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Northwestern Makes a Case for Giving: to Improve College Rankings

By Kathryn Masterson

If you thought making a donation to your alma mater would help raise its rank in the U.S. News & World Report best colleges list, would you reach for your credit card?

Northwestern University is one of the universities betting its alumni will. In a recent e-mail message titled "*US News & World Report* Rankings and Alumni Giving," the No. 12-ranked university made a direct appeal to graduates to think about what they could do to help Northwestern claim a higher spot. "If we, as undergraduate alumni, increased our giving to 40 percent annually, we could radically improve Northwestern's standing in the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. ... Your gift of any size has a direct impact on these rankings." Northwestern says its rate of giving for undergraduate alumni is about 31 percent.

The short, to-the-point e-mail, which included a link for online giving, concluded, "Please make an impact on our university's reputation, its ranking, and what it represents once we have graduated." It asked alumni to make a gift by August 31, the end of the fiscal year, to have the donation count for next year's rankings.

The appeal is less common—and less altruistic—than your typical annual-fund request in support of deserving but needy students or outstanding faculty. It's an approach some annual-giving experts say could backfire, turning off people with its focus on rankings and donor self-interest. But Northwestern says it appeals to graduates' pride—and their competitive natures. And officials say it works.

"It's a competitive message, but it's a positive competitive message," said Sarah R. Pearson, vice president for alumni relations and development. Keeping the value of a Northwestern degree high is important to people, she says, and increasing the number of alumni who show their support by making a gift is one way to do that.

The solicitation has been successful, especially with lapsed donors. Northwestern did hear back from some alumni who said they didn't care about rankings, but the e-mail was opened more than other electronic appeals and resulted in more gifts. In the past several

years, Northwestern has sent electronic appeals about rankings only to younger alumni, who are likely to be thinking about the value of their degree as they enter the job market. In this tougher economic year, Northwestern sent the electronic appeal to the wider alumni population.

"I think the positive results outweigh any kind of negative feedback," Ms. Pearson said. "It's resonating."

Alumni participation is a small part—just 5 percent—of the score that *U.S. News* uses for its rankings. But when one point out of a possible 100 separates Northwestern from its next three competitors—Duke University, the University of Chicago, and Dartmouth College, which all have higher rates of overall alumni participation than Northwestern—perhaps a jump in participation could make a difference. And because alumni participation has declined nationwide for several years, hitting its lowest level last year, colleges may be interested in trying new techniques to reach those who don't usually give.

Robert A. Burdenski, an annual-giving consultant, said research from a number of colleges shows that one reason alumni donate is the desire to preserve the value of their degree. Although those donors are evaluating a gift based on transactional terms, it "is a motivating message," Mr. Burdenski said in an e-mail message. "Referencing *USNWR* is just a more direct way for Northwestern to quantify this 'value.'"

What can't be measured, Mr. Burdenski says, is whether this argument for giving is off-putting to those who give for more altruistic reasons.

Dan Allenby, vice president for annual giving at Grenzebach Glier and Associates, says alumni care about rankings because it brings out their competitive spirit and has a direct impact on the value of their degree. Many institutions include a reference to rankings as part of their giving request. But as a stand-alone message, it's probably not as effective, he says.

"It could make you seem disconnected from the actual mission of the institution," Mr. Allenby said. "Any time you get off message from the core mission, I think you're missing the boat."

Northwestern says it does usually include the rankings message in with letters and other messages outlining its need for support. With e-mails, it often pulls out one idea, says Bridget Haggerty, senior director of annual giving. The recent e-mail about rankings does not represent the full picture of how the development department

communicates with and solicits alumni, she said.

"It's a very tiny part," she said, "But a good part."

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