

Every University Should Offer an Alumni Cruise

A Scalable Strategy for Alumni Engagement & Long-Term Giving

The Opportunity

Universities invest heavily in alumni travel programs that offer high-end, aspirational experiences designed to engage their most affluent supporters.

One of the most widely enjoyed and accessible travel formats is often missing: **the modern ocean cruise.**

This absence represents a missed opportunity to engage alumni earlier, broaden participation, and strengthen long-term donor relationships.

The Strategic Challenge

Most institutions succeed at engaging top donors. The harder question is:

How do you engage alumni before they become major donors and keep them connected for decades?

Nationally, approximately 75% of philanthropic giving comes from small and mid-level donors. Sustained engagement with this group is essential to long-term advancement success.

Why Alumni Cruises Work

A premium alumni cruise:

- Creates an accessible entry point (often approximately \$6,000 per couple)
- Engages alumni during career-building and family-raising years
- Encourages repeat participation
- Strengthens emotional connection to the institution
- Supports consistent small and mid-level giving over time

Cruises are not a replacement for high-end programs. They are the foundation beneath them.

Brand & Experience Control

Modern cruise lines offer experiences well aligned with university standards, including:

- Elevated dining and service
- Curated onboard programming
- Destination-focused itineraries

Premium partners such as Celebrity Cruises provide a strong starting point. Institutions retain control over tone, enrichment, and brand alignment.

Ship Size Is a Choice

Large ships are optional—not mandatory.

- Mid-size ships (approximately 3,000 guests) balance amenities and intimacy
- Smaller ship options are available for niche audiences

Regardless of size, ships sail full every week—meaning your alumni are already cruising, often without institutional connection.

Why This Is Low Risk

- No capital investment required
 - Minimal staff burden
 - Scalable participation
 - Repeatable model
 - Proven consumer demand (35 million cruisers in 2024)
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The Bottom Line

Alumni cruises:

- Broaden engagement
- Extend donor lifecycles
- Strengthen affinity earlier
- Support sustainable giving

For institutions focused on long-term alumni relationships, the question is no longer *if* alumni cruises belong in the portfolio, but *why they aren't already there*.

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Ryan Joy is a travel advisor and alumni travel strategist who works with universities and alumni organizations to design scalable, low-risk travel programs that strengthen engagement and support long-term giving. He specializes in alumni cruises, group travel, and donor-aligned experiences that meet institutions where their alumni are—today and over time. If your institution is exploring ways to broaden alumni engagement through travel, I'm happy to share how a pilot alumni cruise could be structured for your audience.