

Operationalizing and Measuring Role identity and Charitable Giving Behaviors of College and  
University Alumni: The Instrumentation Process

J. Travis McDearmon, University of Kentucky<sup>1</sup>

Kelly D. Bradley, University of Kentucky

<sup>1</sup> Please use J. Travis McDearmon as author of contact. 189 Taylor Education Building, Lexington, KY 40506-0001, or [tmcdearmon@uky.edu](mailto:tmcdearmon@uky.edu).

Operationalizing and Measuring Role identity and Charitable Giving Behaviors of College and  
University Alumni: The Instrumentation Process

Abstract

Historically, alumni giving to higher education have been an important factor in the financial stability of colleges and universities in the United States. Over the last several years, the amount contributed to these institutions has continuously risen to record-breaking amounts; however, the actual number of donors has consistently been falling. The purpose of this paper is to present the construction of a reliable, valid, and useful research instrument which can be used to assess dimensions of college and university alumni role identity and how that identity relates to behaviors of charitable giving after graduation. By incorporating previous research on role identity, measurements of alumni support, principles of measurement theory, and survey research methods, an instrument is illustrated and the links to theory and practice are presented. This paper will be of interest to those connected to higher education philanthropy efforts and to the survey research community.

## Operationalizing and Measuring Role identity and Charitable Giving Behaviors of College and University Alumni: The Instrumentation Process

Charitable contributions to colleges and universities in the United States peaked in 2008 with over \$31 billion in donations being recorded (Council for the Aid to Education, 2009). This amount comes after a steady incline of contributions has been documented in these institutions for several years indicating a vast interest in giving across many different constituent groups. The largest group of individuals to give consisted of college and university alumni who contributed over \$8.7 billion alone. Although this number has also seen steady increases over the years, the actual number of alumni who have contributed continues to fall. This trend has caused college and university administrators to question the motives behind this decline and how they stop it from making a large impact on their institutional budgets.

Research on alumni giving to colleges and universities has historically focused on individual or institutional characteristics which could increase or decrease someone's willingness to make charitable donations after graduation. Individual factors such as age (Bruggink & Siddiqui, 1995; Lindahl & Winship, 1992; Weerts & Ronca, 2007), income level (Bruggink & Siddiqui, 1995; Clotfelter, 2003; Taylor & Martin, 1995), satisfaction with one's collegiate experience (Clotfelter, 2003; Gaier, 2005; McDearmon & Shirley, 2009; Tom & Elmer, 1994) and involvement in institutional activities after graduation (Bruggink & Siddiqui, 1995; Gaier, 2005; Lindahl & Winship, 1992; Taylor & Martin, 1995; Weerts & Ronca, 2007) have been found to increase the likelihood of an alumnus(a) making a gift. Institutional factors like expenditures per full-time student (Baade & Sundberg, 1996) and national ranking (Holmes, 2009; Liu, 2006) has also been found to positively influence alumni giving. Although this line of

work has resulted in some useful information for institutions to use for alumni involvement purposes, most of the research has not been able to produce a meaningful look into what it generally means to be an alumnus or alumna of a college or university.

One weakness of previous research is the lack of focus on instrumentation specific to identifying, constructing and operationalizing variables linked to the area of alumni giving. The information collected can only be as good as the tool used to collect it, thus, creating a reliable, valid, and useful instrument is necessary to gain accurate insights from alumni. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the process of constructing a reliable, valid, and useful research instrument which can be used to assess dimensions of college and university alumni role identity and how that identity relates to behaviors of post-graduation support. The survey instrument being presented in this paper uses a comprehensive theoretical base to assess the dimensions of alumni role identity along with social and institutional expectations and alumni participation behaviors.

