CAMPBELL & COMPANY

CREATIVE DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

FOR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Seemingly overnight, the world changed and higher education institutions across the country and globe had to quickly pivot and safely empty dormitories and campuses. It was an abrupt end with none of the traditional events and milestones to commemorate the conclusion of the academic year or welcome alumni and donors back to campus.

COVID-19 has altered the way we connect and forced us to reimagine how to engage alumni, parents, and donors. Shelter-in-place mandates across much of the country led to innovative ways of staying in touch and engaged through digital channels. As regions begin to reopen, but still with social distancing measures and limited capacity for gatherings, higher education institutions are rethinking their engagement strategies for the remainder of 2020.

Colleges and universities have a unique position to support and engage their community digitally. During this uncertain time, parents, students, and alumni find comfort in hearing from an institution that played such an important role in their lives.

Many institutions have adopted the mantra “meet alumni where they are” in recent years with an increased focus on digital communication and engagement opportunities. At the same time, many have struggled with shifting attention away from the traditional reunion, homecoming, and gala events that commandeer a lot of human and monetary resources.

As you shore up plans for the next fiscal year, you will likely consider which engagement opportunities to pursue. This resource outlines creative engagement strategies that we have seen institutions across the country deploying.

Our Higher Education team finds that engagement opportunities fall within a few different "pathways": mission-focused, career support, continuing education, fundraising, and entertainment. We encourage you to consider the value of each pathway, asking important questions:

- Does this virtual event serve a similar purpose to something we've had to cancel or postpone?
- Are we reaching a diverse set of community members? Can we use this as an opportunity to engage a subset of alumni or parents that we haven't engaged in the past?
- Is this an opportunity for our regional volunteers to take an event and "run with it?"
- How much staff time is needed to execute on this event or opportunity?
- Are we diversifying our communications channels?

As you innovate and test new approaches, don't be afraid to fail. If something is just not working—not appealing to your community, not getting traction in terms of sign ups, taking up too much staff time and resources—scrap it and move on.

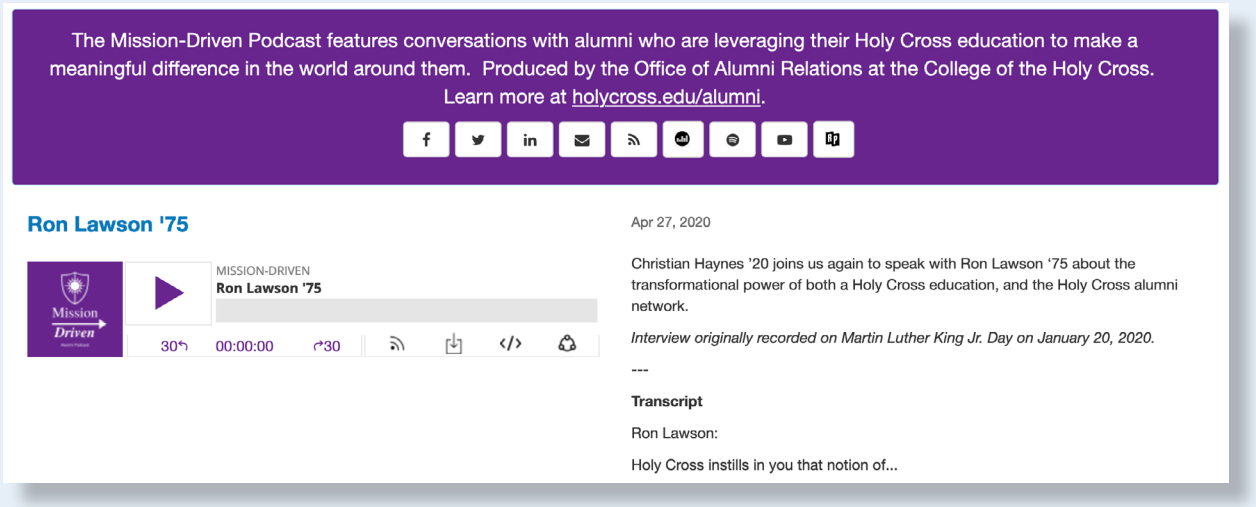
In this resource, you'll find examples of engagement strategies that our team has collected from higher education institutions across the country through our personal connections, colleagues' alma maters, clients, and research.

