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## *Alumni group is more than just a means of accessing tickets; it's also about image*



*(Daily Reporter photo by April Moening)*

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Every year at this time, countless Ohio State University alumni in Central Ohio, and across the country, may look upon their admission to an upcoming Buckeye game and smile at the thought that their membership in the Ohio State University Alumni Association is worth it, just for that ticket.

While they may be among the lucky few to access Ohio Stadium on any given Saturday, most of them also know their memberships in the OSUAA is about more than just a good seat.

"That's kind of what we were known for, access to football tickets," said Ginny Trethewey, chief operating officer of the OSUAA. "The hardest question when I first came (here) was 'what does the association actually do,' and we don't want anybody to have to struggle with an answer for that question. There ought to be 15 good things that come to mind because we're doing a lot more than 15."

Before coming to the OSUAA, Trethewey, who recently celebrated her 30-year reunion with the OSU Moritz College of Law, served as general counsel for OSU, and as a partner with the law firm of Vorys, Sater, Seymour and Pease before that.

While the staff and others knew the association offered so much more, Trethewey added, the public's under-

standing remained the association "put out a magazine and is a way to get football tickets."

"If we are only seen as an outlet for football tickets, then I'm not sure we are doing what's necessary to make membership in the Alumni Association a valuable commodity," said OSUAA President and CEO Archie Griffin.

That thought, combined with the fact that in 2003 now former association President/CEO Dan Heinlen was leaving the OSUAA after 37 years of service, sparked the association's decision to take a good look at the future and where it was headed as an organization.

With Griffin's arrival in January 2004, followed by Trethewey's the following October, the organization spent months developing a strategic plan to become the "biggest and best" alumni association in the world.

With roughly 435,000 living graduates of OSU, the alumni association has about 112,000 dues-paying members, as well as 15,000-20,000 members who have received a free membership for the year immediately following graduation — equaling approximately 25 percent of all available members.

Only the Penn State Alumni Association currently has a larger dues-paying membership.

"So our goal is to improve that substantially," Trethewey said.

On the way to increasing membership, the goal also is to improve the association as an organization and add

value to the university and to the lives of Ohio State alumni.

"We have no reason to exist if we didn't have a great university to be associated with, and ... a great university deserves a great alumni association," Trethewey said, adding that OSU was well on its way to improving as a university when the plan was developed, and the alumni association felt it needed to do the same. "So the plan is the roadmap."

One of the goals of the plan is to become a better gateway through which alumni can connect with the university, and with each other, which required a heavy investment in updating its technological capabilities to create a virtual alumni association available to members 24/7.

"There is a tremendous inherent, passionate loyalty toward Ohio State. We know people want a connection," Trethewey said. "Maybe it's emotional, and maybe it's only seasonal sometimes, but people want to say, 'that's where I went.'"

Updating the OSUAA's online presence and capabilities will allow the association to be a vehicle for those connections. Trethewey admitted the group has not been a particularly electronic association in years past, but it is making a strong effort to be more visible on the Web, even on sites such as YouTube and Facebook, so alumni can connect "on their own terms."

"That's what we're moving toward. The connection isn't just come here and do something in our building ... or come here and be a member of a club or society," she said. "But if you are in India and you still want to have some sort of contact with the university, we want to be one of the places that can facilitate that, even if all we're really helping you to do is find your engineering professor from 30 years ago that you wish you knew how to communicate with."

When the OSUAA proposed a constitutional change recently, which all members can vote on, the first messages the association received were from alumni in Denmark, China and Spain, which showed how global the group needed to be.

"We weren't hearing from California, and we weren't hearing from Newark, Ohio," Trethewey said. "It was a real affirmation of the fact that we have members everywhere and we are obligated to reach them on their terms."

One of the ways to ensure alumni want to stay connected to the university, which will help both OSU and the alumni association, is to reach out to students before they become alumni to build a bond — which is another part of the plan.

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"We decided we needed to develop a goal around students that the day you commit to being a Buckeye, you really are a Buckeye for life," Trethewey said. "We became, as an organization, more of the fabric of the university and not someone waiting to knock on the door when you're done."

While the Student Alumni Council is active, and recognized at OSU and nationally as an award winning student organization, the association also is promoting other efforts — such as reviving May Week, a week-long series of campus-wide activities each spring, a partnership with the First Year Experience program and securing an office "front-and-center" at the new Ohio Union — to place the OSUAA deeper into the campus experience.

Griffin said increasing visibility of the group and impacting students is a vital part of the OSUAA's future success.

"We can't expect to start cultivating a relationship the day you become an alumnus. That won't work," he said. "We are still in our early stages of many of these efforts, but we are encouraged by the feedback we've received thus far."

