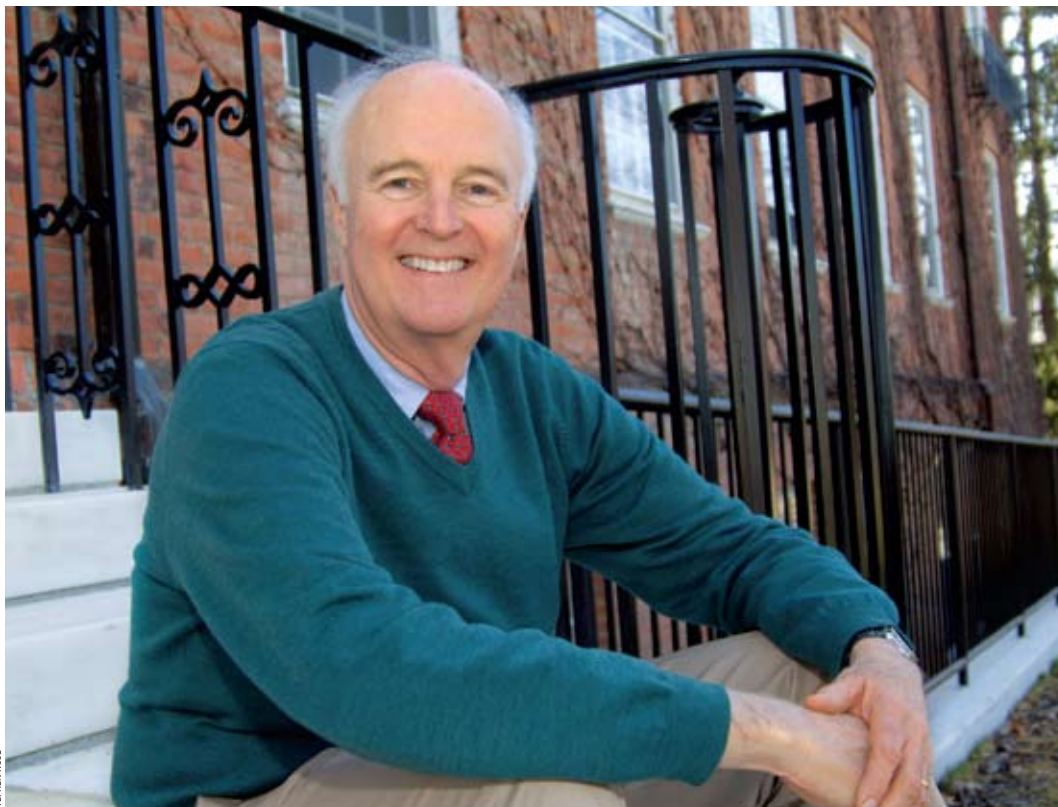


Measurable



STEPHEN ROSE

Steve Birrell '64 was 13 years into a career in teacher education when he decided to make the switch to university development. "I found almost immediately that I enjoyed fundraising," he wrote in his 25th Reunion Class Book, "because the results were clearly measurable."

Results



He didn't have to travel far—literally across campus. But when Steve Birrell '64 decided to leave his job as director of teacher education at the University of New Hampshire to take over corporate and foundation relations there, the gears were set in motion. At a conference in Boston, he ran into Jim Briggs '60, Williams' director of alumni relations and development, who shared plans for a major fundraising effort to mark the College's bicentennial. Steve was lured back to the Purple Valley as director of the 25th reunion program and parent giving and has since made an indelible mark on the Office of Alumni Relations and Development, serving the past 14 years as VP. (We'll try to ignore the four years in the early '90s when he temporarily "defected" to Amherst.) On the eve of his retirement on June 30, Steve discussed the changes he's witnessed in an area of College life critical to Williams' continued success.

Alumni Review: Let's get the toughest question out of the way first: What, in your experience, is the biggest difference between Amherst and Williams alumni?

Steve Birrell: [Laughing.] One of the things that really surprised me was that Amherst alumni feel every bit as strongly about their school as Williams alumni do. I had assumed that Williams cornered the market on this kind of loyalty. It's not unique in higher education, but I think the attachment of Williams and Amherst alumni to their schools is unusually strong. The competition between our schools brings out the best in each. But there are noticeable differences in institutional cultures. At Amherst, for example, the relationship between the faculty and the administration is more adversarial. And there's the geography. The enforced intimacy born of our rural location fosters a strong sense of community and encourages a high level of civility.