PATHWAYS FOR ENGAGEMENT

MISSION-FOCUSED

In light of current events, donors are taking time to reexamine their philanthropic priorities. It is more important than ever that institutions share how they are serving their students and their communities. All digital engagement opportunities should align with institutional mission—there are digital opportunities that can specifically highlight the mission, and there are subtle changes you can make to ensure all communications are aligned with the mission. This is an opportunity to partner with marketing and other campus leaders to strengthen your community's connection to your mission.

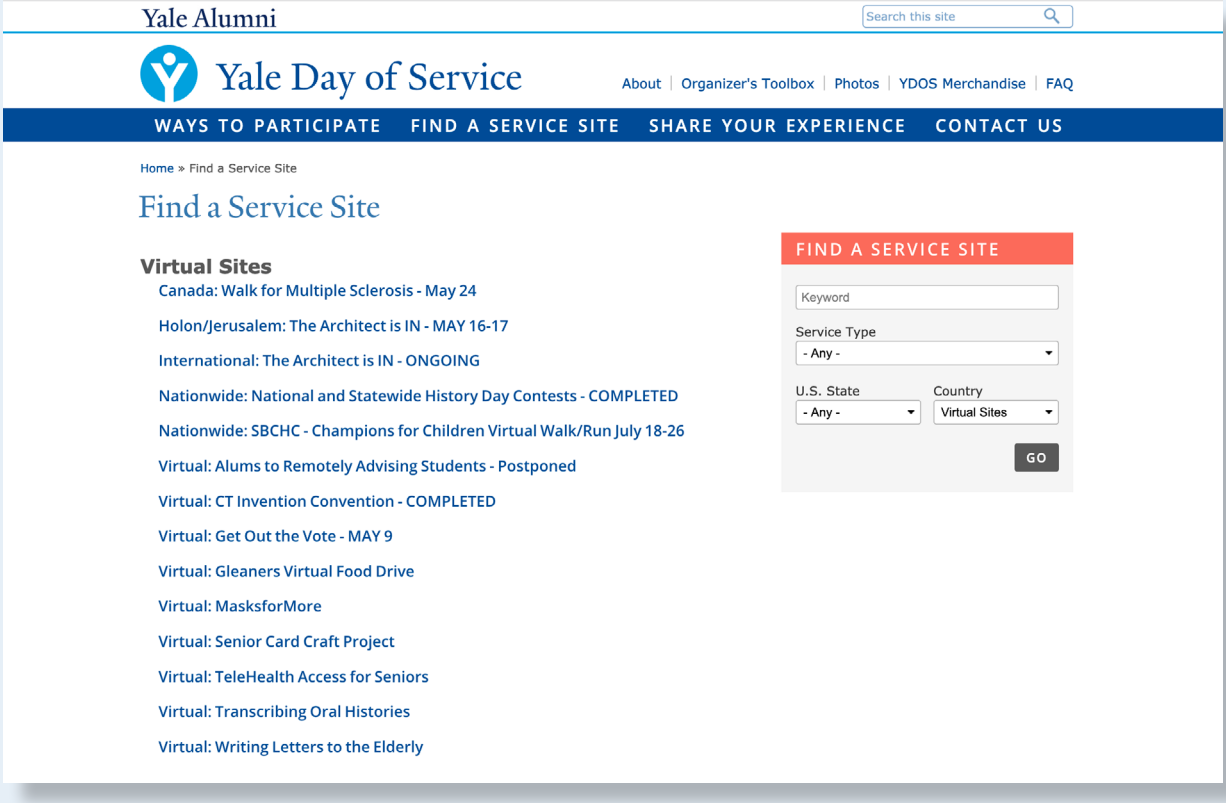
The **College of the Holy Cross** created a [Mission-Driven Alumni Podcast] where they hold conversations with Holy Cross alumni who are making a meaningful difference in the world around them.



QUICK TIPS

- A podcast series can be short and time limited. If you have five to ten alumni who would be good candidates for this medium, you can do one podcast series.
- Choose an interviewer who could draw attention. Do you have a particularly dynamic faculty member? Do you have an alum who works in broadcasting?
- Do you have alumni who focus on healthcare or racial justice? Can you have a candid interview that would address current events?

