GIVING AND GRATITUDE: COMPARING COMMUNICATION MEDIA AND
EXPRESSIONS OF GRATITUDE ON SUBSEQUENT ANNUAL GIVING


A Dissertation

by

AUDRA H. VAZ




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**Abstract**

GIVING AND GRATITUDE: COMPARING COMMUNICATION MEDIA AND
EXPRESSIONS OF GRATITUDE ON SUBSEQUENT ANNUAL GIVING

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The question of how to increase the alumni participation rate (APR) by raising annual

gift donations is one of the biggest challenges facing higher education institutions. While

research shows many factors can motivate individuals to donate, little is known about how

colleges and universities engage with expressions of gratitude to increase donations. Using a

quantitative method design, this dissertation employs a pre-registered field experiment to

determine: a) compared to self-benefit donor stewardship behavior, does other-praising donor

stewardship behavior as expressed through thank you messages increase donor retention and

the level of future donations, and b) does the medium through which donors are thanked

make a difference in whether they will make subsequent donations? As a first step in

examining these issues, and in an earlier experiment upon which this dissertation is

positioned, donor stewardship phone calls communicated between students and donors were

scripted and executed, then ensuing solicitation results were evaluated. As a replication study

to the calling experiment, donor stewardship text messages were deployed, and fundraising

results were assessed. Analyses of and comparisons of these self- or other-oriented expressions of gratitude show some advantage in other-praising phrasing, particularly when live phone conversations or interactive text exchanges are held. Further, those receiving other-praising text messages were much more likely to give again. The results also show two variations on whether direct engagement between the expresser of gratitude and the donor leads to larger subsequent giving. In the calling experiment conducted prior to the design of the texting study, those who received voicemails were more likely to give larger gifts than those who had conversations with students, regardless of the expression of gratitude. However, in the texting experiment, those who did not respond to the text messages showed no significant increases in their subsequent giving. Both studies suggest there is a significant effect of message type on whether donors gave again, but not on the giving amount. Other-praising expressions of gratitude do seem to help with donor retention, but not with how much people give. These empirical experiments suggest that individuals are more likely to donate to an annual giving fundraising campaign if they receive other-praising expressions of gratitude, as communicated by phone calls and text messages. The findings from this dissertation provide practical advice for offices of annual giving at colleges and universities on how to communicate stewardship with donors to affect fundraising results.

## Acknowledgments

I am grateful to so many people for their wisdom, encouragement, and belief in me throughout this journey. To my committee chair, Dr. Les Bolt – thank you for leading the process and for being incredibly easy to work with. Dr. Patrick Dwyer – you were there from the beginning, and without your direction, I would still be wandering. And Dr. Jean DeHart – thank you for being the voice of reason and having a keen eye. Thank you especially to Dr. Vachel Miller, Doctoral Program Director, for being a calming force in my stormy sea.

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I am incredibly grateful to my family. To my husband Johann for his unwavering support and patience – I love and appreciate you for so many reasons above and beyond this

**Dedication**

In memory of my mother, Teresa M. Lousias.

Growing up as a caregiving youth to a disabled father, I went to school to feel normal. School was an escape, an outlet, and a place to be a kid… if only briefly. Getting good grades was not a priority, and homework took a backseat to dispensing medication, managing emergencies like seizures and falls, and providing regular care such as feeding, changing, and bathing. My grades and test scores were dismal despite having been considered gifted. So it was no surprise that I was denied acceptance to every college I applied to. My mother knew going away to college had always been my dream, so at the 11th hour, she encouraged a reluctant me to apply to a small Catholic school and insisted on sending in the paperwork herself. To my surprise, I was accepted on academic probation. I didn't know it until well into adulthood, but my mom had included a letter with my application, explaining my situation and begging them to give me a chance. Mom passed away during my first semester of the doctoral program.

There are 1.4 million caregiving youth in the U.S. who put family first, struggle in school and with social interactions, and suffer from the emotional toll of their situation. To them, I say, you can overcome these obstacles and fulfill your dreams. And to my mom in heaven, I say, thank you for believing in me.

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*"Gratitude is a currency that we can mint for ourselves and spend without fear of*

*bankruptcy." — Fred De Witt Van Amburgh*

**Chapter 1: Introduction**

"Thank you." These two words can have a profound effect on all of us. A simple expression of gratitude can deepen relationships, promote prosocial behaviors, and make us feel good about ourselves and others. In the world of higher education annual giving fundraising, an expression of gratitude, how it is delivered, and whether or not it is "donor-centric" can affect subsequent and increased giving.

The role of every office of annual giving at universities and colleges across America is to acquire new donors, renew donors who have lapsed from previous years, and retain and upgrade current donors (Greenfield, 2002). Additional goals for these offices are to develop a donor pipeline, fulfill their institution's need for unrestricted or critical area funding not covered by tuition and fees, and elevate the alumni participation rate (APR). The APR represents the percentage of those alumni with undergraduate degrees who donate annually to their alma mater. With all these goals and expectations in mind, many annual giving offices focus their efforts on stewarding or thanking donors in the hopes that an expression of gratitude will deepen the relationship between the institution and the alumni and then lead to future and increased giving. Therefore, expressing gratitude is a tenet and best practice for offices of annual giving at institutions of higher education. The questions posed in this study are: 1) which type of expression of gratitude, other-praising or self-benefit, and 2) which communication medium, calling or texting, provides the best results for subsequent giving?

**Expressions of Gratitude**

According to Leong et al. (2020), "gratitude is inherently social because by definition it involves two parties in (the) exchange" (p. 66). In the case of this study, the two members in the gratitude exchange are the donor and the recipient. Empirical evidence shows that gratitude inspires prosocial behaviors, as demonstrated by returning favors to their benefactors (Leong et al., 2020). Helpers, or donors, may increase their feelings of social worth, which could motivate them to participate in prosocial activities, such as volunteering and giving back (Grant & Gino, 2010). When the beneficiary expresses gratitude to the donor, a social exchange occurs, which can affect how the donor views themselves within the community or social world.

There exist two types of self-views in the social world: agency and communal. Views tied to personal competence or self-efficacy are agency self-views. Interpersonal warmth toward others is known as a communal self-view (Grant & Gino, 2010). Experiencing gratitude involves a self-oriented feature (i.e., getting something beneficial for oneself) accompanied by an other-oriented feature (i.e., this benefit resulted from another person's actions). Recognizing that expressions of thanks can also be more self- or other-oriented, recent research has found that other-praising gratitude expressions, which involve calling out the praiseworthy actions and characteristics of a benefactor, are more effective in promoting relationships than gratitude expressions focused on self-benefits (Algoe et al., 2016). Also,

third-party witnesses of gratitude expressions report a greater willingness to help other-praising gratitude expressers (Algoe et al., 2020).

Two examples of language used in expressions of gratitude are classified as "other-praising" and "self-benefit" (Algoe et al., 2016). The "other" in the philanthropic exchange is the donor. The "self" is the recipient of the generosity bestowed upon by the "other." Other-praising expressions of gratitude are donor-centric. For example, "you make the difference!" or "you are the best!" evoke a sense of importance for the donor. Self-benefit expressions speak to the gains received by the beneficiary (as an individual or as an organization). "This scholarship allowed me to succeed" or "your donation enabled me to study abroad." Grant (2016) surmises that Grant & Gino's research reveals that recipients of other-praising expressions of gratitude have stronger positive emotions and feelings of commitment to the relationship in which the gratitude exchange takes place. As offices of annual giving continue their quest to retain, renew and recapture donors, the forms of messaging in how they steward and solicit donors should be considered.

In this study, special attention is paid to the effects of other-praising expressions of gratitude to further investigate the psychology-based theory of gratitude known as the find-remind-bind theory as well as the research findings of Algoe et al. (2016). Their studies have determined that other-praising expressions deepen relationships between partners. Algoe (2012) shows "that a grateful person will draw in a benefactor by demonstrating responsiveness to the benefactor's needs" (p.1). In the instance of this study, we would expect other-praising messages to be seen as more effective than self-benefit.

Saying "thank you" is one of the simplest forms of a verbal or written expression of gratitude. Being thanked leads to enhanced positive emotions, lessens negative feelings, and

promotes relationships between donor and recipient (Merchant et al., 2010). As part of a social exchange process, expressions of gratitude can influence how donors see themselves within the social world (Grant & Gino, 2010). According to Grant (2016), gratitude provides a bond between one and their benefactor, allowing for a continuous source of connectivity and goodwill.

**Gratitude Theory**

In 2012, Algoe identified the find-remind-bind theory of gratitude, which looks at how the emotion of gratitude functions in social life and how it fortifies relationships between benefactors and recipients. The theory looks through the lens of both participants in the exchange of gratitude, primarily through romantic and platonic relationships. However, the theory had yet to be applied through the scope of fundraising donor stewardship, that is, until both the calling and texting experiments were executed when I first applied the theory. I have not found other instances where the find-remind-bind theory was applied to fundraising donor stewardship. The theory may have inferences as to how expressions of gratitude help to find, remind, and bind the two parties together in the benefactor and recipient relationship, particularly those who "stand out in a sea of social contacts" (Algoe, 2012, p. 456), and especially other-praising expressions of gratitude. The theory purports that the message recipient experiences joy and happiness when receiving expressions of gratitude (Algoe et al., 2016). The recipient of the message – the other – feels that the expresser of the message is responsive, and they then feel validated, understood, and cared for. This bevy of positive emotions felt by another person when receiving praise for an action has relational consequences, which for the purposes of this study, is to induce the result of future giving. When thinking about who "should" be feeling the emotion of gratitude in the relationship,

one could argue that the university should be benefitting emotionally from the altruism, but in donor stewardship, the role is reversed in that the university is trying to induce a better relationship through the expression of gratitude that then hopefully has an emotional benefit for the donor. This is not to say that the university does not feel a kinship to the donor, but for the purposes of this research, the study was designed to identify evidence-based data that being thanked leads to the prosocial behavior of giving back.

Expressing gratitude can increase perceived relationships between donors and recipients (Algoe et al., 2016). As discussed earlier, donors who feel they have relationships with their alma maters are more likely to give again. Building donor relationships that promote the prosocial behavior of subsequent giving and evoke positive emotions through expressions of gratitude in donor stewardship requires a focus on the language in the message and the media channel through which these are delivered. Studying the delivery method and the type of message in donor stewardship communications may reveal clues as to whether donors may give again. The types of expressions studied here are self and other-oriented, while the communication media are phone calls in the early study and text messages in the replication study.

**Problem Statement**

The APR is a criterion in the rating rubric of institutional rankings. *US News and World Report* annually ranks institutions on several factors for its Best Colleges standings, one of which is the APR. The magazine measures alumni participation because the percentage of alumni who give serves as an indicator of how satisfied students are with their institution (O'Leary, 2019). A higher level of alumni participation may lead to more funding to improve what an institution can offer its students and faculty. This funding can enhance a

student's experience for the better, both now and in the future. Although the APR accounts for just 3% of the Best Colleges criteria in rating institutions, there is significant emphasis placed by university boards of trustees and advancement leadership to improve it (Allenby, 2014). However, APRs are falling at nearly every institution nationwide and have done so for the last 20 years (White, 2015). This steady decline has been attributed to several factors: competition from the proliferation of nonprofits vying for philanthropic dollars, rising student debt, the growing denominator of alumni bases, and the inflating cost of tuition rates, which have increased more than twice as much as the overall consumer price index in the last decade (Allenby, 2014).

Beyond the economic factors contributing to the decline in APRs, donor motivations (Mann, 2007), as well as their perceived relationship with their alma mater (Wester, 2020), how well they feel appreciated for their giving (Schohl, 2020), and psychological underpinnings (Okaomee & Dwyer, 2020) – such as indebtedness and sense of belonging, as well as felt gratitude rather than received gratitude (simply being thanked) – have all been shown to contribute to levels of alumni participation through giving. A factor commonly researched about alumni participation is the level of participatory engagement (in campus organizations, volunteerism or student government, and prosocial activities) alumni had while enrolled as students (Gaier, 2005). Offices of annual giving cannot go back in time to ensure students have an engaging experience while on campus, yet they are often held responsible for improving the APR. And while the APR serves as an indicator that colleges and universities strive to improve to elevate their rankings and raise more money, the ability to do so proves increasingly daunting. A recent report by EAB Global, Inc. showed that, across 50 higher education institutions, the retention rate of first-time donors who made

another gift the following year is only 20-25% (Bialkowski, 2021). Of that percentage of donors who make a second-year gift, their likelihood of giving the following year is 40-50%, and those who give at least two years in a row have an 80-90% chance of giving multiple years after that. For example, if 100 first-time donors make a gift, only 25 will make a second gift. Of those, 10-12 will make a third gift, and of those, eight or nine will give again. The math shows that retaining donors year over year is both challenging and necessary if those eight or nine donors are to become lifelong givers. Sivaraj (2019) notes that the number one reason donors do not give again is that they were never thanked for their donation. To solve this problem, meaningful, personalized donor stewardship is required.

To that end, the focus of this research is to pose some questions that may provide valuable insights into whether or not thanking donors with varying expressions of gratitude and through different communications media leads to subsequent giving, which ultimately may prove helpful to practitioners who seek to find answers to the problem of shrinking APRs.

**Questions to address the problem**:

- Do types of gratitude expressions matter whether donors will give again and how much they give if they do?
- Does the medium through which donors are thanked make a difference in whether donors will make subsequent donations and how much they give if they do?

In thinking about how higher education offices of annual giving can increase donations, a focus on how donors feel appreciated (Schohl, 2020) requires thoughtful donor stewardship communications. Types of donor stewardship communications may include mailed donation receipts; thank you letters; handwritten notes by development professionals

or beneficiaries; phone calls from faculty, staff, and students; theydigital communications such as emailed receipts or notes of thanks; donor honor rolls posted on giving websites; donor walls at the institution or in printed materials, social media acknowledgments (Greenfield, 2002); and video and text messages.

Communication – the method through which we express those instances of gratitude towards donors, whether through written, spoken, or digital modes – is essential to tapping into the motivations, relationships, and appreciation (or stewardship of donors) in order to generate continued giving. Harrison (2018) stated that continuous, meaningful communication with donors is an essential part of the giving process that fundraisers believe is good practice and the responsibility associated with gift acceptance (Worth, 2002b, p. 17). Communication is central to philanthropic relationships, where stewardship is considered a function of public relations focusing on nurturing connectivity between the organization and its donors (Kelly, 2020).

Experiencing gratitude involves a self-oriented feature (i.e., getting something beneficial for oneself) accompanied by another-oriented feature (i.e., that this benefit resulted from another person's actions) (Algoe, 2012). Recognizing that expressions of thanks can also be more self- or other-oriented, recent research has found that other-praising gratitude expressions, which involve calling out the praiseworthy actions and characteristics of a benefactor, are more effective in promoting relationships than gratitude expressions focused on self-benefits (Algoe et al., 2016). Also, third-party witnesses of gratitude expressions report a greater willingness to help other-praising gratitude expressers (Algoe et al., 2020). Responsiveness to expressions of gratitude can lead to increased feelings of the quality of the relationship between the sender and the recipient (Burgoon & Hale, 1984). However, the

influence of these different kinds of gratitude expressions on giving has yet to be examined in a fundraising context. While not considered "making a purchase," whether someone chooses to donate can be a form of consumption. Given the importance of positive emotional experiences of giving, understanding specific types of positive emotions (gratitude, love, friendship, self-esteem) can have important implications for fundraisers (Algoe et al., 2010).