AR: You mentioned the attachment and affection Williams alumni feel toward their alma mater—something you've coined Williams' "Second Endowment." That's not a common term in the field of alumni relations and development. Can you explain how you thought of it and what it means?

SB: After I came back to Williams from Amherst, the Executive Committee of the Society of Alumni was meeting in Naples, Fla. They were discussing their mission, and I thought, you know, there is this other endowment that we have, and it's an extraordinary resource. Basically, it's a way of objectifying the collective loyalty, affection, love, devotion, generosity and goodwill that Williams alumni, and

WHAT A DIFFERENCE 25 YEARS MAKES

The alumni body has grown significantly over the past quarter century. So, too, has the Office of Alumni Relations and Development in terms of its size, scope and capability.

	1984	2008
TOTAL ALUMNI	15,388	25,522
% MALE/FEMALE	83/17	66/34
ALUMNI FUND VOLUNTEERS	500	1,600-plus
YEARLY ALUMNI GIFTS*	\$12,921,130	\$53,702,981
TOTAL AR&D STAFF	22	72

*cash in hand

to a certain extent parents and friends, feel for this place. The alumni relations program is particularly responsible for making sure that this endowment grows and is protected. The point I make often, and it's proving to be only too true at the moment, is that the financial endowment can take a hit, but you can bring it back. The Second Endowment is different. If that ever sustained a serious hit, it would be much more difficult to rebuild that trust. So it's the role of the Executive Committee and the alumni relations and development office to be the principal stewards of the Second Endowment.

AR: Your office oversees alumni volunteers numbering in the thousands who give generously of their time and expertise. In what ways do Williams alumni participate in the life of the College, and why is that so important?

SB: We rely heavily on volunteers for all of our alumni relations and development programs. Their support has always been essential in terms of promoting Williams in the high schools. They've been absolutely indispensable to generating financial support for the College. But our alumni also serve in untold other ways. They act as class officers and leaders of regional associations and affinity networks. They organize Williams-Amherst game telecasts in 50-some locations every year and welcome faculty to their cities and towns for seminars through Williams' RoadScholars and other regional programs. They gather Class Notes for *Williams People* and offer career mentoring to undergraduates and fellow alumni. They serve as trustees and community service volunteers. The value of this service to Williams is incalculable.

AR: Why has the number of volunteers for the Alumni Fund, in particular, increased so dramatically from about 500 when you arrived in 1984 to more than 1,600 today?

SB: In the mid-1980s, the average undergraduate class size doubled to more than 500, so it became too much for one class agent, even with associate agents, to keep up with fundraising among all his or her classmates. Another factor is the rise of two-career families and the hectic pace at which most

of us live. Our alumni have less time to offer the College, so we need more volunteers.

AR: The number of employees in alumni relations and development also has increased since 1984.

SB: Yes, the work of our office has increased dramatically, in part to better assist the growing pool of volunteers, as is the case with annual giving. We also support new programs. For example, in 1986, as we were heading into the Third Century Campaign, I became director of major gifts. It was the first formal fundraising program at the College dedicated exclusively to large gifts, and it was labor-intensive—more reliant on staff than on volunteers. Our staff also work with an alumni body that is much more widely dispersed geographically and disproportionately younger. Younger alumni tend to be much more mobile, which makes it more challenging for our office to keep in touch with them.

AR: Technology must play a larger role than it ever has.

SB: Here's just one example. Let's say you're a class agent, and you want to make some fundraising calls to your classmates on a Saturday afternoon. But you don't know if Mary has made her Alumni Fund gift yet. You can log in to our secure system and find out the answer, in real time, along with her contact information and the amount of money she's given in years past. We developed these online tools after discussions with the Alumni Fund vice chairs, who pushed us in a very positive way to get better, and now other schools are emulating them. I should add that the highly personal requests volunteers make of their classmates have kept us among the top in the nation in terms of percentage of alumni making at least one gift per year to the College. We've consistently been in the 60-plus percent range, and more than 75 percent of alumni made at least one gift to The Williams Campaign that just ended. There are only about four or five schools in the country that can claim that level of support. The national average is about 20 percent.

AR: What challenges might your successor face in maintaining that level of participation—not just in regard to fundraising, but also in terms of volunteerism?