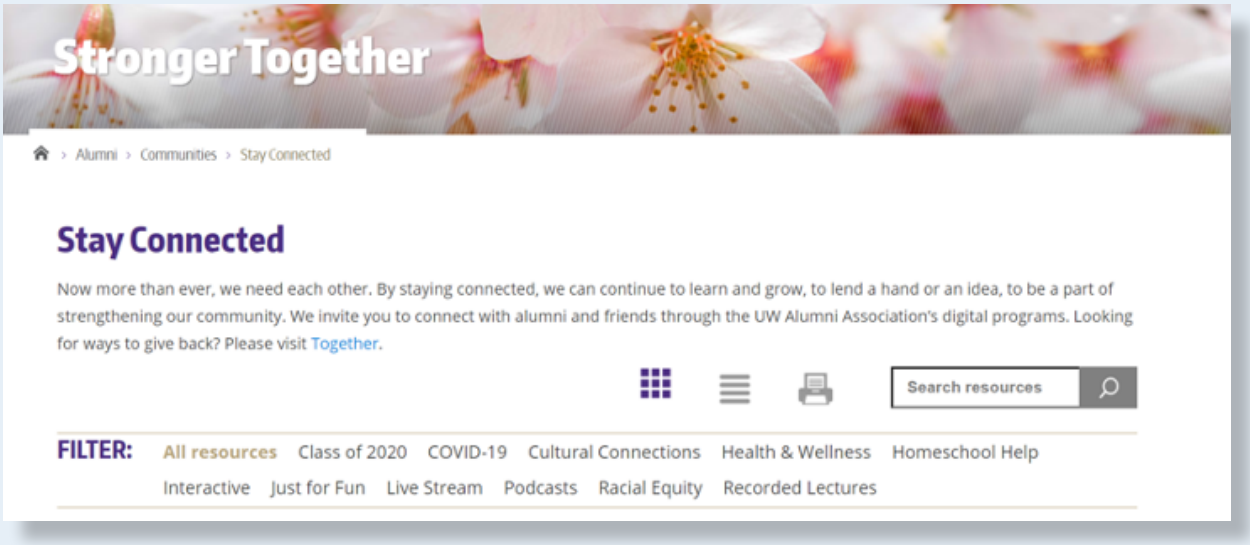
Yale University is offering several [virtual community service opportunities] that range from making and distributing masks, writing letters to the elderly, and participating in virtual food drives.



QUICK TIP

Consider engaging your regional alumni groups to organize these virtual opportunities. Most regional events are canceled right now, and these alumni groups may be looking for ways to connect with their local peers while helping the community. Can you encourage the group to support local organizations committed to COVID-19 relief or addressing racial inequities?

University of Washington created a website, **Stronger Together**, that serves as a digital hub with resources for alumni and friends to connect through UW's programs and initiatives. The website features a range of topics from health and wellness and homeschool help to recorded lectures.



QUICK TIP

Creating this "hub" is not specific to COVID-19. Maintaining a collection of digital engagement opportunities could be powerful moving forward.

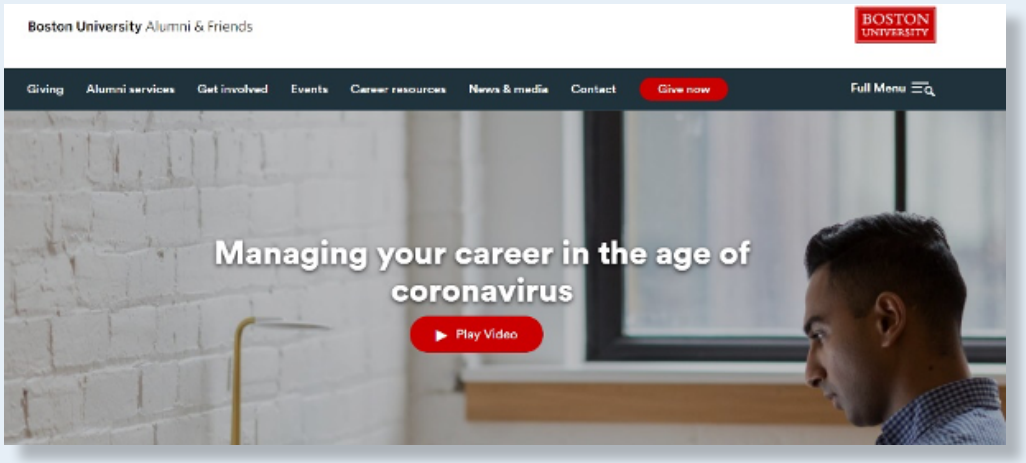
CAREER SUPPORT

Unemployment rates have risen, and colleges and universities are uniquely positioned to offer resources and assistance to alumni during this time. Alumni love to talk about their careers and how they are navigating hard situations, and people want to learn from each other. This is an opportunity for alumni relations and career services departments to work together to offer programs that support alumni and deepen relationships between the institution and alumni.