**Methodology**

A quantitative research methodology using a preregistered field experiment was utilized in this study to answer the research questions within the general context of: does how we thank annual giving donors make a difference in whether they will give again? Due to the lack of field experiments in the most recent and relevant body of literature, as discussed below, this positivist approach was employed to garner information that will be useful to both the annual giving fundraising practitioner and the philanthropic studies academician alike. The texting study is a replication study of a previous experiment similarly designed but using phone calls. There is a breadth of research on the topic of gratitude, but very little in terms of field studies in philanthropy, especially in the sphere of higher education. Knowing if donor stewardship efforts being conducted in offices of annual giving throughout the United States in public, four-year institutions are worth the time, effort, and expense are of great use to many, like myself, whose role it is to increase giving and the APR. A field experiment using actual, anonymous donor data, a texting communications strategy, and two expressions of gratitude (self-benefit and other-praising) was designed and employed to attain this knowledge.

**Definition of Terms**

*Annual giving* is a subset of the development efforts within higher educational advancement divisions. The words *giving*, *development*, and *advancement* are all synonymous with fundraising. Annual giving fundraising is focused on small, regular gifts that typically serve as the initial donor entry point to giving at higher education institutions (Greenfield, 2002). Annual gifts are classified as donations in amounts less than what each institution quantifies as a major gift. Depending on each institution's size, age, and fundraising prowess, major gifts can be defined as $10,000, $25,000, $50,000, or $100,000, or higher. Further, annual gifts usually are for the college or university's most critical needs funds, often for unrestricted purposes not covered by tuition or fees. These purposes can address various needs such as tutoring, counseling, career services, scholarships, student veteran support services, research, study abroad, and even social justice purposes, such as diversity, inclusion, and equity programming for students, faculty, and staff. As the name implies, annual gifts are those that the institution hopes to realize each year, helping to build the donor pipeline throughout a donor's lifetime to realize a major gift in the future. Regular annual givers who steadily increase their giving over time are an institution's best prospects for major gifts later in their lives (Greenfield, 2002). These annual gift donations are solicited by offices of annual giving from alumni, friends, parents, and students of the university through direct mail, email, phone calls, text messages, digital marketing, crowdfunding, days of giving, and other channels.

Thanking donors is an example of *stewardship* where they are shown gratitude for their support of a cause, organization, or institution. Typical forms of donor stewardship may include gift receipts, written or typed thank you letters and notes, phone calls from beneficiaries, board members, or staff members, tokens of appreciation, listing in printed or

electronic donor honor rolls, admission to giving societies, and others. In higher educational fundraising practices, thanking donors is a significant part of the donor engagement process that includes qualification, cultivation, solicitation, and stewardship (Plus Delta Partners, 2020). How donors are thanked, whether through a thank you card, a phone call, an invitation to an event, or a material token of appreciation, can lead to future and sustained giving. Kelly (2000) maintains that donor stewardship is the second most crucial step in the fundraising process, as practitioners must implement four elements of donor stewardship into the overall fundraising plan: reciprocity, responsibility, reporting, and relationship nurturing. Donors who give multiple times to an organization rate the relationship stronger than one-time givers. In fundraising donor stewardship, it is quite common to use gratitude to obtain benefits from others, such as more donations, which lead to positive change. Expressions of gratitude after a gift is given are both genuine and persuasive in that the hope is to promote future benefits for the organization (Dwyer, 2015). An organization, such as an institution of higher learning, will express gratitude through donor stewardship coming from its president, program beneficiary, or students, for being "helped" (through monetary donations). The aim of the university in stewarding donors is that the act of stewardship will increase the likelihood that the institution benefits in the future through prosocial behaviors of donors, such as sustained giving. Worth (2016) says that incorporating donor stewardship into the fundraising process will increase donor loyalty, thereby requiring more time dedicated to donor relations. Practitioner resources, such as articles, webinars, books, conference sessions, and websites, are abundantly full of creative and traditional methods for building these relationships through the donor stewardship process.

*Gratitude* is an emotion that results when a person feels that they have benefited from the actions of another person (McCullough et al., 2008). "The feeling of gratefulness is an inner state, it can be socially expressed as thankfulness, most often in the form of giving thanks (e.g., saying 'Thank You') to the giver of some personal benefit" (Steindl-Rast, 2004, p. 3). Komter (2004), believes the view that gratitude is "a warm and nice feeling directed toward someone who has been benevolent to us" (p. 198) contains an essential element of truth but disregards a more fundamental meaning of gratitude. She states that, under the warm glow of gratitude, a reciprocal force compels the recipient of gratitude to return the benefit received.

*Expressions of gratitude* are methods to communicate feeling grateful. Saying "thank you" is one of the simplest forms of a verbal or written expression of gratitude. For gratitude to have a positive effect on relationships, it must first be expressed (Lambert, et al., 2010). As Komter (2004) puts it, "gratitude has a specified action tendency connected to it" (p. 199). Therein lies the hope of all annual giving fundraising practitioners: that their expressed gratitude will result in future donations. Previous researchers have conducted studies that have proven gratitude leads to continued pro-social behaviors, such as higher tipping (Rind & Bordia, 1995), repeat voting (Panagopoulos, 2011), and increased visits to residential clients (Clark et al., 1988) – all because beneficiaries (waitstaff, election boards, and adolescent residential facility dwellers) expressed thanks to patrons, voters, and caregivers. The language used in expressions of gratitude is classified as "other-praising" and "self-benefit" (Algoe et al., 2016).

The purpose of this study is to determine if types of gratitude expressions matter. First, to understand the orientation of "self" and "other," one must position the expresser of

gratitude as the self – and any self-benefit expressions refer to the person communicating the gratitude. In the instances of this study, the self is the student expressing gratitude to the donor, or the "other." Another way to look at it is that the "other" in the philanthropic communication exchange is the donor. The "self" is the recipient (student/institution) of the generosity bestowed upon by the "other." Other-praising expressions of gratitude focus the sentiment on the donor and are considered donor-centric in that they speak to the donor's impact on the giving. For example, "*you* make the difference!" or "*you* are the best!" evoke the donor's sense of importance or power. Self-benefit expressions speak to the gains received by the beneficiary (as an individual or as an organization). For example, "This scholarship allowed *me* to succeed" or "your donation enabled *me* to study abroad."

Grant (2016) surmises that Grant and Gino's research reveals that recipients of other-praising expressions of gratitude have stronger positive emotions and feelings of commitment to the relationship in which the gratitude exchange takes place. According to Algoe et al. (2009), positive emotions broaden one's perspective and motivate one to do things that will build resources for the future. Haidt (2003) positioned gratitude as one of the other-praising emotions. Therefore, other-praising emotions should also fit into fundraising and donor stewardship frameworks by making people feel so good that the expression motivates subsequent behavior that is beneficial in the long run. As offices of annual giving continue their quest to retain, renew and recapture donors, the forms of messaging in how they steward and solicit donors should be considered.

**Significance of the Issue / Emerging Trend**

Thanking donors is not a new practice. The media used to communicate these gratitude expressions are ever-evolving due to technological changes and advances. Research

and best practice guidelines from fundraising professionals indicate that thanking donors over the telephone is one way to provide personalized donor stewardship. However, with the increasing number of cell phones replacing landlines, caller ID, and spam filters, getting a donor on the phone is becoming increasingly challenging. According to a Pew Research Center Study, about 85% of adults own smartphones, and 97% of them use their phones to text daily (Gordy, 2021). As a fundraising practitioner, I have employed student employees to call and thank annual giving donors. In a preliminary experiment upon which this one is replicated, only about one-third of the donors the students attempted to call answered the phone (Dwyer & Vaz, 2020). Combining the fact that donors are less likely to engage in live conversations than they used to be with increasing usage of text communications, expressing gratitude through text messages seems like a logical progression. Not everyone agrees that this form of communication will lead to deepened relationships between an institution and donors. "While texting can offer new communication channels in terms of informational updates, no great relationships can be formed over mobile phone texting… technology may help make giving faster and more convenient, it can also make philanthropy more impersonal" (Cheng & Mohamed, 2012, p. 10). To determine whether expressions of gratitude communicated through phone calls and texting had any effect on subsequent giving, I conducted a pre-registered field experiment with the research questions in mind.

**Organization of Study**

In Chapter 2, an examination of the current literature on whether expressions of gratitude play a role in subsequent higher educational annual giving is made, as well as an endeavor to find any evidence of field experiment research. A survey of relevant research, experimentation, studies, and papers on gratitude and its place in fundraising will reveal the

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current landscape of the course of study outlined in this dissertation. Chapter 3 will discuss

and evaluate the field experiment that was convened in support of the literature, the basis for

the study, and the methodology aimed at improving higher educational annual giving

fundraising praxis. Chapter 4 focuses on the results of these experiments and examines the

findings, and Chapter 5 presents conclusions and implications for further study.

**Chapter 2: Literature Review**

According to Schwinn (2008), donors (annual and major) who receive thank you notes are 21% more likely to give again than those who do not receive any stewardship. Thanking donors can lead to an increased sense of the relationship between the donor and the organization, leading to increased and subsequent giving intentions (Kelly, 2001). Merchant et al., (2010) conducted several studies on donor feelings based on the acknowledgments they received and whether the donors would give again. The consensus was that stewarding donors can lead to positive feelings about an organization, increase relationships between the donor and the institution, and likely, lead to future giving. While these studies suggest that those who received acknowledgments had positive feelings and would likely give again, the researchers did not obtain quantitative data on whether or not they did actually donate again. No field experiments were conducted that looked at subsequent giving by the donors surveyed in the studies of Merchant et al. Much of the scholarship is qualitative and consists of thoughts, feelings, inferences, experiences, and propensities, but not actual quantified giving that has come to fruition. Among other studies, surveys seem to be the method researchers use to examine existing emotions and predict future behavior. But few, if any, conduct field experiments to determine if their hypotheses are rejected or accepted. In a literature review of 187 research articles on experimental studies in fundraising, Bhati and Hansen (2020) found that only 66 were field experiments. Of these field experiments, only two took place in colleges or university settings, and none of the 66 examined stewardship or gratitude. This opens the door for experimental field studies to be conducted, which would either reinforce or negate the inferential survey-based research on expressions of gratitude in

stewardship practices with annual fund donors at public institutions of higher education, and, if and how the results of the experiments influence subsequent giving.

Though there are numerous studies and much literature regarding the psychological benefits of engaging in prosocial behaviors, few studies are about the effects of giving money philanthropically (Konrath, 2014). In the existing studies, giving money to others, including charitable organizations, "is associated with more happiness than spending it on oneself" (p, 14). Further, recalling the feeling of making a gift provides similar emotions of happiness and leads to continued giving (Aknin et al., 2012). Weerts and Cabrera (2018) identified gaps in the research about whether prosocial behaviors among alumni promote giving, so they conducted focus groups to ascertain if alumni who were pro-socially engaged while students, either civically or charitably, were more likely to donate back to their alma mater. Their findings showed that those who were more engaged as change agents – whether as student government members or as volunteers – were more likely to want to give back to their institution than those who were not as engaged. Further, Weerts and Cabrera provided practical implications for advancement professionals to consider when seeking to improve the APR. They suggested that connecting to alumni about creating change or solving societal problems akin to their philanthropic or civic interests can be a way to increase their relationship with the institution. Donors want to know their efforts are making a difference. However, Weerts and Cabrera's research did not comment on forms or types of communication the alumni received after graduating or what expressions of gratitude they experienced after donating. Instead, it focused on previous behaviors and how they were manifested later in life regarding feelings about giving back to one's alma mater, and not actual quantified giving behaviors.

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There are traditionally four indicators of a quality relationship that institutions leverage in their stewardship and acknowledgment efforts (Waters, 2008) to ensure donor loyalty, including trust, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Hon and Grunig (1999) define control mutuality as "the degree to which parties agree on who has the rightful power to influence one another" (p.3.) in (Sisson, 2017). Naskrent and Siebelt (2011) identified involvement, rather than control mutuality, in their list of four indicators of a quality relationship that leads to future engagement, which served as a nuance to the standard thinking established by Hon and Grunig. In their research, Merchant et al. (2010) concluded that donor acknowledgments help to strengthen the relationship between the donor and the institution, and that acknowledgments enhance positive emotions and alleviate negative ones. In fact, they found that when donors did not receive a gift acknowledgment, they were more likely to have negative feelings towards the beneficiary, and their view of the relationship was damaged.

Prior to the study conducted by Weertz and Cabrera (2018), Gaier (2005) conducted a study to see if alumni engagement while on campus would lead to prosocial behaviors of participating (volunteering, attending events) and donating. He found that the more alumni were engaged while on campus, the more likely they were to give back potentially. Gaier's study, however, did not examine whether or not the study participants did actually give back; it was simply an attitudinal study. Gaier's research also indicated that the better the relationship alumni felt they had with their professors, the more likely they were to engage in prosocial behaviors. Several recent studies have researched and theorized about the various reasons/motives that cause people to donate. Okaomee and Dwyer (2020) found that indebtedness and a sense of belonging contribute to increased levels of philanthropic alumni

participation. Knowing those motives and matching donor experiences to them may be necessary in sustaining giving over time. Konrath and Handy (2017) developed and validated a comprehensive self-report scale of why people give. After gathering interdisciplinary theories, they created the scale. Further, they organized the theories into public and private benefits. This includes altruism, trust in charitable organizations, social egoism based on reputation norms, egoism based on conditional cooperation or reciprocity, fiscal incentives, guilt, and self-esteem. However, the research that went into the development of the scale did not look at whether those who took the survey actually made donations but rather their propensities to give, based on public or private facing motivations. The scale also did not measure the impact of donor stewardship or expressions of gratitude on these motivations.

Bekkers and Wiepking (2011) conducted an extensive literature review of more than 500 published articles of empirical studies on the eight mechanisms that drive charitable giving: awareness of need, solicitation, costs and benefits, altruism, reputation, psychological benefits, values, and efficacy. Neither gratitude nor donor stewardship is specifically mentioned as part of their review. But, of these eight mechanisms, tangible and intangible benefits can be associated with donor stewardship through psychological costs and benefits (intangible and donor-centric) and costs/benefits (tangible and organizationally focused). Since gratitude, like giving, increases positive feelings, the psychological pairings between the two are worth noting. It seems common sense to a fundraising practitioner, that giving and gratitude can increase happiness, so it is imperative that the annual giving fundraiser seek to engage both elements in their efforts as "positive moods, in general, may motivate giving (p. 938)." Other mechanisms outlined in the Bekkers-Wiepking literature review also have comparative underpinnings to gratitude, such as awareness of need and altruism.

Awareness of need speaks to the potential change that could be affected by giving, indicating that a need is met through philanthropy. Articulating that need to potential donors, or making a case for support, could also be expressed when thanking a donor for "making a difference" or "allowing me to succeed." Altruists are selfless, empathetic supporters of many causes who often prefer anonymity in their giving. The relationship that altruists mainly increase through their giving is the one they have with themselves. They feel good about the act of giving and expect nothing in return (Prince & File, 1994). The Bekkers-Wiepking literature review showed that one-third of the 500+ articles they researched mentioned experiments, though it was not captured whether they were field experiments. A fuller review of those 175 experiments-mentioning articles would need to be conducted to determine if they utilized a field experiment methodology. Again, none were about expressions of gratitude or donor stewardship.

