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NEWS AND ANALYSIS

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Giving Days Gain Traction in College Fundraising, and Other Trends From Education Conference

By Drew Lindsay
NEW YORK

The Voluntary Support of Education — the 60-year-old annual survey of charitable giving to higher education — has a new home.

The [Council for Advancement and Support of Education](#) announced this week that it has acquired the survey and its decades of information as part of the organization's effort to build a comprehensive set of data for the 3,700 college, university, and independent school officials in its membership. Officials said that over time, that effort — called [AMAtlas](#) — will provide benchmark data and analytics for higher education in the United States and around the world.

The council conducts more than 20 surveys globally, and AMAtlas will marry that data to help advancement offices analyze their fundraising, alumni relations, marketing, and other work.

Fred Weiss, chief research and data officer for the council, said the work will take a few years.

"This is an announcement, not a launch," he noted before the organization's annual conference of top advancement leaders. "But what we have coming out of the gate is a variety of very, very strong sources of data from places around the world."

An early effort will aim to analyze alumni engagement. The Voluntary Support for Education survey tracks the percentage of graduates who donate to their colleges, and Weiss says amAtlas will add to that data other measures of how alumni connect to their alma maters through volunteering and communications, among other things.

The [Council for Aid to Education](#) has conducted the Voluntary Support for Education since the survey was launched in 1957. Roger Benjamin, the organization's president, said in a news release that it spun off the survey to focus on education assessment and learning efforts that are a core of its work.

- The organization [encouraged its members](#) to adopt a "zero-tolerance" pledge on sexual harassment. "The whole #MeToo campaign has gained increasing prominence and volume in all of our lives in the recent months," Sue Cunningham, the council's president, told the *Chronicle*.

- Giving days — once seen as a novelty — are now a fundamental part of higher-education fundraising, according to a new analysis of alumni small gifts.

Nearly 8 percent of alumni donors to 140 institutions made a giving-day gift in 2017, up from about 3 percent in 2013.

Retention rates for giving-day donors are nearly identical to those for alumni donors generally. Some 64 percent of 2017 giving-day alumni donors had given the previous year, according to the analysis. Over all, retention rates are 64 percent for alumni of private colleges and 55 percent for graduates of public institutions.

Shaun Keister, vice chancellor for development and alumni relations at the University of California at Davis, and Jenny Cooke Smith, a consultant with Blackbaud, presented the giving-day data as part of a [broader analysis](#) of gifts by alumni of \$100,000 or less to 217 institutions.

Keister said the numbers suggest that colleges without a giving day should start one. "And if you have one already, you should put it on steroids," he added.

- The Blackbaud analysis also indicates that alumni participation rates are continuing their decades-long slide. From 2013 to 2017, the percentage of graduates giving to the institutions in the Blackbaud study dropped from 9.9 percent to 7.9 percent.

"Unfortunately, we do not believe this is reversible," Keister said. "We'll go on record saying that."

Despite this decline, dollars raised from small donors continue to grow, in part because those who give are giving more. Median per-donor revenue for private institutions in the study, for instance, increased from \$784 in 2013 to \$930 in 2017, even when adjusting for inflation.

Also, the analysis found that colleges are persuading donors to make more than one gift to the annual fund in a year. Donors to the institutions in the survey made an average of 1.3 gifts in 2017.

The data indicate the more colleges are developing "second ask" programs, Smith and Keister said.

Those who give more than once in a year are more likely to give the following year, too. In 2017, the retention rate was 77 percent for donors who made two gifts and 87 percent for those who made three.

- The influence of the biggest donors to college campaigns has grown significantly over the past few decades. The 100 biggest donors to campaigns in 2017 accounted for an average of 81 percent of dollars committed — up from 75 percent in 1981, according to a new analysis of almost 30 years of campaigns.

On average, each donor to national public-college campaigns contributed \$795,000 — a 323 percent increase over the \$188,000 average in 1987. At private colleges, each donor averaged \$1.6 million in contributions, up from \$564,000.

[Reeher](#) — a company that provides a donation-management technology platform to colleges and universities — conducted the analysis based on data from on more than 34 million donors to more than 140 colleges and universities.