YOUTH MOVEMENT

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In a land where tradition is both the durable constant and a flashing trailblazer, there’s a new one materializing. As Texas A&M University gets older, the average age of its former students is getting younger.

It’s true that age is just a number, but as this number goes lower, it’s changing how The Association does its job.

Young Former Students Are The Future Of The Aggie Network

By Stephanie Jeter Cannon ’06
It happens each fall, spring and summer. As Texas A&M welcomes the incoming tide of new students, there’s an opposite flow of graduating seniors that ebb out of College Station. After each commencement, the newest former students of Texas A&M University pack up their dorms, load up their vehicles, slap a former student decal on their car’s rear window, and hit the road. The long line of blinkers marks the former students’ direction on Highway 6 as they head out to tackle the future. And then they’re gone.

With each departure, there’s an alarming tradition in the works. Watch this math, said Marty Holmes ’87, vice president of marketing for The Association.

Last May the number of graduates to receive their degree was 6,800, an all-time record, breaking 2010’s 6,250 spring graduates, which broke 2009’s record of about 5,900 spring graduates. This past fall, Texas A&M broke its total enrollment record, surpassing 50,000 for the first time.

The pattern is easy to spot. Texas A&M is growing and graduating more students than ever before. So many students that there’s a new quick fact to throw around: More than half of all living former students graduated in 1994 or later. But, it’s not the increase in size that’s alarming, he said. Growth is healthy and to be celebrated. What is harmful is as the overall former student base gets younger, fewer former students are choosing to be involved in Texas A&M through The Association of Former Students, he said.

“Our student body today is a different generation than our student body from years ago,” he said. “They think, act, and connect with each other in ways that we’re not accustomed to thinking, acting and connecting.”

Take, for example, the traditional Association-hosted Class Reunion, Holmes said. These young former students don’t need one because they’re connecting daily using social media like Facebook and Twitter. Then there’s the traditional A&M Club luncheon. Often times, young former students choose not to attend because they’re in a season of life where it’s just not feasible to steal away during a work day. As a percentage, young former students don’t give financially to The Association like former students of generations past because they think they have to have thousands of dollars to make a difference. They don’t tune into A&M news updates from The Association because they have the Internet, he said.

Younger former students are active in ways that are different than The Association has traditionally been active, and as such, “We’re learning more every day about what being relevant to younger former students looks like,” he said.

The Aggie Spirit is as strong as it has ever been, so it’s not a problem of passion, he said. An Aggie’s core value of loyalty is eternally curled in every detail of his person. But if The Association’s role is to strengthen The Association of Former Students, promote the interests and welfare of Texas A&M, perpetuate ties of affection and esteem formed during an Aggie’s college days, and serve the student body—“And it is,” he said. And if the way The Association has previously fulfilled these goals is no longer working with its younger former student base, then “we need to make a change,” he said.

So we are, he said.

Several months ago, The Association started brainstorming what it needed to do to connect with young former...
students. “What do they need?” asked Katy Lee ’08, coordinator of Constituent Networks and young alumni at The Association of Former Students. What are they missing from their interaction with The Association? What makes them tick?

So, she sent out word that she was looking for the answers. Through email, personal contacts, and releasing her questions to swing through the grapevine, she started collecting the remedy, and the Young Alumni Advisory Council started taking shape.

“The Young Alumni Advisory Council is a volunteer group that serves on behalf of The Association of Former Students,” Lee said. It’s a brainstorming group of Aggies who are within 10 years of their graduation year—though Lee redefines “young alumni” to anyone who sees themself as a young former student. “If you feel young, you’re in,” she said.

The group is still in its early stages of formation. As Texas Aggie went to print, letters had just gone out to the 60 former students who applied and were accepted to serve on an advisory committee to the council. Much has gone into this idea of an advisory council, Lee said, but now is when the hard work starts. Because, as it turns out, young alumni care deeply about The Association of Former Students and the Aggie Network, they just don’t know how to be involved, Lee said.

“You could look at all these numbers and lack of connection and say, ‘Well, that stinks,’ or you could look at the numbers and say, ‘If we do things right, this could be amazing,’” said Clint Haby ’02, who serves as a committee chair on the advisory council. Because what we have here is a big opportunity, Haby said. Thousands upon thousands of former students fresh from Aggieland who identify themselves as selfless servants are just waiting for an invitation to make a difference for Texas A&M.

“Aggies love to serve,” Haby said. The Big Event has wild popularity on campus, making it the largest student-run service project in the nation. “In every student organization, you’re doing service projects,” he said.

