIVATE! Network – known as Activators – are more likely than the average young person in South Africa to participate in elections, petitions and activism.¹ They also run programmes tailored specifically to address challenges in their communities.

ACTIVATE! Change Drivers was initiated in 2012, and has since provided young South Africans with the training to change their lives, and the world they inhabit. Change Drivers programmes seek to impart skills and knowledge to young people through a comprehensive package of social economic programmes. The goal is to equip Activators to be innovative active citizens, influencing and provoking positive change for the global good.

- > AFRE is based at Columbia University in New York and at the Nelson Mandela Foundation in Johannesburg. Alumni have access to support, resources and networks available from both these institutions.
- > ALA communicates the success/progress of alumni to inspire current or potential students and connect them to the expertise and know-how of alumni in different fields.
- > As fellows typically seek to make meaningful contributions to society, some Kellogg programmes have offered opportunities for them to 'give back' to the communities they visited as a means of expressing thanks. Over the years, the network has successfully expanded the number and types of occasions for fellows to participate in activities designed to utilise the network for good. One example is Mink'a Talent Exchange. This is a programme in which fellows volunteer their time and talent toward another's initiative, with the Alumni Network underwriting the volunteers' travel to the targeted community.

CHALLENGES OF GROWING AN ALUMNI NETWORK

Growing and operating an effective alumni network is no easy task. We examine four particular challenges identified by the alumni networks interviewed:

- 1) Keeping alumni engaged
- 2) Diversity of alumni
- 3) Lack of financial resources
- 4) Evaluating alumni impact

¹ Read more about ACTIVATE! Change Drivers here: https://issuu.com/activatechangedrivers/docs/activate_change_drivers_network_su and here: https://issuu.com/activatechangedrivers/docs/2nd_tier_evaluation_final

KEEPING ALUMNI ENGAGED

Perhaps one of the most difficult challenges when it comes to keeping an alumni network alive is how to keep fellows constantly engaged post the fellowship period. As time passes, fellows often disconnect from the network. According to Kellogg Fellows, those who remain active in the network tend to do so for the following reasons:

- > to continue to learn and grow, especially as leaders;
- > to “give back” for the transformational experience of the fellowship;
- > to “relive” the fellowship experience;
- > to take advantage of the talent, experience and connections within the network;
- > to reconnect with other fellows with whom they bonded during the fellowship and since; and/or
- > to stay connected to the Kellogg Foundation.

AFRE faces the further challenge of building deep bonds within the fellowship, given that the fellowship experience is non-residential and fellows have limited contact time with each other and programme staff. To keep Senior Fellows connected to the programme and their network, AFRE offers a number of resources and support or capacity-building incentives, such as access to auditing academic classes at Columbia University (New York), dialogues, travel vouchers to enable knowledge exchange visits and funds to collaborate on projects.

DIVERSITY OF ALUMNI

Langat of ALA cites the diversity of the alumni as a major challenge. This is not only with regard to nationality, with close to 50 countries represented at ALA, but also in terms of age, as alumni range from 18 to 32 years old. The diversity of fellows requires a degree of flexibility and adaptability. Hlalele, of the Kellogg Fellows Alumni Network, says that while they celebrate longevity and diversity, there are inherent challenges posed by these factors. She explains: “Over the several decades, the network of alumni has been made up of people not only from different academic backgrounds and orientations, but a multiplicity of cultures, generations, race groups, continents, etc. We note that while others are just starting out in their careers, some are already retired, or getting ready to retire; while some are dealing with excesses of the riches enjoyed by the first world, others are faced with extreme levels of poverty in their

communities – priorities are at different ends of the pole and these sometimes cause challenges in priorities or focus areas during dialogues and debates. In their efforts to connect alumni, the Alumni Office must constantly balance needs and activities with the realities of individuals.”

3 LACK OF FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Lack of sustained financial resources is a pressing issue for many alumni networks. Mutami of ACTIVATE! says lack of sustained resources means they sometimes struggle to ensure visibility of network members in communities. “To date there have been several budget cuts which have seriously curtailed the sustainability of the network.”