In the more recent literature review, Bhati and Hansen (2020) examined the last two decades of experimental fundraising studies and found that the published research was focused on two specific topics: the testing of "fundraising practices and techniques that result in different behavior by potential donors, and the philanthropic environment in which fundraising occurs, largely focused on potential donors' experiences, preferences, and motivations" (p. 1). After analyzing 187 published articles across a myriad of academic disciplines (business, psychology, public administration, philanthropic studies, among others), Bhati and Hansen determined that few, if any, examined gratitude as a motivator to give. Instead, they described a "warm glow" effect that donors experience when giving. No mention was made of the afterglow felt when donors were thanked. Most of the articles they reviewed were focused on nonprofit organizations. While college and university foundations

often serve as the IRS designated nonprofit organizations, their review proved scant in terms of annual giving donors to higher educational institutions. In summarizing the thematic and representative articles about experiments in charitable giving they reviewed, Bhati and Hansen identified nine whose experiments tested the following mechanisms: solicitation, images, altruism, and warm glow, reputation and social pressure, and values. The altruism and warm glow article (Dunn et al., 2008) found that spending on others, rather than oneself, increased feelings of happiness for the donor. Of these nine articles, the Dunn et al. experiment measured whether people experienced the positive emotion of happiness through the prosocial behavior of giving when spending money on others rather than on oneself. Those who gave to others, whether to individuals or a charity, experienced happiness at higher levels than those who spent the funds on themselves. The dyad of giver and receiver relationship partners in this study only focused on the giver and did not measure any gratitude they received from the beneficiary because of their giving. The Bekkers-Wiepking and the Bhati-Hansen comprehensive literature reviews approach fundraising applications and processes, as well as the emotions, motivations, and other factors associated with giving, from a praxis point of view; for at the end of the day, the fundraising practitioner is seeking to achieve their goals, including increasing donor participation – whether at an institution of higher education or a nonprofit organization.

According to a study conducted by Levine (2008), the number of stewardship communications pieces sent to donors was not associated with increasing the APR. This is a bit of a contrast to best practices prescribed by the fundraising authors. Fundraising professionals know that thanking donors seven times (Eisenstein, 2014) has long been touted as a best practice and the most effective way to ensure repeat giving. These seven instances

of stewardship include: thanking the donor when the ask is made, having a board member call and thank a donor, sending a tax receipt within 48 hours, having the organizational leader send a handwritten thank you note, listing the donor in an honor roll of donors (whether in print, online, or on a physical wall), publicly recognizing donors at events, and several months after securing the gift, updating the donor as to how their donation was used. According to Rosen (2014), this update can be made in person, over the phone, and/or by email (depending on the size of the gift). Interestingly, sending a mailed, written communication to update donors on the philanthropic impact of their contribution is not listed in Rosen's piece. In looking at Eisenstein's seven methods of thanking donors, one is by phone, two are in person, one is written, two are in a public setting, and one is dependent on the size of the gift. Greenfield (2002) warns that donors will not react well if they are over-stewarded with too frequent outreach, unnecessary tokens of appreciation, or expensive-looking communications materials, such as annual reports and newsletters. In her study of the frequency and type of alumni communications, Levine (2008) focused on annual givers and did not address stewardship efforts.

Most literature and best practices agree that communicating to donors how their gifts are being used to create positive change, regardless of donation size, is one of the most critical factors in achieving repeat gifts (Hoelscher, 2018). What has not been as widely researched is which medium yields the best repeat donation results. Further, what also has not been studied is the type of expression of gratitude – a self-benefit oriented one (one that shows how the beneficiary is positively impacted), or an other-praising one. As of today, offices of annual giving in the higher education sphere have several media at their disposal for thanking donors, including printed and mailed thank you letters and receipts, emails with

links to stories about beneficiaries, websites, dedicated walls in buildings, printed annual

reports listing donors, videos from recipients offering personal thanks, text messaging, and

phone calls from faculty, staff, board members, and students (Burk, 2003). Levine (2008)

conducted an analysis of materials sent to alumni, including: annual reports, electronic

newsletters, appeal letters, and alumni magazines. She found some empirical evidence

positively correlating an institution's communications efforts and subsequent alumni

donations, but only for those who received alumni magazines and electronic newsletters.

Levine did not study donor stewardship pieces, nor did she study telephone calls. Holland

and Miller (1999) conducted a survey of faculty and staff members and found that telephone

solicitation was a more effective solicitation strategy than direct mail or inhouse campaigns.

However, they did not study the effectiveness of thanking donors by telephone. Knight

(2003) took Holland and Miller's research one step further and found that telephone

solicitation was less desired by faculty and staff donors than peer-to-peer solicitations. Again,

this study did not examine phone stewardship, but both studies revealed that the personal

touch made a difference and was more effective than other media for solicitations.

Recent conflicting research has swelled regarding utilizing the telephone for donor

stewardship. Penelope Burk (2013) conducted an experiment on whether thank you calls to

donors made a difference in whether they gave back or not. In Burk's experiment, donors

received a thank you phone call from a board member within 24 hours of receiving the gift.

Board members typically only call major givers or first-time donors of significance. The

likelihood of board members calling annual giving donors who made gifts of $25 is

improbable and not befitting the level of contribution. In Burk's study, the next time donors

who spoke to board members were solicited, they gave 39% more than the other donors who

did not receive a call. And after 14 months, those called were giving 42% more. The script in Burk's study is not outlined, other than to say that there was no further solicitation – just an expression of gratitude, so it is unclear if the script was donor-centric (other-praising), or organization-specific (self-benefiting). Burk's study was also conducted at nonprofit organizations, not colleges or universities. While the foundations of most colleges and universities serve as the 501(c)3 nonprofit organization designation of the IRS tax code, fundraising and donor stewardship for higher education is nuanced differently. What fits a humane society, for example, in terms of donor solicitation and stewardship may not serve an institution of higher learning similarly. The basis of this research is to examine annual giving stewardship through expressions of gratitude through specific types of communication at higher education institutions.

Samek and Longfield (2019) examined whether donors who received thank you calls were more likely to give again. They studied the donor behavior of givers to several public television stations and one large national nonprofit after receiving a thank you phone call. They learned that calling to thank donors had no effect on whether they gave again. They found that donors to the public television stations and the national nonprofit gave again at about 28% or 31%, respectively, regardless or not of whether they received a phone call. These percentages are lower than the anticipated outcome, as Samek and Longfield had surveyed fundraising professionals, utilized repeat donor giving data, and gathered feedback from nonprofit organizations as to the anticipated effectiveness of calling donors. The expected return percentage was about 51%. As a result, they concluded that calling to thank donors made no difference.

Several issues emerged by looking at the Samek and Longfield (2019) study. First, the callers were paid employees, not beneficiaries of the donors' gifts. Next, one script used both an other-praising and self-benefit expression of gratitude: "Your support helps us keep quality programming on the air, and we simply couldn't do it without you."  The study did not consider the type of gratitude expression; rather it only looked at whether donors were thanked or not. Thirdly, the study did not focus on higher education institutions, but rather on 70 public television stations (who often incentivize giving with tote bags and t-shirts and which rely on donations to continue programming) and one large national nonprofit, which they did not identify. The donors were thanked, not within 48 hours as per the best practice (Burk, 2003), but within seven months of making their gift (Atkinson, 2020). While the donors in the Samek and Longfield study were annual giving level donors ($70-$150 average first donation), they were first-time givers and not repeat annual supporters. There was no mention of whether voicemails were left for donors and any correlation between the message delivery (live or recorded) and subsequent giving. Lastly, the study did not address what other forms of gratitude the donors received; it only focused on the phone call's effectiveness in obtaining a second gift. Considering the best practice of providing seven thank yous (Eisenstein, 2014), and Parsons and Wellington's (1996) assertion that regular communication builds relationships between donors and organizations, the Samek-Longield study did not evaluate the level of relationship between the donor and the organization in terms of providing numerous and regular donor stewardship communications. Phone stewardship simply may not be the desired method of thanking donors prefer. According to recently compiled statistics, around 69% of charitable donors say an email is the best way for nonprofits to express gratitude, while a printed letter and a text message are at 14% and 6%,

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respectively, and only 5%, 4%, and 2% of donors prefer to receive thanks via printed postcards, social media messages, and phone calls, putting telephone outreach dead last in preference (Milena, 2021).

This experiment aimed to explore the influence of different gratitude expressions on giving. Prior to the Samek-Longfield study being published (2019), a colleague and I conducted a pre-registered field experiment on the effectiveness of calls to university annual fund donors from students. We asked: compared to self-benefit behavior, does other-praising behavior in thank-you messages increase donor retention and level of future donations? We also sought to explore whether there is a difference in donating and how much is donated based on whether the person had a live conversation or whether a voicemail was left for them, and whether any conditions affect this variable. In other words, does how we thank donors lead to further philanthropic engagement, such as giving? This key difference between our study and Samek and Longfield's is that we looked at not just whether donors were thanked or not, but if the type of gratitude had any bearing on subsequent giving.

Here, we considered whether the type of gratitude expression that a donor receives matters in promoting future giving and the amount of future giving by developing and deploying two different scripts (Dwyer & Vaz, 2020). Donors to a public, four-year institution's Day of Giving in May of 2019 were randomly assigned to receive a thank-you call from a student that used either a self-benefit script (e.g., "As a current student, I want to personally say thank you for making a difference in my collegiate experience!") or an other-praising script (e.g., "You went out of your way to support us, and we want you to know how much we appreciate you. Basically, we think you're great!"). There was also a voicemail version of each script, as we aimed to explore whether there was a difference in donating,

and how much was donated, based on whether the person had a conversation or received a voicemail, and whether the effect of message condition depended on this variable. Students made calls between June and August of 2019. Of the n=1,009 connections made, n=313 led to real-time conversations with donors, and 696 led to voicemails. The same donors were again solicited for gifts through direct mail, email, and telephone campaigns in September and December 2019. We recorded whether donors made subsequent gifts and whether those were less than, the same as, or more than their Day of Giving donation. A total of n=152 subsequent gifts were given (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Subsequent Gift Based on Script Type*
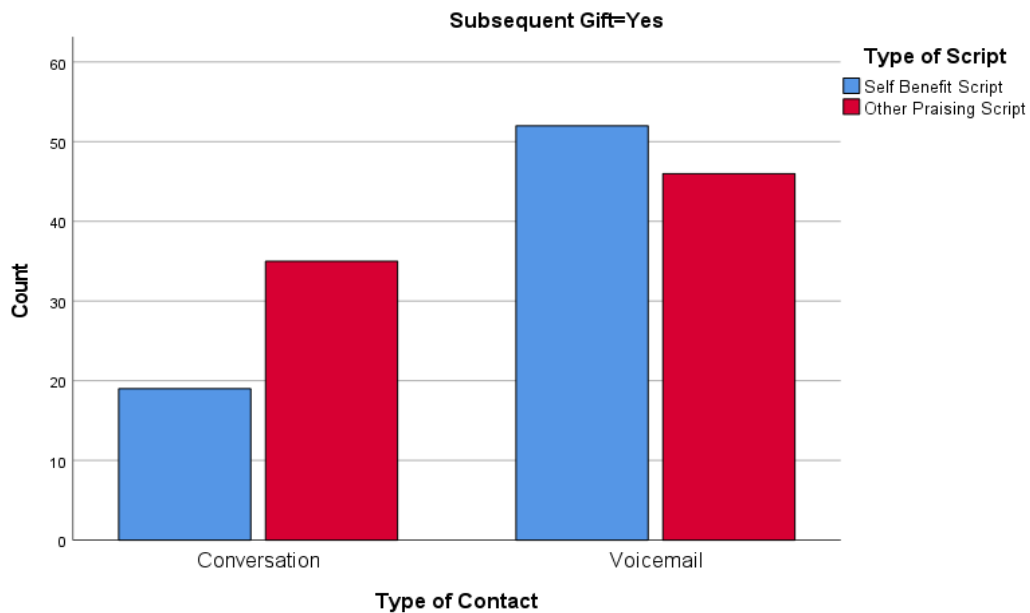


The percentage of donors who were thanked by phone, whether through a conversation or a voice message, and who gave again was just 15% in our study, which is less than the Samek-Longfield study's percentages of 28% and 31%. While 15% may seem meager in comparison, when one considers the current APR at the university is just below

6%, 15% feels like a positive result. However, our study was not only for first-time donors, as was the Samek-Longfield. Further, our period of time between when donors were thanked and when they were evaluated for subsequent giving was six months, similar to the Samek-Longfield study. We ran Chi-Square analyses to examine whether the type of script (self-benefit vs. other-praising) and type of contact (conversation vs. voicemail) influenced subsequent donation behavior and amount donated. We used regression analyses to examine potential interactive effects between the type of script and type of contact.

First, when considering the main effects on subsequent giving, neither type of script nor type of contact produced a significant effect. However, a binary logistic regression revealed evidence of an interaction between these variables, which was probed by examining simple slopes. When a conversation was had, there was a significant correlation between the type of script and subsequent giving, such that those who received the other-praising script were more likely to give. As suspected, the type of thanking mattered. Then, when a voicemail was left, this correlation was not significant. Next, considering the main effects on the level of giving among those who gave, there was no significant effect from the type of script, but there was a significant effect from the type of contact. Of the 54 gifts that came from donors who spoke to students, 11.1% were less than, 53.7% were the same as, and 35.2% were more than their previous gift. Looking at the subsequent gifts from those who received a voicemail from a student, 21.4% were less than, 33.7% were the same as, and 44.9% were greater than the amount previously given. Among those donors who had a conversation, the largest percentage gave at the same amount as their previous donation. However, among those who received a voicemail, the largest percentage gave at a greater

level than their previous gift (Figure 2). We found no evidence of an interactive effect between the type of script and type of contact on donors' giving level.

