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**FIRST-GENERATION ALUMNI GIVING BEHAVIORS AND THEIR  
PERCEPTION TOWARD THEIR ALMA MATER**

by  
Kenold E. Gosier

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Services and Leadership  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Master of Arts in Higher Education  
at  
Rowan University  
March 22, 2022

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Drew Tinnin, Ed.D., Associate Vice President of Student Life

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## **Dedication**

This study is dedicated to every first-generation college student who is currently matriculating through school or graduated. Congratulations for making it this far and continuing your education. Never forget, you are meant to be here, you belong!

## **Acknowledgments**

Thank you, Rowan University, for the last two years of my life. I will forever cherish the opportunities given to me, memories made, and lessons learned. I would like to give a special thank you to Vice President Jesse Shafer and the Division of University Advancement. Thank you for welcoming me and setting me on a new path. A huge shout out to the Alumni Engagement Office. Thank you so much Chris, Jess, Carly and Kiniece for all the talks about my future and purpose, the good laughs and wisdom you shared. I truly value the support, kindness, and grace you have shared with me while I interned with you. To my professors and the higher education administration program, thank you for inspiring me to learn and be the change that I wish to see. I would not be here without the help of two of my mentors Shane Karolyi and Dr. Wright-Mair. Thank you for your patience, correction, and guidance. I will forever appreciate your investment in me. A special thank you to Dr. McCombs for his continued support throughout the past two years. Thank you to Dr. Drew Tinnin for serving on my committee, I really appreciate it. Dr. Sadeddine and Dr. Lezotte, thank you for your guidance, patience, and tough love throughout this last year. Because of your endless support this study was completed. Lastly, to my friends and family thank you for always pushing me and reminding me that I have purpose.

## **Abstract**

Kenold E. Gosier

### **FIRST-GENERATION ALUMNI GIVING BEHAVIORS AND THEIR PERCEPTION TOWARD THEIR ALMA MATER**

2021-2022

Stephanie Lezotte, Ph.D.

Master of Arts in Higher Education

The purpose of this research study was to evaluate the perceptions first-generation alumni at Rowan University had towards their alma mater and explore reasons why they give back or not. In addition, this study provides recommendations to Rowan University on how they can better engage first-generation alumni. This study utilized surveys and quantitative data analysis in order to analyze the perceptions and giving behaviors of first-generation alumni. The participants in this study were first-generation alumni that graduated from Rowan University after 2006. The most significant themes were (a) first-generation alumni give back to their alma mater Rowan University at higher rates than the institutions alumni giving rate, (b) first-generation alumni give and volunteer with various nonprofits and charities, (c) finances hinder first-generation alumni from giving back to their alma mater Rowan University. The findings also revealed first-generation alumni's desire to still be connected and engaged by their alma mater. Recommendations include suggestions for the Division of University Advancement to do yearly or bi-yearly email audits of their alumni, Rowan University should develop a mentorship program for their first-generation students and Alumni Engagement staff should host programs, events, or activities to engage first-generation alumni that connect them to current first-generation students.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

Alumni may arguably be some of the most influential and vocal individuals in higher education, second only to current students matriculating at the institution. Alumni who give back to their alma mater have more power and privileges than those who do not. There are various motivations alumni have that make them want to give back to their alma mater, including having buildings or rooms named after them, creating endowed scholarships in their name, direct access to the University President, a seat on the Board of Trustees or Regents, and premium access at athletic events. Some other motivations alumni have for giving back may be for their children or grandchildren to attend their alma mater too. Not every alumna or alumnus that gives back to their alma mater expects something in return from the institution. Alumni give back to their alma mater because they had a great academic or student experience during their matriculation. They also may have been involved in extracurricular activities that made a meaningful impact on them. Alumni could have also had a positive, personal, or emotional connection with faculty or staff and want to support their department, division, or program.

Alumni play various roles at their alma mater, the biggest being giving philanthropic donations Gaier (2005). For some members of the alumni community, it is easier to financially support the institution, while others prefer to invest time and other resources in the institution. Alumni volunteer to serve on boards and committees, participate in job fairs, lead alumni chapters, and assist in recruiting future students. They also can advocate on behalf of the institution on the local, state, and national level. Alumni are their alma mater's most valuable assets and advocates (Bowen, 2011).

## **Statement of the Problem**

Giving back to one's alma mater is more about than the benefits, perks, and influence. The individual may feel they are making a difference and enabling the institution to continue their mission of educating students and preparing them to be successful citizens. Since 2016, over 60 public and private nonprofit colleges and universities in the United States have closed, merged with, or were acquired by another institution (Whitford, 2021). As an example, the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education is exploring consolidating six public universities (Whitford, 2021). Various alumni groups began actively organizing and meeting with the state school system to advocate on behalf of their alma maters.

In addition, many institutions of higher education have deferred maintenance in their academic buildings and residence halls. The flashiness of colleges and universities attract students and make them want to enroll opposed to choosing rival institutions. For public institutions, state appropriations do not cover capital projects that are not academic buildings. This leaves institutions with the option of entering public, private partnerships (P3) in order to build new residence halls or their other needs (Lundy & Ladd, 2021). Philanthropic support from Alumni gifts could prevent institutions from closing their doors due to low enrollment. Not every college and university is fortunate to have an overwhelming endowment that they could survive on. If alumni donations were consistent and sufficient this would only benefit their alma mater. It is also on the institution to engage with their alumni and inform them of their needs, so they can continue their mission of educating students. Alumni engagement and annual giving offices must determine better ways to engage their alumni, while considering factors such

as age, affinity, proximity to campus, and life stages. If alumni have a positive perception of their alma mater, had a good student and academic experience or a sense of belonging during their matriculation they may be more likely to support the university.

Understanding why alumni give to their alma mater is critical in helping the university become financially sustainable and able to continue its mission.