4 EVALUATING ALUMNI IMPACT

Another common issue is keeping track of alumni and the impact they have over time. Gillian Attwood, Southern Africa Manager at the **Canon Collins Educational and Legal Assistance Trust**, which offers postgraduate scholarships, explains: “While scholars are studying, they have a closer relationship with the programme staff, and it is easier to engage with them through progress reports they are required to submit for continued funding. However, once scholars graduate and return to their various life and work contexts and related demands, it is harder for staff to retain close contact with them and keep up with what they are doing, particularly in the absence of a financial incentive. This is when a strong self-sustained network characterised by collaborative relationships becomes so valuable.”²

As suggested above, there are ways to overcome the various challenges identified. Here are four key lessons to building a robust and connected community:

- 1) Invest in dedicated staffing and allocate resources
- 2) Have alumni shape and drive the network
- 3) Offer varied and flexible engagement
- 4) Trace alumni

1 INVEST IN DEDICATED STAFFING AND ALLOCATE RESOURCES

According to the *Evaluating leadership fellowship programmes* report, an alumni network was almost impossible to sustain without staffing to support both the alumni programme and evaluation.³ The report's author, Klugman notes: “(I)n every case where there is a large alumni, the programmes that have been successful in sustaining contact and engagement with alumni have had staff employed for this purpose. Programmes with this full staff complement could keep track of shifts in alumni’s contact details more easily and could ensure the ongoing working relationships.”⁴

The Kellogg Fellows Alumni Network is managed and supported through the Kellogg Foundation’s leadership team, with on-the-ground support offered by a team of regional liaisons, who themselves are alumni. While the network received significant funding from the Kellogg Foundation, it also generated revenue sources of its own – some more successful than others.⁵ The Mink’a Talent Exchange⁶ was an exchange programme fully funded and supported by fellows: the host fellow took care of all the needs of the visiting fellow for the duration of the visit; the visiting fellow brought their talent and skills to the community development initiative being run by the host fellow. Other fellows pooled private funds together to cover the visiting fellow's transport costs.

The AFRE alumni programme has been running for two years and has a budget set aside for its operating costs as well as funding opportunities to contribute towards the work that alumni do in their respective communities. Nqaba says: “A full-time staff person is assigned to work with the alumni community because the role requires intensive pastoral care and administration.”

ALA has a dedicated Alumni Engagement Team responsible for the execution of events and activities that keep alumni engaged and connected to the community, such as the annual community call and regional meet-ups. Regional connectors (alumni volunteers) get people together for meet-ups quarterly in different regions with a high concentration of alumni (e.g. Dakar, Nairobi, London, Johannesburg and New York).

From its inception, ACTIVATE! Change Drivers has had a fully-fledged alumni programme with staff and budgets for events and activities. Most activities and events are coordinated by staff although Activators run community programmes and events on their own.

Nokes of inHive says they have seen a strong correlation between alumni networks that thrive and support at a senior leadership level. “Alumni networks do require backbone support from some staff to coordinate and manage, but where they work best is where they are integrated into the wider strategy of the organisation, and not siloed.”

² Correspondence with Gillian Attwood

³ Klugman, B. 2021. *Evaluating leadership fellowship programmes: Report on challenges and lessons shared among South Africa-based initiatives*, Tekano: Atlantic Fellows for Health Equity, Cape Town, p. 31

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ In recognition of differing resources available, no monetary contributions were solicited from fellows from Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

⁶ Read more here: <https://www.kfia.org/en/minka>

2 HAVE ALUMNI SHAPE AND DRIVE THE NETWORK



“A successful alumni community must be bound together by a shared purpose, driven by the community itself and not dictated to from above.”

Abi Nokes,
CEO of inHive

The more alumni are involved in programme activities and shape programme priorities, the more active an alumni network is likely to be. Nokes adds that this increases the likelihood of alumni being willing and able to offer longer-term leadership support for the network. For instance, ACTIVATE! network support staff run a consultation process with the network to generate areas of common interest, which they then research to produce facts and

statistics about selected issues. These are published in the form of visualised data (infographics) to the network members who then discuss and decide on their own courses of action to take in their communities.

