



## PRESIDENT'S ESSAY

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*"Wow! Now, finally, I'm a King alum. But what does that mean?"*

These were the words of an exuberantly happy graduate I congratulated last December at my first King commencement as president. His question stuck with me, because I'm not sure we have always done a good job explaining exactly what it means to be a King alumnus or alumna—that it means much more than merely having a King diploma or having attended here the requisite time.

A hint to the answer to his question can be found in the root of the word itself, which comes from the Latin for to *nourish*. The word *alumnus* was used to connote an almost parental relationship, in much the same way as does the Latin term *alma mater* (other mother). That deeply connected—*nourishing*—relationship between alumnus and university is at its best when most like one's relationship with the best of parents. When we left home that relationship certainly changed, but it did not end. The same should happen with the relationship between a graduate and King, as that alumnus commences the rest of his or her life away from—but never detached from—the King family.

As with leaving home, the transition from student to alumni status is subsumed in many changes, uncertainties, and new opportunities: a new job, or graduate school, changed relationships with family to name just a few. It's no wonder not much thought is given to what graduating to alumni status really means.

In many ways it may seem like the alumnus-school

relationship is actually ending, becoming mere memory. And though that may prompt nostalgia and gratitude and pride, it isn't always clear the relationship of alumnus to King University is really a living, continual connection that will always be there. Some alumni express disappointment that what they enjoyed as a student they no longer enjoy as an alumnus. That's understandable—but it's also an affirmation of their student time at King.

The expectations of being a student in our Christian academic community are plain enough, but rarely does anyone tell a graduate much more than "visit often," or "stay in touch." While we pride ourselves on preparing students well for life beyond King's campuses, for some reason we rarely, if ever, tell them what obligations and opportunities come with being a King alumnus. We perhaps do not signal to them as we ought that part of this transition is shifting their attention from themselves and their King experience to a focus on the students who follow them—a transition that every generation of King alumni has made.

In my remarks to graduates I stress that among the "rights, privileges, and responsibilities" we confer upon them is their responsibility to "own King." I point out to them that while legally it is our dedicated board of trustees (many of whom are alumni) who "own" the school, the *moral* ownership of the school is a shared one, and *no group carries that responsibility more than the alumni*. I want them to know—as I want all alumni to know—that we see alumni as critical not only to our past, but to our present and our future.

When schools go awry, it is rarely a surprise to find that the alumni were not really engaged. Likewise, when alumni are outraged about something, it is often because they have not been involved and so find themselves surprised. When colleges and universities fail, it is almost always in part because alumni have not committed themselves to the school sufficiently. (And often the longer they stay disengaged, the more they wrongly assume their involvement isn't really needed). Today there are almost no private colleges and universities that can survive, much less thrive, without alumni who are actively and financially engaged—and King is certainly no exception.

This continuity of the relationship between student and university is a hallmark of the private-higher-education experience. That is because getting an education at a school like King is much more than a business transaction: it is becoming part of a life-long community, a community that stretches across time and place. And King has always seen education not as a transaction, but as a transformation.

So, how, in practical terms, does an alumnus maintain this relationship?

First, watch carefully what happens at your alma mater, to know what is going on, to stay informed.

Tell us what you think: we need your perspective and insights. Be attuned to the successes of the school as well as its needs and opportunities to improve.

Second, tell your King story to young people you believe would be a good fit for King's unique whole-person education. Encourage them to visit and learn more. And let us know about high school students you believe would excel in this Christian "place of the mind." Alumni really are our best recruiters.

Third, become involved at King. Volunteer to serve, attend events, and be a visible presence—even online. If you are in the area, help out with student "care" packages before exams. Attend athletic events, plays, and concerts to show the students you are supporting them. Be an example for the students to follow when they become alumni. To see and help the students who stand where you stood is one of the most inspiring and rewarding of experiences.

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Fourth, and importantly, being an alumnus does mean giving. There are some who give because King needs support and they are grateful. Others give because they know alumni before them made possible their educations here and want to "pay it forward" for today's students. Still others give because they believe deeply in King and its values and believe its mission is relevant and needed in the world today. And many give for all those reasons.

Giving can and needs to come in a variety of forms. Regular annual giving that is predictable allows King to better forecast and meet its budget each year, while keeping costs down for students. Gifts for specific projects, large and small, help address critical short-term needs (the RallyMe mini-campaigns are a good example of this). Scholarship gifts, both expendable and endowed, help students directly, enabling many to attend that could otherwise not be able to. Estate gifts are particularly important to the long-term health of the university—and allow a donor to give more than may be prudent while one is still living. Reunion gifts can be a particularly powerful way for classes to pool their resources and make truly transformative gifts to their alma mater.

Regular, sustained, and growing alumni giving is crucial to King's ability to fulfill its mission. Were it not for alumni giving in all these forms, King would not exist. Moreover, we need an alumni giving rate

much higher than what we have now so to make the strongest case possible to large individual and institutional donors why King is worthy of support. Your gifts truly do count and make a difference.

Now and then a well-meaning King alumnus will offer advice with the words, "King should." I appreciate the great ideas we receive, but the clause seems to suggest that the alumnus does not view himself or herself as "King." In truth, alumni built this school, sustained this school, and are integral to its future. As alumni, you *are* King, and King is you; you represent King to others. And King—and its health as an institution—reflects to others your level of involvement and commitment.

So I put these questions to you plainly: Do you want today's King students to have as good and even better experience than you did? Do you believe in King's mission to prepare thoughtful, resourceful, and responsible citizens with a passion for serving God, the Church, and the world? Do you believe our broken world needs graduates such as we produce? Do you want King to continue for years to come?

I believe most King alumni do, and are only waiting to know how they might best give of themselves. With King's trustees, faculty, and staff, I believe strongly in what King stands for, what it achieves for its students, and what it can be with the support and involvement of our alumni. Will you join us in making a bright future for King a reality?

Sincerely,



**Alexander W. Whitaker IV, J.D.**  
President