Over the past decade alumni giving has been on a steady decline nationally, dropping from 12% in 2010 to 8% in 2020 (Advancement Metrics and Research for Education, 2019). At Rowan University, the Division of University of University Advancement has witnessed a similar trend. Rowan University's director of alumni engagement stated the alumni giving rate has declined from 5% to 3.5% during that same period, with previous alumni giving being as high as 9% in 2000 (C. D'Angelo, personal communication, March 1, 2022). In summary, understanding why alumni give to their alma mater is critical in helping the university become financially sustainable and able to continue its mission, especially as institutions grapple with a national decrease in total alumni giving.

### **Significance of Problem**

Due to the shifting demographics in the United States, there will be a substantially larger amount of first-generation college students. In 2018, 33% of higher education students noted they were a first-generation college student ("National Data Facts Sheets", n.d.). A growing amount of first-generation college students are pursuing higher education now than ever before. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic only propelled what some are referring to as the Great Resignation (Schroeder, 2021). Workers from various industries are quitting their jobs and going back to school to learn new skills, to change

careers or to find a job that suits their passion. It is paramount that factors that impact first-generation alumni and their giving behaviors are understood sooner rather than later so those alumni do not become disengaged from the university.

### **Purpose of Study**

In Fall 2020, 33% of Rowan University's enrolled students were first-generation college students (Rowan University Institutional Data Dashboard). The purpose of this study is to examine the perception of first-generation alumni at Rowan University to determine what factors influence their giving. The research will explore the alumni's satisfaction with their academic program and overall student experience during their matriculation. Also, the research will seek to see if the alumnus or alumna had a sense of belonging at Rowan University. Lastly, alumni who participate in the study will provide recommendations to Rowan University's Alumni Engagement and Annual Giving offices on how they can better serve them.

As Rowan University continues to graduate their students and the alumni population increases it is the goal of the institution to engage with their alumni and keep them a part of the Rowan family. This research will provide a better understanding of first-generation alumni and their giving behaviors.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the perceptions of Rowan University first-generation alumni towards giving?
2. What are the reasons that influence first-generation alumni decisions to give back to their alma mater or not?

3. What are the recommendations to the university's annual giving and alumni engagement offices to better engage alumni?

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

This study was limited to first-generation alumni that graduated from Rowan University's main campus in Glassboro, New Jersey in the last 15 years. This study was based on alumni perceptions of Rowan University and conducted through a cross-sectional online survey. The researcher assumed that the participants completed the survey by answering each question truthfully and fair. There were 442 emails that bounced back. This survey was completely anonymous and did not look at college degree and year.

### **Operational Definitions**

- Alumni (Alum): Former students of an institution
- Alma Mater: A institution in which one matriculated at and has a conferred degree from
- First-Generation (First Gen): A student whose parent, guardian, or supporter who they regularly resided with did not complete a baccalaureate degree ("Flying First", n.d.).
- Alumni Giving: Philanthropic donations from members of the University community who have obtained their degree from a particular college or university

### **Overview of Study**

Chapter II presents an overview of the current scholarly literature surrounding alumni roles and importance, alumni giving during the COVID-19 pandemic, alumni engagement, alumni loyalty, and the giving demographics of alumni who give back and those who do not give back.

Chapter III discusses the methods used to study the perception that first-generation alumni have toward their alma mater, Rowan University.

Chapter IV presents the findings and result of the study and explains the profile of the sample.

Chapter V discusses the research questions in connection with the results and findings of the survey. Conclusions and recommendations for future practice and research are included in this chapter.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of Literature**

Although alumni are no longer matriculating at the institution, they are the backbone of their alma maters. States appropriate money to public institutions of higher education and they also receive financial aid. This money alone is not merely enough money for those schools to keep their doors open and operate as they should. Private institutions do not receive state funding, but they do receive federal money or financial aid and money from donors. Private colleges and larger public universities often have a substantial endowment they can pull money from. When withdrawing from their endowment universities can usually subsist on the accrued interest alone, preserving the cash contributions for further interest accumulation. Colleges and universities have plenty of financial strains and the COVID-19 pandemic has not eased that burden. Institutions of higher education have had to close their doors for good, others have had to lay off or furlough staff and faculty to save money. Ultimately, this negatively impacts students and their success and limits the support students need.

This literature review provides an analysis on alumni giving, their roles and their impact on their alma mater. The major focus of this literature review is to examine alumni philanthropic behaviors and see why alumni give back to their alma mater and why they do not. The three factors that will be analyzed will be alumni's academic, student experience, and their sense of belonging during their matriculation to make connections to their giving behaviors. The research examined will link alumni's current financial circumstances to why they do or do not give back to their alma mater.



## **Alumni Importance and Role**

Alumni are significant because they do not have the same limitations in the various roles that they can serve in. Staff, faculty, administrators, and the Board of Trustees must refrain from speaking out against the Institution, University school system and State. Those stakeholders doing this could bring negative implications back on the institution where some may lose their job, or the school could lose funding. Alumni and students do not have to follow the same protocols as those employed by the state and university do.

Alumni can serve in various roles to advance the mission and goals of their alma mater. They can serve as advocates socially and politically, fighting for the appropriation of more state dollars and policies that would benefit their alma mater. They can serve as benefactors and philanthropists donating money to support programs, university infrastructure and the school's endowment. Alumni can serve as committee members, serving on various committees at the school such as the Board of Trustees or boosters for the athletics department. Alumni can also serve as fundraisers and recruiters on behalf of state and regional alumni chapters. They can visit college fairs and recruit potential students to come to their alma mater. Alumni serving in this volunteer capacity helps the university save money because they would not have to pay these alumni for their services. These constituents serving as recruiters can ultimately boost the school's enrollment.

A 2013 study by McDearmon suggested that alumni want to serve in significant and identified roles with or on behalf of their alma mater. This study analyzed the social behaviors of alumni and the chances of them being engaged with their alma mater after

their matriculation. The social behaviors that were analyzed were visiting campus and participating in campus and athletic events, joining the alumni association, and giving back money (McDearmon, 2013). The survey conducted had a population of 8,987 alumni, with 688 total participants. The results indicated that alumni with a defined or significant role would be more likely to participate in one or more social behaviors (McDearmon, 2013). The roles alumni have must be clearly defined to maximize their engagement and involvement. When alumni feel valued, they will be more inclined to donate money, give back time and serve in other various capacities because they know they are appreciated. Although alumni are no longer matriculating at their alma mater, many still want to be involved in ways their schedules permit.

