



**Young Alumni Engagement – Connecting with Recent  
College Graduates**

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## **The K-State Alumni Association – Your Link for Life**

The K-State Alumni Association serves thousands of K-State alumni and friends by providing alumni a direct link to Kansas State University. Through the Alumni Association's membership program, K-State graduates as well as friends of the university are able to become annual or lifetime members of the K-State Alumni Association. Membership includes many unique benefits such as the quarterly *K-Stater Magazine*, a 10% Varneys discount, discounts on select McCain performances, discounted select athletic tickets, networking opportunities, and much more.

K-State's Alumni Association has been ranked No.1 in the Big 12 Conference, for 19 consecutive years, for the percentage of graduates who are members. With its numerous benefits and loyal members the K-State Alumni Association is able to directly aid in the success for the university, current students, future students, graduates, and friends of K-State.

The K-State Alumni Association has become what it is today over the past 141 years. In 1874, a group of K-State agricultural graduates envisioned the idea of an alumni group which featured a triennial reunion after graduation for all of the past and new graduates of Kansas State University. By 1910, these reunions had turned into luncheons, and by the year 1928, the luncheon had formed into an elaborate evening banquet. As the number of graduates increased, more programs were introduced to the Association. The first *K-Stater Magazine* was published in 1951. From 1980 to present day, multiple programs including the Alumni Fellows, Student Alumni Board, and the Powercat license plate program have begun.

The current K-State Alumni Center building was built in 2002 and was an exciting time for the future of the Association. Every year, the Alumni Association looks to improve our programs and be the "link for life" for K-Staters for years to come. This opportunity provided by the NEAT Grant Program is one of the ways to search for opportunities to improve and make changes for the future.

## **Project Description**

As a NEAT Grant Intern, I worked with the K-State Alumni Association, analyzing its membership program to develop a marketing strategy to improve membership engagement in recent graduates of Kansas State University (K-State). To develop this plan, I conducted extensive research on other Alumni Associations to compare their processes, membership rates, membership benefits, and interactions with members, to the K-State Alumni Association. I evaluated the K-State Alumni Association's current membership program including its social media marketing, website layout, and mass mailing pieces. I also researched the organization's general interaction with current college students of whom will graduate within two years and graduates who have graduated from K-State within the last nine years. To further evaluate the membership program, I composed two surveys that were sent directly to graduates of K-State to receive their opinions of the membership program and what could be done to appeal more to this generation of graduates. The resulting research has been composed into a report that will be included in a binder and presented at the end of my internship at the K-State Alumni Association.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this NEAT Grant Intern role is to provide research and develop a marketing plan to improve the way the K-State Alumni Association engages with recent graduates of K-State. Ultimately, the purpose is to take this research and apply it to the membership program to increase membership retention for young K-State alumni. Considerable research and communication within this target market of young alumni is necessary to continue to improve the K-State Alumni Association and carry on the title of No. 1 in the Big 12 Conference for the percentage of graduates who are members.

As the NEAT Grant Intern, I will present the K-State Alumni Association with:

1. Comparison reports of the K-State Alumni Association membership program to each of the other Big 12 School's Alumni Association's membership programs.
2. Two research reports completed from the results of two surveys:

- a. Survey one: Distributed to K-State graduates of whom graduated within the past two years (2012-2014).
  - b. Survey two: Distributed to K-State graduates of whom graduated within the last five to nine years (2006-2009).
3. A research binder including general research about social media trends, media in the workplace, how to utilize social media, the future of college Alumni Associations, and current popular marketing channels.
4. Social media strategies to increase current engagement among K-State graduates with the K-State Alumni Association.
5. Strategic marketing plan to target the future graduates of Kansas State University and expand engagement and membership.