While becoming involved with students early is not an overnight plan to build membership, Trethewey said it should have such long term rewards. In order to help build membership now, the OSUAA is targeting services and programs to appeal to specific groups.

"You can't send an e-mail to 300,000 people and expect any reasonable number of them to respond at all, let alone in a way you want them to," Trethewey said of the decision to target specific groups with specific needs and interests.

For the past year, for example, the OSUAA has targeted women by hosting its "Women and" series, which included topics such as health, wellness and finance. It also has hosted programs to discuss football basics with guests that have included OSU head football coach Jim Tressel, as well as Buckeye gridiron greats Eddie George, Kirk Herbstriet and Griffin.

"It has been very good for us to raise the profile, one to say we really do care about what you're interested in and we can be a vehicle for helping you learn about things you're interested in, or frankly just come out and have a good time with people you have a lot in common with," said Trethewey. "That same approach will turn into very targeted membership strategies."

While the plan is concerned with growing the association and preparing it for the future, all of the goals also were crafted to serve and improve the university.

"Universities live and die on their reputation. The public view is not always the institutional view, and things can happen positively or negatively," Trethewey said, noting that if OSU wins a national championship in football then all the talk is positive, but if it loses that game there is a totally different view of the school.

With so many alumni across the country and around the world talking about OSU, the alumni association considers it a duty to keep them informed and connected to their school so they can serve as ambassadors of the university.

"They can either be ignorant or informed, and we consider it an obligation, but also an opportunity, to help them be informed wherever they are," she said. "Our feeling is, because there is this 'O-H-I-O-' kind of spirit, that if you can give people good stories, sometimes painful ones but truthful ones, that increases the knowledge about the university and ultimately the reputation of the university."

One of the ways the OSUAA has worked to reach that goal is by revamping its alumni magazine over the past few years. Now more comprehensive and thought-provoking, it covers the happenings at OSU on topics ranging from global warming to hip hop.

"It is really intended to reflect the intellectual strength and the great diversity of the university, and frankly in a much more serious way," Trethewey said. "You can find everything at Ohio State, and you cannot think of a topic that you will not find expertise on at Ohio State."

This summer's July/August issue of the alumni magazine featured a series of stories that followed three OSU football players: Anthony Gonzalez, Jay Richardson and Todd Denlinger, and their families through last season. Trethewey said after Tressel viewed the articles, he asked for more than 100 copies of the magazine to share with recruits and their families.

"That, to me, was just a perfect way of being in sync with the university and their aspirations because the messages were about character, dedication, hard work and disappointment, and all those things," Trethewey said, adding the stories the magazine tells of the university are a little different than ones the university would tell of itself, which makes it more credible and less self-serving.

"We do have at least a bit of distance, so I think that gives our stories more strength."

In addition to the changes made to the magazine in recent years, the OSUAA is working on putting more information, and multimedia not contained in the magazine — on its Web site in a continuing effort to present

the most positive image of the university.

"The more people (who) know Ohio State has tremendous things to offer and makes a difference in society, the better the university is going to be," said Trethewey.

Trethewey said the association has made good advances in the plan, but has not reached its goals just yet.

"At this point I think we would all agree, and I think our board would agree, that we've captured the most important work and we're making progress on that work," she said. "So I would say the plan is doing what it's supposed to and keeping us focused."

The combined leadership and dedication of Griffin and of incoming OSU President Gordon Gee presents the OSUAA with a perfect team to help it continually improve. The two will build on a very good relationship they enjoyed during Gee's first term at OSU, she added.

"We think that Dr. Gee is going to be a tremendous asset to us," she said. "We're already calling it the 'Gee Factor.'"

Before Gee was formally introduced as the new president at the Longaberger Alumni House, he and Griffin were discussing the future of both organizations, and Gee promised to double the size of the alumni association membership, later listing it as one of the priorities of his agenda.

"He claims to have a bet with Archie over one of his Heisman's that he can do that," Trethewey said.

Griffin said in the discussions the two have had, Gee has pledged to "do what it takes" to double the membership.

"Now, that's certainly an audacious goal, but I don't doubt for a second that President Gee will do everything he can to make it happen," Griffin said.

Trethewey hopes Gee will serve as "chief salesman" of the alumni association, and the OSUAA will make big strides thanks to the mass appeal of both he and Griffin.

"Alumni love him and he loves alumni. He loves crowds, he remembers people and he wades into it with an enthusiasm that few people can match," she said. "And I think one of the great treasures of the alumni association is having the president and CEO be the person who is just Mr. Ohio State, literally, to generations."

"(Gee) and Archie get along very well together, and they've known each other for a very long time, so you get the two of them on the same stage and it's a tough act to beat," Trethewey said.

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