### Theoretical Framework

Research on role theories states that there are varying levels of identity development which coincides with an individual being labeled as fulfilling a particular role (Stryker, 2002). Individuals use social cues and perceived expectations to develop a sense of identity and behavior patterns for each role they have been assigned. In regards to alumni relations, making financial donations, volunteering for events, and recruiting new students are just a few of the expectations that have been historically developed by the institutions for their graduates to be considered as a supporter of their alma mater. Although the expectation may be set, no research

has every tried to discover if college and university alumni use these expectations and behaviors to develop their own sense of identity as an alumnus or alumna.

The two theoretical positions guiding this research is the work of sociologist Sheldon Stryker and researcher David Weerts. When presenting his version of symbolic interactionism, Stryker (2002) stated humans respond to a world that is categorized or classified. According to Stryker, the physical, biological, and social environment in which humans live is a symbolic environment where the symbols attached to that environment can serve as cues to behavior. Weerts' work focuses on the expectations that the institutions as well as alumni perceive to be the basis on support amongst college and university alumni (Weerts & Ronca, 2007). According to Weerts, expectancy theory "argues that alumni donors decide whether it is worthwhile to give or volunteer, in part, due to the presence or absence of institutional messages making a case for support" (p. 24). When an individual enters a situation where the appropriate behavior is unknown, they may seek out symbols within the situation to represent the how to proceed. For the purpose of this study it is assumed from the theoretical positions that, when a student graduates he or she has to rely upon cues and symbols from previous generations or the institution itself in order for them to behave in a way that corresponds with their new situation.

Symbolic interactionism uses "position" to refer to any socially recognized category of actors (Stryker, 2002). "Positions serve to cue behavior and so act as predictors of the behavior of persons who are placed into a category" (p. 57). The term "role" is used for the expectations that correspond with the position in question. For the current study, the role of alumni in relation to an individual's alma mater refers to the behaviors that are expected to be performed by the person who occupies that position. Stryker's symbolic interactionism framework also incorporates the development of individual identities. Identities are parts of self, internalized

positional designations. They exist insofar as the person is a participant in structured role relationships” (p. 60). According to Stryker, an individual could have many identities which are only limited by the number of role relationships someone is willing to be involved in. For example, a woman could have multiple identities such as a wife, mother, attorney, golfer, artist, or any other roles that she uses to compose her sense of self.

If we were to use Stryker’s (2002) definition of identity in raw form, then we would assume that anyone who is categorized into a particular role will act out the appropriate behaviors accordingly. However, in some cases, individuals may be placed into specific roles because of some circumstantial situation they may have been directly or indirectly involved. In regards to alumni, this definition would assume that all who occupy that role from any college or university will automatically act in accordance to the given expectations. This of course is not the case, since in the United States virtually everyone who graduates from a college or university is given the title of alumnus or alumna regardless of their involvement with the institution. The term role identity, first coined by McCall and Simmons (1978) was defined as “the character and the role that an individual devises for himself as an occupant of a particular social position” (p. 68). Stryker (2002) incorporated the notion of role identity into his theoretical position because it stresses “the tie between components of the self and locations in the social structure” (p. 130). In regards to the alumni scenario from above, the individual will ultimately determine the level of social involvement with the role definition and how much of it will be attributed to their own sense of self.

## Method

The purpose of this study is to guide the reader through a process of constructing a reliable, valid, and useful instrument to measure the dimensions of alumni role identity along

with social and institutional expectations and alumni giving behaviors. Using a meta-analysis approach to reviewing the literature for existing items, variables, and constructs that support the measurement goal, the survey begins with a sketch of the existing. The researcher then builds through practice and experience to construct a full instrument. During this process, the principles of measurement and survey research methodology are taken into account. The instrument is then deconstructed item by item to review the content, construct and face validity.