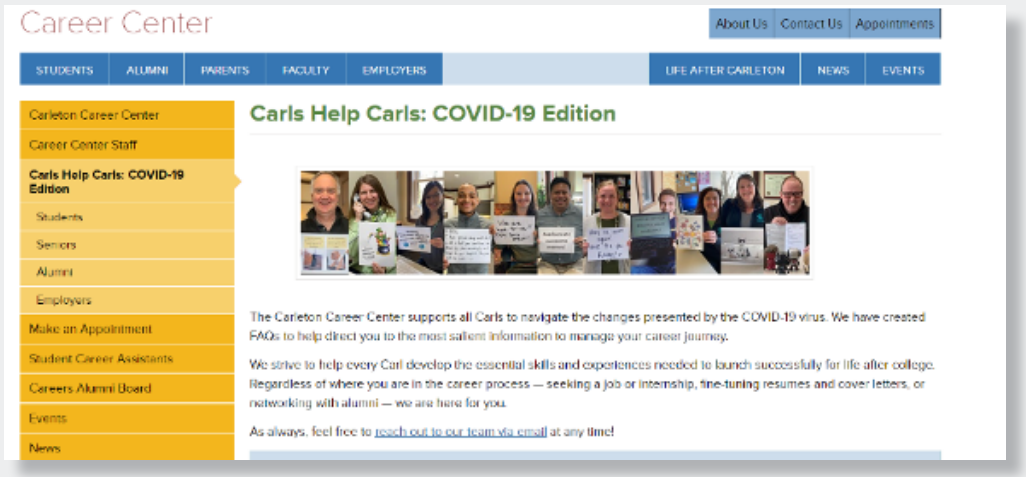
Boston University held a series of webinars which included:

- Successful leadership for managing remote teams
- Managing your business during COVID-19
- Managing your career in the age of coronavirus
- How to reignite your life's work

The University [archived these webinars] for future viewing.



Carleton College's Career Center developed the "[Carls Help Carls: COVID-19 Edition]" program, which provides support to students, alumni, and employers navigating the crisis. They offer meetings with career services, connections with other alumni, the ability to post a job online, and resume help.



QUICK TIPS

- Offer easy ways to schedule using Doodle or a similar scheduling platform so alumni do not have to take multiple steps to connect.
- Offer webinars hosted by career services staff covering a range of topics:
    - Conducting a job search during a crisis
    - Expert virtual networking
    - Spruce up your resume
    - Building professional skills
- Use your alumni to host career-related webinars, which could span a number of topics: managing a company during a crisis, honing your mediation skills, managing staff virtually, etc. Middlebury College hosted a panel discussion for their community featuring alumni from the classes of 2007-2009 who graduated into an uncertain economic marketplace to share experiences and perspective.
- Create alumni LinkedIn groups where alumni with similar career paths can support each other during these times.
- Develop a webinar series on anti-racism and diversity, equity, inclusion, and access. Do you have alumni who are doing good work in this space? It is important to remember that these individuals are experiencing a lot of "asks" so it will be important to be mindful of their time. Can you highlight content they have already created?

CONTINUING EDUCATION

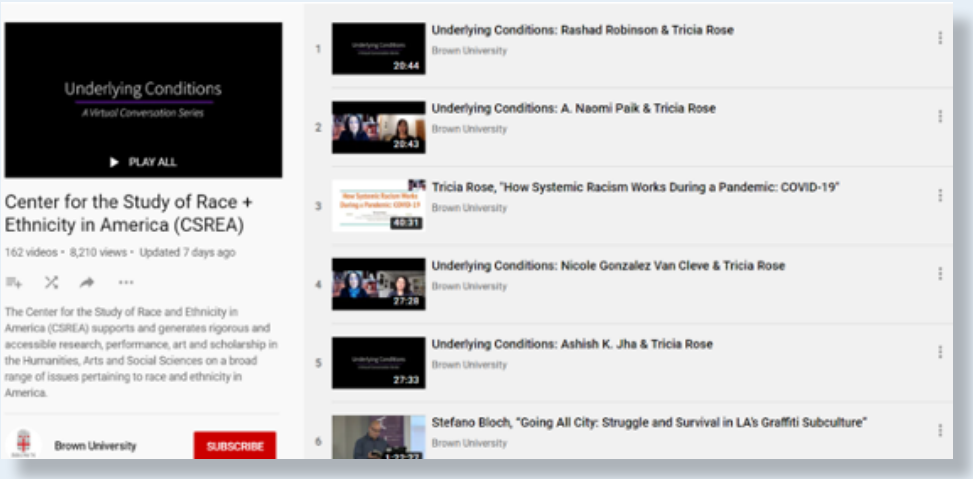
Alumni and parents are at home more and may have more time and interest in learning. Colleges and universities have adapted quickly to online learning, and faculty are better positioned to share classes or a series of classes online. Many institutions have offered opportunities to learn alongside students at home.