### **Alumni Giving During COVID-19**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic alumni giving behaviors and trends have fluctuated nationwide. Some institutions have not missed a beat still bringing in dollars and others are struggling. Calvin Tyler, a former Morgan State University student who dropped out because he could not pay for school donated \$15 million to the university (Bowie & Reed, 2021). He and his wife have donated to Morgan State University numerous times giving over \$20 million. The money donated will continue to fund student scholarships. Oregon State University received \$50 million from an “anonymous donor” to renovate their football stadium (Anderson, 2021). New York Union College received a \$51million from Rich Templeton, and Eastern Michigan University’s alumni donated \$2 million to 2020 graduates and incoming first year students impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Haynes, 2020).

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Emory University wanted to raise money to help support their students. Jenna Civitello, Director of Alumni and Constituent Giving at Emory University said the institution was trying to be understanding and cognizant of asking their alumni for money during the pandemic. The University wanted to support their students in some way and decided to solicit donations without explicitly asking for money (Haynes, 2020). In one week, alumni gave \$35,000 to support relief plans for undergraduate and graduate students. Christina Paxson, the President of Brown University said, “fundraising in a time of uncertainty is really, really tricky, and you can't push it too hard,” (Haynes, 2020, n.p). This was the reality for so many colleges and universities. Over 300 educational institutions had to cancel their annual day of giving out of respect for their alumni and asking them for money during turbulent times (Haynes, 2020). Brown University, like Emory and so many other institutions, launched a fundraising campaign to support their students and raised \$500,000 (Haynes, 2020). The money raised would go on to support students as they flew home, bought books for class and technology they may need to purchase as a result of going home. The COVID-19 pandemic had a positive and negative impact on donor relations offices nationwide. Fundraising during the COVID-19 pandemic provided institutions a safety blanket and displayed that regardless of circumstance alumni who have the capacity and inclination to give will give.

### **Alumni Engagement**

The pandemic forced educational institutions to find unique and non-traditional ways to engage their alumni. Alumni engagement stimulates philanthropic gifts from constituents. Some of the non-traditional ways alumni have been engaged were virtual

homecomings, virtual galas, virtual alumni chapter meetings, social media challenges, and more. Homecoming is a tradition many schools have where they bring in a substantial amount of money. Virtual homecomings served as an opportunity to still bring in dollars while alumni enjoy tradition in a virtual setting.

Relationship building between alumni and the institution is important because, that strong foundation sets both up for success. In order to engage their alumni properly the institution must know their alumni (Bowen, 2011). One cannot engage someone who they do not know. Knowing and understanding your alumni helps strengthen that relationship and keeps them engaged. Gaier (2005) suggested that it would be better for institutions to engage their alumni that reside in state more than their alumni who live out of state. In state alumni were more likely to give back financially and attend on campus and athletic events than out of state alumni (Gaier, 2005).

Other than philanthropy, another way alumni can stay engaged with their alma mater is through volunteerism. Alumni speaking on panels, serving as mentors to current students and young alumni, volunteering at campus job fairs and events are all ways alumni can give back without opening their wallet and checkbook. Alumni engaging with their alma mater civically is often overlooked because it does not involve money, but it can have a far greater impact than dollars.

### **Alumni Loyalty and Giving Demographics**

Institutions of higher education benefit from alumni loyalty. Alumni loyalty is fidelity and allegiance to one's alma mater. Snijders et al. (2019) suggested that alumni loyalty begins during the student's matriculation at their alma mater. The student's undergraduate experience shapes whether they will be loyal to their alma mater or not.

Students who were engaged are more likely to be loyal to their alma mater than those who were not (Gaier, 2005). Alumni loyalty is influenced by one's personal and emotional connection with the institution. When alumni are loyal, they defend their alma mater, they wear paraphernalia, they give back money and they are engaged.

Giving demographics change and vary per class, graduation year, socioeconomic status and more. For example, older alumni give back more than young alumni. Gaier (2005) suggested that institutions should work to engage and solicit young alumni and not older alumni. Younger alumni have a more recent connection with the institution, but they do not have the same financial capital older alumni do. Older alumni also have family commitments whereas younger alumni and recent graduates may not have those same family commitments. Young alumni also work more entry level positions and they do not make as much as older alumni. The young alumni that Gaier suggested may be working to pay off loans and other bills they accumulated in undergrad and may not have the financial means to donate to their alma mater as well. In Gaier's study women gave back to their alma mater more than men. Weerts and Ronca (2008), found that women are also more likely to volunteer and engage civically with their alma mater than men.

### **Factors that Impact Alumni Giving**

The research analyzed gave positive results on the many different factors that impact alumni giving.

#### ***Academic***

Burley et al. (2007) analyzed the academic experience of Black students and their feelings toward the institution. The Black students surveyed had a positive academic experience at their alma mater and would all give back philanthropically. Gaier (2005)

examined the alumni's satisfaction with their academic experiences and the implications it would have on them giving back financially, engaging with the institution and their volunteerism. According to Burley et al. (2007) and Gaier (2005) if alumni were satisfied with their undergraduate alma mater, their academic program, and the experiences they had they more were likely to give back. Koeing-Lewis et al. (2016) evaluated the academic experience of students in order to assist alumni departments and associations with their recruitment of alumni with different experiences. The research reported that students who had a positive academic experience would be more inclined to support the institution financially and civically (Koeing-Lewis et al., 2016). McAlexander et al. (2001) researched the relationship between academic student experiences and if alumni would support the institution. The research conducted concluded that students who created a long-lasting relationship in their academic program with faculty would be more likely to still have that same relationship after they graduated (McAlexander et al., 2001). This long-lasting relationship and positive experience would motivate that student to give back financially. From the research gathered, it can be concluded that if students have a positive academic experience, they will be more inclined to give back to their alma mater.