## **Young Alumni Membership Engagement**

The K-State Alumni Association has ranked No. 1 in the Big 12 Conference, for 19 consecutive years, for the percentage of graduates who are members. We pride ourselves on the relationships that we foster with not only members of the K-State Alumni Association but also all alumni and friends of the university. While our membership program is very strong, we are looking to increase numbers among one of our weakest member segments, the young alumni and recent graduates of K-State.

To increase membership engagement immediately after graduation, the K-State Alumni Association has teamed up with the nine individual colleges at the university (College of Business, College of Human Ecology, College of Arts and Sciences, etc.) to provide one free year of membership to the newly graduated student. This free year includes all of the benefits that members of the K-State Alumni Association receive. After their free year concludes, the K-State Alumni Association has found that the percentage of new graduates who renew their membership immediately following the free year is lower than that of the older graduates. Aside from the free year, there are also discounted membership prices available to those within five years of receiving their first degree at K-State.

This young alumni segment we are trying to reach depicts the recent college graduate, who is often times paying off student loans, living on their own, and searching for a job in the “real world”. Without a large amount of disposable income, a membership to the K-State Alumni Association may not be something this age of alumni is interested in immediately after college. These aspects provide obstacles to overcome when targeting this group of young alumni. Regardless, the K-State Alumni Association believes that with the right marketing and communication, we can overcome these obstacles and increase the percentage of young alumni members.

As of 2015, approximately 18% of each graduating class becomes dues paying members of the K-State Alumni Association after their free year. My goal for this project was to research reasons why this percentage is low and how to increase engagement with these K-State graduates to increase membership.

To find these solutions, I composed two surveys that allowed me to receive direct feedback from young graduates. Of the two surveys I created, one was sent to graduates who recently graduated within the time frame of December 2012 – July 2014.

The second survey was sent to slightly older graduates who got their first degree from K-State within the years of 2006 and 2009.

The first survey was sent to 5,689 recent graduates and received a total of 873 responses, or 15.3% response rate. The second survey, sent to 9,865 graduates who received their degree five to nine years ago, received 1,694 responses, representing a 17.2% response rate.

The two surveys totaled to 2,567 responses, which provided a large amount of feedback and very visible trends within the data. After receiving all of the responses, two separate reports were made for the two surveys to further explain the results.

A strategic plan regarding this constituency group's responses and the research done on the K-State Alumni Association membership program versus its competitors was then created.

## Research Process and Timeline

MONTH	PROCESS
August	Reviewed current K-State Alumni Association membership procedures, current membership behaviors, and current marketing efforts
September	Evaluated current goals at the K-State Alumni Association, researched other Big 12 school's Alumni Associations and created comparison reports
October	Completed research on current marketing efforts and what current membership looks like, started identifying survey questions
November	Created first survey (graduates 1-2 year out), conducted survey over a two week time period
December/January	Conclusion of survey, started analyzing results and observing trends within the data
February	Completed analysis report of first survey, composed second survey (graduates 5-9 years out), began conducting second survey over a four week time period
March	Conclusion of second survey, began analyzing results and observing trends, developed ideas for new things to implement/new engagement strategies
April	Concluded second survey report, composed NEAT Grant Report, submitted report, presented the K-State Alumni Association with conclusions/findings



## Survey Instrument

To compose and distribute the two surveys used during this past year, we used a survey program called Qualtrics. This program is a comprehensive survey tool that helps generate surveys, polls, and assessments. Due to a partnership with Kansas State University, all faculty and staff are granted an account, allowing them to use Qualtrics for work purposes.

Qualtrics provides users the ability to create up to twenty surveys each year. The features available on these surveys include the option of ninety-one different question types, the ability to share and collaborate on results, the ability to distribute the survey using a specific URL, and the use of “skip logic” and “display logic” to help customize survey questions based on an individual’s response to a previous question.