Harvard University offered a virtual reading list to support learning on issues of race.

The **Center for Urban Education** at USC offered a webinar series on racial equity.

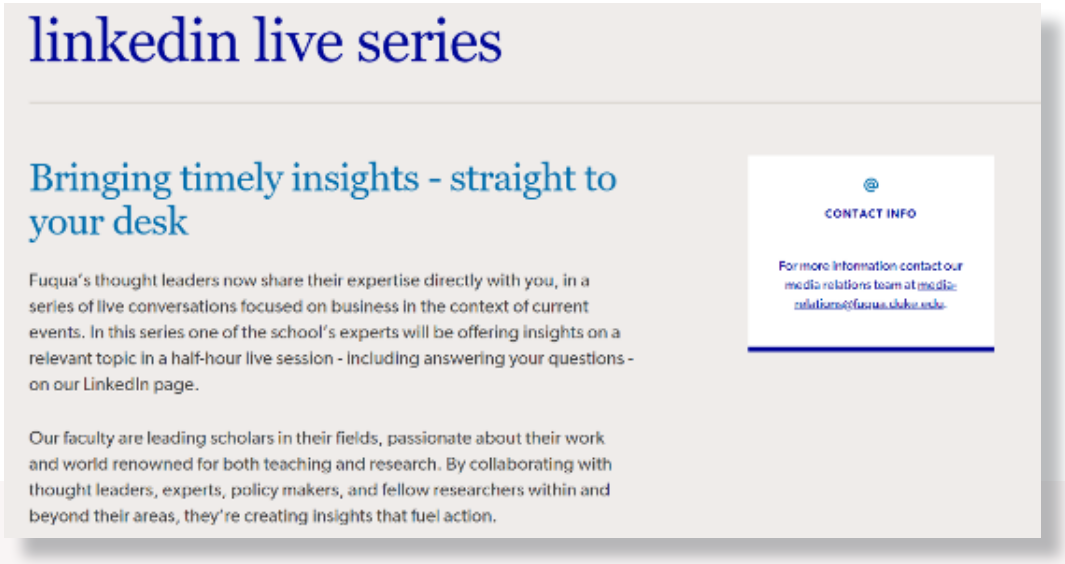
Middlebury College created a virtual hub, [Digital Middlebury](), that showcases several opportunities to engage and learn, including a webinar and podcast series. This idea of a "virtual hub" (similar to the University of Washington "Stronger Together" website referenced above) can be used long term.

Brown University is hosting a webinar series on diversity, equity, and inclusion during COVID-19 through its Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America. This series features [ongoing conversation]() with experts across the country.



Yale University is offering free access to a selection of introductory courses through [Open Yale Courses.]

Duke University's Fuqua School of Business offers a weekly [LinkedIn Live series], featuring Duke experts discussing business in the context of the current environment.



