



Transforming a Successful Organization: Societal Changes Challenge the Alumni Association of the University of Michigan

With just a little bit of time left before he had to explain it all, Steve Grafton pondered an ultimate question: Was the transformation of his organization relevant and complete? It was November 2021, and Grafton, longtime president and CEO of the Alumni Association of the University of Michigan (AAUM), was about to do an online presentation and interview session about the all-consuming mission that could be the capstone of his career.

His mind went back a half-dozen years to when he and his organization were, as he would say, “in a good place.”¹

The Challenges in 2015

As 2014 drew to a close, the AAUM was financially healthy and nationally prominent. Yet Grafton and other AAUM leaders were seeing a lot of changes in the world—“you know, the whole social media was exploding,” for example—and they wondered about a need for some really different thinking and strategic planning.²

The topic became a central focus for an AAUM Board of Directors retreat at the end of January 2015. After an encouraging set of discussions, the board told Grafton, as he put it: “Go big or go home.” He and his team needed to come up with not simply a strategic plan but instead a detailed, five-year path to transform the organization, in order to become increasingly relevant in a future that was far from clear. In particular, even as the very workings of society were in fast flux, the AAUM leadership needed to ensure that the association could substantially improve at connecting the alumni to each other and to the university. “It was about rebuilding our foundation to give us the ability to be successful in a new world,” Grafton said.³

Major questions loomed, each of them requiring extensive thoughtfulness. Among them:

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