

**Building Authentic Alumni Relations: Starting with Seniors**

Cari Cearley  
389 Agricultural Hall, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078  
405-744-8036  
cari.cearley@okstate.edu

Ashtyn Humphreys  
318 Agricultural Hall, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078  
405-744-8036  
ashtyn.humphreys@okstate.edu

Lauren Lewis Cline  
242 Agricultural Hall, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078  
405-744-8036  
lauren.l.cline@okstate.edu

Bradley Coleman  
238 Agricultural Hall, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078  
405-744-8036  
b.coleman@okstate.edu

Courtney P. Brown  
239 Agricultural Hall, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078  
405-744-8036  
courtney.p.brown@okstate.edu

### **Introduction/Need for the Idea**

Alumni are often one of the most important resources of a university (Chi et al., 2012). Building relationships between alumni and institutions happens well before graduation (Chase, 2021). Creating a connected alumni culture starts by engaging alumni throughout the program to establish an expectation of lifetime involvement (Oetjen et al., 2023). A student's relationship with the institution does not end post-graduation; instead, it evolves while the needs and expectations change (Chase, 2021). Creating a strong sense of the institution's mission in alumni means they are supportive in a variety of ways of helping achieve the institution's goals (Singer & Hughey, 2002)

At Oklahoma State University (OSU), the need to develop strong relationships with agricultural leadership alumni arose after the retirement of two longstanding faculty members and the hiring of three new faculty. Along with this change in faculty and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on program culture, there was a need to rebuild positive rapport and a culture of positive relationships within the undergraduate degree program and alumni. At the department annual banquet, we awarded outstanding seniors and alumni; but as a program we realized we had a lot more outstanding students that should be recognized annually. This recognition, along with the need for building relationships within the program, led us to develop our Agricultural Leadership Core Value Senior Awards. Since 2023, we recognize five seniors who exemplify one of the core values of our program through their leadership, relationships with others, and contributions to the agricultural leadership program. The five core values awarded are (a) Authentic Leadership, (b) Commitment to Agriculture, (c) Critical Thinking, (d) Diversity; and (e) Professionalism. Additionally, to recognize graduating seniors in agricultural leadership, we created the Senior Breakfast to celebrate with their families the morning of graduation.

### **How It Works**

The Agricultural Leadership Core Value Seniors is a group of outstanding seniors chosen every year who represent the values of our academic program. Each spring, the agricultural leadership faculty selects five seniors who represent each of the program's five core values. To reward the students selected, faculty take the Core Value Seniors to dinner and present their award. At the dinner, the faculty take time to share why each student was selected for their respective core value and recognized for their outstanding work and contribution to the program. The Core Value Seniors receive a framed certificate, as well as their name on a perpetual plaque displayed in the department.

The second part of building stronger connections with our future alumni is the Senior Breakfast. The Senior Breakfast recognizes all graduating seniors in the department. During the morning of graduation, the program hosts a breakfast to recognize each of the seniors and their families. At breakfast, seniors get the opportunity to introduce themselves, their families, and share about their next steps and future plans. Faculty also share memories and anecdotes about the students. This breakfast is a great opportunity for pictures to be taken and for faculty to often meet the students' families for the first time. Senior Breakfast is a final touch point for our program to strengthen relationships with our graduating seniors as they transition to alumni and to continue to build the culture of our program.

### **Results and Implications to Date**

OSU Agricultural Leadership's Core Value Seniors and Senior Breakfast were implemented in 2023. We have seen alumni connections and opportunities with alumni strengthened in a short amount of time. By deepening our connections with program alumni, we have been able to connect with these individuals that are now in industry to speak in classes and offer farm tours and job shadow opportunities for current students and class projects. Other alumni have also reached out looking for students from our program to apply for internships and to offer job opportunities. In the three years since starting the initiatives, we have inducted 15 individuals to our group of Core Value Seniors (five from each year). At the Senior Breakfast, we have hosted about 15 seniors and their families on the morning of graduation annually. Sample quotes from students about the invitation to Core Value Seniors include:

- "I am honored."
- "I'm honored to be recognized and gracious for the award."
- "Thank you for the recognition!"
- "I feel so honored to be recognized for who I am as a person – thank you for seeing me!"

### **Future Plans and Recommendations**

We plan to continue recognizing and celebrating five of our seniors that show outstanding characteristics of our core values and celebrating our seniors and their families with the senior breakfast. We have seen valuable connections made at these events that have helped strengthen our relationships with alumni and the culture of our program. We recognize these initiatives are specific touch points at a critical moment of students' lives as they are leaving our program and entering the workforce. These initiatives do not replace the importance of making connections with students in the classroom; however, they are ways to celebrate student success and strengthen the relationships that have been built within their time in the program.

### **Costs/Resources Needed**

The costs of implementing Core Value Seniors and the Senior Breakfast are relatively low. The costs include program funds for the certificates given to our core value seniors and their nameplate for the departmental plaque (less than \$100), the meal for the Core Value Seniors dinner, and the food for the Senior Breakfast for graduates and their families. As of now, food expenses have been shared equally between the three faculty members. Overall, we view the costs as relatively low for the high return on investment that we get in improved culture and stronger relationships with graduates/alumni. We hope to investigate ways we can have the initiatives externally funded through donor or foundation support in the future.

### References

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