**Figure 2**

*Subsequent Gift Amounts Based on Conversation or Voicemail*
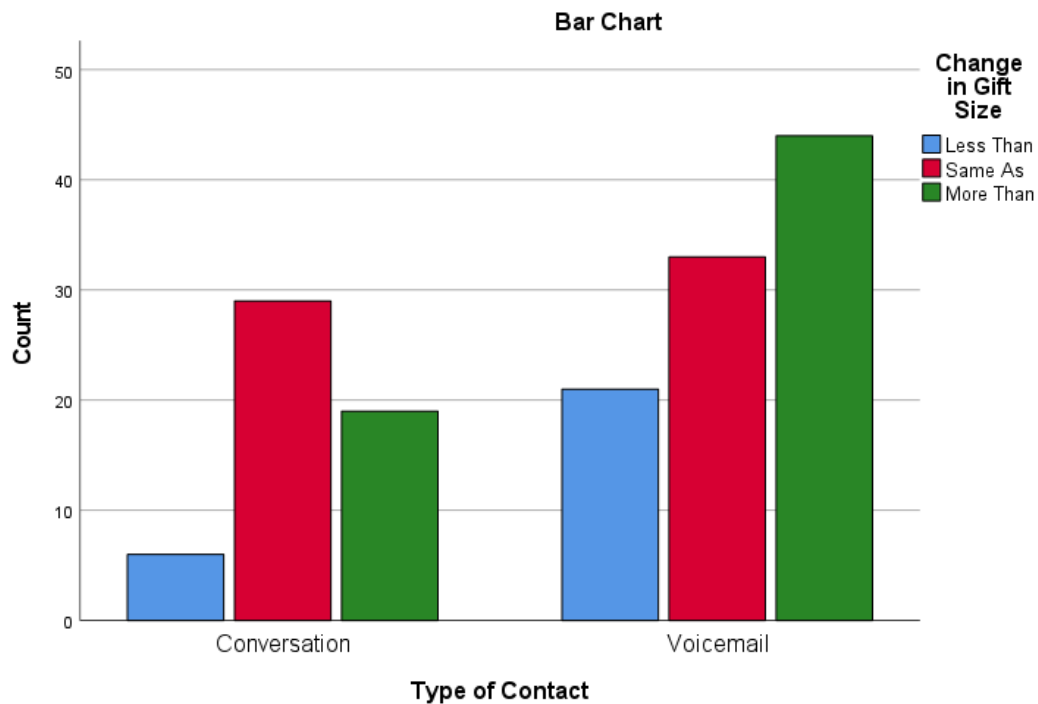


This one field experiment garnered interest from annual giving practitioners, including myself, who wanted to know if the other-praising expression of gratitude and the voicemail results would be replicated when using a different type of method of communication. Since texting is prolific among the masses, the idea to replicate the giving and gratitude study through text messaging was born. A follow-up, pre-registered field experiment was then conducted, as outlined in the methodology section below.

**Significance of the Study**

A review of numerous contemporary studies cited on the areas of giving and gratitude, donor stewardship, the power of relationships, motivations for giving, and

expressions of gratitude reveals that most utilize mixed methods, with many skewing towards qualitative and predictive modeling based on surveys that identify attitudes, propensities, and likelihoods which are then quantitatively examined through statistical analysis and can be described as exploratory sequential designs. Few provide strictly quantitative data to indicate that certain donor stewardship activities or expressions of gratitude actually evoke subsequent giving. Rather, they simply allude to the likelihood that those surveyed will give again and/or give at higher levels. I want to examine further whether expressions of gratitude can influence subsequent giving through a quantitative experimental study.

One recent study examined actual donor data after providing donor stewardship through phone calls. Samek and Longfield (2019) conducted field experiments with public television stations and a national non-profit organization in which new donors were randomized to either receive a thank you call or no call at all. The experiments evaluated about 600,000 donors and 500,000 thank you calls over the course of six years and found that thank you calls had no bearing on whether new donors would give again. They also evaluated other treatments and variables within the vast number of subjects, such as age, gender, income level, and length of residency. Their findings showed that thank you phone calls were not influential in obtaining subsequent gifts, much to the chagrin of fundraising and donor stewardship practitioners. This study, however, did not differentiate between other-praising or self-benefit expressions of gratitude.

For the annual giving stewardship practitioner, the historical body of research reflects that anecdotal or surface-level quantitative studies by industries supporting communication methods such as calling, texting, or video messaging for annual giving donors have been conducted (Mongoose, 2020 and RNL, 2020). However, few studies have been published in

peer-reviewed journals, articles, or dissertations, revealing a divide between industry and academia. This study looks at actual annual giving donor behavior after receiving texted expressions of gratitude, as conducted through an experiment specifically designed to manipulate gratitude and measure the resulting prosocial behavior of giving. The texting study builds upon our previous research, where we examined the effects of self-benefit or other-praising expressions of gratitude as communicated by students through telephone calls or voicemails. What we learned there helped drive the replication study's design by paying more attention to the collection of the demographic information of the texted donors, as this information was not captured in the calling study. Both of these studies are unique for several reasons: they are field experiments conducted in real-time with actual donor data at a public, regional, four-year institution of higher education. The approach is also novel in that it employs a theoretical concept not typically applied to donor stewardship.

**Theoretical Framework**

Higher educational annual giving fundraising professionals all over the United States will tell you that thanking donors, showing appreciation, and expressing gratitude are not only examples of good donor stewardship, but these activities help to build a quality relationship between the donor and the institution by invoking positive feelings that the donors will then recall when asked to give again. One theory that has great potential for informing my study is the find-remind-bind theory (Algoe et al., 2008), which indicates that gratitude may function to promote relationship formation and "posits that the positive emotion of gratitude serves the evolutionary function of strengthening a relationship with a responsive interaction partner" (Algoe, 2012, p. 455). The theory examines how exchanges of gratitude play a role in how we find new relationship partners, and how we are then

reminded of the goodness and positive feelings of our relationship partners, which then binds the relationship for both partners as being seen as more responsive. Algoe's theory primarily looks at how partners in friendships or romantic relationships respond to expressing gratitude and the resulting change in connectivity within those types of personal dyads, hence the nod to "responsive interaction partner." Her exploration of the theory also delves into the implications of gratitude on other types of relationships, such as communal and exchange relationships. In thinking about my research, this theory and its connotations about relationships, gratitude, and resulting prosocial behaviors proved exciting as I sought to provide possible solutions to the problem of shrinking APRs.

Earlier studies (DeSteno et al., 2010 and Tsang, 2006b, 2007) focused on the transactional nature of gratitude through induction methods of favors and gifts followed by the measurement of the subsequent distribution of resources. This looks pretty similar to the somewhat transactional disposition of annual giving donor stewardship. The remind function is about valuing current relationships. The find function is about taking advantage of new relationship opportunities (that emerge via gratitude). Algoe expanded the early research through an evolutionary process with personal relationships, focusing on the emotional elements of gratitude rather than the transactional or exchange nature of relationships. Algoe (2012) sees the need for further study, as this theory has yet to be applied to a relationship between an organization and the donor who supports it, which in my opinion, is the middle ground between the interpersonal and transactional/exchange relationship of gratitude in the context of higher education annual giving. My study examines how varying expressions of gratitude may lead to an increased relationship with the institution, as evidenced by subsequent giving. Admittedly, it does not measure whether or not donors feel, believe, or

openly acknowledge their relationship has strengthened, but by applying the find-remind-bind theory to the experiments, I believe there exists enough evidence to say that the relationship has improved or been strengthened, mainly through one type of expression and another type of communication. In a series of experiments focused on witnessing gratitude, Algoe et al. (2020) hypothesized that third-party witnesses of gratitude would behave pro-socially to the expresser of the gratitude. They found that witnesses were, in fact more helpful, or willing to be helpful, disclosed more information, and wanted to affiliate with the expressers of gratitude, particularly when the expression of gratitude was other-praising. The find-remind-bind theory has implications for study in the realm of annual giving fundraising donor stewardship as the opportunities for comparisons are there, particularly when we delve into how this theory emphasizes seizing opportunities for connection with responsive others. In my study, the responsive others are 1) the donors who receive expressions of gratitude through phone calls, voicemails, or text messages from students (the beneficiaries) themselves, and 2) the students expressing gratitude.

Algoe (2012) identifies five key elements of relationships in "seizing opportunities for connection with responsive others" (p. 457) through the find-remind-bind theory. First, she recognizes the short-term cognitive shifts which enable one's knowledge about the world and social partners to adapt in a way "that facilitates the potential for adaptively relevant future behaviors" (p. 465). In this way, the effect gratitude has on the receiver becomes part of their reasoning and subsequent prosocial behavior because, essentially, they, like the person or entity who thanked them, come to think of the other in a positive light – find. In another short-term shift, Algoe recognizes motivational and behavior changes focusing on relationship promotion. In other words, people are motivated by emotions, and gratitude is a

positive emotion – remind. Interestingly in Algoe's theory, the view is not simply on the person who receives the expression of gratitude, but also on the provider of it, thereby looking at both sides of the relationship. This was not my consideration when devising the research questions or methods, but it provides an interesting perspective. Instead, I chose to simply measure how gratitude affects the benefactor and not the expresser, though there may be some reciprocity there. However, the find-remind-bind theory considers the duality of the relationship and ultimately enhances each party's connectivity yet does not address predictions from the theory. Despite Grant and Gino's (2010) affirmation that benefactors who are thanked are more likely to engage in future prosocial behaviors with the expresser, Algoe felt more research was needed and conducted some experiments to ascertain if the theory held up. She found that "perceived benefactor responsiveness triggers a recipient's gratitude and would lead to a benefactor's perception that the recipient is responsive" (p. 462). That, in essence, is the crux of why annual giving practitioners believe that thanking donors binds them to the institution.

Next, Algoe leads us to the binding elements of the theory – the impact on the quality of the relationship, which serves as the basis of my research. She reported that Fredrickson (1998, 2001, 2009) theorized that long-term strategies for relationship success and growth opportunities could result from positive emotions, like feelings of gratitude. The find-remind-bind theory can be tested by "examining repeated or accumulated instances of gratitude as well as social consequences in the context of ongoing relationships" (Algoe, 2012, p. 463), such as the experiments I conducted through my research of other-praising or self-benefit expressions of gratitude through varying methods of communication. While Fredrickson and Algoe focus on the dyadic relationships, my research pairs the find-remind-bind theory

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between an individual and an institution, through nuances of personal communication. It stretches the theory in an intermediary way. To that end, Algoe (2012, p. 464) examines how the theory interacts with groups and cultures, finding that "greater gratitude felt towards a benefactor within the context of a group tradition was associated with the grateful recipient's greater sense of being integral to the group" (Algoe et al., 2008, p. 464). This is specifically important in the realm of annual giving when messaging is often centered on the communal benefit to an institution where the APR is touted as a case for group giving. Algoe's find-remind-bind theory provides many directions for further research, particularly in understanding relationship dynamics (personalized messaging from an individual expresser within and representing an institution to a singular donor), which is why I have chosen it as my theoretical framework for my research and study.

**Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter reviews the scope and type of methodological approach taken in the texting experiment, outlines the research questions asked of the study, and discusses the design rationale for the research. Also reviewed in this chapter are the role of the researcher and any ethical issues that may have arisen and how they were handled, an overview of the study participants, the timing of the study, any validity concerns, and consideration of the Institutional Review Board procedure. An initial analysis of the data then follows this.

**Methodological Approach**

Experimental design methodologies manipulate one or more variables to see how the manipulation affects the dependent variables. These designs also isolate the effects of the manipulation by holding all other variables constant (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Correlational research is used when making predictions about variables so their findings can be used to determine commonalities and relationships among variables and forecast events from current data and knowledge (Curtis et al. 2016). Utilizing a correlational research methodology may provide future forecasts on the subject matter. A causal-comparative research design seeks to find relationships between independent and dependent variables after an action or event has already occurred, as was the case for the two studies herein. This methodology aims to determine whether the variables affected the outcome by comparing two or more groups of datasets (Salkind, 2010).

There are ontological, epistemological, axiological, rhetorical, and methodological paradigmatic assumptions with quantitative methodologies, which can be associated with varying types of questions (Sukamolson, 1996). Ontologically speaking, quantitative methodologies answer the question about the nature of reality by saying that reality is

objective and singular apart from the researcher. In answering the question about the relationship between the researcher and the subject, the researcher is independent of the research subject, epistemologically. From an axiological perspective, a quantitative researcher will be value-free and unbiased in their role or their values. The language or rhetorical assumption associated with quantitative research is formal, relies on definitions, and uses a detached voice. Quantitative researchers answer the research process question through deductive reasoning, look at cause and effect, make generalizations that lead to prediction, focus on explanation and understanding, and rely on accuracy, validity, and reliability. The quantitative researcher is on the outside looking in, free from personal entanglements, voice, and bias, and is independent and separate from the research subject.

The theoretical framework of quantitative research is essentially positivist and post-positivist, stemming from the scientific method while acknowledging objective, empirical approaches to observable phenomena to test and understand relationships (Given, 2008). The scientific method involves developing hypotheses, making predictions from them as logical significances, and then conducting experiments on the predictions to determine whether the original hypotheses were correct (Pierce, 1908).

The previous field experiment that a colleague and I conducted engaged students to make stewardship phone calls with two expressions of gratitude scripts and served as the basis and impetus for this, the second field experiment, used texting as the communication medium. The results of the initial calling study are outlined in Chapter 2. In considering whether the type of gratitude expression a donor receives matters in terms of promoting future giving and the amount of the subsequent gifts, we learned from the previous calling experiment that donors are more likely to respond to other-praising expressions of gratitude when a

conversation was had to determine if that propensity exists in other forms of communication. The second study was designed and executed utilizing text messaging with its results serving as comparative data to the calling study. A quantitative methodology was employed in both the calling and texting studies. This experimental design was used in combination with elements of correlational research and causal-comparative methods, as evaluated with descriptive statistical results.

**Research Questions**

Overall, the experiment's goal was to answer the following research question: Compared to self-benefit expressions, do other-praising expressions in texted thank-you messages increase donor retention and level of future donations? The results for this experiment are then compared to those of a previous calling study to find any similarities, disparities, or other findings and implications. The pre-registered hypothesis stated in the previous calling study and which served as the driving question in the texting study was: "compared to self-benefit behavior, does other-praising behavior in thank-you messages increase donor retention and level of future donations?" (Dwyer & Vaz, 2020).

The goals of the research are to determine 1) if types of expressions of gratitude have any bearing on subsequent giving, 2) how the medium of the message influences subsequent giving, and 3) if the stewardship efforts of calling and texting put forth by public higher education offices of annual giving have any influence on subsequent giving, and ultimately, the APR. In the pre-registered study for the texting experiment, the research question put forth was: compared to self-benefit behavior, does other-praising behavior in thank-you messages increase donor retention and level of future donations (Dwyer & Vaz, 2020)? This question is bifurcated in terms of the expression, and the amount of subsequent giving,

therefore two hypotheses were developed from the original question, resulting in $H_01$ and $H_02$ below:

$H_01$: Compared to self-benefit behavior, other-praising behavior in thank-you messages does not increase donor retention.

$H_02$: Donors who respond to other-praising expressions of gratitude with a subsequent gift are not more likely to give a significantly higher amount compared to self-benefit expressions.

$H_03$: Donors who have interactive communications with student texters are not more likely to give again (regardless of script type).

$H_04$: Donors who respond to texted expressions of gratitude (regardless of script type), and who make subsequent gifts, are not more likely to give larger subsequent gifts.

**Design Rationale**

The purpose of this new replication (texting) study was to investigate previous research further, as conducted via pre-registered experimentation with actual donors through the medium of telephone communication, followed by an examination of the resulting prosocial behavior, as evidenced by future giving. A quantitative methods approach was utilized. The new study was modeled after and compared to, the results of the first study in which phone calls (Dwyer & Vaz, 2020), were made, against a new communication media – texting, to see whether expressions of gratitude build relationships between donors and their alma mater as evidenced by subsequent giving. This was accomplished by investigating whether scripted forms of self-benefit or other-praising expressions of gratitude, as provided by university students through text messaging, led to subsequent and/or increased giving, with the goal being to improve the APR. The initial experiment led us to believe that other-

praising expressions of gratitude seemed to promote giving from those hearing the expressions. This new study also examined whether an ensuing text exchange with the donor impacted giving, as the initial study revealed that a non-exchange led to larger subsequent donation amounts.

