

Miami University: Winter College – Pride of CASE V Award entry

Title of Entry: Winter College 2009

Category Number and Title: 1b, Best Practices in Alumni Relations, 3,000-9,999 FTE

Institution: Miami University, Oxford, OH

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General Description of Entry: Launched in 2004, Miami University's Winter College provides rich educational programming for alumni/friends at warm resort accommodations in February. Sponsored by the Alumni Association, in concert with the Office of Development, the program has exceeded institutional expectations in participation, volunteer service, increased giving, and engagement of alumni who have been void from traditional alumni activities.

Programmatically, Winter College features some of Miami's most distinguished faculty from across the disciplines presenting "Classes without Quizzes" on historical and contemporary topics. Along with the 15-18 classes offered each year, a handful of "Pre-College" programs are featured, along with informative excursions and "extra-credit" Saturday afternoon options. The three-day event wraps up with a "Graduation Brunch," where the university president gives concluding remarks and each participant receives a customized graduation diploma.

Although the program is relatively young, it has become an integral part of the advancement operations at Miami and has yielded great success. Indeed, Winter College is in "a class by itself."

Goals and Objectives of the Project:

- Engage alumni/friends/prospects in the educational fabric of the institution
- Develop stronger relationships with faculty members while showcasing their talents
- Increase awareness of institutional needs, priorities and achievements with alumni/friends
- Build philanthropic support for the institution through increased engagement and giving
- Enhance collaboration across offices/staff within the Division of University Advancement

How Project Fits into Overall University Goals: While many institutions consider one's graduation to be the conclusion of a college education, Miami University believes in a life-long process of learning, teaching, leading and serving to advance the individual, the institution, and society.

The objectives for Winter College are continuously met and exceeded. Alumni activities at most campuses, for example, are traditionally perceived to be social and youth-oriented. Winter College, however, has found its greatest support among older alumni (especially retirees) who embrace active learning and mental stimulation. Alumni truly embrace being around the faculty, deans and the president of the University for three days which in turn builds greater loyalty and commitment. Additionally, alumni giving rose substantially because of Winter College.

Audience: All Miami University alumni are exposed to general information about Winter College through ads in the Miamian alumni magazine, and through e-newsletters and online. Promotional materials are distributed at major alumni/development programs including Alumni Weekend, class reunions, chapter events, regional campaign galas, etc.

Targeted audiences receive customized materials. They include past Winter College participants, members of lifetime giving clubs (Prodesse Society, President's Club, Brice Society, Bishop Society), managed prospects, current and former alumni/development volunteers, emeriti faculty/staff, alumni event attendees, and Alumni Association dues-paying members, among others. Additionally, a Host Committee comprised of alumni volunteers contact alumni in their regions and/or with similar class years/activities.

Total Staff: One professional Alumni Relations staff member is responsible for leading the overall planning of Winter College, in addition to his other responsibilities. Four members of the Office of Advancement Services contribute with on-site audio/visual requirements, design/writing of promotional materials, and coordination of online registration and promotion through www.MiamiAlum.org/wintercollege. In addition, staff from the Office of Development helps promote the program to their donors, prospects, and other key constituents.

Budget and Costs: Participants each paid \$375 (to cover costs of materials, meals, classroom set-up, etc.) Additional costs to Miami University in 2009 were approximately \$30,000.

Special Circumstances: Creating a weekend college experience for alumni absent from class for up to 50 years, in itself, is innovative. Keeping the curriculum fresh, along with excursions, pre-college offerings, and collateral materials requires constant innovation. Since many participants are repeaters, there's a constant need to seek creative approaches that engage, educate, and inspire.

Results and Measurements of Effectiveness: To date, 442 alumni have attended the program, many of whom have attended multiple years. In addition, hundreds of spouses, family members and friends have also participated.

From these 442 alumni, 92 percent are donors to the current capital campaign underway. Prior to Winter College, these alumni had total giving of \$4.9 million; since they experienced Winter College, their giving has increased an additional \$14.6 million. In regards to program satisfaction, of those recently surveyed, 98 percent of the participants rated their overall Winter College experience to be “Excellent” or “Good.”

Another indicator is the volume of returning participants. More than 70 percent of the participants had been to at least one previous Winter College, with close to two dozen having attended at least four of the six Winter Colleges.

Engagement with faculty on campus has increased through tapping into the talents of Miami faculty at Winter College, and other similar programs like Alumni College (held during Alumni Weekend) and One Day U (held in Chicago on Oct. 11, 2008). Faculty rave about how much they enjoy adult learners who are eager to explore and challenge.

Additionally, since the start of Winter College, several other institutions have expressed interest in launching similar programs, and some have modeled their programs identically to Miami’s.