When South Carolina’s Clemson University has an issue before the state legislature, the tap of a keyboard can help school officials find out which alum was the roommate of a key lawmaker, or which graduate attends church with a critical committee chairman.

Using those alumni connections, Clemson has been able to reach out to state lawmakers at budget time to safeguard state funding and save programs on the legislative chopping block, says Beth McInnis, director of advocacy for the university.

“We have this powerful database that can tell me the nature of [an alum’s] relationship, whether it’s business, personal or close professional,” she says. “I want to have someone call a member knowing they’re going to get a call back.”

The university’s high-tech database of about 1,000 people has taken alumni advocacy into the realm of the digital age, McInnis says, and there are plans to push these efforts even further, while still maintaining traditional grassroots efforts.

As the economy continues to falter, colleges and universities across the country are rethinking the ways they use alumni, students, staff, parents and other school supporters to make the case for higher education funding, to recruit high-caliber students and to push for donations. It’s a tool that many say doesn’t have to cost much, but can reap significant dividends in an economic climate where every dollar counts.
"It’s not expensive and if done properly it doesn’t take a whole lot of time, but when you get into it, you find there’s a lot of grassroots interest out there," says Alan Janesch, the director of Pennsylvania State University’s Grassroots Network. “Once you engage these people and help them understand that their voices make a difference . . . it can’t help but have a huge potential impact.”

**Being Heard by Lawmakers**

Schools are tapping these networks of supporters in very different ways and for different purposes. While many alumni still do traditional outreach, like attending local career fairs, high school college fairs and talking to prospective students, universities are taking advocacy one step further.

The Penn State Grassroots Network, launched in 2003, now includes 38,000 alumni and friends who Janesch calls on for a variety of efforts. He uses e-newsletters and the group’s Web site to inform alumni on issues important to the university and sends them electronic action alerts to mobilize volunteers. The Web site provides step-by-step instructions for e-mailing or meeting with legislators and sample letters. For example, when the university was trying to convince lawmakers to approve a university purchase of state property, an action alert prompted members of the network to send more than 3,000 messages to lawmakers in one day.

“It was a huge outpouring in a very short time and it definitely caught attention,” Janesch says.

At San Diego State University (Calif.), the school frequently hosts coffee klatches inviting local politicians to mix with alumni and students to talk about higher education issues, says Jim Herrick, executive director of San Diego State’s alumni association. The school has about 200 alumni considered “ambassadors for higher education” who are knowledgeable about San Diego State University issues and advocate on behalf of the institution, Herrick says.

As money gets tighter, it’s important that schools make it clear why the mission of their institution is vital, Herrick says. “Advocacy continues to gain relevance and importance here,” he says. “Fundraising, sources of state tuition and outside support of the university are all getting hit. The gap has to be made up.”

For the University of Texas at Austin, that alumni support is not only a boon, it’s critical, says Leticia Acosta, director of public policy for the Texas Exes, the university’s alumni association. Texas law bars the university itself from doing any lobbying, so the alumni association is established as its own independent group to allow for advocacy. Since the Texas legislature meets only once every two years for a compressed 140-day session, quick action during that time is imperative, Acosta says. Alums and volunteers are crucial to those efforts.

For example, in March, a Texas Exes alert prompted alums to flood the state capitol’s phone lines in support of a bill revising a state law that requires the university to accept all Texas students in the top 10 percent of his or her class. The result, Acosta says, is that those “10 percent students” made up 81 percent of this year’s freshman class at the University of Texas at Austin, “limiting the university’s ability to look at other factors like SAT scores or community involvement” when evaluating applicants.

Shortly after the barrage of calls and a lobby day which included alumni visits to lawmakers, the bill passed out of committee. Acosta said alums are willing to take time to act on behalf of the university through “a sense of pride for campus and to insure that the value of their diploma is higher than when they left.”

**’Grow Your Own’**

But sometimes there’s a need for more targeted advocacy, says Andrew Paul, CEO and president of Atlanta-based Capitol Impact, which provides legislative tracking, database and integrated e-mail services to colleges...
and universities. Paul says his services allow schools to find a more personal way of convincing key decision-makers of the importance of a university or college stance.