While some alumni networks have experienced difficulty in integrating the various cohorts, research by inHive has shown that having a common vision is more important than having a common experience. Nokes observes: “Connections to the specific programmes in which young people had taken part were found to be less important than the values and vision that programme participants had in common. A successful alumni community must be bound together by a shared purpose, driven by the community itself and not dictated to from above.”

If alumni are involved in programming, they are also more likely to respond to requests for information honestly. Kellogg's Hlalele notes that if alumni are not experiencing value from the programme, they are less likely to put in the time to respond. “Unless people are committed to the programme, they won't respond truthfully... activities keep people connected and interested, so when you send out an evaluation question they respond from the core of the being. They will only respond if you're relevant to how their lives are shaping out.”⁷

Siphelele Chirwa: From Activator to CEO

Siphelele Chirwa was in the first ACTIVATE! Change Drivers cohort (2012) and joined the alumni network in 2013. She is now the CEO of ACTIVATE! Change Drivers.

1 How did being part of the ACTIVATE! alumni network impact your trajectory?

I have created life-long connections on a personal level and got a lot of learning from different Activators in my career and brought common solutions to community challenges. My knowledge base grew from just being an Activator.

2 Do the alumni help to shape ACTIVATE! policies or contribute to the Activate operations?

Yes, and we can do more to include the network. We have started shifting our organisational strategy to be driven by the network for the network. Our operations are to give support to the network and to maximise the impact of the network in different communities and South Africa.

3 How could the ACTIVATE! alumni network be strengthened?

In the last few years, we have needed to articulate the role of the network and the mandate of the organisation. This is a continuous process that helps the network to see itself as a force of agency with the support from the organisation. The network needs to trust itself and learn to self-organise and be able to be sustainable. We have a lot of different skills and capacity in the network that we have not yet been able to fully realise. There is great potential in the network.



Key insights used by the Kellogg team to improve their alumni programme and keep alumni engaged include:

- > Skills development workshops to address youth unemployment and under-employment among fellows.
- > Alumni engagement conversations across Southern Africa.
- > Connecting with fellows in Southern Africa and globally via virtual means such as Slack or Zoom.

3 OFFER VARIED AND ADAPTABLE ENGAGEMENT

A balanced mix of face-to-face and online engagement and activities is important to develop the breadth and depth of relationships. However, the COVID pandemic has meant that over the past year or so, most engagement has moved online. Webinars are an important online component because they offer opportunities for engagement and further learning opportunities. Langat observes: “As much as we have sustained activities such as webinars and the annual virtual community call, we try to give alumni the opportunity to autonomously run and participate in activities. This is done through the regional connectors programme as well as the ALA Alumni Association where alumni can elect their representatives.”

Hlalele maintains that effective engagement and making connections are central to maintaining high levels of interest in all alumni activities. Kellogg has tested various approaches; initially, the emphasis was on building and maintaining a comprehensive database of the fellows and sharing that information within the network. Lately, considerable resources have been directed at communicating with fellows about past and upcoming events, as well as ensuring that fellows know who is in the network, i.e. who the fellows are, what programmes and classes they represented, where they reside, and what their interests are. These communications are accomplished primarily through paper, although the use of electronic means, newsletters, blogs, and outreach events in the communities where fellows live are increasingly used.

Newsletters are a popular form of communication. For example, AFRE’s Senior Fellow Newsletter provides updates on different members in the network and AFRE, as well as informing alumni about the various opportunities available to them from AFRE and their various partners. The annual Senior Fellow Survey is used to update fellows’ information and elicit feedback on programming, while peer-exchange via “Wise Counsels”⁸ allows members of the alumni community to provide each other support on a real-life challenge that one of their peers is facing.

⁸ An activity whereby a group of fellows come together (to form a brain trust) to grapple with a challenge brought forth by one of their peers. The aim is to brainstorm solutions and offer advice on the subject matter.