Every year, university Annual Giving offices spend time, energy, and money stewarding donors for their gifts in the hopes of building relationships with donors that lead to continued and sustained giving, thereby increasing the APR. Like many other higher educational institutions, Appalachian State University utilizes its Engagement Center student workers to call and personally thank donors for their gifts. Appalachian specifically focuses these stewardship efforts on thanking donors for its critical needs fund gifts. Normally students call and thank donors, but in 2020, with limited Engagement Center capacity due to pandemic safety protocols, students utilized a text messaging platform to express gratitude to donors for support of the university's critical needs funds. Traditionally, students have conversations with donors, leave voicemail messages, or cannot connect for various reasons, such as wrong numbers, busy signals, or full voicemail boxes. While text conversations may not happen in real-time or may not be as interactive or expressive as live telephone conversations, texting allows for similar engagement on a different level, but through an alternative communication medium. Emojis, photos, and gifs can be utilized in text messaging where voice nuances were previously used in phone conversations.

**Role of the Researcher and Ethical Issues**

My role in this research is two-fold: as a practitioner and an academic investigator. Because my role within the institution was to raise money for critically needed funds, achieve ever-increasing fundraising goals, and to improve the institution's APR, I had a

professional interest in determining whether expressions of gratitude influenced subsequent giving. Because my research utilizes calling and texting platforms whose licenses were leased by the institution, researchers at these platforms expressed an interest in the studies to validate their product's effectiveness. This was not a driver in my exploration, simply an aside of interest. As an investigator seeking a doctorate who realized there was scant peer-reviewed research that examined the relationship between expressions of gratitude and increased giving, the lifelong learner in me was intrigued – as were other academicians in the fields of philanthropic studies. Thus began a partnership between Dr. Patrick Dwyer, a faculty member of philanthropic studies at Indiana University's Lilly School of Philanthropy, and me, a doctoral student with both a practical and theoretical interest in giving and gratitude and the role other-praising phraseology in donor stewardship messaging plays in subsequent giving. This partnership served as the impetus for the initial calling study, which then led to the replication texting study.

This closeness to the research for both my professional and academic endeavors may outwardly appear to have competing values (O'Neil, 1990), those where the researcher may hold biases towards the outcome of the experiment – in my case achieving the goal of being professionally successful to earn a paycheck or achieve promotion within the organization. However, the experiment's outcomes would benefit the practitioner equally whether the null hypotheses were accepted or not because the results would help determine if the efforts of providing stewardship expressions were worth the cost of doing them; essentially a win-win. As far as the academic researcher is concerned, the outcome of the experiment would provide future evidence for the research that others had conducted in the field. One area in which I had to pay extra attention to the ethical practice of the research study occurred when the

students were responding to the text messages. I was able to read them in real-time and if the students deviated from the other-praising or self-benefit vernacular, I had to remind them to keep the conversation either student-focused or donor-centric.

**Data Sources and Collection**

The initial donor data was collected through queries utilizing Appalachian's University Advancement Services donor database, a Blackbaud product titled Fundraiser Performance Management. Data from donors who gave to the university's three critical needs funds (The Appalachian Fund, The Parents Fund, and the Mountaineer Emergency Fund), were gathered utilizing a gift date range within the timeframe of the experiment. The output showed how much donors gave to those funds, to which fund(s) they donated, and their names and phone numbers. Companies and soft credited donors were then eliminated from the pool so as not to dilute the direct relationship between the institution and the donor. A soft credited donor is defined as the spouse or partner of a donor on the same household record who also gets "credit" for the donation. The donor data was then uploaded into the texting platform from where the experiment was conducted. Once the texting experiment was executed, I collected data through the platform, and a member of the annual giving team was tasked with oversight of the texting platform. After the solicitation process, when donors were asked to give again, was concluded, the texting data was then shared with the data analyst employed by the institution's advancement services department. She ran reports on who in the initial dataset gave again and then matched the subjects in the texting pool with those in the initial thanking data set and the subsequent giving dataset. The following giving data was collected through Appalachian State University's Prospect and Research Management department within the division of University Advancement. The texting data

was mined through the university's texting platform, Cadence. The steps in the process were to: 1) Gather data from the donor database of those who gave to the university's critical needs funds during a specific period; 2) upload those donors into the texting platform and conduct a texting experiment; 3) solicit donors who received texted expressions of gratitude over a period of time; 4) run gift reports for those in the texting pool; and 5) extract data from the donor database after the solicitation process and match those who received texts with the giving data.

We recorded whether donors made subsequent gifts and whether those gifts were less than, the same as, or more than the donation for which they were thanked. A total of 284 subsequent gifts were given, totaling $57,312. Of those n=284 gifts, n=166 had received the other-praising scripted text, while n=118 received the self-benefit scripted text. Further, the quasi-independent variable of whether a "conversation" was had with the student texter was identified. A conversation here is a texted interaction between the donor and the student.

Moderating variables considered were the gender of the texter, the number of consecutive years of giving by the donors, the race, gender, and age of the donors, as well as donor characteristics such as their socioeconomic status as determined by their institutional wealth rating, whether they are assigned to a development professional within the university, and what type of constituent group they belong to, whether alumni, parent, employee, or friend of the institution.

**Participants**

In this replication study, n=847 donors to Appalachian's three critical needs funds: the Appalachian Fund, the Mountaineer Emergency Fund (established as a result of the hardships students faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic), and the Parents Fund who gave

between January 1 and November 15, 2020, were considered the donor participants. Donors were randomly assigned to receive a thank-you text from one of two student texters who used either a self-benefit script or an other-praising script (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

*Texting Scripts*

# Texting Scripts– Expressions of Gratitude

### Other-Praising

[FirstName], this is [Student], a senior at App reaching out to thank you for your recent donation. **You went out of your way to support Appalachian during this critical time, and we want you to know how much we appreciate you. To put it simply, you rock! :)**

### Self-Benefit

[FirstName], this is [Student], a senior at App reaching out to thank you for your recent donation. **Your gift is making a direct impact by supporting critical needs at Appalachian. As a current student, I want to thank you for making a difference in my college experience! :)**

The two student texting participants were employees of the university's Engagement Center who were trained on utilizing the texting platform. The students were both undergraduates, one female (Jenna) and one male (Nathan), who were aware of the experiment, but not the hypotheses. The research team wrote the scripts. The randomization of the texting pools and text scripts was conducted very simply, by first halving the entire data set, which was randomized, then assigning one half to Jenna and one half to Nathan. From there, each of the two data sets was halved again, this time into script assignments. There ended up four data sets, described as follows: Jenna Other-Praising (JOP), Jenna Self-Benefit (JSB), Nathan Other-Praising (NOP) and Nathan Self-Benefit (NSB). Then, each of

the four data sets was uploaded into the texting platform, which runs a diagnostic on whether the corresponding phone number is a cellular number, as landline numbers cannot receive text messages. Once the diagnostic was run on each pool, and eliminations made (see below), the data set quantities were JOP n=224, JSP n=221, NOP n=211, NSB n=192.

The donors who were in each of the four pools then received text messages the Tuesday before Thanksgiving of 2020. Participants could respond to the text messages or not, and these interactions were collected. Jenna and Nathan could respond to the text exchange, keeping in mind which pool they were working in, having been instructed to keep the messaging positive, and to use either other-praising (talking about the donor) or self-benefit (talking about themselves). Several of the responses were Thanksgiving greetings, such as "have a nice holiday" or "Happy Thanksgiving!" The texting platform gathered data as to whom texts were delivered. Donor participants could also "opt-out" of future texting, while others responded indicating they were not the intended recipient of the text message. In several of these instances, family members who were on the main phone number's account, such as in a family phone plan, may have received a message addressed to their father, mother, etc. In other instances, the university simply had incorrect phone numbers for the recipients. The students were instructed to gather the proper phone number, pass along the message, or remove the wrong recipient from the database. The participants who had wrong numbers or who opted out of texting were then eliminated from the data sets, resulting in the n=847 participants, per above.

**Timing**

Texts were sent on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, November 24, 2020. Of the n=847 texts delivered to valid recipients, n=101 donors responded, while n=746 did not.

These same n=847 donors were again solicited for gifts by direct mail, email, and telephone through three separate campaigns from December 2020 through March 4, 2021 (noting that if donors gave through the first solicitation, they were suppressed from the following solicitations {as were those who gave at the second ask then omitted from the third}). Donors were asked to give to any of the three funds mentioned above, or to any fund of their choice. Text solicitations were not part of the appeal process, as Appalachian did not utilize a text-to-give mechanism for fundraising at the time.

**Validity**

Validity of the field experiment and resulting findings was established by replicating a previous IRB-exempt, pre-registered experiment. Utilizing SPSS for statistical analysis, validity was maintained related to the data interpretation. While there are some elements of other influence on whether or not the donors in the experiment give again or feel a certain way about the expression of gratitude they receive, these will be accounted for in Chapter 5: Summary, Implications, Conclusions.

Because this study was conducted through a pre-registered field experiment design, there exists high internal validity, from randomizing participants to manipulating and controlling variables. Since it was a field experiment, there is also higher ecological validity than in a lab setting. Field experiments are studies using an experimental design that occur in a natural setting.

In the natural environment, many researchers examine how manipulating at least one independent variable leads to a change in a dependent variable (Allen, 2017). By conducting experiments, researchers study how manipulating independent variables causes a change in a

dependent variable. Causality occurs when the influence of the independent variable leads to a change in the dependent variable.

A caution against the generalizability of lab experiments (low external validity) was made when List (2006) found that although subjects demonstrated noteworthy pro-social behavior in regulated laboratory situations, the behavior vanished when the subjects were in a spontaneously happening marketplace. This can apply to fundraising as well as economics, where List's discipline lies, in that numerous factors influence donor behavior beyond stewardship, such as economics, timing, life events, support of other charitable causes, and motivation.

**Institutional Review Board (IRB) Procedure**

A review of the study, #21-0149: Giving and Gratitude: Comparing communication media through expressions of donor stewardship, by the IRB at Appalachian State University resulted in the determination that the activity described in the study did not constitute human subject research. University policy and federal regulations [45 CFR 46.102 (e or l)] and therefore did not require IRB approval (Appendix 1).

**Chapter 4: Results**

In this chapter, the data from the experiment is evaluated by examining the null hypotheses and what the statistical analysis revealed. A look is taken at the participants of the study and their ensuing behavior within the experiment. The participants' demographics are identified and explained. Lastly, it is revealed that a particular expression of gratitude is more likely to elicit future donations.

**Data Analysis**

In Table 1, the results of the data analysis are shown. For $H_01$: compared to self-benefit behavior, other-praising behavior in thank-you messages does not increase donor retention; a chi-square analysis was conducted, and a significant main effect was found – that those who received the other-praising script were more likely to give (Chi-Square = 8.605, p = .003). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

However, in looking at $H_02$: donors who respond to other-praising expressions of gratitude with a subsequent gift are not more likely to give a significantly higher amount, we considered the main effects on the subsequent gift amount, among those who gave, and found there was not a significant effect of type of script (Chi-Square = 1.901, p = .387). The null hypothesis is accepted.

Next, we examined $H_03$: donors who have interactive communications with student texters are not more likely to give again (regardless of script type). We also examined whether a text exchange (occurred or did not) influenced subsequent donation behavior. A significant effect (Chi-square = 13.130, p = .000) was found through chi-square analysis, indicating that text respondents are more inclined to give than those who do not respond. This rejects the null hypothesis.

In evaluating $H_04$: donors who respond to texted expressions of gratitude (regardless of script type), and who make subsequent gifts, are not more likely to give larger subsequent gifts, n=50, and their subsequent gift amount was not significant (Chi-square = 1.487, p = .475). This accepts the null hypothesis.

**Table 1**

*Chi-Square Analysis Results*

| Hypothesis | Chi-Square | p-value | Result |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| $H_01$ | 8.605 | 0.003 | Reject |
| $H_02$ | 1.901 | 0.387 | Accept |
| $H_03$ | 13.13 | 0.00 | Reject |
| $H_04$ | 1.487 | 0.475 | Accept |

In summary, we found evidence that the type of thank-you message a donor receives can promote subsequent giving, particularly when they receive an other-praising message. And while engaging in a text exchange was more likely to lead to subsequent giving, the amount of those subsequent gifts was not significant in terms of an increased amount of the next gift compared to the amount of the gift for which they were thanked. Compared to the previous study that utilized phone calls rather than text messages (Dwyer & Vaz, 2020), it was discovered that texted other-praising expressions of gratitude had a stronger effect on subsequent giving. Conversely, the voicemail effect in the previous study, which led to significantly larger subsequent gifts, was not realized in the texting study. This dichotomy calls for further investigation into why donors who receive voicemails make larger subsequent donations than those who receive but do not respond to text messages.

Now that we have two completed studies based on field experiments, we compare them to the body of literature and research previously conducted. Seemingly few field experiments on giving and gratitude in the higher educational annual giving sphere have been

conducted, leaving us with a sparse landscape to compare our results to but opening up the field to offer future implications for their use in theory and practice. We examined the participant behavior and discussed how the study's results may influence the APR at colleges and universities.

**Participants**

The behavior exhibited by the participants of this texting, and the previous calling study, suggests that people are more likely to respond with a subsequent donation when they are thanked with an expression of gratitude that is other-praising. In essence, the find-remind-bind theory that other-praising expressions of gratitude deepen relationships between partners is reinforced by this finding (Algoe, 2012). This is not to say that donors do not want to know their gift is making a difference; the studies simply revealed that when they are provided other-praising expressions of stewardship, donors are more likely to give again – particularly those who receive these expressions through text messages. The donor pool may provide insights into why a certain type of expression of gratitude is more effective at eliciting future donations. As previously mentioned, donor motivations and their existing feelings about their relationship with their alma mater are factors that may influence whether donors are loyal givers (Wester, 2020). Psychological factors such as indebtedness and a sense of belonging have been shown to contribute to levels of alumni participation through giving (Okaomee & Dwyer, 2020). Further, one's capacity to give may also be a factor in whether or not alumni regularly contribute (annually) to their institution (Wertz & Ronca, 2007). The giving capacity of alumni is based on the availability of financial resources, and influenced by demographic characteristics, such as age. As age increases, so does the capacity and the inclination for philanthropic contributions.

It should be noted that many of the participants in this study have both a history of giving as multi-year donors to Appalachian State University and are more mature than first- or second-time givers. The average number of years of consecutive giving for the subject pool is 14.3 years. This loyal, continuous giving is an indicator of a level of high inclination of future giving. However, n=97 first-time donors received the text messages, representing 11.4% of the pool. The wealth of the subject pool is also noteworthy; of those for whom we had wealth indicators (an aggregate of information gathered through public information, giving history, and other factors), the mean giving capacity was $41,215. This is significant from a practitioner's perspective in that such a high level of giving capacity, combined with more than a decade of giving history, may inform the annual giving office that their donor pool is rife with major gift potential. The university may benefit by assigning these high-capacity, high inclination donors to members of the major gift fundraising team. Of those in the subject pool, only n=116, or 17%, are presently assigned to gift officers. Further, the gift for which donors were thanked averaged $169.52.