For my research purposes, I utilized Qualtrics to create and send two surveys through email to a total of 15,668 graduates. The surveys were sent to every graduate whose email the K-State Alumni Association had on file during the respective graduation years. I was able to email and distribute all of the information to the surveyors through the Qualtrics program. I sent an initial email to take the survey and for those who didn’t respond to the survey within an allocated time, a reminder email was sent to their email address provided. A thank you email was also sent to those who completed the survey. To increase the number of surveys completed, we provided incentives including a \$50 Visa gift card, a \$50 Varney’s gift card, and a free night’s stay at The Bluemont Hotel in Manhattan, to award at random upon completion of the survey.

Upon completion of recording the survey responses, Qualtrics organized the results in multiple forms including a word document, excel document, pdf, and others. I was able to utilize Qualtrics’ evaluation of the data to gather findings and opinions to include in my research reports and complete further analysis of the results.

## Outline for Process and Surveys

After researching the K-State Alumni Association's current efforts to engage recent graduates and young alumni of Kansas State University, I composed a list of objectives that I hoped to find through the results of the two surveys. To create these objectives, I researched the K-State Alumni Association website, the membership benefits, the communication with this age group including social media efforts and direct mailings, and similarities among recent graduates who are members of the K-State Alumni Association versus those who are not.

### Objectives:

1. *Involvement:*
  - a. Does involvement during college have a direct impact on membership at the K-State Alumni Association after graduation? If so, is there a trend between a certain club or organization and membership?
2. *Communication:*
  - a. Do the two different survey audiences have different preferences for channels of communication or social media usage?
3. *Social Media:*
  - a. Do graduates know about the presence the K-State Alumni Association has on social media? (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn)
  - b. Are there other social media channels that would help engage more graduates?
4. *Free Year Program:*
  - a. Is the free year of membership to new graduates a beneficial asset for the K-State Alumni Association? What are opinions about the free year?
5. *Recent Graduate Discounts:*
  - a. How familiar are graduates with the discounted membership rates available for five years after graduation?
6. *Benefits:*
  - a. How applicable are the K-State Alumni Association's membership benefits to the young alumni?

7. *Future Plans:*

- a. For those who are not current members, what are their future plans regarding membership? Is there a trend that after x number of years after graduation, graduates will join and become a member?

8. *Outside Factors:*

- a. Are there any outside reasons why surveyors want to join/do not want to join the K-State Alumni Association? Would something such as additional benefits affect their membership status?

With these objectives in mind, I compiled survey questions to help find the answers. The first survey was sent to K-Staters who have graduated within the past two years. We targeted this group of graduates separately because they were either in their free year of membership, or their free year had just concluded. The survey received 873 responses out of 5,689 and provided great feedback regarding the objectives listed above. With the results of this survey, I constructed a complete analysis of each question asked in the survey. I then performed research regarding the trends I found within the survey. For example, since direct mail was listed as the second most popular communication channel, I looked into the trends of direct mail online and compared what my survey showed to the national trends.

After analyzing the results from the first survey, I created a similar survey that was distributed to surveyors who have graduated in the past five to nine years. The objectives remained the same for the second survey, but targeted graduates who are now unable to receive a discounted membership prices (discounted memberships available for five years after graduation) and have now been in the workforce for multiple years. The survey received 1,694 responses out of 9,865. These responses helped in answering my objectives. I was also able to compare the responses of the first survey to this second survey.

## Grant Project Budget and Allocations

To complete the research project on young alumni engagement and connecting with recent grads, the K-State Alumni Association spent approximately \$2,346.01. Below shows a breakdown of how the money for the project was allocated. Any additional expenses occurred that are not covered by the NEAT Grant are budgeted towards the K-State Alumni Association 2014-2015 membership retention budget.

1. The NEAT Grant Intern received hourly pay at minimum wage, and worked roughly 10 hours each week during the 2014-2015 academic school year. This excludes any university holidays.