### ***Financial***

Alumni who do not have the financial means to give back do not donate or engage with their alma mater. Wastyn (2009) conducted a qualitative study which examined why alumni do not give back to their alma mater. The participant's backgrounds varied with some former students who did not have a strong connection to their alma mater, a positive undergraduate experience and others who are now parents of current students (Wastyn, 2009). Some of the participants who did not have the financial means to support

the institution looked at the university as greedy or not in need of financial assistance (Wastyn, 2009). The participants did not donate because they were unsure of where their money was going once they donated to the institution (Wastyn, 2009). It was surprising that alumni who have children studying at the institution do not give back. A reason for this was that they are already paying for their student's tuition, and they did not want to pay the university twice (Wastyn, 2009). Institutions of higher education must find better ways to engage their alumni who do not have the resources to give financially and let them know they can still be involved.

### ***Sense of Belonging***

The positive relationships students built on campus as undergraduate students allowed them to fit in and feel as though they mattered. This section draws comparisons with those students who had a positive academic experience. Burley et al. (2007) found that Black students who had a sense of belonging at their PWI alma mater would give back because of this connection. This was surprising due to many Black students not feeling like they belonged at their alma mater during their matriculation. Students who had a strong sense of belonging while they matriculated were more inclined to donate to their alma mater (Burley et al., 2007). These are the students who have the emotional connection and alumni loyalty to the institution.

### ***Student Experience***

Students who were involved on campus and had positive experiences were more likely to give back to their alma mater than those who did not. McDearmon (2013) conducted research analyzing the prosocial behaviors of students who were involved on campus to prove if students who were involved on campus would donate, attend campus

and athletic events, and join the alumni association. In this study he looked at students who lived on campus, were involved in student government, and worked in residence life. His research concluded that students who have a positive student experience were more likely to donate, come back and attend events on campus and join the alumni association (McDearmon, 2013). Gaier (2005) analyzed student involvement in Greek letter organizations and other student activities to prove that students who were involved as undergraduates have a connection to their alma mater and will give back. Alumni give back to their alma mater partially because of fond memories they made during their undergraduate studies. They remember the experiences they had and want to afford those same opportunities to other students.

### **Summary**

This literature review discussed the importance of alumni giving and the role that they play in the success of their alma mater. It included topics such as alumni loyalty, alumni giving during the COVID-19 pandemic, alumni engagement, and the significance of the alumni role. According to the research analyzed, it can be concluded that alumni play a significant role in the institutional advancement of their alma mater. Their generous gifts allow the university to continue their mission of educating and supporting students and ensuring their success. In order to increase alumni giving, universities must provide their students with positive undergraduate experiences during their matriculation. This will increase alumni giving and engagement long after the student's matriculation. This research provides suggestions on how institutions can better engage their alumni. A strong and continuous relationship between the two entities sets the institution up for success in the long run.



Some of the limitations or gaps that existed were there was not enough first-generation data and gender-based data. In multiple studies responses received did not equal the population of alumni. Overall, the research analyzed was overwhelmingly positive and favorable.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

#### **Context of Study**

The context of study is to explore the perceptions first-generation (first-gen) alumni from Rowan University have towards their alma mater, and to evaluate the reason why they give back or not. The research population of this study is first-generation alumni that graduated in the last 15 years and attended Rowan University's, main campus in, Glassboro, New Jersey. A non-experimental quantitative research design will be used to (a) examine Rowan University first-generation alumni perceptions towards giving; (b) explore the reasons why they give back to their alma mater or not; and (c) provide recommendations to the university's annual giving and alumni engagement offices on how they can better engage first-generation alumni.

This study will be conducted at Rowan University's main campus in Glassboro, New Jersey. Rowan is a R2 university, according to the Carnegie classifications. Rowan is the United States fourth fastest growing research university ("Rowan University Fast Facts 2020-2021", n.d.). Rowan University has 13 schools and colleges; they are the Colleges of Business, Communication and Creative Arts, Education, Engineering, Honors, Humanities and Social Sciences, Performing Arts, Science and Mathematics, and the Schools of Earth and Environment, Health Professions, and Biomedical Sciences, and its two medical schools; Cooper Medical School of Rowan University and Rowan University School of Osteopathic Medicine.

Rowan University has a total of 19,678 students ("Rowan University Fast Facts 2020-2021", n.d.). Twenty seven percent of the university's undergraduate population are

first-generation college students ("Flying First", n.d.). Rowan's College of Science of Math has the most first-generation college students in their college. Second is the college of Humanities and Social Sciences and third is the Rohrer College of Business ("Flying First", n.d.). Rowan University has over 98,748 alumni in their network ("Rowan University Fast Facts 2020-2021", n.d.). They have alumni in all 50 states and 42 countries ("Rowan University Fast Facts 2020-2021", n.d.). Rowan has a few distinguished alumni such as fitness guru Shaun T, financial advisor and businessman Ric Edelman and singer-songwriter Patti Smith.

Rowan University is extremely supportive of their first-generation college students. The Division of Student Life has a program called Flying First. Flying First is a task force that was created to support the academic success of Rowan University first-generation college students ("Flying First", n.d.). The program seeks to assist with the transition of the institution's first-generation college students and aid them with resources and support. The university offers various financial resources to their first-generation students, such as the Rowan Opportunity Fund, The Martyn and Cheryl Gallus Flying First Scholarship and The Ric Edelman College of Communications and Creative Arts Flying First Endowed Scholarship Fund ("Flying First", n.d.). These resources aid students financially so they can continue their matriculation at Rowan University. The Flying First program offers programs and events for their students that support them throughout the academic school year. Rowan University's Department of Residence Life and University Housing has a first-gen living learning community in which first-generation college students have the opportunity to live amongst each other in a section of one of the residence halls on campus.

## **Research Questions**

1. What are the perceptions of Rowan University first-generation alumni towards giving?
2. What are the reasons that influence first-generation alumni decisions to give back to their alma mater or not?
3. What are the recommendations to the university's annual giving and alumni engagement offices to better engage alumni?