In the subject pool of participants (Table 2, Appendix B) for whom age information was available, n=784, the ages ranged from 22 to 97, with the average age of the text recipient as 55.9 years of age. In terms of gender, female donors were in the majority with n=449 or 53%, while the male population, n=398 made up 47% of the pool. Looking at gender and which responded to text messages, n=57 or 56.4% of women responded while n=44 men responded (43.5%). When looking at the gender of the texter and how people responded to them, n=54 (53%) of the population responded to both Nathan's scripts combined, while n=47 (47%) responded to Jenna's scripts.

Appalachian State University is a predominately White institution and the sample donor pool reflected as such, with just n=40, or 4.7%, identifying as races other than White, including Asian, Black, American Native/Native Alaskan, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. No one in the data set identified as Latino/Hispanic.
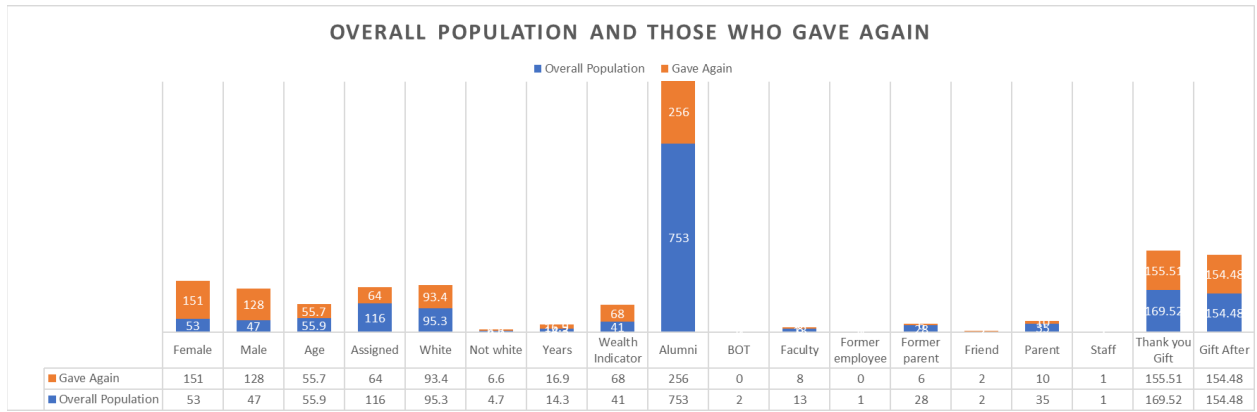
A constituent type indicates the primary relationship one has with the university. These constituencies are categorized through a hierarchy set by the university, with alumni being the highest. We recognize that constituents may have more than one attribute. For example, an alumnus who is a parent and a staff member will be categorized in the university's data set based on the hierarchy and therefore will be counted as an alumnus. The subject pool consisted of n=753 alumni (90%), n=35 current parents (4.1%), n=28 former parents whose children had graduated (3.3%), n=13 faculty members (1.6%), n=2 members of the board of trustees, n=2 friends of the university (those who did not graduate from Appalachian), and n=1 each of staff members and former employees (all adding up to 1%). In Appendix 1, I have combined current and former employees into one field, calling them "staff." So, if we characterize the entire subject pool with commonalities, we can envision a White, middle-aged alumna with a high inclination and high capacity to give.

Looking at the demographic information of the donor pool who gave again after receiving the expressions of gratitude and subsequent solicitations, we find the average number of consecutive years of giving was 16.9. The mean age of the population was 55.7 years old. For gender in this population, 54% are female and 46% are male. The mean wealth indicator for those who gave again was $68,283, and the gift amount for which they were thanked was $155.51, lower than the overall population. Their current gift after being solicited was very similar to the amount for which they were thanked: $154.48. Of those who

identified their race and who gave again, I found the following populations: 93.4% White, 4.6% Black, and 1% each for Asian and Native American/Alaskan. Those who are assigned to major gift officers number n=64 (22.5%). In looking at constituent type: n=256 alumni (90.1%), n=10 current parents (3.5%), n=6 former parent (2.1%), n=9 faculty (3.2%), n=2 friend (<1%), n=1 staff (<.5%), and no former employees or members of the board of trustees. Comparing the donors who gave again to the overall dataset, we find that the subsequent givers' races, ages, genders, and constituent types were similar to the overall dataset. However, the average wealth indicator is much higher, by more than $27,000. This may be because both of the $5M rated donors gave again, thereby serving as outliers and skewing the wealth indicator. For those who gave again, the number of years of consecutive giving is also longer by nearly three years. Yet, the gift for which they were thanked is 9% lower than that of the entire population, with their subsequent donation slightly lower than the gift for which they were thanked. Those who are assigned to gift officers were also higher by 5%. So, while the salient characteristics of those who gave again remained similar, their ability and inclination to give was elevated, yet they did not give larger gifts. This may indicate that while they participate in the day of giving, they may also make larger gifts to their own scholarship or other funds at the university, hence their assignment to a gift officer. Data around other giving to the university was not captured for this study. Now we have two sets of data (Figure 4): the overall population that was studied, as well as the population who gave again.

**Figure 4**

*Study Participants of Subsequent Givers and Non-Givers*



OVERALL POPULATION AND THOSE WHO GAVE AGAIN

| | Female | Male | Age | Assigned | White | Not white | Years | Wealth Indicator | Alumni | BOT | Faculty | Former employee | Former parent | Friend | Parent | Staff | Thank you Gift | Gift After |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gave Again | 151 | 128 | 55.7 | 64 | 93.4 | 6.6 | 16.9 | 68 | 256 | 0 | 8 | 0 | 6 | 2 | 10 | 1 | 155.51 | 154.48 |
| Overall Population | 53 | 47 | 55.9 | 116 | 95.3 | 4.7 | 14.3 | 41 | 753 | 2 | 13 | 1 | 28 | 2 | 35 | 1 | 169.52 | 154.48 |

Next, a look is taken at whether the script and the population of subsequent givers bore any interesting results. There are four treatments: two other-praising expressions of gratitude delivered by Jenna and Nathan, and two self-benefit expressions. I combined Jenna and Nathan's other-praising expression recipients into one data set and did the same for the self-benefit message receivers. As outlined in Figure 4, the other-praising script outperformed the self-benefit script for those who gave again in nearly every area, except the subsequent gift amount, with a variance of just $2.53 overall. Two areas where self-benefit scripting out-performed other-praising is found in the number of former faculty and former parents, though the sample size for both is negligible.

In the calling experiment, we examined whether students had a live conversation or left voicemails for donors, offering one of the two scripted expressions of gratitude. For the texting study, we looked at those who responded to the text messages and categorized them similarly to a live conversation, as the text exchanges were held in real-time. When donors did not respond to the text messages, we categorized those similar to a voicemail – a message received but with no ensuing exchange, conversation, or communication. The following

dataset (Figure 5) reveals information about those who responded to the text messages,

n=101, and those who responded to text messages and then gave again n=50,

**Figure 5**

*Demographics of Subsequent Givers*



GAVE AGAIN DEMOGRAPHICS BASED ON SCRIPT TYPE
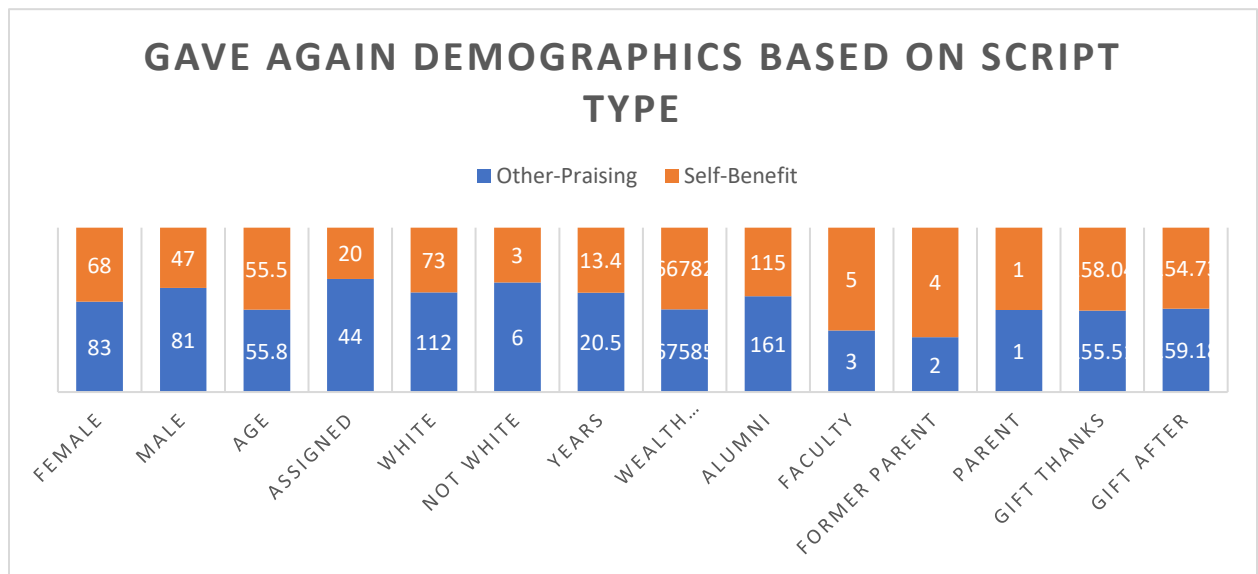
and which script type they received (which will be referred to as "text responding donors").

Of the 50 text responding donors, n=28 (56%) received other-praising expressions of

gratitude, while n=22 (44%) received self-benefit messages. While this may outwardly

appear to be significant, the small sample size of 50 text responding donors would need to be

larger to determine significance adequately, therefore chi-square tests were not run on this

small cohort of donors.

In terms of demographics (Figure 6), 58% of the text responding donors were women.

There was no significant influence by script on gender in terms of responding to text

messages and giving again, as the numbers were even across the dataset. The average age of

both genders was 54.3 years old. The average age of text responding givers who received

other-praising expressions of gratitude was 55.5, with 53.1 years for self-benefit expression

recipients; all very similar. When examining the text responding giver's average number of

years of consecutive giving, we see 18.2 compared to 19.3 years of all who responded to texts. The script type was insignificant, as each expression garnered an average of 18 years of giving history. The data on the wealth indicators was disproportionately skewed in this dataset of text responding donors, since, in the entire population of the original dataset, there were n=2 donors with wealth indicators valued at $5M or more, and both people appeared as text responding donors; one in an other-praising script pool, and one in a self-benefit script pool. The wealth indicators for the population of 50 text responding donors ranged from $38,308 to $373,733, with self-benefit averaging at $263,831 and other-praising at $197,521.

The biggest surprise was in looking at race, whereas in all previous sets, the vast majority identified as at least 93% White. Here, 32% of the text responding donors identified as races other than White. Another surprise found in the population of the text responding donors was that only two constituencies were represented: alumni and friends of the university, with *n*=48 (96%) alumni and just n=2 (4%) friends. Both friend text responding donors received self-benefit scripting, while *n*=28 (58.3%) alumni received other-praising scripts, and *n*=20 (41.7%) received self-benefit messaging (overall 56% other-praising and 44% self-benefit).

**Figure 6**

*Text Responding Donors*
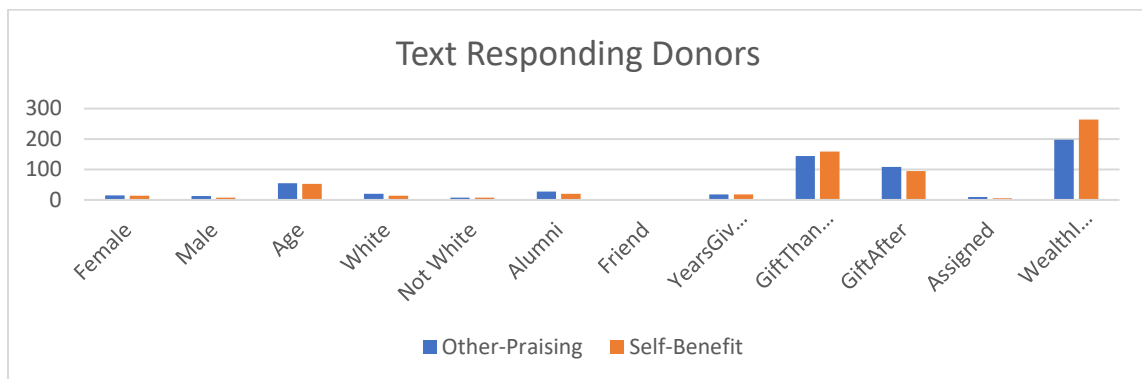
**Results Summary**

Donors who received other-praising expressions of gratitude were more likely to give again than donors who received self-benefit expressions, as evidenced by the outcomes of both studies, with a stronger positive effect found in the texting study. Further, donors who engaged in conversations or text exchanges were more likely to give again, particularly those who received the other-praising script, if only slightly, indicating donors respond to personal interaction. The subsequent amount given, however, did not increase in either study.

This reinforces that other-praising expressions of gratitude make donors feel good about themselves, strengthening their relationship with their alma mater and leading to the prosocial behavior of subsequent giving (Grant & Gino, 2010). This realization may prove helpful to annual giving practitioners. By employing other-praising messages in their donor stewardship, they achieve their goals by retaining, renewing, and acquiring donors, thereby solving the problem of improving the APR at their institution.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions

In this chapter, a review of similarities and disparities in the literature is conducted to explain how this study addresses those likenesses and differences. Gaps in the body of research are identified. Also identified and discussed are any limitations the COVID-19 pandemic played in the study's development, deployment, and analysis. Implications this research has on the fields of gratitude, philanthropy in higher education, and donor stewardship communications are identified. Lastly, recommendations for further study are offered for fundraising practitioners and institutions of higher education.

**Analysis**

This study revealed that annual giving donors, in this case to Appalachian State University's day of giving, respond to other-praising expressions of gratitude with subsequent donations, when the expressions are delivered through text messages by student beneficiaries. The evidence for this conclusion was reached through statistical analysis of a pre-registered field experiment designed to answer questions about the pro-social behavior of annual giving donors when thanked for their philanthropy through the communication medium of texting with one of two expressions of gratitude. The results were then compared to a previous, pre-registered field experiment that was conducted similarly, but through the medium of phone calls, and then replicated by the study in this analysis.

Through two comprehensive literature reviews by researchers in the field of philanthropic studies over the past two decades, as well as extensive exploration of gratitude, fundraising, and donor stewardship studies, I have found that little research is similar to mine: experimental field studies that looked at how expressions of gratitude – as delivered by student phone calls or text messages – may influence subsequent annual giving donations at a

public, regional state university. A 2010 study conducted by Merchant et al. incorporated a field study wherein they examined the impact of acknowledgments on organizational-donor relationships. Still, these acknowledgments were not focused on a particular type of expression of gratitude, nor were the donors supporters of institutions of higher learning, but of a public television station. They also examined the emotional effect on donors who did or did not receive gift acknowledgments and suggested the resulting positive feeling of being thanked led to the retention of those donors. This reinforces the claim that being thanked leads to feelings of a positive relationship but does not go the next step of suggesting a particular type of expression of gratitude. The Samek-Longfield (2019) study also utilized a field experiment to examine the behavior of donors to public radio stations, as well as to a national non-profit, and revealed that stewardship phone calls had little bearing on subsequent giving. Their study did not differentiate between types of expressions of gratitude, nor did it utilize beneficiaries to make the calls. Comparing my call study to theirs shows that while phone calls in and of themselves may not yield a significant increase in subsequent giving, it does call to attention that perhaps the study, and its outcomes, could have benefited from utilizing varying expressions of gratitude. The Samek-Longfield study contrasts Burk's (2003) outcomes where she indicated that phone calls made an impact on subsequent giving; her sample of donors were major givers, not annual givers like those in the Samek-Longfield study, or in mine. Again, Burk does not mention the content of the expression of gratitude, which may have been useful in conducting the research.