The instrument being presented in this paper will incorporate the two theoretical frameworks to create a survey procedure to assess the role identities, expectations and giving behaviors of college and university alumni. In order to ensure reliability and validity of the instrument, previous measurement scales will be used as a guide for survey item development. “The key to successful item generation is the development of a well-articulated theoretical foundation that would indicate the content domain for the new measure” (Hinkin, 1998, p. 105). The identity salience and social expectation measurement was adopted from the work of Peter Callero (1985) and Lee, Pilivian, and Call (1999) who developed scales to assess the role identities of blood donors. Identity salience is simply defined as readiness to act out an identity. (Stryker, 2002; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). This scale has been modified to fit the expectations of alumni giving behaviors. The role expectations dimension and behavioral items were created from the work of Weerts and Ronca (2007) that looked at multiple support behaviors amongst a sample of university alumni.

The current assessment tool has been created to fit multiple survey domains including web-based applications and paper-and-pencil formats. The instrument will have four sections, each with specific duties towards the research objectives, with operationalized, measurable domains. Each step of the way, the review is focused on the final outcome of an instrument that

will assess the role identity of alumni participants based upon the relationships between individual support behaviors and three dimensions of identity development: identity salience, social expectations, and role expectations.

### Results and Discussion

The first section will inquire about alumni support behaviors. These questions have been designed to assess behaviors related to the institutional expectations of alumni involvement and giving. This section was designed based upon the expectancy theory used by researchers David Weerts and Justin Ronca (2007). According to Weerts and Ronca, expectancy theory “argues that alumni donors decide whether it is worthwhile to give or volunteer, in part, due to the presence or absence of institutional messages making a case for support” (p. 24). This corresponds to the theoretical work of Stryker (2002) in which an individual must look for cues and symbols in order to behave in accordance with a particular role designation. For alumni, the cues may come from the actual institutions when deciding how to stay involved with their alma mater after graduation.

Weerts and Ronca (2007) created four categories in which study respondents could be classified including INACTIVE, VOLUNTEER, DONOR, and SUPPORTER. Alumni respondents were placed into a category based upon their responses to the involvement measures. The behaviors that historically correspond with alumni involvement and were used to determine alumni classification include charitable giving, volunteering, recruiting potential students, and attending alumni events. These behaviors were used in the current instrument as dichotomous variables for the same reasoning to determine varying levels of alumni involvement. Although the focus of this study is primarily to assess charitable giving, more institutional support



behaviors are being assessed with this instrument in order to see if relationships exist between the behaviors themselves and the dimensions of identity development.

The first role identity dimension to be used in the survey is a measure of identity salience. Identity salience refers to the willingness of an individual to act out the expected behavior associated with a particular role definition (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Based upon the work of Peter Callero (1985) the identity salience dimension will assess how the role is associated with an individual's self-concept. Callero (1985) developed the measure of identity salience based upon the implications that role identity has on self-definition. According to Callero, "when a role identity is salient it is more representative of the self and consequently one's self-definition will more likely reflect salient role identities" (p. 204). In his study of the role identities of blood donors, Callero hypothesized that the act of blood donation will be linked to an individual's sense of self through their own thoughts, feelings, and personal identity.

The original five items used in Callero's study will be altered to fit the definition of a college or university alumnus(a). All but one item will be used in the current assessment. Item number two in Callero's study, "I would feel a loss if I were forced to give up donating blood," will not be used since alumni involvement can cover more behaviors beyond just charitable giving. All of Callero's items were measured on a 9-point strongly agree/strongly disagree scale. The results of Callero's study found a Cronbach reliability coefficient of .81 for this section which indicates a strong relationship between the assessment tool and the concepts it was developed to measure. For the current study, the four items will be rated on a 6-point strongly agree/strongly disagree scale due to the preference of the primary investigator. These items will be analyzed in relation to the expectations that colleges and universities perceive for the alumni

to support the institutional mission and the behaviors an alumnus(a) exhibits which meet those expectations.

The second dimension of role identity will assess the social expectations of being a college or university alumnus(a). This scale is being used to examine the relationship between the identity salience of the alumnus(a) to the perceived social expectation that corresponds with that role. According to Callero (1985), “salient role-identities have implications for social relations in that they announce to others who we are” (p. 205). They are not only used for social relationships but also for our desire to act on the overall expectations that a particular role carries. Stryker (2002) wrote on this phenomenon in his theory when he stated that greater identity salience leads to more stable relationships with others base upon the role identity in question. This line of reasoning led to Callero’s hypothesis of the role identity salience will be positively associated with interpersonal relationships associated with the role and the expectations that will be perceived from others.