## **Research Design**

This study utilizes a non-experimental quantitative research design. Non-experimental research does not allow the researcher to manipulate or control the phenomena to change the participant's perception (McMillan, 2016). This study will be designed using descriptive non-experimental quantitative research to analyze the perceptions of Rowan University first-generation alumni and their decision to give back to their alma mater. Non-experimental descriptive research involves the usage of questionnaires, interviews scales and tests to find the perceptions of the quality of services provided (Meadows, 2003).

## **Population and Sample**

Rowan University has over 98,000 alumni in their network ("Fast Facts 2020-2021", n.d.). About 30% of Rowan's students are first-generation college students ("Flying First", n.d.). The total population of first-generation alumni from Rowan is 16,624. However, there are only 13,696 alums that are emailable. Based on the population the target sample size is 374 with a 95% confidence level. Receiving at least 374 survey responses ensures the findings are generalizable to the population.

## **Data Collection**

The instrument that will be utilized to collect data will be a cross-sectional online survey. The survey will be conducted anonymously online using Qualtrics. Qualtrics is Rowan University's surveying tool (*Qualtrics Quick Reference.pub*, n.d.). The use of electronic surveys save time, money and respondents may be more comfortable with online surveys than paper-based surveys (McMillan, 2016). First-generation alumni from the last 15 years will receive an email with a survey link for them to complete. The survey will be a cross sectional survey approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants will have to consent to the survey before moving on. All the responses will be anonymous, and the responses will be kept on a password protected laptop.

The survey will have two sections Likert scale questions and open-ended questions. The Likert scale results will be used to examine how satisfied the alumni were with Rowan University, their academic and student experience and if they had a sense of belonging during their matriculation. Lastly, there will be two open ended questions in order to have a better understanding of first-generation alumni perceptions and how they would like to be engaged by Rowan University.

## **Quantitative Data Analysis**

The data collected will allow me to study giving behaviors through the perceptions of first-generation alumni from Rowan University. Descriptive statistics summarizes the data from the collected sample in order for it to be analyzed (McMillan, 2016). Descriptive statistics uses the frequency of scores, percentages, means and graphs (McMillan, 2016). Using Qualtrics, I will be able to generate the frequency, percentages, and means from the data collected. Tables and charts will be used to display the data

collected from first-generation alumni. Quantitative data analysis will help me identify common themes from all the responses. I will also discuss and share the limitations from the study and provide recommendations for future research.

## Chapter IV

### Findings

#### Profile of the Sample

The target population for this study was first-generation alumni that graduated from Rowan University's main campus in Glassboro, New Jersey in the last 15 years. The survey was created on Qualtrics, Rowan University's surveying tool (*Qualtrics Quick Reference.pub*, n.d.). The link to the survey was sent to first-generation alumni through Qualtrics. The sample was provided by the Division of University Advancement's Services and Donor Relations department at Rowan University. The survey was launched February 15, 2022, and sent out two more times to individuals who did not complete the survey. The survey was closed on February 24, 2022. A total of 524 responses were started and 462 responses were collected. From 462 responses that were collected there was a 3.8% response rate and an 88% completion rate.

Table 1 contains responses from first-generation alumni from Rowan University and their level of satisfaction with their extracurricular experience during their matriculation. The total number of responses for this question was 371. Two hundred and twelve alumni had a positive extracurricular student experience. Sixteen alumni were extremely dissatisfied with their student experience.

**Table 1***Q3 - How Satisfied Were You with Your Extracurricular Student Experience? (n=371)*

| Extracurricular Student Experience Satisfaction | <i>f</i> | %     |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------|-------|
| Extremely dissatisfied                          | 16       | 4.31  |
| Somewhat dissatisfied                           | 38       | 10.24 |
| Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied              | 105      | 28.30 |
| Somewhat satisfied                              | 118      | 31.81 |
| Extremely satisfied                             | 94       | 25.34 |

Table 2 contains responses from first-generation alumni from Rowan University and their level of satisfaction with their academic experience during their matriculation. The total number of responses for this question was 374. Three hundred and six alumni had a positive extracurricular academic experience. Eleven alumni were extremely dissatisfied with their academic experience.

**Table 2***Q4 - How Satisfied Were You with Your Academic Experience? (n=374)*

| Academic Experience Satisfaction   | <i>f</i> | %     |
|------------------------------------|----------|-------|
| Extremely dissatisfied             | 11       | 2.94  |
| Somewhat dissatisfied              | 31       | 8.29  |
| Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied | 26       | 6.95  |
| Somewhat satisfied                 | 168      | 44.92 |
| Extremely satisfied                | 138      | 36.90 |



Table 3 contains responses from first-generation alumni from Rowan University and their perception on how well they were understood as a person during their matriculation. This question was taken from a survey conducted by the Imperial College London that measured sense of belonging (Sense of belonging scale, n.d.). The total number of responses for this question was 374. One hundred and forty-four alumni felt they were understood quite a bit. Twenty-two alumni were felt as they were not understood at all.

**Table 3**

*Q5 - How Well Did People at Rowan University Understand You as a Person? (n=372)*

| Were you Understood      | <i>f</i> | %     |
|--------------------------|----------|-------|
| Do not understand at all | 22       | 5.91  |
| Understand a little      | 56       | 15.05 |
| Understand somewhat      | 103      | 27.69 |
| Understand quite a bit   | 144      | 38.71 |
| Understand completely    | 47       | 12.63 |

Table 4 contains responses from first-generation alumni from Rowan University and their perception on how connected they were to faculty and staff during their matriculation. This question was taken from a survey conducted by the Imperial College London that measured sense of belonging (Sense of belonging scale, n.d.). The total number of responses for this question was 373. One hundred and twenty-one alumni felt they were connected quite a bit to faculty and staff of Rowan. Fifty-four alumni felt they were not connected at all to faculty and staff of Rowan.

