STRONGER ROOTS

ASSOCIATION FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Reviving a Dormant Network: the PSS Alumni Club

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Association for International Affairs (AMO)

is a non-governmental non-profit organisation dedicated to research and education in the field of international relations. AMO's mission is to explore and explain international issues, to improve Czech foreign policy and to contribute to shaping a world that respects the values of freedom, democracy and sustainability. AMO's main educational project is the Prague Student Summit (PSS), which brings about 350 young people a year and which AMO has been implementing for three decades.

The Association for International Affairs decided to use the 30th anniversary of the Prague Student Summit to reach out to its broad and diverse alumni base. The goal was not only to revive contact with former participants, but also to create space for their further involvement. Thanks to the support of Stronger Roots, the PSS Alumni Club was created, which today brings together hundreds of people and functions as a natural tool for networking and feedback.

Over 5,000 students from high schools and universities have attended the Prague Student Summit during its 30 years of existence, and many of them remember the summit as a very formative experience - some were influenced in their choice of university or profession, others discovered new friendships or even their life partners. AMO decided to revive its contact with graduates and introduce them to its current activities.

We are looking for 5,000 PSS attendees

The first step was to make a visible announcement that the Alumni Club was being established. Therefore, AMO made an announcement to 5,000 attendees of the summits, sharing it on its LinkedIn page, via the Facebook groups of each year, and through emails.

It was crucial to reach out to a narrower but more active key group – the former coordinators who helped organise each individual year of the Prague Student Summit. Since the leadership changes regularly for each year, this meant that over a period of three decades a relatively large group of roughly 60 people, who knew the program well and had a strong relationship with PSS had been created. It was exactly for this group that AMO organised an informal meeting during one of the most recent years of the summit. The former coordinators and their deputies participated in a morning program and then engaged in a brainstorming session about how the new Alumni Club should work. This moment proved to be pivotal. A motivated group of 20 people was formed who began to share information about the Club on their social media and professional networks, which helped spread the word.

"The first meeting together helped clarify this a lot. A group of people came together that spanned an entire generation, but they had something in common, the Prague Student Summit. The Summit proved to be a strong connecting link. During the meeting we were able to identify things that the members of the alumni community perceive to have in common and things in which differ, which we will be able to use to further the work on the direction of the Alumni Club." ***– Vít Dostál***

Meeting up is the most valuable thing

Based on these first steps, AMO launched a questionnaire survey among the available contacts. AMO wanted to know what kinds of activities alumni would be interested in, how often they would like to participate in events and what type of involvement they would prefer. Out of the approximately 5,000 people that were approached, around 600, or approximately 12%, responded. It turned out that the greatest value for most of them were the meetings themselves and the opportunity to remain part of the community.

The more complex and time-consuming kinds of participation, such as mentoring, giving lectures or providing internships, were much less attractive.

A secondary, but very valuable, outcome of the project was the introduction of a CRM system. It was originally purchased for the purposes of the Club, but soon it started to be used in other parts of the organisation and today it has significantly streamlined the day-to-day work of the organisation.

What Worked and What Didn‘t

Throughout the entire process, the organisation has had to re-evaluate its original ideas several times. Originally, it expected that it would be necessary to offer members an extensive program of activities. However, the questionnaires and the experience in practice showed that alumni do not have the capacity to regularly participate in a number of events, but rather appreciate individual, well-timed and meaningful events.

The celebration of the 30th anniversary of the summit proved to be a crucial moment in the building of the Club. AMO prepared an attractive program that had both a social and a symbolic dimension, and the event was met with a great response. It turned out that formal and informal and, above all, the natural moments of meeting up in person are what the alumni are really interested in.

The original ambition to involve alumni as donors did not materialise to the extent that we had expected. Although several individuals have contributed smaller amounts, fundraising through the Club is not yet realistically viable. Presently, AMO has continued to work with this knowledge and focuses on keeping the community in its basic form. The Club is up and running, offers opportunities for meetings within the future editions of PSS, maintains a clear database of contacts, offers Club members the opportunity to participate in various public events organised by AMO, promotes the fact that the Prague Student Summit, which has changed the lives of so many people, is still going on and doing well and has not given up the ambition to become a fundraising tool for this wonderful project.

WHAT TO LEARN FROM THIS: 10 TIPS FOR YOUR ORGANISATION IF YOU WANT TO BUILD AN ALUMNI CLUB

1. Find natural leaders (those who were successful leaders in the past are likely to still be successful leaders now).
2. Start informally (a first meeting without great ambitions can still get a lot of things started).
3. Ask questions, don't guess (questionnaires and personal contact will bring more real information than a vision put down on paper).
4. Be ready to change direction (let go of things that don't work).
5. Don't overwhelm the program (sometimes it's enough to offer a space to come together).
6. Engage the leadership (when an organisation's leadership takes it upon themselves to be involved, the project gains importance and can motivate others).
7. Take advantage of milestones (anniversaries or other significant moments are a great opportunity to reach out to your community).
8. Build a database (a good CRM system will help keep track and relationships over the long-term).
9. Share the results (let people know what they've done, even small achievements count).
10. Don't be afraid of simplicity (less often means more. One good event has more of an impact than five mediocre ones).

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