“This type of grassroots is about how to be heard and not how to make noise,” says Paul, whose company’s services cost about $12,000 annually. “We’ve seen our clients able to move mountains with a very small number of people because they’re able to get the message to the people who make the decisions.”

With databases like the one Clemson University uses, alums sign-in and provide information on contacts that might be helpful to a university agenda, McInnis says. The Clemson database started with alumni but now includes students as well. More than 100 students in the database recently held a rally on the steps of the South Carolina statehouse to advocate in favor of higher education funding, she says.

The database of alumni connections has been so successful that McInnis, working with Capitol Impact, is now developing a similar database for the federal level. The university is amassing a list of contacts that Clemson alums have with federal lawmakers and key point people within federal agencies. Those alums may be called upon to make phone calls or in-person visits to key players in Washington. “There are a lot of funding opportunities there too,” McInnis says.

In addition to having alums and other school supporters contact lawmakers, some higher education institutions are reaching out to lawmakers who are alums themselves.

Miami University of Ohio is taking more of a “grow your own” approach in this area, actively trying to recruit and nurture students with an interest in public service and running for office or working in government, says Randi Malcolm Thomas, the school’s director of institutional relations. The school has developed a Government Relations Network for students with this interest. The program not only teaches students about public policy, but preps them on issues affecting the university. As part of the program, students often visit state and federal lawmakers for unofficial lobbying trips and also do internships in government offices. “We are hopefully populating government . . . with people who understand how higher education works, not only through their personal experience, but also by educating them about the challenges higher education faces,” Thomas says.

Using staff and students, as well as alumni, “is a very effective way of building public support for public education, especially in these tight economic times,” says Mike Dean, the founder of St. Paul, Minn.-based Tipping Point Strategies, which helps higher education institutions build public support for their legislative agendas. “There’s a lot of misinformation that gets around,” he says. “By providing this sort of education and resources it makes sure everyone is engaged in this advocacy and can do something about it.”

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The Right Balance

But Dean says it’s important for institutions to use a balanced approach of direct lobbying, public relations and grassroots efforts for success. "Those three components working together can create a truly effective advocacy program," he says.

Hershenson agrees. Advocacy, he says, is not a once-a-year event, or even one strategy. In addition to its lobbying efforts, CUNY also formed a Business Leadership Council made up of leaders of prominent corporations, some alums and some school supporters. Not only has the council helped guide the school in business areas, but the work of some of the council’s alumni members has resulted in significant donations, Hershenson says.

Seymour Sternberg, the CEO and chairman of New York Life Insurance Company, is a graduate of CUNY’s City College and a member of the CUNY business council. He worked with the New York Life Foundation, the charitable arm of the insurance company, to secure a $10 million donation to the college for a major scholarship program. And current chair of the council and City College alum, William E. Macaulay—chairman and CEO of the private equity firm First Reserve Corporation—donated $30 million to CUNY system-wide in 2006 to create a home for the institution’s honors college, Hershenson says.

But it’s also essential to showcase the importance of such institutions to the public, Hershenson says. Early this the year CUNY created a financial education hotline in collaboration with New York City to allow people to call in for one week and talk with the school’s economic experts about everything form mortgages to budgeting. According to Hershenson, more than 9,000 people called in.

“Communication and advocacy must take place on a year-round basis,” he says.

That’s just what Al Berry, a 1965 graduate of Clemson University, tries to do. Known as a "super advocate" in some Clemson circles, Berry makes a point of establishing relationships with state lawmakers by giving to their campaigns, going to their events and rubbing elbows in social circles. That enables him to have a direct pipeline to decision-makers when budget season rolls around. "I need to be on a first-name basis," he says. "Massive e-mails are, to me, not an effective way to present a position. I like to do that face to face."

Berry also helps to recruit potential students for Clemson, identifying the top students in his area and meeting with their families and hosting barbecues at his home. “We need to be discerning and say this is the type of student we want," he says.

On top of all that, Berry has been a Clemson “IPTAY” representative for 25 years. The fund was launched in 1934 as “I Pay Ten a Year” to support Clemson University athletic teams. Now IPTAY members donate millions each year and, among other things, the money funds all of the student-athlete scholarships awarded by the school—about 540 students annually, Berry says. "I went to Clemson without a dollar in my pocket," says Berry, who went on to a long education career and later launched several successful education-related businesses. “This is all part of giving back.”

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