Where similarities exist in the literature are in the study of gratitude and its linkages to relationship-building. As Algoe et al. (2016) said, other-praising expressions of gratitude are more effective in promoting relationships than those expressions which are self-benefit

oriented. This was supported by the results of the texting experiment, where it was shown that a greater number of donors responded with subsequent gifts after receiving a student's text message with an expression of gratitude that was donor-centric, or other-praising compared to self-benefit expressions. Yoshimura and Berzins (2017) assert that gratitude expressions are "most effective at promoting relationship quality when they include content indicative of how important the person and the relationship are to the (expresser)" (p. 111). The other-praising content in my experiment, which tells the donor that they "rock," may, based on the evidence outlined in the study results, express how important the donor is to the student. This outcome is significant to annual giving practitioners and philanthropy and psychology scholars. It corroborates the research about expressions of gratitude and their potential implications on relationship building that may lead to increased fundraising, feelings of satisfaction, connectedness and engagement.

The literature reveals that donors decide to give again to organizations through various motivations, including altruism, family obligations, religion, and others. The research I have conducted does not necessarily delve into why someone chooses to give again. Rather, it promotes that having a positive relationship with the institution can be increased when donors hear an expression of gratitude as communicated by students through one of two telephonic media (calling and texting). Schlia (2021) states that donors can be influenced by one of four motivational factors including costs and benefits, reputation, impact and influence, and altruism. Knowing which of these to tap into when cultivating, soliciting, and stewarding donors can greatly influence their relationship with the institution or nonprofit organization, and their return to those positively leaning feelings through subsequent giving. But how does a fundraising practitioner, particularly one who works with thousands of

annual giving donors each year, know what motivates each person? Unless the donor is surveyed and indicates precisely what motivates them in every instance, and that motivation is then tied to their record and subsequent communications, it is impossible to know. Therefore, this study was designed utilizing research questions steeped in the belief, as Schila states, that donors are motivated by impact. As the results show, impact as an expression of gratitude through the self-benefit phrasing in the experiments was not supported in this study. Based on my years as an annual giving practitioner, I wondered if what we had been told for years is right – that donors want to know they are making a positive impact on an issue or the life of someone else. While the results of this study indicate an advantage of other-praising gratitude, that does not necessarily mean that donors are not motivated by altruism or impact; it simply was revealed that people respond at higher rates to donor stewardship messages that express gratitude through other-praising messages.

Some researchers, such as Hoelscher (2018), believe that communicating to donors how their gifts are being used to create positive change is one of the most critical factors in achieving repeat gifts. Kelly (2020) asserts that communication is central to philanthropic relationships, yet Greenfield (2002) believes that over-communicating can be a turn-off to donors, despite Eisenstein's suggested seven forms of donor stewardship communications (2014). There seems to be some confusion in terms of to what extent communications play a role in repeat giving. This study only examined the one mode of donor stewardship communication – texting, a relatively new medium in the thanking toolbox – rather than written thank you letters, emails, or other types of communications. Of those who responded to the text message, several replied with their own expressions of gratitude for simply being thanked. This reciprocal communications exchange and the fact that donors who responded

to text messages were more likely to give again – regardless of the expression of gratitude – indicate that some donors enjoy personal communication when they can have engaging conversations or dialog. This is further evidenced in the previous calling study where those who held a live conversation, and who received the other-praising expression of gratitude, were more likely to give again. The findings contradict Cheng and Mohamed (2012) who stated that texting cannot lead to increased feelings of relationship and that texting is impersonal and could negatively affect philanthropic engagement. Granted, their paper was written in 2012, long before the proliferation of texting today. Unfortunately, there are no other studies on giving and gratitude through texting, as of the writing of this dissertation.

**Limitations**

The following is a discussion of some of the limitations of this study and how they influenced the research.

***Pandemic-related Influences on Texting Experiment and Giving***

The initial calling experiment, upon which the texting experiment was replicated, was conducted in alignment with the typical annual giving calendar at Appalachian State University. The annual day of giving, iBackAPP Day, is typically held in the spring and the thank you calls are made in the summer, as was the case in 2019 when the calling experiment was conducted. The plan for the replication study was to follow the same timeline: solicit donors in the spring, thank them in the summer, solicit them again in the fall and winter, and then evaluate their giving before the following iBackAPP Day. The 2020 day of giving was slated for April 30. However, by then, the university had sent students and employees home to weather the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the myriad needs students began facing as a result of the pandemic, Appalachian developed the Mountaineer Emergency Fund as a way for donors to support students suffering financial hardships because of the pandemic, including rent, food, medical and mental health services, computer and connectivity needs, and transportation. Constituents were solicited for the Mountaineer Emergency Fund through an email campaign for the newly created fund in late March. No solicitation calls were made, as they typically are during iBackAPP Day, as students were no longer working in the Engagement Center. Rather than holding a day of giving, the university pivoted to a purely digital "Day of Caring" titled "AppBacksU Day" still held on April 30. No solicitations were made during the newly minted "APPBacksU Day"; instead, messages of community engagement surrounding the pandemic were shared. For example, stories featured on the APPBacksU Day website included those about students working in health care, staff providing support to students and others, donors who supported the Mountaineer Emergency Fund, and faculty who were continuing to teach innovatively. This outreach was conducted via email and social media, but not through phone calls. During regular days of giving, Appalachian's Engagement Center students are typically highly engaged in the solicitation process with parents, alumni, donors, and friends of the university. Appalachian did not obtain a texting platform until the fall of 2020, so constituents had never received texts from the institution until they received the expressions of gratitude around Thanksgiving.

Appalachian's annual giving office opted for other appeals after suppressing the solicitation efforts of the 2020 iBackAPP Day. For the texting study, the donors who were thanked just before Thanksgiving had given to one of three solicitations: Mountaineer Emergency Fund (March but before the Day of Giving was canceled), a fiscal year-end

appeal (June), and a fall giving campaign (September/October). Though donors were thanked for contributing to those appeals, they were again solicited during a newly adopted university rival challenge that was created and deployed in December where constituents were asked to give to Appalachian in competition with its main football rival, Georgia Southern University, coinciding with the football game on December 12. By then, Appalachian had begun using the texting platform, and donors were engaged via text as well as email and social media.

After foregoing a year of iBackAPP Day, Appalachian resumed the effort and conducted one in 2021, the most successful in the university's history in terms of dollars raised. For the texting experiment, donors to this iBackAPP Day and those thanked at Thanksgiving were those whose giving was evaluated for the study. Donors to iBackAPP Day may have also given during the period between the fall appeal, the Georgia Southern challenge, or of their own volition and without any solicitation effort on the part of the university prior to iBackAPP Day 2021.

Also noteworthy is that in 2019 and the seven years prior when Appalachian held iBackAPP Day, donors were asked to give to just one designation – the university foundation's unrestricted fund called the Appalachian Fund. In 2021, the decision was made to expand from this singular priority area to 20 areas, representing the most critical needs funds of each college, as well as for scholarships, athletics, and the newly created Mountaineer Emergency Fund. Therefore, some factors are different in the replication study than had previously existed in the call study: timing of solicitation and donor stewardship, funding priorities, and communication methods.

The texted message of gratitude was not the only form of stewardship donors to Appalachian State University received. They also would have received printed gift

acknowledgments from the university foundation. They also may have received personal

outreach by the donor's assigned fundraising professional (should they have been assigned).

Depending on the donation level, particularly those of $1,000 or more, they also would have

received a personalized thank you letter from the appropriate member of the advancement

team, such as the vice chancellor, assistant vice chancellor, or another member. I had no

control over those types of messages or expressions of gratitude, so it should be noted that

the text messages were not the only forms of stewardship communication that donors may

have received. It was not captured in the data who of the donors examined in this study had

received what other form of thanking.

### *Annual Giving during the Pandemic*

The pandemic has deeply affected annual giving in the United States (Salmon, 2020).

According to a recent COVID-19 impact survey by Grenzbach Glier and Associates (2020),

68% of organizations said their participation numbers had declined back to numbers similar

to 2019, while 57% reported a decrease in the number of first-time donors to their

organizations. *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* (through the Giving USA Foundation, 2021)

reported that 20% of American contributors may have ceased donating during the pandemic,

and 53% of donors took a more cautious approach to their giving. *The Chronicle* further

explained how lockdown measures affected institutions of higher education's ability to run

mass participation annual giving events, such as days of giving, leading to a significant

decline in giving among younger and occasional donors. Conversely, contributions from

older, wealthier donors did not decline in the same way despite colleges and universities'

inabilities to run large-scale campaigns.

Giving by individuals totaled an estimated $324.10 billion, rising 2.2% in 2020 (an

increase of 1.0%, adjusted for inflation) (Giving USA Foundation, 2021). However, this

information includes all giving, not just what can be defined as "annual giving," those

smaller donations that organizations anticipate realizing every year. Major gifts may have

contributed to the fact that giving by individuals achieved its highest total dollar amount to

date in 2020, adjusted for inflation. According to Osili (2021), "…giving trends vary by

donors' income and wealth, since the Great Recession, we have seen giving become more

concentrated toward the top end of the income and wealth spectrum." Giving to education is

estimated to have increased 9.0% (7.7% adjusted for inflation) to $71.34 billion. It is

important to note that educational giving includes contributions to K-12 schools and libraries,

as well as institutions of higher education. The data were not parsed out in the study among

annual giving donations to higher education. Additionally, a strong year-end stock market

accounted for the growth in giving to education (Giving USA, 2021). So, while overall

giving has increased since the pandemic, regular, annual gifts have decreased, perhaps

signaling that the average donor was not left with discretionary funds, while wealthier donors

could maintain their ability to give.

Another increase seen during the pandemic was from digital communications, such as

texting, videoconferencing, social media usage, online gaming, emails, and cell phone calls.

As places of business, schools, and social outlets, such as restaurants and entertainment

venues, were shuttered, people were locked down at home. Areas of employment transitioned

to remote work; classrooms became digital; and people were left with in-home entertainment

outlets as social distancing measures were implemented throughout the country. Just two weeks into the pandemic, a study conducted by Nguyen et al. (2020) showed the 1,374 American survey respondents increased their online gaming by 22%, email usage by 24%, video calls by 30%, social media engagement by 35%, voice calls by 36%, and as the most increased digital form of communication, texting had increased by 43%. The study further looked at who had increased their digital communication during the pandemic. Of those who had access to broadband at home and who were tech-savvy enough to utilize the digital media, women, those living alone, and older populations increased their usage over younger people, men, and those living with others.

In another study conducted by Twigby.com in May of 2020 (Cision PR Newswire), three months into the pandemic, the 2,200 respondents reported an increase in texting by 37%. A third study, conducted 12 months after the start of the pandemic, revealed that 51% of Americans with cell phones increased their use of texting (Oliveras, 2021). For many, the cell phone provided their link to others, as 59% of the 2,000 respondents believed their phone functioned as their lifeline during the pandemic, reducing feelings of isolation and loneliness during the past year. Interestingly, the survey also revealed that consumers became more comfortable with receiving text communications from companies, citing a feeling of security (65%) interacting with them through text (65%). The three studies mentioned indicated that Americans were texting anywhere from 37% to 51% more than they had before the outbreak of the coronavirus. These findings suggest an increased familiarity with texting and digital communication, particularly if two-thirds of the population feels secure in texting with companies or brands.

**Revisiting the Conceptual Framework**

Gratitude builds relationships between the expresser and the recipient (Algoe et al., 2016) via perceived responsiveness as a key conceptual variable that makes the recipient of the expression feel good about themself, the organization, and their philanthropy, and gives the sense of a strong relational bond. The findings of this study also reinforce Algoe's (2012) find-remind-bind theory of gratitude, as she noted that in the moments an emotion, in this case, gratitude, is experienced, "one's perception about the social partner (the institution) shifts in a way as to facilitate the potential for relevant future behaviors (repeat giving)" (p. 460). While this theory had never before been associated with giving behavior through formal research, the field experiment process and the application of the theory to the ensuing results indicate that its reach extends beyond personal relationships and can therefore be applied to relationships between donors and their institutions. The find, remind, and bind theory of gratitude posits that these three actions are essential to strengthening a relationship with an interaction partner. When the emotion of gratitude is felt in response to a benefit, it is partly because the recipient noticed an exceptionally responsive sentiment from the benefactor. A responsive gesture stands out from the rest in social situations as it signals that the expresser understands, approves, or cares about the person who did something altruistic. This assists in binding the partners in the relationship more closely together (Algoe, 2012).

Previously, we discussed how Algoe encourages the need for further study (2012), as the find-remind-bind theory had yet to be applied to a relationship between an organization and the donor who supports it, let alone in a college or university annual giving setting, serving as the halfway point between the interpersonal and transactional/exchange relationship of gratitude. My study examined how other-praising expressions of gratitude led

to an increased relationship with the donor's alma mater, as evidenced by subsequent giving. This reinforces the find-remind-bind theory in a new setting from that of the preliminary study. My study was quantitative and did not measure whether or not donors feel, believe, or openly acknowledge their relationship has strengthened, but by having applied the find-remind-bind theory to the experiment, I feel the evidence from the experiment shows that the relationship has improved or been strengthened, particularly through other-praising expressions of gratitude as communicated through text messages. The find-remind-bind theory's implications for study in the realm of annual giving fundraising donor stewardship have been applied in these two studies, which allows researchers and practitioners alike to seize opportunities for connection with responsive others. This also reinforces that benefactors who are thanked are more likely to engage in future prosocial behaviors with the expresser (Grant & Gino, 2010).

**Combining Practice and Theory**

The essence of fundraising is relationship building, which leads to donor retention and increased giving (Love, 2020), and hopefully provides a solution to the problem of the ever-shrinking APR. The evaluation of the calling and texting studies outlined in this dissertation, as situated through the find-remind-bind theory, and executed through field experiments focused on other-praising expressions of gratitude brings about a groundbreaking approach to donor stewardship research. The research sought to elicit a stronger sense of relationship between the donor and the institution, as evidenced by the prosocial behavior of repeat philanthropy. This combination of communication media, theoretical perspective, philanthropy, and higher education served as the interdisciplinary approach to the design and execution of this new and exciting body of research. The concept

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of evaluating donor stewardship effectiveness is not new, but the utilization or manipulation of types of expressions of gratitude through verifiable experimental testing is, according to the lack of published research. My goal for this research is to benefit annual giving fundraising practitioners.

The aim of higher education annual giving fundraising is to raise money from alumni, parents, faculty and staff, and friends of the institution to accomplish several goals: build a consecutive year donor pipeline, acquire new donors, retain current donors, renew lapsed donors, increase the APR, and provide funds for critically needed gaps in services and programs that tuition and fees do not cover. The reward for achieving these goals is often the same – higher goals the following year, and the next, resulting in a never-ending cycle of donor engagement opportunities to position the institution for success. The mechanics of annual giving fundraising may change with the times, but the tenets remain the same – raise more money from more donors. Sound donor stewardship ensures donors feel so good about giving, that they keep giving.