**Total amount for this expense=\$2,136.11**

**\*This includes approx. amount for the next two weeks of work (may slightly change).**

2. Prizes were purchased for both surveys that were sent out during the project. The prize winners were drawn at random from those who completed the surveys; as an incentive to complete the survey. Detailed expenses for the prizes are listed below:

First survey:

- i. \$50 Varney's Gift Card - Cost; \$50.00
- ii. \$50 Visa Gift Card - Cost; \$54.95
- iii. Free one night's stay at the Bluemont Hotel - no cost to the Alumni Association

Second survey:

- iv. \$50 Varney's Gift Card - Cost; \$50.00
- v. \$50 Visa Gift Card – Cost; \$54.95

**Total amount for this expense= \$209.90**

**Total cost for research project=\$2,346.01**

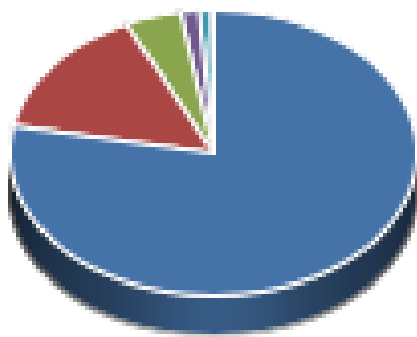
## Summary of Findings

Through the two surveys sent out to multiple aged graduates, I found many results that would allow the K-State Alumni Association to grow in its connection to young alumni. When these findings were paired with the general research on such topics over the Internet and through the evaluation of the K-State Alumni Association's current efforts, new opportunities were revealed. While I found many things throughout the two surveys, I have presented the top ten findings from each survey.

### Results of the survey sent to K-State graduates who graduated in 2012 – 2014:

1. Email was the number one preferred method of communication by 78% of the surveyors. Following email was direct mail with 39% of surveyors ranking it as their second choice. This presented a surprise as one would assume that, for young alumni, technology would be most important in the forms of email, websites, apps on mobile phones or tablets, and social media. According to an article from *Business 2 Community*, direct mail is projected to still be a strong marketing channel in the current and upcoming years with all age groups. It states that as multiple businesses and organizations move to only technological communication, the few organizations left using direct mail will have a huge advantage, as there will not be much competition.