4 TRACING ALUMNI

Tracing alumni allows for the assessment of alumni impact, although it can be difficult to evaluate the contribution or influence of the programme over the long term. Klugman notes that when a fellowship programme’s theory of change is that the programme experience and relationships built will enhance fellows’ abilities to influence social change over time, then keeping track of fellows and their influence is important to allow programmes to understand if, and how well, the programme has contributed towards fellows’ ability to influence social change.

For Canon Collins Trust, keeping in touch with alumni and knowing what they go on to do, enables them to understand what kind of change alumni influence or bring about. Attwood explains: “Our assumption is that our support contributes directly or indirectly to scholars’ and alumni’ ability to influence change in their various locations. We want to know this in order to determine whether our programmes are effectively contributing to what we want to achieve. This tells us whether we are being successful in what we do.”⁹

Keeping in touch with alumni can be challenging, partly because of the difficulties alumni have in accessing mobile or internet data. One programme incentivises participants to respond by offering data in return for them responding; another offers a book on the topic of the fellowship.¹⁰ Another challenge can be language, familiarity with computers and survey tools. Some programmes address this by inviting participants to use WhatsApp voice or video to share feedback.¹¹

Programmes have various ways of tracing alumni. ALA has a database of all alumni and tries to keep track of them by conducting an annual alumni survey inviting them to self-report on where they currently are and the type of work/studies they are pursuing. ALA also keeps track of all the alumni who attend their events and webinars. For ACTIVATE! network-wide indicators are done through the annual YouCount Survey and programme specific impact studies. However, for the past two years, this has not happened due to lack of budget. AFRE traces their alumni in the following ways: through funding reports submitted to the programme, individual check-in calls with staff, annual senior fellow survey data, fellows’ notifications on our various communications platforms, social media mentions and news search engines (made possible by publications that identify people as AFRE fellows).

⁹ Correspondence with Gillian Attwood

¹⁰ Klugman (2021), p. 27

¹¹ Ibid.

Case Study: Social Network Analysis¹²

Some fellowships have used social network analysis to track fellows' connectedness over time. Norma Kok, former Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Officer at Tekano, which runs the Atlantic Fellows For Health Equity Fellowship in South Africa, describes Social Network Analysis (SNA) as a method and set of metrics to measure, visualise and draw inferences on the characteristics of a group or a group of individuals. It is useful when the objective is to evaluate changes in connectivity among the fellows, quantifying relationships among people, and how they change over time as the result of interventions (such as a fellowship programme).

One question Tekano used for their SNA was: 'Are the fellows developing as a network that supports each other's activities in social determinants of health equity?' Tekano surveyed fellows asking who they a) shared information with and b) collaborated with at three moments: before joining the fellowship, at six months into the fellowship, and a year later, that is six months after the fellowship ended and they had become alumni. The below visual maps illustrate how the method identified shifts among the first cohort of fellows over time.