Service—the idea of giving back—is something that recent grads connect with, he said. No one purposely thinks “Now that I’m graduated, I can be selfish,” Haby said, but that can happen. It’s up to The Association to create opportunities to remain involved.

When Haby first graduated, he ad-
mits, his local A&M Club didn’t make
his radar. He moved to San Antonio,
made some work friends and hung out
with some Corps buddies who lived
close by. He stayed connected to Texas
A&M through his own enthusiasm for
the school, but not by getting involved
in his local Club. That all changed
when he started showing up to meet-
ings. Soon the Club put him in a lead-
ership position with its young alumni.

“In San Antonio, we’ve had a group
for young Aggies for a long time,” he
said. “You have to go to them on their
terms,” he said. “You go where they are, because here’s the main key…”

People need connection, he said. No
matter if they have an address book
full of college friends, a Facebook page
full of interactions, or a standing Skype
date with their freshman dorm mate,
people need to be connected.

“Back in the days of Old Army,
former students went off to World War
II and then came back to San Antonio,”
he said. They met up with some bud-
dies at the A&M Club after returning
and still have Monday lunch. “Now,
former students don’t have to have the
A&M Club to find connections,” he
said. “There’s been a change in the way
people connect, and as a result of that,
the traditional ‘After we graduate we’re
going to join our local Club because
that’s the right thing to do’ no longer
applies.”

It’s not because Aggies don’t love
A&M, it’s because the traditional
involvement opportunities and The
Association don’t meet their specific
needs like those organizations did in
the mid-to-late 1900s, he said.

“It is so important to capture the
young alum’s attention,” said Emman-
uel Guillory ’06, also part of the Young
Alumni Advisory Council. “I am inten-
tional about remaining connected, but
had I not been intentional, I may have
not heard much of anything.”

“The only way we hear about giving
back is financial,” he said. When a
young alum is contacted by The Asso-
ciation to be involved in the success of
Texas A&M, it’s normally through his
checkbook. And because The Associa-
tion has not done an ample job of com-
municating that it is an organization
that fundraises in small gifts, Holmes
said, that creates a barrier that’s hard
to leap.

“If I feel like my value is found in
my finances, and I can’t provide that,
then I feel that I’m not useful to Texas
A&M,” Guillory said.

It is a false statement, but that
doesn’t mean some former students
do not feel it’s true, he said.

Young former students need to be
engaged, he said. They need to be in-
vested in, just like they invested in the

Volunteers Needed

The Association of Former Students seeks volunteers to help coordinate activities and
programs for younger former students on the local A&M Club level. If you are interested,
please contact Katy Lee ’08 at 979-845-7514 or KLee08@AggieNetwork.com.
success of the university as a current student through their activities and community service. “When you invest in a young alum’s character and experience, and not just their bank account, eventually they will remember that and jump at the opportunity to give however they can,” Guillory said.

That’s how this generation thinks, he said. “I think the most passionate time for Ags is right after they have graduated,” said Chris Diem ’05, another council member. “That’s when they most want to stay involved with Texas A&M.”

Yet, in addition to drawing time, talent, and treasures from these young former students, Diem said it’s important that they know that The Association is there for them, as well. The Association of Former Students works with The Career Center to provide a team of career specialists who help former students land jobs. The Association supports student organizations, traditions and scholarships that impact all former students, but “they just don’t know it,” he said.

“That was a big part of it for me,” he said. Diem was part of the Muster Committee in 2004 when the Bonfire Memorial was dedicated. “Anytime the Muster Committee needed help, The Association was one of the first people to step in,” he said. When he graduated, that is what fueled his participation in the 500,000-member strong Aggie Network.

When you’re a student, you are mentored and molded through the generosity of former students. “Now we want to step into those mentor roles,” he said.

“Think about the experiences you had,” he said. “You can still be tied to the school. That’s what makes us Aggies. That’s what makes us unique.”

Traditions, the unique lifestyle Aggies live, Aggie Spirit, those things don’t go away, he said. “There was a reason that we participated in certain activities, and now there’s no reason not to continue being involved.”

Specifics around the Young Alumni Advisory Council continue to be ironed into something definable, Lee said. But as this group of former students meets to engage, invest in and impact the young former student, you can expect a transformation to take place.

The transformation of unspent passion can only mean good things for Texas A&M, she said. Texas A&M is the best university in the world, she said. It develops leaders of character dedicating to serving the greater good. It provides an environment where students can develop a passion and a skill. Then it gives opportunities for students to use that passion and skill to change the world.

That there are a growing number of former students wearing Aggie Rings and making a difference in the world is a tradition to celebrate. 🙌
Texas A&M University broke its total enrollment record last fall and each year the number of graduates continues to climb. More than half of all living former students graduated in 1994 or later, and The Association is making great strides to keep this demographic plugged in. That is the Young Alumni Advisory Council’s cue.