**Preferred Method**



Blue = Email

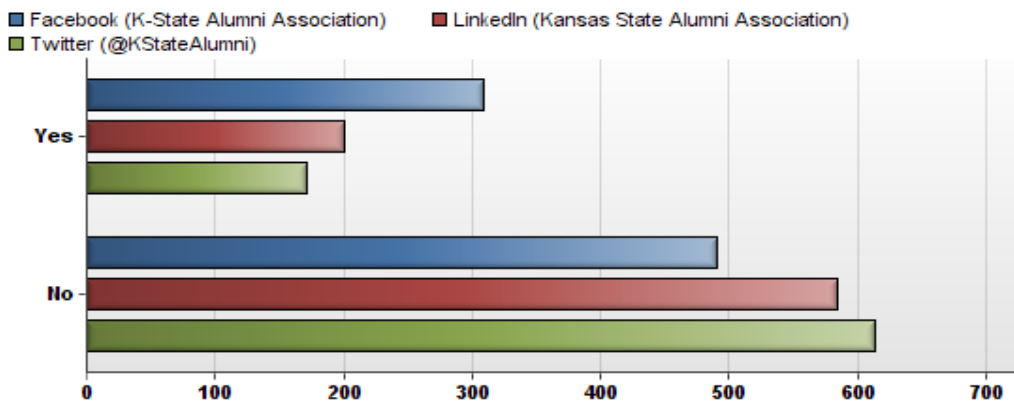
Red = Direct Mail

Green = Social Media

Purple = Apps Through Mobile Phone/Tablet

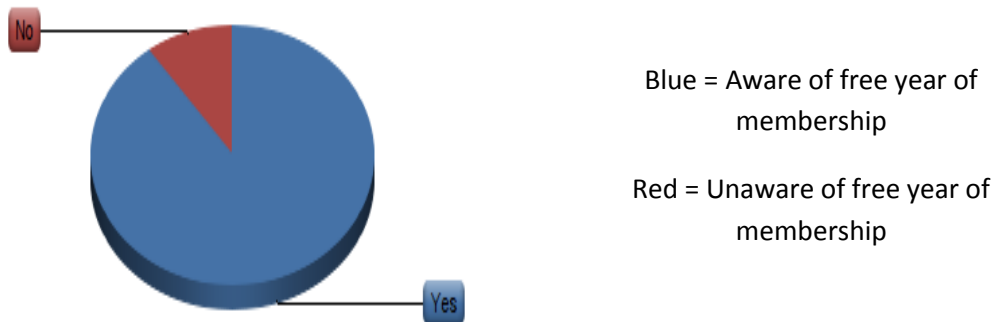
Blue = Mobile Number

- Facebook is still the most viewed social media site among surveyors. While Twitter and Instagram have large followings and are still very crucial to an organization’s success, Facebook still holds the lead for preferred social media channel. 71.2% of surveyors ranked Facebook as their most viewed social media outlet.
- Majority of the surveyors do not follow the K-State Alumni Association on any of their social media sites. The biggest reason for the lack of connectedness is that surveyors were unaware of the presence that the K-State Alumni Association has on social media.



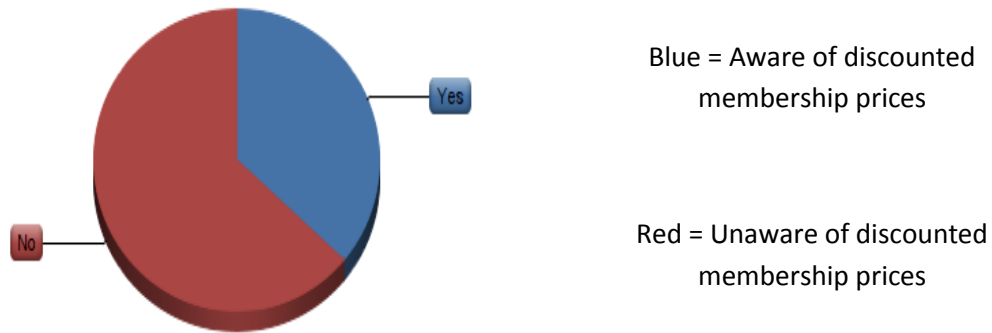
- The free year membership to the K-State Alumni Association was recognized by 90% of the recent graduates. Only 10% of surveyors were unaware that they had received a free year membership.

**Free Year Membership Awareness**



5. 63% of the surveyors were unaware of the discounted membership prices available to K-State graduates who have received their first degree within the past five years.