**Table 4***Q6 - How Connected Did You Feel to Faculty and Staff at Rowan University (n=373)*

| Level of Connection to Staff | <i>f</i> | %     |
|------------------------------|----------|-------|
| Not at all connected         | 54       | 14.48 |
| Slightly connected           | 55       | 14.75 |
| Connected somewhat           | 98       | 26.27 |
| Connected quite a bit        | 121      | 32.44 |
| Completely connected         | 45       | 12.06 |

Table 5 contains responses from first-generation alumni from Rowan University and their perception on how connected they were to their peers during their matriculation. This question was taken from a survey conducted by the Imperial College London that measured sense of belonging (Sense of belonging scale, n.d.). The total number of responses for this question was 373. One hundred and eleven alumni felt they were connected quite a bit to other students at Rowan. Forty-nine alumni felt they were not connected at all to their peers at Rowan.

**Table 5***Q7 - How Connected Did You Feel to Other Students at Rowan University (n=373)*

| Level of Connection to Peers | <i>f</i> | %     |
|------------------------------|----------|-------|
| Not at all connected         | 49       | 13.14 |
| Slightly connected           | 68       | 18.23 |
| Connected somewhat           | 95       | 25.47 |
| Connected quite a bit        | 111      | 29.76 |
| Completely connected         | 50       | 13.40 |

Table 6 identifies the various charities and nonprofit organizations first-generation alumni from Rowan University are more inclined to support. Respondents were allowed to select more than one response for this question. The total number of responses for this question was 1243. One hundred and seventy-eight alumni are more inclined to support education nonprofits and organizations. One hundred and seventy-seven alumni are more inclined to give or donate time to nonprofits and organizations that support animals.

**Table 6**

*Q8 – Please Identify the Charities/Nonprofit Organizations You are More Inclined to Support (services, time, donations, etc.) (n=1243)*

| Philanthropic Support     | <i>f</i> | %     |
|---------------------------|----------|-------|
| None                      | 23       | 1.85  |
| Animals                   | 177      | 14.24 |
| Arts, Culture, Humanities | 110      | 8.85  |
| Community development     | 123      | 9.90  |
| Education                 | 178      | 14.32 |
| Environment               | 109      | 8.77  |
| Health                    | 119      | 9.57  |
| Human services            | 114      | 9.17  |
| Human & Civil rights      | 143      | 11.50 |
| International             | 34       | 2.74  |
| Religious                 | 39       | 3.14  |
| Research & Public safety  | 57       | 4.59  |
| Other (please specify)    | 17       | 1.37  |

*Note.* Participants were permitted to choose more than one response.

Table 7 analyzes the frequency of donations made by first-generation alumni from Rowan University. The total number of responses for this question was 363. Two hundred and thirty-three alumni make charitable gifts at random. Sixty-eight alumni said they never make charitable gifts.

**Table 7**

*Q9 - How Frequently do You Make Charitable Gifts? (n=363)*

| Frequency of Donations               | <i>f</i> | %     |
|--------------------------------------|----------|-------|
| Never                                | 68       | 18.73 |
| At Random                            | 233      | 64.19 |
| Monthly                              | 25       | 6.89  |
| Recurring donation/payroll deduction | 25       | 6.89  |
| Annually                             | 12       | 3.31  |

Table 8 analyzes the frequency of gifts first-generation alumni from Rowan University made to their alma mater. The total number of responses for this question was 365. Three hundred and three alumni said they have never made a gift to their alma mater. Sixty-two of the respondents (16.99%) said they have made a gift to their alma mater. This is higher than the institution’s average alumni giving rate of 3.5% over the past three years.

**Table 8***Q11 – Have You Ever Made a Gift to Your Alma mater? (n=365)*

| Frequency of Donations | <i>f</i> | %     |
|------------------------|----------|-------|
| No                     | 303      | 83.01 |
| Yes                    | 62       | 16.99 |

## **Chapter V**

### **Summary, Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusions**

#### **Summary of Study**

This study investigated first-generation alumni giving behaviors and their perception of their alma mater Rowan University. The research sought to understand why or why not first-generation alumni from Rowan gave back. There were a total of 462 alumni that completed the survey. The survey was sent out through Qualtrics February 15, 2022. There were two additional reminders that were sent to unfinished respondents on February 18 and 22, 2022. The survey was open for ten days and closed February 24, 2022. The survey data was saved and downloaded and saved to a password protected laptop to begin data analysis.

#### **Discussion**

##### ***Research Question 1***

What are the perceptions of Rowan University first-generation alumni towards giving? There were three questions that addressed first-generation alumni's perception toward giving. Question eight, asked alumni to identify the charities/nonprofit organizations alumni are more inclined to support and overall, there were 1243 responses. Respondents were allowed to select more than one response for this question. Based on the responses Rowan's first-generation alumni do give back to causes that they care about or have a connection to. First-generation alumni that participated in this study are more inclined to support educational and animal nonprofits and charities.

Question nine, asked respondents how frequently do you make charitable gifts? There were 363 first-generation alumni that responded to this question. Two hundred and

twenty-three alumni said they make gifts at random. Sixty-six alumni said they never make charitable gifts. Rowan University's first-generation alumni give when they have the money to give or when they feel the need to give.

Question eleven, asked first-generation alumni, have they ever made a gift to their alma mater? Eighty three percent (303) first-gen alumni said no, they have never made a gift to their alma mater. Sixteen percent (62) alumni said yes, they have made a gift to their alma mater.

Rowan University's first-generation alumni have positive feelings toward giving to areas they are passionate about. However, most first-generation alumni surveyed do not have positive feelings toward giving to their alma mater. The average giving rate for first-generation alumni that participated in this study was (16.9%). This giving rate is higher than Rowan University's institutional average which is 3.5%.

### ***Research Question 2***

What are the reasons that influence first-generation alumni decisions to give back to their alma mater or not?

Question thirteen on the survey asked are there specific factors that impact your willingness to give? There were over 208 responses from alumni for this question and the answers varied. Finances was a common theme that appeared throughout the responses. Many of the first-gen alums said they are still paying off loans, they are in debt, or they are not in a financial position to give. Also, some said they already paid their tuition to Rowan and would not want to give back because they would be giving to them twice. Some respondents give because of their personal attachment and connection to Rowan

University and others said they do not give back because of their lack of connection to Rowan.