With the advent of the digital age, new approaches to fundraising have been employed by annual giving practitioners to engage potential and current donors. No longer do most offices of annual giving rely solely on direct mail; they now engage in a multichannel approach to fundraising, layering in other techniques such as email, digital marketing, phone calls, crowdfunding, days of giving, personal solicitation, and texting. Other factors such as the timing, messaging, and appearance of the fundraising appeals seem to also promote success or failure in these efforts. Data segmentation of the various audiences of alumni, parents, and friends of the institution can also be critically important to the efficacy of the fundraising efforts. Other factors beyond the rote mechanics, and control,

of fundraising efforts are also ever-present: donor motivations, the economic landscape, institutional credibility, and the relationship the prospective donor feels they have with the college or university. Just as fundraising mechanisms have evolved, so have stewardship methods, as we do more than send thank you letters; we call, text, send video messages, and post social media "shoutouts," among others.

As an annual giving professional with more than a decade of experience in higher education fundraising, I position myself as a seasoned practitioner. Over the years, I have admittedly had mixed success with various elements of the solicitation process. Particularly at times of less effective efforts, I cannot help but wonder, "Why?" This curiosity, coupled with the ever-lingering goal of improving the APR by getting more people to give more money, drives my research-oriented modus operandi. I want proof so that I can replicate these successes to raise more money, and ultimately, help the students who attend my institution. I do not fundraise in a vacuum as I am an alumna of four state institutions: Grand Valley State University, Indiana University-Northwest, Florida Atlantic University, and Appalachian State University – all of which solicit me for my annual giving dollars. When I make donations to my alma maters, I keenly pay attention to how well they thank me. For me, meaningful donor stewardship deepens my relationship with the institution knowing that my philanthropy is helping someone else.

The preliminary calling experiment outlined in my research originated from a debate I had with my Engagement Center manager, who did not feel that spending time calling donors to thank them was worth the effort, particularly when that time spent paying students could be used to raise money and achieve fundraising goals. I felt it was worth it, but could not provide evidence-based, data-driven proof to back up my position. I could not find studies

specific to higher educational annual giving stewardship that reinforced my opinion. All that existed were anecdotal or inferential accounts of how well donor-centric stewardship made a difference in whether or not people would give again. Hence, an experiment was born; one that was steeped in tangible results that came from actual data and people. From this initial study, the replication study engaging text messaging was developed and delivered.

Because most lists of donor motivations cite altruism as one of the reasons people behave philanthropically, and because it is a commonly held belief among annual giving fundraising practitioners that donors want to see the impact of giving, I imagined that the hypothesis would be rejected – that self-benefit phrasing in the expression of gratitude might prove more significant. Perhaps through a qualitative exploration, I believe more research is warranted to ascertain why this set of people, annual giving donors to Appalachian State University, responded to the other-praising expression. More surprising than learning that people like to know they "rock," it was very enlightening to learn from the first experiment, the calling study, that the donors who gave again and who received a voicemail from a student, regardless of the expression of gratitude, gave significantly higher subsequent gifts than those who had live, interactive conversations with student beneficiaries. Few people with whom I discuss this research guess that would have been the outcome. However, after thinking about it, most of them will say that in retrospect perhaps people like to talk on the phone less these days, or maybe while they are listening to the student, they are half anticipating what is coming next – perhaps a secondary solicitation – and are not truly paying attention to the expression of gratitude that listening to or reading a transcript of a voicemail might allow for. Further research on how donors feel while listening may be needed.

**Recommendations for Future Research and Practice**

Future studies may include other experimental designs where the method of communication is considered. In the studies outlined in this dissertation, the initial calling study and the replicated texting study, I employed phone calls and text messages. Still, there are other options and tools, old and new, at the annual giving practitioner's disposal, including written communications and video messaging. The experiments in these studies involved telecommunications: calls and texting, so video messages, such as through the ThankView platform, may create even more personal communications, where a donor has a salient view of someone they are helping. Rather than hearing a voice or reading a scripted text message, seeing the beneficiary may or may not influence the donor, regardless of the expression of gratitude – this is an area of potential study. Algoe et al. (2020), utilized videos as an approach to studying third party witnessing of gratitude behavior and if it had an effect on the sense of relationship, parallel to the first two parties involved in the gratitude exchange. While this reinforced the positive emotion of gratitude, a video message does not allow for a communications exchange, as does calling and texting, so it would need to be noted that the communication is not interactive.

Another option for study replication could be to alter or strengthen the expressions of gratitude, perhaps adding a third possibility – a hybrid expression or one completely different, though this would require further inquiry into the discipline of gratitude to find what gaps may exist in the existing research. Delving into the gratitude discipline could help discern what this third expression of gratitude could be – based on the current research these academicians are conducting, analyzing, and sharing, such as revisiting the concepts of transactional gratitude or third-party witnessing. It may also be worth the effort to assess the

current or future expression of gratitude through a linguistic inquiry software that allows researchers to code and evaluate the scripts for emotions or other relevant dimensions.

Yet another direction for future study of the effects of expressions of gratitude on subsequent giving could be to develop a continuum of communications revolving around the expression that starts with donor stewardship and reverberates through the solicitation process. In my study, there was no marriage of gratitude expression in the following appeals to give again. It would be interesting to see if a concentrated, long-term effort to speak to donors from either an other- or self-oriented voice throughout the year, would reveal significant outcomes in subsequent giving.

Because the study was conducted with annual giving donors, it would also be noteworthy to determine if another subset of donors, such as major givers, athletics donors, or planned giving donors, would have similar responses to the expression of gratitude and the method of stewardship communication. The donors in my study were primarily alumni, parents, and friends of a public, regional four-year institution, so another possible study would be to look at donors to private or national universities, community colleges, or international institutions.

As my study involved quantitative field experiments that used actual donor data as results, it would be interesting to take a qualitative approach to the methodology and then compare the two methodologies and their results. This would be an opportunity to either reinforce what practitioners believe may be the case or guide them to a new way of thinking about and practicing donor stewardship. For example, provide two expressions of gratitude to donors through a survey and ask them which they they believe would be more likely to respond to with a future donation. Or ask them why they are motivated to give and then

compare that motivation to the expression of gratitude they believe they would be more likely to respond to. The outcomes could then be compared to this or another field experiment study and its donor giving data to identify similarities or differences. To take that approach a step further, it would also be relevant to survey annual giving fundraising practitioners to gather their viewpoints on which expression they believe would have a more significant impact on subsequent giving. As practitioners, we are often told to show the impact of giving on the affected change with the beneficiary rather than to let the donor know they "rock." This comparative type of study could have implications for future donor stewardship communications.

Another option would be to create an entire year-long campaign around the expression of gratitude that starts with engagement and cultivation, moves into solicitation, and then rounds out with donor stewardship. This long-term, comprehensive approach would require a very detailed, strategically deployed, and data-driven methodology. It may be an option for a smaller institution or a randomized set of donors from a larger one. A-B testing, a common practice where two different treatments are deployed then the results calculated would be necessary for that level of an experiment (Gallo, 2017).

**Implications for Educational Leadership**

Unlike many members of my beloved doctoral cohort 26, I am not a teacher or a principal; I am not a college or university administrator; and I am not seeking a career as a professor. I am a member of a vitally important service unit that supports the university, known as Advancement, that is tasked with ensuring unmet needs are satisfied through development, alumni relations, donor stewardship, and communications efforts. It is a multi-disciplinary enterprise of the university consisting of many layers, all focused upon creating,

building, and deepening relationships between alumni, donors, and the institution. The vice chancellor or vice president of university advancement at most institutions serves as a member of the leadership's cabinet and therefore has great input and influence on decision making at the highest level, that which affects the whole university. With evidence-based, data-driven fundraising and donor stewardship strategies and tactics aimed at achieving fundraising goals, the advancement division helps the university achieve its mission of educating students by providing private philanthropic support (Schmidt, 2018). Enrolling more doctoral students whose roles within the university are not directly related to pedagogy could prove advantageous to the program by creating an atmosphere that welcomes those who contribute to the success of the university and its students, but through non-pedagogical means. This further legitimizes the degree while bringing differing perspectives to the faculty and students in the doctoral program.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, utilizing a methodology of conducting field experiments on whether expressions of gratitude play a role in subsequent annual giving at a regional, four-year public institution served as a new approach to the question of whether stewarding donors can ultimately positively affect change for the APR. Engaging the find-remind-bind theory of gratitude within this conceptual framework proved noteworthy, as well as an expansion of a theory into a new discipline: fundraising. Seldom before has research in this area, through this post-positivist, field experimental methodology and the epistemological lens of a fundraising practitioner, been conducted. The design and results of this study have both academic and practical implications for future research and practice. Perhaps what was

discovered here will encourage all of us to express gratitude in a way that builds relationships

by telling people simply, "you rock!"

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# Appendices

## Appendix A

*IRB Notice*



Audra Vaz <vazah@appstate.edu>

**[External] IRB Notice - 21-0149**

**IRB** <irb@appstate.edu>                                                                                      Sun, Jan 3, 2021 at 5:59 PM
To: boltll@appstate.edu, vazah@appstate.edu

**To:** Audra Vaz
Assoc VC Development , Assoc VC Development
CAMPUS EMAIL

**From:** IRB Administration
**Date:** 1/03/2021
**RE:** Determination that Research or Research-Like Activity does not require IRB Approval

**STUDY #:** 21-0149
**STUDY TITLE:** Giving and Gratitude: Comparing communication media through expressions of stewardship

The IRB determined that the activity described in the study materials does not constitute human subject research as defined by University policy and the federal regulations [45 CFR 46.102 (e or I)] and does not require IRB approval.

This determination may no longer apply if the activity changes.  IRB approval must be sought and obtained for any research with human participants.

If you have any questions about this determination, please contact the IRB Administration at 828-262-4060 or irb@appstate.edu.

Thank you.

**Appendix B**

*Participant Table 2*

## PARTICIPANTS

| GIVING CHARACTERISTICS | |
|---|---|
| Consecutive Years of Giving | 14.3 |
| Wealth Indicator | $41,215.00 |
| Assigned | 116 |
| Gift TY Amount | $169.52 |

| DEMOGRAPHICS | |
|---|---|
| Age | 55.9 |
| Female | 449 |
| Male | 358 |
| White | 95% |
| Non White | 5% |

| CONSTITUENCY TYPE | |
|---|---|
| Alumni | 753 |
| Current Parent | 35 |
| Former Parent | 28 |
| Faculty | 13 |
| Staff | 2 |
| Friend | 2 |
| Board of Trustees | 2 |

# Appendix C

*Pre-registration 1*

**As Predicted:** "Gratitude and Giving Behavior" (#27599)
**Created:**        09/08/2019 04:03 PM (PT)
**Author(s):** Patrick Dwyer (Indiana University) - pcdwyer@iupui.edu, Audra Vaz (Appalachian State University) – vazah@appstate.edu

**1) Have any data been collected for this study already?**
No, no data have been collected for this study yet.

**2) What's the main question being asked or hypothesis being tested in this study?**
Compared to self-benefit behavior, does other-praising behavior in thank-you messages increase donor retention and level of future donations?

**3) Describe the key dependent variable(s) specifying how they will be measured.**
There are two dependent variables: whether the person makes a donation when solicited, and how much money they donate.

**4) How many and which conditions will participants be assigned to?**
Two conditions: Self-benefit or other-praising thank-you message.

**5) Specify exactly which analyses you will conduct to examine the main question/hypothesis.**
We will run a logistic regression predicting whether a person donated based on which condition they were in. We will also run a t-test predicting how much they donated based on which condition they were in.

**6) Describe exactly how outliers will be defined and handled, and your precise rule(s) for excluding observations.**
We don't plan to exclude any observations.

**7) How many observations will be collected or what will determine sample size?**
**No need to justify decision, but be precise about <u>exactly</u> how the number will be determined.**
Sample size is 1026. This is the number of donors who were called and thanked earlier this year. The donation solicitation will occur later this year.

**8) Anything else you would like to pre-register?**
**(e.g., secondary analyses, variables collected for exploratory purposes, unusual analyses planned?)**
We will also explore whether there is a difference in donating and how much is donated based on whether the person was spoken to or whether a voicemail was left for them, and whether any effects of condition depends on this variable.

**Appendix D**

*Pre-registration 2*

**As Predicted:** "Gratitude and Giving Behavior – Texting Study" (#52892)
**Created:**      11/24/2020 01:26 PM (PT)
**Author(s):** Patrick Dwyer (Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy) -
pcdwyer@iupui.edu, Audra Vaz (Appalachian State University) - vazah@appstate.edu

**1) Have any data been collected for this study already?**
No, no data have been collected for this study yet.

**2) What's the main question being asked or hypothesis being tested in this study?**
Compared to self-benefit behavior, does other-praising behavior in thank-you messages increase donor retention and level of future donations?

**3) Describe the key dependent variable(s) specifying how they will be measured.**
There are two dependent variables: whether the person makes a donation when solicited, and how much money they donate. Regarding the donation amount, gifts will be compared to the 2020 gift they gave (that was to either the App Fund, the Parents Fund, or the Mountaineer Emergency Fund), and will be coded as less than, more than, or the same as that earlier gift.

**4) How many and which conditions will participants be assigned to?**
Two conditions: Self-benefit or other-praising thank-you message.

**5) Specify exactly which analyses you will conduct to examine the main question/hypothesis.**
We will use a Chi-squared test to determine whether condition (other-praising vs. self-benefit message) influenced whether a person donated. Among participants who donated, we will also use a Chi-squared test to determine whether condition (other-praising vs. self-benefit message) influenced how much they donated.

**6) Describe exactly how outliers will be defined and handled, and your precise rule(s) for excluding observations.**
We will exclude participants who's phone numbers are landlines as they cannot receive text messages, or if the number no longer belongs to them or is no longer in service.

**7) How many observations will be collected or what will determine sample size?**
**No need to justify decision, but be precise about <u>exactly</u> how the number will be determined.**
Sample size is 1099. This is the number of donors who were texted and thanked earlier today. Participants will be solicited in December, 2020 (at Calendar Year End), and on March 4, 2021 (iBackAPP Day of Giving).

**8) Anything else you would like to pre-register?**
**(e.g., secondary analyses, variables collected for exploratory purposes, unusual analyses planned?)**
We will also collect past donation behavior for exploratory purposes.

**Vita**

Audra H. Vaz was born in 1970 to Anastasios and Teresa Lousias and raised in Dearborn, Michigan. She graduated from Edsel Ford High School in 1988 and, as a first-generation transfer student, attended and graduated from Grand Valley State University in 1992 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Communications. After marrying her husband, Johann, and having her children, Brenna and Derrick, Audra attended graduate school at Indiana University, Northwest campus in Gary, Indiana, earning a graduate certificate in nonprofit management in 2003. After a move to South Florida, she completed her master's degree in Nonprofit Management from Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton in 2008. Audra earned a graduate certificate in strategic communication from Appalachian State University in 2018 and entered the doctoral program at Appalachian in the fall of the same year, completing her degree in August of 2022.

Audra has enjoyed a 30-year career in advancement, is an avid tennis player, and loves learning and teaching. She resides in Columbia, South Carolina with her husband and cats.