### Discounted Membership Awareness

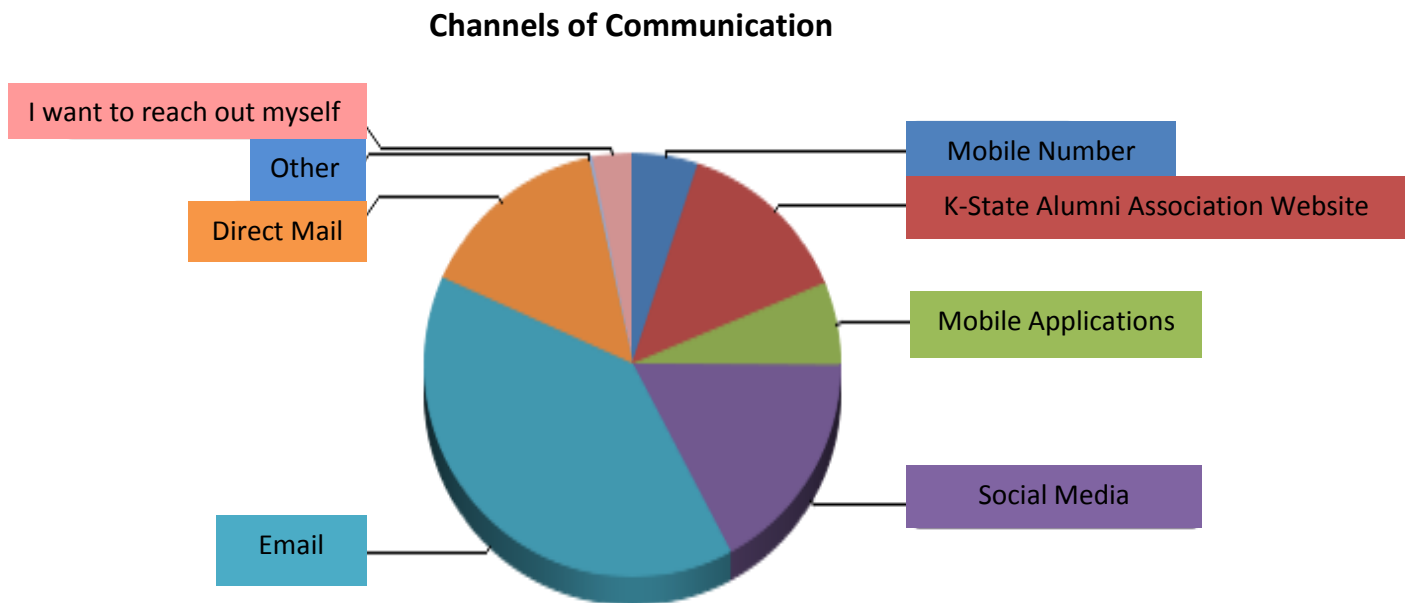


6. Many surveyors stated that they were unaware of the benefits available to them through their free year of membership.
7. Of those who said they are current members of the K-State Alumni Association, 225 out of 697 said they were involved during their time at K-State. 40 out of 176 stated they were members but were not involved in anything during their time at K-State.
8. Google mail will divide emails into three categories – primary, social, and promotions. Anything that has an unsubscribe option included in the email is likely to be put into the promotions tab which may or may not be checked by the user. Emails sent from the K-State Alumni Association do have an unsubscribe options. Of the 875 responses we received from this survey, 812 of them were sent from Gmail accounts.
9. 5% of the of the recent graduates who stated they are not a dues paying member of the K-State Alumni Association stated their membership status incorrectly and actually are current members.
10. When asked to rank understanding of membership at the K-State Alumni Association (ex. Benefits, recent graduate discounts, reasons to join, etc.) on a 1-5 scale with 5 = strong understanding:

- a. 13.6% = 1 (No Understanding)
- b. 27.5% = 2 (Little Understanding)
- c. 35.5% = 3 (Neutral Understanding)
- d. 18.1% = 4 (Decent Understanding)
- e. 5.3% = 5 (Strong Understanding)

**Results of the survey sent to Kansas State University graduates who graduated in 2006 - 2009:**

1. Email was the number one preferred method as it was in the first survey. The second most popular channel that graduates want to be communicated through was social media including Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Following social media was the channel of direct mail.

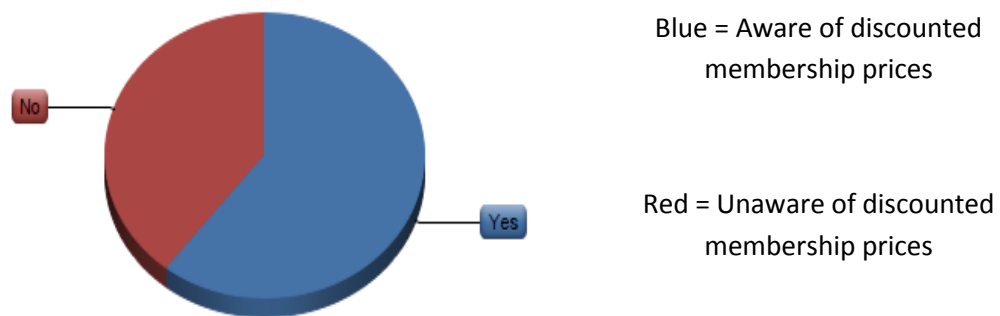


2. When asked to select social media sites that surveyors use on a regular basis, Facebook was still ranked as the number one choice. The next site was LinkedIn, followed by Instagram and then Twitter.