### ***Research Question 3***

What are the recommendations to the university's annual giving and alumni engagement offices to better engage alumni?

Question fourteen asked do you have recommendations for Rowan University to better engage first-generation alumni? There were over 364 responses to this question. Some common themes from alumni is that they wanted to hear more from Rowan throughout the year just not when they needed money. Three of the respondents said this was the first time Rowan has reached out to them regarding being first generation. Another went further and added this was the first time they have been engaged by someone from Rowan since they graduated 10 years ago. A few alumni recommended building a mentorship program for first-generation students while they matriculate at Rowan University. Some alumni even went further to say they need a mentor to help guide them even though they have graduated. Another theme that appeared a few times is alumni saying they want free merchandise on occasion.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

According to the findings of this study and previous research, these are recommendations for Rowan University, the Division University Advancement and Alumni Engagement.

1. When the survey was sent there were 442 emails that bounced back. The Division of University Advancement should do yearly or bi-yearly email audits of their alumni to ensure they are keeping in touch with their alumni.



2. Rowan University should develop a mentorship program for their first-generation students. The mentors could be administrators, alumni, faculty, staff, or students who were first-generation college students.
3. Several first-generation alumni said this was the first time someone from Rowan has reached out to them or reached out to them about being a first-generation alumna or alumnus. The Division of Advancement and Alumni Engagement Office should explore hosting something for first-generation alumni and current first-generation students during homecoming week.
4. First-Generation alumni of Rowan University should be included or sent information about the First-Generation Symposium that Rowan hosts.
5. First-Generation alumni should be reminded or educated about Flying First and the First-Generation task force.
6. Alumni Engagement staff should host programs, events, or activities to engage first-generation alumni that connect them to current first-generation students.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

According to the findings of this study and previous research, these are recommendations for future research:

1. Researchers should explore doing more demographic (race, gender, social economic status, degree specific, etc.) research around first-generation alumni and their giving behaviors.
2. Researchers could survey current first-generation students and explore if they would or would not give back to their alma mater or not after their matriculation and why.

3. A qualitative study can be conducted on first-generation alumni and their giving behaviors.

## **Conclusions**

The trends from this research are clear: First-generation alumni from Rowan give at a higher rate than the institutional average, but it is clear many alumni prioritize increased opportunities to engage and connect with the institution over giving. Rowan University's first-generation alumni support a wide range of charities and nonprofits they have a connection to, most notably education, animal, and human and civil rights-based causes. Various respondents expressed a desire to mentor and work with first-generation students at their alma mater. From the results of the research, it was evident that a major roadblock that prevents first-generation alumni from giving back to their alma mater Rowan University, was their financial circumstances. When asked are there specific factors that impact your willingness to give; most of the responses were no money to give, job status, the economy, having to pay for their own kids in college, and student loan debt.

The giving behaviors that already exist among first-generation alumni from Rowan University paired with those who have the inclination to give indicates an opportunity by the Offices of Alumni Engagement and Annual Giving to increase first-generation alumni giving. Lastly, there are many ways to engage alumni outside of annual giving and philanthropic gifts. Rowan University must present volunteer opportunities that their first-generation alumni can participate in, and this could have a far greater impact than money.

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## Appendix A

### Data Collection Instrument

# First-Generation College Students Giving Behaviors and Their Perception Toward Their Alma Mater

---

#### Start of Block: Block 1

Text You are invited to participate in this online research survey entitled "First-Generation College Students Giving Behaviors and their Perception Toward their Alma Mater."

You are included in this online survey because you are a first-generation alumnus or alumnae of Rowan University. The number of subjects to be enrolled in the study will be 13,696.

There is no time limit to complete this survey. Your participation is voluntary. If you do not wish to participate in this survey, please do not feel obligated but your input would be greatly appreciated. Completing this survey indicates that you are voluntarily giving consent to participate in the survey.

The purpose of this study is to examine the perception of first-generation alumni at Rowan University to determine what factors influence their giving. The research will explore alumni satisfaction with their academic program and overall student experience during their matriculation. Also, the research will seek to see if the alumnus or alumnae had a sense of belonging at Rowan University.

The survey will be sent to 13,696 first-generation alumni of Rowan University. Your response will be kept confidential. All the responses will be anonymous, and the responses will be kept on a password protected laptop. Results and findings will be shared with Rowan Universities' Division of Advancement in order grow donations from first-generation alumni and to better engage first-generation alumni. Any part of the research that is published as part of this study will not include your individual information.

If you have any questions about the survey, you can contact the principal investigator for this study at the address provided below, but you do not have to give your personal identification if you wish. Dr. Stephanie Lezotte Assistant Dean School of Graduate Studies 856-256-4124 [lezotte@rowan.edu](mailto:lezotte@rowan.edu) or co- principal investigator Kenold E. Gosier at [gosier35@rowan.edu](mailto:gosier35@rowan.edu). If

you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at (856) 256-4078– Glassboro/CMSRU.

This study has been approved by the Rowan IRB, PRO-2021-579.

End of Block: Block 1

---

Start of Block: Block 2

Q1 To participate in this survey, you must be a first-generation alumni of Rowan University. First-Generation (First Gen) is defined as a student whose parent, guardian, or supporter who they regularly reside with that did not complete a baccalaureate degree ("Flying First", n.d.).

Confirm (1)

---

Q2 Completing this survey indicates that you are voluntarily giving consent to participate in the survey.

I consent (8)

I do not consent (9)

*Skip To: End of Survey If Q2 = I do not consent*

End of Block: Block 2

---

Start of Block: Question Block

Page Break

---

Q1 What is your perception of your alma mater, Rowan University?

- Very negative(11)
  - Somewhat negative (12)
  - Neither negative nor positive (13)
  - Somewhat positive (14)
  - Strongly positive (15)
- 

Q2 How satisfied were you with your extracurricular student experience?