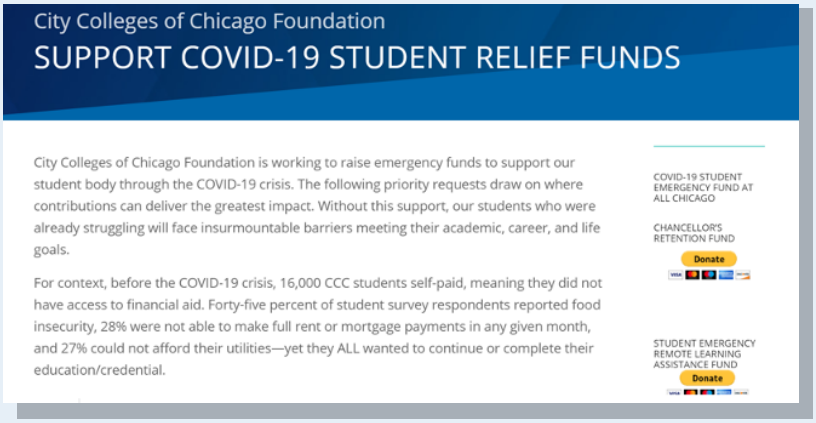
QUICK TIPS

- Be mindful of available resources, programs, and technology that you can leverage.
- Consider offering a mix of new, topical content and repackaging previously recorded lectures or webinars that would be of interest to your community.
- Connect with academic partners to create programming and consider engaging both content experts who can speak to the current environment and beloved faculty members.

FUNDRAISING

Fundraising continues during these uncertain times and many institutions have created a COVID-19 emergency relief fund or emphasized existing funds that address pandemic-related challenges. This is a great opportunity to partner with annual fund and other development staff to ensure all fundraising efforts are collaborative and impactful across all engagement pathways and channels.

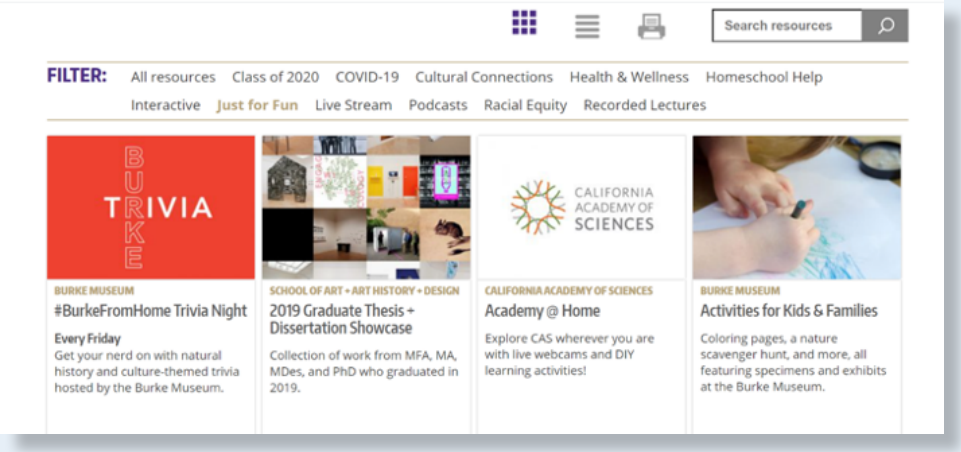
The City Colleges of Chicago developed a COVID-19 emergency fund for students. They used specific statistics that communicated their students' needs on a very compelling and day-to-day level (food insecurity, rent, and utility payments) to support their case for support.



ENTERTAINMENT

More so than ever before, individuals and families are looking for ways to stay entertained and active. Many institutions have stepped forward to engage their community through different channels with virtual fitness classes, weekly trivia competitions, activities for children, and Zoom backgrounds featuring favorite places on campus.

University of Washington has featured links to local and national museums and aquariums with content that would appeal to families on its [Stronger Together] website.



American University is offering [daily fitness classes] streamed online.

The College of Wooster created a multi-week virtual trivia contest for alumni and families called [The Highland Games](). The contest has multiple rounds with teams moving through a bracket to get to the finals.

Saint Louis University's School for Professional Studies and Brewing Science and Operations faculty held a virtual guided beer tasting with faculty members and alumni and community members in the brewing industry.

QUICK TIPS

- Consider the cultural institutions in your community. Can you share their content—such as zoo webcams or virtual operas—to create a more robust offering?
- If you push out images for coloring, virtual scavenger hunts, bingo, or other shareable content, create a hashtag and encourage alumni and friends to post on social media using that hashtag.

As you work to engage your alumni in creative ways, use this time to create or build stronger partnerships with on-campus partners. Are there ongoing opportunities in these areas that your team can engage in? Suggested partners are:

- **Admissions**
- **Annual Fund**
- **Career Services**
- **Marketing/Communications**
- **Student Affairs**

Each time you pilot a new program or engagement pathway, consider if the outreach will be relevant or sustainable beyond the pandemic. Be mindful of what investments you make in the short term that can serve your community in the long term.

While we hope this guide is a good starting point for thinking through engagement, the challenges posed by the current environment extend well beyond this. We're offering free 30-minute consultations, and we'd be happy to answer any questions you have. Please email us to schedule a call.

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