When Texas Aggie previously reported on young alumni (see “Youth Movement: Young Former Students Are The Future Of The Aggie Network” in the May/June issue), the Young Alumni Advisory Council was still being formed. On June 22-23, they convened for the first time and met within five committees, assessed the current needs and came up with a game plan. Yes, indeed—these Aggies are on the move!

Before day one was finished, the YAAC created a page on Facebook and a Twitter account to engage other young former students. The advisory council suggested making young former students aware of how their dollars are used, and how they help current students, so that they would be able to say they supported a specific project or program. A recurring theme of the conference was the misconception that the only way to give back to Texas A&M and The Association is through a large financial gift. But, small, consistent gifts make a big difference, too.

“I left [the conference] with a better understanding of the impact even my small donation has. If every young former student donated at minimum $10 a month, the impact would be astronomical,” said Lesley Vaculin ’05, who serves on the communications committee.

Young former students can also give back to Texas A&M through The Association by giving of their time and talents, which are often untapped resources.

“What makes the council a worthwhile commitment for me is the sense of giving back,” Vaculin said. “As young former students, many of us do not have the financial ability to donate a large sum of money. Yet, we can give of our time and talents to help The Association and the university become more successful. In short, the council has been another way for me to be a selfless servant to Texas A&M University.”

Members of the YAAC were on hand at the Clayton W. Williams, Jr. Alumni Center for The Next Tradition on Aug. 9-10 to meet new former students and tell them how important it is to stay connected.

“With over 50 percent of our former students having graduated in the past 10 years, this is a critical population that needs to be reached out to. Right now is the time to connect with these students, get them involved with The Association, and keep them connected with Texas A&M as a whole,” Vaculin stressed.

The best way to do that is to make sure to update your email address on AggieNetwork.com. Another way is to serve as a Young Alumni Coordinator within your local A&M Club and work side-by-side with our YAAC Regional Representatives. If you are interested, please email us at YoungAlumni@AggieNetwork.com to find out more.

The YAAC has only just begun to put their plans in motion, so stay tuned! Gig ‘em, Young Alumni.

Members of the Young Alumni Advisory Council at the Clayton W. Williams, Jr. Alumni Center in June.
The same weekend, the Summer Leadership Conference (SLC) took place, gathering Class Agents, A&M Club presidents, Constituent Network representatives, and more. Similar to the YAAC, this group came together to learn how The Association can help them as they continue to connect Aggies in their respective areas. It provided an opportunity for current leaders to pick up some new ideas and information, and also a time for incoming officers to learn about their new role and what resources are available to them.

“Hearing directly from The Association leadership and staff about what they do, and what great opportunities there are for former students and Clubs to better communicate about shared goals and vision was very beneficial,” said Jason Goodman ’00, president-elect of the Brazos County A&M Club. “Skill sharing and brainstorming with other Clubs proved to provide new ideas that we can use in our own club throughout the year.”

The Aggie Network hasn’t changed—but, like most things, it grows and adapts to the world around it. To keep up with the fast-paced world, The Association will begin sending out all Class newsletters electronically starting in January 2013. Make sure your contact information is up to date, especially your email address, so that you don’t miss out on news from your Class and Texas A&M!

“It was interesting to learn of the new methods The Association is using to reach out and grow with the use of social media. The Association leads the way as the premier former student organization,” Goodman said.

If a former student loses their Aggie Ring, the “Find an Aggie” feature has been key in helping reach those Aggies when the Ring is found. Help keep the Aggie Network strong by keeping your information current.

“We all know that there is not a challenge we can’t face or a goal we can’t accomplish. Borrowing a line from Apple Inc., with their ‘There’s an app for that’—well, I think you could easily say the same and no matter the need, there’s an Ag for that,” Goodman quipped.

Both the Young Alumni Advisory Council and Aggie leaders who attended the Summer Leadership Conference are perfect examples of Aggies being selfless servants—giving their time and resources to keep the Aggie Network alive. You can do your part by logging on to AggieNetwork.com/profile today and updating your information. Take a few moments to see what Aggie resources are available, like “Find an Aggie”—a detailed search engine for finding your Classmates. If we all take a few moments of our time to stay connected, the Aggie Network will continue to thrive. Thank you to all the Aggies—Class Agents, A&M Club presidents, Constituent Network leaders, Young Alumni Advisory Council, Leadership Council—who continued to exemplify our core values of excellence, integrity, leadership, loyalty and selfless service. We are the Aggies, the Aggies are we.