Much like the first section of the survey instrument, five of the original eight expectation items in Callero’s (1985) study will be altered to fit alumni role identity. Three of the original items will not be utilized since they only assess donation behaviors. Similar to the first section, Callero’s items were measured on a 9-point strongly agree/strongly disagree scale which resulted in a Cronbach reliability coefficient of .82. Once again, the altered items for the current study will be assessed on a 6-point scale. This set of survey items will be assessed alongside the other dimensions of role identity and the behavior items at the beginning of the survey.

The last dimension to be assessed is perceived alumni role expectations. These items are used to assess the expectations that individuals have about their own role as an alumnus(a). These items were based on the expectancy theory questions found in the research of Weerts and

Ronca (2007). Their research found that the perceived expectation to participate after graduation does increase an alumnus(a)'s willingness to engage in those supportive behaviors. These items tie into the theoretical framework since, according to Stryker (2002), behavior is the product of a role-making process, initiated by expectations invoked in the process of defining situations. This scale will evaluate that concept based on its relationship with the responses to the behavior items.

In order to evaluate generational differences in alumni responses, a graduation year will be an item added to the survey for exploratory purposes. Research has shown that alumni participation increases the farther away the individual is from their graduation date (Bruggink & Siddiqui, 1995; Lindahl & Winship, 1992; Weerts & Ronca, 2007). The research has also shown that support increases with the age of the alumnus(a) (Bruggink & Siddiqui, 1995; Willemain, Goyal, Van Deven, & Thukral, 1994). Responses to these items will be grouped into categories based on year of graduation to be assessed along with the other items in the survey.

### Conclusion

With this new line of research into college and university alumni relations, it is important to create a valid and reliable instrument which will assess the measurable domains. Learning how alumni use that role in relation to their sense of identity and their willingness to be involved with their alma maters could revolutionize the way institutions interact with these individuals. It could also alter how current students are cultivated into being active alumni when they graduate.

### References

- Baade, R. A., & Sundberg, J. O. (1996). What determines alumni generosity? *Economics of Education Review*, 15(1), 75-81.
- Bruggink, T. H., & Siddiqui, K. (1995). An econometric model of alumni giving: A case study for a liberal arts college. *American Economist*, 39(2), 53-61.

- Callero, P. L. (1985). Role identity Saliency. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 48(3), 203-215.
- Clotfelter, C. T. (2003). Alumni giving to elite private colleges and universities. *Economics of Education Review*, 22, 109-120.
- Council for the Aid to Education. (2009, February 25). Contributions to colleges and universities up 6.2 percent to \$31.60 billion. Retrieved on March 16, 2009, from [http://www.cae.org/content/pdf/VSE\\_2008\\_Survey\\_Press\\_Release\\_with\\_Tables.pdf](http://www.cae.org/content/pdf/VSE_2008_Survey_Press_Release_with_Tables.pdf)
- Gaier, S. (2005). Alumni satisfaction with their undergraduate academic experience and the impact on alumni giving and participation. *International Journal of Educational Advancement*, 5(4), 279-288.
- Hinkin, T. R. (1998). A brief tutorial on the development of measures for use in survey questionnaires. *Organizational Research Methods*, 1(1), 104-121.
- Holmes, J. (2009). Prestige, charitable deductions and other determinants of alumni giving: Evidence from a highly selective liberal arts college. *Economics of Education Review*, 28, 18-28.
- Lee, L., Piliavin, J. A., & Call, V. R. A. (1999). Giving Time, Money, and Blood: Similarities and Differences. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 62(3), 276-290.
- Lindahl, W. E., & Winship, C. (1992). Predictive models for annual fundraising and major gift fundraising. *Nonprofit Management & Leadership*, 3(1), 43-64.
- Liu, Y. (2006). Determinants of private giving to public colleges and universities. *International Journal of Educational Advancement*, 6(2), 119-140.
- McDearmon, J. T., and Shirley, K. (2009) Characteristics and institutional factors related to young alumni donors and non-donors. *International Journal of Educational Advancement*, 9: 83-95.

