Admit it. The first time you got an email from your school’s alumni association asking for a donation, you were a bit taken aback. After four (or more) years of university, you’ve probably written quite a few checks and may have a considerable amount of student debt. Even if you’ve already secured a graduate position, you probably don’t feel financially ready to start donating. You may think that alumni donations are for rich, successful people who have had time to accrue high-flying jobs, pay off mortgages, and start college funds for their own children. But alumni associations aren’t just charitable organizations. Yes, they rely heavily on the gifts of former students, but they also offer former students a wealth of opportunities. Every alumni association is different, so here are just a few of the many reasons to consider joining yours.
1. Networking opportunities

We'll start with the obvious reason. One of the main purposes of alumni associations is to support a network of former graduates who will, in turn, help to raise the profile of the university. Just like most other university student organizations, alumni associations aim to bring together like-minded individuals. But unlike sororities, fraternities, and other student organizations, alumni programs are open to all graduates and offer a broader networking scope. If you're heading to graduation in a couple of months or have just finished your degree, joining your school's alumni association is a good way to get a foot (or three) in the door. Contact your alumni association to see what sort of networking opportunities they offer. Some school's host job fairs. Others have mentor programs for graduates that pair outgoing students with alumni in similar career fields. And remember that with alumni associations, quality can definitely trump quantity. In fact, many small, private liberal arts colleges have some of the most active and effective alumni associations.
2. Career building tools

One of the things to remember about alumni associations is that they want you to succeed. Of course, they're hoping that you'll use your success to help the association and university, but successful graduates are a university's best asset. It's no surprise then that most alumni associations offer a variety of career services. These can be anything from the aforementioned job fairs to things like resume workshops, job postings, and online resources for job-seekers. And most of these services are offered free of charge to alumni members. Remember the mentor programs we mentioned? These can be great tools for building your career or finding ways to maximize your earning potential.
3. Benefits

But alumni associations aren't just about jobs and recruiting new students. When you were a student at your university, you were part of a community that offered all sorts of exciting perks – free concerts, student discounts, poetry readings, art exhibits, library access, sporting events, and numerous other things that made your university unique and dynamic. And university alumni associations understand that even after graduation, many students continue to feel connected to their university, or associate a part of their identity with the institution. That's why many alumni associations continue to offer former students ways to keep their connection with the university. Many associations host special alumni social events, and others give members free tickets to university sporting events, life-time email services, insurance and banking services, and, of course, discounts. You might expect that alumni would get discounted university merchandise, but alumni associations often offer discounts on other things like hotels, rental cars, restaurants, and other services around the world.
4. Give back

But remember that your university provided you with numerous educational opportunities and that your alumni association isn't just about discounts and job offers. Whether you know it or not, your school's alumni association was probably instrumental in your success, and while most universities hope that their students' successes post-graduation will promote the school's reputation and encourage others to consider matriculation, one of the main purposes of alumni associations is to recruit new students. Plus, alumni associations are great resources for incoming students – many award scholarships (funded by donations from alumni) and the strength of a school's alumni association can be a deciding factor for incoming students. And alumni associations aren't just for domestic students. Many universities with aspiring international programs depend on their alumni to spread the word, and alumni recommendations carry a lot of weight with prospective students. So whether you sign up for membership, send a generous donation, or offer to serve as a mentor, there are many ways that your alumni association will help you help your school.

So, if you're looking for a way to maximize the potential of your degree and give back to your university at the same time (while maintaining access to that all-important Home v. Rival football game), consider getting involved with your alumni association.

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