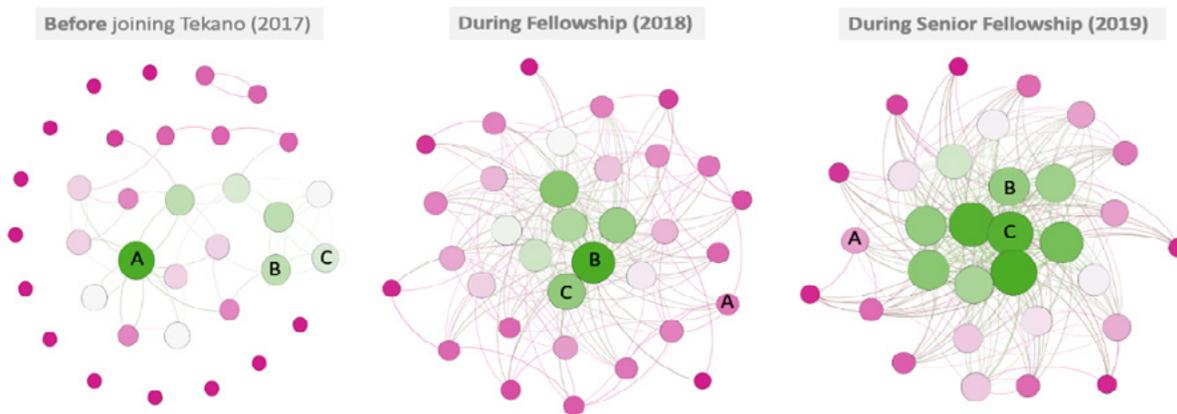


Figure1: Shifts in fellows' connections over time

Each dot in Figure 1 represents a fellow. Larger circles indicate a fellow having more linkages. The darkest pink indicates fewest linkages; the darkest green indicates the most. What the figures, and the data underlying them, show is that at start there were 54 information-sharing connections in total among 34 fellows, 255 during the fellowship and 298 a year later. As the image reflects, almost all fellows were sharing information by the end of the fellowship.

While SNA offers a formal evaluation approach, a number of other programmes informally monitor connectedness through fellowship online platforms, WhatsApp groups and e-lists. These provide critical information to programmes about what kinds of support fellows or alumni need, and the levels of engagement of different fellows.

CONCLUSION:

While the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly impacted on the ability of alumni to connect in person, online components have facilitated interaction in different and innovative ways. It is hoped that the eventual easing of restrictions will allow for more face-to-face interaction and direct relationship building, although it is likely that online interaction will continue,

and we should explore the associated benefits of this mode of interaction for network building. By utilising the learnings shared, more alumni networks may flourish, ensuring that the potential seen in the fellows is realised over the long-term, significantly improving the influence of young South Africans.

This is the learning experience of:



ACTIVATE! Change Drivers was initiated in 2012 with the mission to build the capacity of young people to become leaders for public innovation and catalyse connection points, growing a network of change drivers as a new political, social and economic force. There are currently 4 254 Activators, who are network members or alumni.



African Leadership Academy (ALA) is a pre-university located in the outskirts of Johannesburg. It is dedicated to 16- to 19-year-olds from Africa and the rest of the world, with alumni from 46 different countries. ALA's selective, two-year pre-university programme develops and connects Africa's future leaders. ALA currently has 1 126 alumni around the globe.



Atlantic Fellows for Racial Equity (AFRE) aims to bring diverse change makers from South Africa and the US into sustained learning and exchange, to enhance their capacity to collaborate, so they are better equipped to change the structures that maintain racial inequality and build the policies, institutions and narratives that can lead to greater equity. Currently, there are 47 alumni; in November 2021, this will increase to 67.



Canon Collins Educational and Legal Assistance Trust offers postgraduate scholarships as a strategy to strengthen the skills and capacity of carefully-selected individuals committed to social, economic and environmental justice. Scholars and alumni build relationships and engage with each through their participation in the Canon Collins Network.



The **Kellogg Fellows Alumni Network** is a global network of 1 700 individuals, representing 15 different Kellogg leadership programmes in 53 countries. Kellogg fellows represent an array of individuals who have participated in leadership and academic programmes funded by the Kellogg Foundation over the span of 40+ years. Fellows were drawn from the three regions of Latin America and the Caribbean, Southern Africa, and the United States of America.



inHive is a specialist team of network builders, working with partners across the world to strengthen young people's access to strong networks and relatable role models; inHive has served a range of partners, from school networks such as EducAid in Sierra Leone, youth leadership programmes such as Akazi Kanoze Access in Rwanda and Columba Leadership in South Africa, scholarship programmes such as the Mastercard Foundation (pan-Africa) and Windle International (East Africa) and professional leadership programmes.



Tekano, Health Equity in South Africa, is growing health equity leadership to tackle the deep social and economic inequities that characterise South Africa; contributing to building leaders and engaging communities across sectors and disciplines to address barriers that prevent people from leading healthy and productive lives. At the time of the *Evaluating leadership fellowship programmes* report, the Programme lasted 12 months with four modules with strong inter-modular activities such as coaching and mentoring support. Twenty-five fellows were selected annually.