- Monks, J. (2003). Pattern's of giving to one's alma mater among young graduates from selective institutions. *Economics of Education Review*, 22, 121-130.
- Stryker, S. (2002). *Symbolic Interactionism: A Social Structural Version*. Caldwell, New Jersey: The Blackburn Press.
- Stryker, S., & Serpe, R. T. (1994). Identity Saliency and Psychological Centrality: Equivalent, Overlapping, or Complementary Concepts? *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 57(1), 16-35.
- Taylor, A. L., & Martin, Jr., J. C. (1995). Characteristics of alumni donors and nondonors at a research I, public university. *Research in Higher Education*, 36(3), 283-302.
- Tom, G., & Elmer, L. (1994). Alumni willingness to give and contribution behavior. *The Journal of Services Marketing*, 8(2), 57-62.
- Weerts, D. J., & Ronca, J. M. (2007). Profiles of supportive alumni: Donors, volunteers, and those who "do it all". *International Journal of Educational Advancement*, 7(1), 20-34.
- Willemain, Goyal, Van Deven, & Thukral. (1995). Alumni giving: The influences of reunion, class, and year. *Research in Higher Education*, 35(5), 609-629.

Survey Items	Answer Choices
<b>Question</b>	
What year did you graduate from college?	TBD
Please respond to the following questions: (Behavior items)	Yes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you ever attended an on-campus alumni event (Homecoming, etc.)?</li> <li>• Have you ever recommended your college to a prospective student?</li> <li>• Have you ever contacted your college on behalf of a prospective student?</li> <li>• Have ever served on a college committee or board?</li> <li>• Have you ever attended an off-campus alumni event (Club Event, Alumni Dinner, etc.)?</li> <li>• As an alumnus(a), have you ever volunteered at a student event?</li> </ul>	No
Please rate your agreement with the following statements on the scale provided: (Salience items)	Strongly Disagree
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being an alumnus(a) is something I rarely think about (Salience_1)</li> <li>• I really don't have any clear feelings about being an alumnus(a) (Salience_2)</li> <li>• For me, being an alumnus(a) means more than just contributing money or time (Salience_3)</li> <li>• Being an alumnus(a) is an important part of who I am (Salience_4)</li> </ul>	Disagree
Please rate your agreement with the following statements on the scale provided: (Social items)	Strongly Disagree
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It does not matter to most people that I am a college alumnus(a) (Social_1)</li> <li>• Many of the people I know are not aware that I am a college alumnus(a) (Social_2)</li> <li>• Other people think that being an alumnus(a) is important to me (Social_3)</li> <li>• It is important to my friends and family that I am a college alumnus(a) (Social_4)</li> <li>• Many people think of me as being a college alumnus(a) (Social_5)</li> </ul>	Disagree
Please rate your agreement with the following statements on the scale provided: (Role items)	Strongly Disagree
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I will seek opportunities to support my college through volunteering (Role_1)</li> <li>• I will seek opportunities to support my college through financial contributions (Role_2)</li> <li>• Alumni should support their alma mater through financial contributions (Role_3)</li> <li>• Alumni should support their alma mater through volunteer service (Role_4)</li> <li>• As a college alumnus(a), it is my duty to make financial contributions (Role_5)</li> </ul>	Disagree
	Agree
	Strongly Agree

- 
- I have learned what is expected of me as an alumnus(a) from previous graduates (Role\_6)
  - As a college alumnus(a), it is my duty to volunteer for events in my area (Role\_7)
  - As a college alumnus(a), it is my duty to recruit prospective students (Role\_8)
-