- Extremely dissatisfied (1)
  - Somewhat dissatisfied (2)
  - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (3)
  - Somewhat satisfied (4)
  - Extremely satisfied (5)
- 

Q3 How satisfied were you with your academic experience?

- Extremely dissatisfied (1)
  - Somewhat dissatisfied (2)
  - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (3)
  - Somewhat satisfied (4)
  - Extremely satisfied (5)
-



Q4 How well did people at Rowan University understand you as a person?

- Do not understand at all (1)
  - Understand a little (2)
  - Understand somewhat (3)
  - Understand quite a bit (4)
  - Understand completely (5)
- 

Q5 How connected did you feel to faculty and staff at Rowan University?

- Not at all connected (1)
  - Slightly connected (2)
  - Connected somewhat (3)
  - Connected quite a bit (4)
  - Completely connected (5)
- 

Q6 How connected did you feel to other students at Rowan University?

- Not at all connected (1)
  - Slightly connected (2)
  - Connected somewhat (3)
  - Connected quite a bit (4)
  - Completely connected (5)
-

Q7 Please identify the charities/nonprofit organizations you are more inclined to support (service, time, donations, etc.)

- None (1)
  - Animals (2)
  - Arts, Culture & Humanities (3)
  - Community development (4)
  - Education (5)
  - Environment (6)
  - Health (7)
  - Human services (8)
  - Human & Civil rights (9)
  - International (10)
  - Religious (11)
  - Research & Public Safety (12)
  - Other (please specify) (13)
-

Q8 How frequently do you make charitable gifts?

- Never (1)
- At random (2)
- Monthly (3)
- Recurring donation/payroll deduction (4)
- Annually (5)

---

*Display This Question:*

*If Q8 = At random*

*And Q8 = Monthly*

*And Q8 = Recurring donation/payroll deduction*

*And Q8 = Annually*

Q9 What motivates you to give?

---

---

Q10 Have you ever made a gift to your alma mater?

- No (1)
- Yes (2)

---

*Display This Question:*

*If Q10 = Yes*

Q11 What motivated you to give to your alma mater?

---

*Display This Question:*

*If Q10 = No*

Q12 Are there specific factors that impact your willingness to give?

---

Q13 Do you have recommendations for Rowan University to better engage first-generation alumni?

---

End of Block: Question Block

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## Appendix B

### IRB Letter



**DHHS Federal Wide Assurance Identifier:** FWA00007111

**IRB Chair Person:** Dr. Ane Johnson

**IRB Director:** Eric Gregory

**Effective Date:** February 8, 2022

### Notice of Approval - Initial

**Study ID:** PRO-2021-579

**Title:** First Generation College Students and Their Perception toward Their Alma Mater

**Principal Investigator:** Stephanie Lezotte

**Study Coordinator:** Kenold Gosier

**Co-Investigator(s):** Kenold Gosier

**Sponsor:** Department Funded

**Submission Type:** Initial

**Submission Status:** Exempt

**Approval Date:** February 4, 2022

**Review Type:** Exempt

**Exempt Category:** Category 3.(i)(A). Research involving benign behavioral interventions in conjunction with the collection of information from an adult subject through verbal or written responses (including data entry) or audiovisual recording if the subject prospectively agrees to the intervention and information collection.

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

**Pregnant Women, Human Fetus, and Neonates Code:** N/A

Pediatric/Children Code: N/A

#### ALL APPROVED INVESTIGATOR(S) MUST COMPLY WITH THE FOLLOWING:

1. Conduct the research in accordance with the protocol, applicable laws and regulations, and the principles of research ethics as set forth in the Belmont Report.
- 2a. Continuing Review: Approval is valid until the protocol expiration date shown above. To avoid lapses in approval, submit a continuation application at least eight weeks before the study expiration date.
- 2b. Progress Report: Approval is valid until the protocol expiration date shown above. To avoid lapses, an annual

progress report is required at least 21 days prior to the expiration date.

3a. Expiration of IRB Approval: If IRB approval expires, effective the date of expiration and until the continuing review approval is issued: All research activities must stop unless the IRB finds that it is in the best interest of individual subjects to continue. (This determination shall be based on a separate written request from the PI to the IRB.) No new subjects may be enrolled and no samples/charts/surveys may be collected, reviewed, and/or analyzed.

3b. Human Subjects Research Training: Proper training in the conduct of human subjects research must be current and not expired. It is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator and the investigator to complete training when expired. Any modifications and renewals will not be approved until training is not expired and current.

4. Amendments/Modifications/Revisions: If you wish to change any aspect of this study after the approval date mentioned in this letter, including but not limited to, study procedures, consent form(s), investigators, advertisements, the protocol document, investigator drug brochure, or accrual goals, you are required to obtain IRB review and approval prior to implementation of these changes unless necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to subjects. This policy is also applicable to progress reports.

5. Unanticipated Problems: Unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or others must be reported to the IRB Office

(45 CFR 46, 21 CFR 312, 812) as required, in the appropriate time as specified in the attachment online at:

<https://research.rowan.edu/officeofresearch/compliance/irb/index.html>

6. Protocol Deviations and Violations: Deviations from/violations of the approved study protocol must be reported to the IRB Office (45 CFR 46, 21 CFR 312, 812) as required, in the appropriate time as specified in the attachment

online at: <https://research.rowan.edu/officeofresearch/compliance/irb/index.html>

7. Consent/Assent: The IRB has reviewed and approved the consent and/or assent process, waiver and/or alteration described in this protocol as required by 45 CFR 46 and 21 CFR 50, 56, (if FDA regulated research). Only the versions of the documents included in the approved process may be used to document informed consent and/or assent of study subjects; each subject must receive a copy of the approved form(s); and a copy of each signed form must be filed in a secure place in the subject's medical/patient/research record.

8. Completion of Study: Notify the IRB when your study has been completed or stopped for any reason. Neither study closure by the sponsor nor the investigator removes the obligation for submission of timely continuing review application, progress report or final report.

9. The Investigator(s) did not participate in the review, discussion, or vote of this protocol.

10. Letter Comments: There are no additional comments.

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