PASSING THE MORTAR BOARD AROUND
Singapore's universities look to tap alumni spirit

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JUST how does the Singapore Management University (SMU) continue to find its students' G-spot? That's "G" for giving.

Today, the university will receive a $10,000 donation from Renfred Tay and Koh Seng Leong, national sailors and first-year students at the varsity.

Last year, fresh graduate and valedictorian Darren Lim pledged an annual $4,000 gift to SMU in the form of a scholarship named after his parents.

In 2005, three graduates from its Masters in Wealth Management programme contributed $6,500 to set up an annual alumni-sponsored book prize.

SMU may be well known for tooting its horn, but is there something "different" about the university when it comes to giving?

Certainly, its small size is conducive to better personal interaction between and among faculty and students. Its alumni community is just 1,500 strong, and the pioneering spirit of a fledgling entity helps, too.

"For example, the effort needed to start a co-curricular activity from scratch makes a big difference," said Mr Clarence Chai, 27, a member of the SMU Alumni Association executive committee.

But, as all the universities agree, it is the long run that counts in alumni giving. It's why SMU has also cottoned on to the best practices of private American universities, one of which is to involve alumni in student activities as early as possible, such as freshmen orientation. At Stanford University, for example, a personal alumnus helps students settle in their dorms on their first day.

"The message from the presence of that alum is clear: 'I graduated from Stanford a while ago, but I'm still involved in helping this university do the best job that it can do.'

"This message is repeated during the student's time at the university - 'You and Stanford are bonded forever.' Donating in later years comes a lot easier for students who graduate with that attitude," said Professor Larry Vanderhoef, chancellor of the University of California in Davis.

To be fair to the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), they are also actively engaging alumni. While more established than SMU, they are relative newcomers on this issue - NUS' development and alumni affairs office was decoupled into separate entities only in 2003.

The challenges at the two bigger universities also have to do with the student experience. Mr Chew Kheng Chuan, director of NUS' development office, admits there may be a disconnect with some generations of students.

"But I think you should ask students now if they are still being ignored," he said.

While change is in the air, though, NUS alumni advisory board member Viswa Sadasivan hopes that "entrenched cynicism" - that universities are "forced" to come to alumni because the umbilical cord with the Government has been cut and they need the money - does not take root.

NTU, for one, stresses that there are many ways to give back to the university, not just in monetary terms.

To a certain extent, the changes at the university, from Nantah to the Nanyang Technological Institute to NTU, have been an issue in developing a sense of identity.

"But the university has put in a lot of effort to integrate everyone so that we feel a sense of long history and identity," said alumnus and MP Inderjit Singh.

It is doing a good job of reaching out with newsletters, agreed 30-year-old Cindy Tan, a relationship officer at a bank and an alumnus of both NTU and NUS.

For now, it may be good to look at these little things, even if it is groundbreaking donations that make the headlines.