He wants to get to know YOU better

*NTULink* chats with Professor Lee Sing Kong and finds out why this is one of his key priorities in his newest role as NTU Vice-President for Alumni & Advancement.

It does not matter which year you graduated from NTU or where you are currently residing, nor whether you are starting your career or a family.

As long as you are an alumnus of NTU, Professor Lee Sing Kong wants to understand you and your needs better.

Last October, Prof Lee was given the role of NTU’s Vice-President (Alumni & Advancement), in addition to his existing responsibilities as the University’s Vice-President (Education Strategies). NTU President Professor Bertil Andersson said of the appointment: “Given the importance placed on alumni affairs and development work and their symbiotic relationship, there is a need for a senior academic leader to provide leadership in these areas in a holistic manner.”

Since then, Prof Lee has gotten right down to business with the first item on his agenda being to achieve a better understanding of the ‘landscape’. He says: “The alumni landscape is very complex. It stretches from someone who has just graduated to someone from the Nanyang University days.”

He explains that a person who has spent five or less years in the workforce may be focused with building his or her career and family, whereas a graduate with six to 15 years of experience will probably have very different needs. Having a good understanding of the various alumni profiles will allow NTU to know which types of events and communication channels – whether it be printed or social media – can better engage them, and also how to better address their respective needs.

Appreciating the needs of alumni is just the first step. Prof Lee’s time as the Director of the National Institute of Education – where he served for over 25 years with eight years as Director – has reinforced in him the importance of open communication. While at NIE, he could often be found seeking out the thoughts of random colleagues and students in the canteen over lunch.

Similarly, he would like to hear from alumni on how they would like their alma mater to better serve and assist them.
with driving the University’s fundraising efforts to meet NTU’s academic needs. A horticulturist by training who played a role in turning Singapore into a Garden City, he now hopes to grow NTU’s endowment fund by nurturing a culture of giving amongst NTU alumni, akin to that found in the United States.

Says Prof Lee: “In the United States, many private universities are really dependant on the returns of endowment funds to support their work.”

He points to Harvard University as an example of an institute of higher learning that has tapped on the returns of its endowment fund to engage in top-notch R&D work. For Prof Lee, it is not how much a person gives, but the heart and the gesture behind the donation. “I do appreciate that alumni from the different cohorts will have various (differing) financial demands.”

“Giving to your alma mater is all about the future. If you give in terms of a scholarship, it can support the education of a student in that it can really empower him to learn without the worry of finding financial support for his studies. And when this student graduates, he will contribute (back) to the community.”

Prof Lee cites how young graduates entering the workforce today will probably have to “learn, unlearn, and relearn for about six cycles in their career” as a result of the rapid advancement of technology and changes in job skills need.

He says: “So the key question is how the university can support our alumni, in addition to the larger community of professionals, and equip them with new skills and knowledge that will enable them to stay relevant over time.”

Prof Lee is also keen to extend this support to NTU’s large alumni population based out of Singapore. Currently, there are a total of 45 Alumni Associations across the globe, excluding those in Singapore. NTU is exploring various platforms through which our international alumni and the local alumni can interact, collaborate and serve their alma mater in proactive and meaningful ways.

As a graduate of the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, he is a member of an alumni association for Singapore-based graduates of New Zealand universities. Prof Lee shares: “Whenever some university leaders from New Zealand stop by Singapore, we will meet with them. One of the key features that we can learn from this engagement process is that their High Commission is very proactively involved in facilitating such activities.” Thus, could our diplomatic missions overseas also be involved to facilitate alumni engagement?

Apart from building a sense of belonging, Prof Lee has also been tasked by Prof Andersson with having a good understanding of the various alumni profiles will allow NTU to know which types of events and communication channels can better engage them, and also how to better address their respective needs.

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