SB: We're already seeing demographic and technological changes that affect how alumni relate to the College. With the advent of social networking, for instance, we no longer play an exclusive role in keeping alumni connected to one another. So we're developing an application to allow us to engage them through their own Facebook profiles, and

CAREER AT A GLANCE

- 1964: Bachelor's degree with honors in American history & literature, Williams College
- 1966: Master's in teaching, Wesleyan University
- 1967-69: U.S. Navy lieutenant, junior grade
- 1969-77: Administrative positions in the Master of Arts in Teaching Program, Brown University
- 1977-82: Director of teacher education, University of New Hampshire
- 1980: Master's in public administration, University of New Hampshire
- 1982-84: Assistant director of development for corporate/foundation support, University of New Hampshire
- 1984-86: Director of the 25th reunion program & parent giving, Williams
- 1986-91: Director of major gifts, Williams
- 1991-95: Director of development (and later alumni relations and public affairs), Amherst College
- 1995-2009: VP for Alumni Relations and Development, Williams



In 1984, Williams was just transitioning from keeping biographical and financial information on thousands of index cards to a computerized system called Advance. Advance streamlined alumni record-keeping and donor tracking for the Office of Alumni Relations and Development, and the software the company developed at Williams has gone on to lead the industry.

	1984	2008
ALUMNI RECORDS		
Paper files, in linear feet	280	620
Computerized, required disk space	300MB	20GB
ELECTRONIC REPORTS AVAILABLE TO VOLUNTEERS		
	0	38
ELECTRONIC FINANCIAL TRANSACTIONS		
	N/A	26,515
ELECTRONIC ALUMNI CONTACT REPORTS		
	N/A	59,974

I'm sure we'll have to continue to adapt as social media evolve. Also, some of our most powerful programming—reunions, annual giving, etc.—has been organized by class year. Now alumni are organizing themselves according to their own particular interests, including clubs, sports and majors, so it's possible that the class year will recede in importance. Another trend that will undoubtedly affect how our office operates is the increasing diversity of our alumni population. As the College continues to recruit the best students from various countries, regions and socioeconomic backgrounds, we're looking at a very different alumni body in the coming decades. One size will no longer fit all. We're going to need to intensify our efforts to understand more fully how alumni want to relate to the College and what they need from us to do that, rather than saying, "Here's the way *we* think you ought to do it." It's a logical part of the evolution of Williams, and it will involve a lot of listening and willingness to adapt. We've made the cognitive leap, but how does that translate programmatically?

AR: What would you say is the biggest difference in the Office of Alumni Relations and Development between your first day of work at Williams and now?

SB: When I got here, Williams had a smaller, more homogeneous alumni body. More than 80 percent were male. Most had come to Williams from the Northeast. So it was a much narrower universe. But for me the similarities between then and now stand out: an unwavering commitment to quality, the sense of place, the intimacy of scale, the shared values of a liberal arts education that retains at its center the centuries-old symbol of Mark Hopkins and the log. Williams remains an intensely personal, people-centered place. More diverse, to be sure, and striving to be inclusive. Williams tries harder than any institution I've ever known to live up to its ideals. No wonder we all love it so much.

AR: What do you look back on most fondly as you prepare to retire?

SB: To be able to spend the majority of one's professional career as a part of the Williams community, working with and for Williams alumni, faculty, students and staff—especially the extraordinary group in the Office of Alumni Relations and Development. It's been a rare privilege, one for which I am deeply grateful. ■

Interview conducted by Denise DiFulco, a freelance writer and editor based in Cranford, N.J. Data provided by Advancement Information Systems.

In years to come, the Williams alumni population will become increasingly diverse as a result of the College's efforts to recruit the best students regardless of their geographic location, background or ability to pay. Here's a portrait of the alumni body as of January 2009:

GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION

New England	24%
West	17%
New York	16%
Mid-Atlantic	13%
South	11%
Midwest	10%
Southwest	4%
Foreign/Other	4%
Non-contiguous	1%

ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION

White	64.9%
Did not report	21.7%
Black/African-American	4.9%
Asian/Pacific Islander	4.4%
Latino	2.6%
Mixed Heritage	.7%
Other	.7%
Native American	.1%

DECADE DISTRIBUTION

1920s	.01%
1930s	.46%
1940s	3.18%
1950s	8.14%
1960s	10.34%
1970s	16.96%
1980s	20.81%
1990s	21.01%
2000s	19.09%