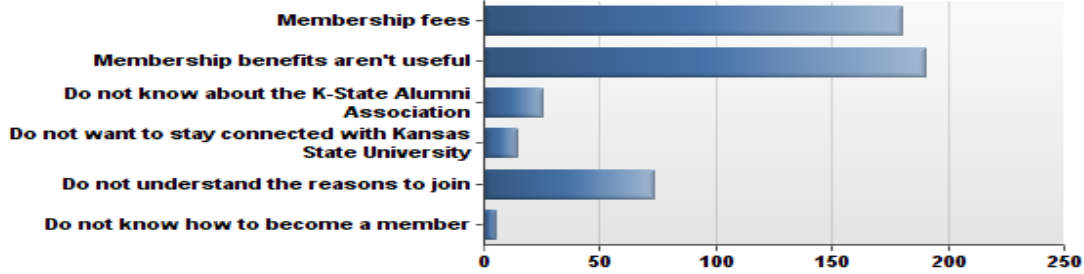


3. Almost half of the surveyors stated that they were unaware of the K-State Alumni Association's presence on social media.
4. 80.3% of surveyors said they use social media on a regular basis.
5. Of those who said they were current members of the K-State Alumni Association, 561 of them stated they are still involved with K-State in some way and 93 of them stated they are not involved with K-State at all outside of the K-State Alumni Association.
6. 60% of surveyors were aware of the discounted membership rates available to graduates within five years of receiving their degree. Of that 60% of surveyors, 65% of them took advantage of those discounts to become members of the K-State Alumni Association.

### Discounted Membership Awareness



7. Loyalty to Kansas State University is the number one reason why graduates said they join the K-State Alumni Association.
8. The number one reason why people do not join the K-State Alumni Association is due to the lack of useful benefits. The second most popular reason was due to membership fees.



9. Many surveyors, both members and nonmembers, stated they were unaware of the benefits that they were eligible to receive as a member of the K-State Alumni Association.
10. Surveyors who went on to pursue a second degree or traveled outside of the United States were not in a position to become a member of the K-State Alumni Association during the five year discounted membership time frame.

**General research involving the K-State Alumni Association in comparison to other university Alumni Associations:**

1. In the Big 12 conference, the K-State Alumni Association has the lowest annual membership cost for both single and joint membership options.
2. The K-State Alumni Association's recent graduate membership rates for a lifetime membership are the third lowest in the Big 12 conference.
3. Membership benefits offered at the K-State Alumni Association are very similar to other Big 12 Universities. In most cases, K-State offered more benefits than the other schools.
4. The use of mobile applications is something that multiple Alumni Associations across the nation are utilizing. The K-State Alumni Association does not currently have an app, but is looking into opportunities within this channel of communication.
5. Instagram is being utilized among other Big 12 Alumni Association's but is not something the K-State Alumni Association currently uses.

## Summary of Conclusions

After concluding the research and surveys, I believe the K-State Alumni Association should look into the following suggestions to improve engagement and membership with graduates between the years of 2006 – 2014 and future graduates of Kansas State University:

1. Increase the email communication. While there are a significant number of emails already being sent out, two new emails could be implemented to help satisfy other problems that were presented through the surveys.
  - a. An annual email including all of the benefits available to members to remind them of the benefits they receive.
  - b. An annual email sent to graduates within the five year discount time frame that showcases the discounted membership rates available to them within those five years.
    - i. Example: Graduate who graduated two years ago would receive an email that says he/she has three years left to take advantage of the discounted membership prices.
2. Increase the marketing of the K-State Alumni Association's social media presence. This could be done multiple different ways:
  - a. Market the social media on brochures, monthly newsletters, the K-Stater magazine, throughout campus, and at athletic events.
  - b. Create a social media article to place in the K-Stater alerting readers to the presence of these sites.
  - c. Utilize paid advertising on Facebook and Twitter. Establish a trial month with paid Facebook advertising to see if the number of followers increases significantly.
  - d. Through events inside the K-State Alumni Center such as Grad Bash (a celebration of graduating seniors), perform social media related contests. For example, to win a prize at Grad Bash, one must follow and retweet a tweet of the K-State Alumni Associations.
3. Extend the K-State Alumni Association's reach to young alumni through social media and mobile phone/tablet applications.
  - a. Create an Instagram to reach the surveyors and graduates who said Instagram is one of their top social media preferences. Stay in competition with other Alumni Associations utilizing this social media site.

- b. Look into creating an app to reach users who may not use a computer often. The tablet and mobile phone transition is quickly occurring as phone and tablet use is becoming a top method for communication.
- 4. Market the discounted membership option everywhere possible.
  - a. Create an email as stated in #1.
  - b. Place an advertisement in the graduate's commencement information.
  - c. Frequently post about the discounts on social media.
  - d. Advertise it on the K-State Alumni Association's website – major focal point upon opening site.
  - e. Promote it during current senior events such as Grad Bash or commencement.
- 5. Look into the process of extending the discounted membership period to eight or ten years to allow graduates pursuing a second degree immediately following first degree or graduates traveling overseas to have the opportunity to utilize such benefit.
- 6. Provide general knowledge regarding the K-State Alumni Association and its membership program to both members and nonmembers consistently throughout the year.

## Future Impacts

Through the research provided in this report and in the binder to be presented to the K-State Alumni Association at the conclusion of this internship, I believe there are many opportunities for growth within the engagement of young alumni and recent graduates.

With the suggestions provided, I believe that the K-State Alumni Association will ultimately achieve a higher number of recent graduate members. Each conclusion found provides a new angle of reach for the K-State Alumni Association.

- Increasing the emails sent out to both members and non-members reminds graduates of the benefits available to them and the discounted membership prices. This provides a direct incentive to either become a member or continue one's membership to the K-State Alumni Association.
- Marketing our social media channels provides social media users a chance to interact with the K-State Alumni Association online. By putting our social media information in the *K-Stater Magazine*, campus events, the monthly newsletter, as well as others, we increase the awareness of the social media presence on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn and allow our alumni and friends to become more engaged.
- Creating an Instagram and a mobile application allows us to extend the K-State Alumni Association's reach even farther. By doing this, we would stay in competition with other Alumni Associations, and reach potential graduates that we have never reached before. The convenience of joining the K-State Alumni Association or renewing membership would also be easier through a mobile application.
- Marketing the discounted membership prices in every promotion will inform more graduates about the discounts offered to them.
- By starting the discussion of extending the discounted membership rate period, we look into making the discount applicable for those who go on to receive a master's degree immediately following their first degree or who travel out of the country after receiving their first degree. Ultimately this allows more graduates to become members of the K-State Alumni Association at a time in their lives that is most suitable for them.
- Providing a general education of the K-State Alumni Association to members and nonmembers creates knowledge about the organization's purpose and programs.

These future plans can each be implemented within the next year. The social media additions and extra emails are can be implemented within the next few months. Over the course of this next year, we can change the marketing on our handouts, magazines, and advertising to include the discounted membership rates and the social media presence. We can also increase the number of people we educate about the generalities of the K-State Alumni Association throughout the upcoming year. Lastly, the discussion regarding the change in the discounted membership rate period can be held over the next few years to evaluate opportunities moving forward.

As a result of being better connected with this age group, more memberships will be purchased, the membership percentage will improve, and the K-State Alumni Association will ultimately improve its relationships with graduates of Kansas State University.