



# Utilizing volunteers in advancement

Building long-term engagement with alumni  
through gifts of time and talent

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Creating volunteer opportunities for constituents is becoming top-of-mind for many in the field of advancement. Engagement of this type is invaluable in keeping key stakeholders—such as alumni, donors, and current students—involved on a personal level, and eventually leading to support through time, talent, and treasure.

Volunteerism is a way for institutions to build engagement and affinity among friends and alumni to keep them “warm” for eventual solicitation down the road. Advancement executives need to recognize gifts of “time” and “talent” are likely to lead to financial gifts in the future. While alumni offices/associations offer a range of general volunteer opportunities, there is always potential to connect individuals with other assignments that match their specific skills. Volunteerism unlocks engagement from alumni and studies show that active involvement of graduates at their alma mater encourages philanthropic support.

According to the 2016 U.S. Trust Study of High Net Worth Philanthropy, most wealthy individuals believe charitable giving (45 percent) and volunteering (31 percent) have the greatest potential for positive impact on society. The report goes on to state that, among the wealthy, volunteering with a nonprofit organization has a strong correlation with giving to that organization. A large majority of high net worth individuals (84 percent) give financially to at least some of the organizations with which they volunteer, while 49 percent give to most, if not all, of the organizations where they volunteer. The

report also shows a clear correlation between volunteering and the amount of philanthropic support. Wealthy individuals who volunteered in 2015 gave 56 percent more on average than those who did not volunteer.

A 2015 study by the Corporation for National and Community Service found that roughly 1-in-4 Americans volunteered through an organization. Approximately 62.6 million Americans volunteered in 2015, providing service worth an estimated \$184 billion. Working mothers and people age 35 to 44 were the most likely to give their time to charity. Thirty-six percent of mothers who have jobs outside the home volunteered while Generation X had volunteerism rates of 28.9 percent.

According to the report:

- » **Millennials (people under age 35) had the lowest rates of volunteerism;**
- » **Parents were most likely to give their time to education groups and institutions;**
- » **Twenty-four percent of volunteers helped raise money.**

## We're trading *breadth* of engagement in exchange for *depth* of engagement

Traditionally, institutions of higher education have tried to appeal to as many constituents as possible with a goal of broad participation. Think of large “cattle call” alumni tailgates: even the majority of participants may be only marginally engaged with the institution. But with many institutions facing budget shortfalls, the focus on the importance of philanthropy has changed. Once an added bonus for many institutions, philanthropic funds are now a critical piece of overall operating funds. Instead of the traditional “fundraising” of years past where all alumni were courted and invited to events, foundations and alumni associations are looking for higher quality over quantity. Efforts are now tailored toward reaching fewer but more select individuals for volunteer roles. This leads to the ability for staff to engage more deeply with each individual and build meaningful relationships.

But there is a trade-off. When priorities are shifted, institutions reach fewer constituents but gain even more committed supporters. In the long run, institutions must collect, analyze, and segment data to help predict which constituents are worth

the time and effort to contact, train, and cultivate for both volunteer roles and philanthropic giving. Balance between broad outreach communications/events and targeted ones can be difficult to achieve but worth the headache. Research clearly shows that alumni engagement, via social media, event attendance, campus visits, targeted publications, or formal volunteer roles can lead to engaged alumni who are more likely to give.

### Profile: today's volunteer

What does today's volunteer look like? He or she could be someone who just graduated and is full of excitement and energy. Or a busy working parent who wants to stay connected to his or her alma mater and, more importantly, friends he or she made while in school. Today's volunteer could be a retiree with time on his/her hands who decides to make an impact on the world. Maybe this volunteer is a donor who wants to do more than just write a check or transfer stock—this individual is hands-on and wants to see the impact of his or her gift.

No matter which part of the constituent lifecycle someone is in, today's volunteers expect that the



time they are giving, and the work they are doing, is something the organization needs in order to accomplish its mission. Volunteers need to see that the time they are committing will have a specific outcome for the institution or community, which is not necessarily measured in monetary value. Alumni want to help students and other alumni, perhaps via internships through the companies they work for or by recruiting high-level students to attend their alma mater. The increase in value of someone's degree is often a strong motivator for volunteering.

However, relationships between alumni and their alma mater is reciprocal: volunteers promote an institution's mission and vision to alumni and donors, the campus community, and the larger external community.

No matter what the volunteer's background or situation, his or her needs remain the same: to find some type of personal satisfaction in the work he or she is doing for your institution—work which is accommodated within already hectic schedules. Many of the individuals called upon to volunteer are those commonly labeled as “mid-career.” They are 30 to 40 years old and have been in the workforce for 10 to 15 years. They have enough experience so that they don't have to be retrained on common duties like customer service and they still have enough energy to work a five-hour event without a break.

What does an “ideal volunteer” look like for your institution? This person is someone who generates results without taking up all of your time and energy to train or monitor. These volunteers are reliable, passionate, professional and have connections they can leverage for partnerships which will assist your institution in reaching its goals. They energize those around them as well as the institution; they are endless advocates—always on topic and ready to share with anyone and everyone what you do and, more importantly, *why*. They are problem solvers, outside-of-the-box thinkers, and, above all else, they are results driven. There's nothing worse than

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enlisting help from someone who never shows up—or shows up and contributes nothing. The “ideal volunteer” can be a lifelong supporter or make one-off contributions of time, treasure, and/or talent.

To ensure someone is a good match for the tasks you need handled, find out why he or she wants to volunteer. In a study of alumni who were donors, Weerts and Ronca (2009) found that a high level of student engagement was predictive of alumnus volunteer activity. Can you segment your data to find graduates who participated in student organizations, clubs, or sports? Is volunteering a resume builder or a way to show others they can “do good” and be accepted in their community? Or do they have a true passion for your institution's mission?

There can sometimes be a mismatch between what an organization needs and what someone can or wants to contribute. Remember, it's acceptable to say “no” to someone who's not a good fit. The ideal volunteer will focus more on what he or she can contribute and less on what can be obtained

from the experience of volunteering. So, do your homework (or “volunteer prospect research”) to find people with the skill set, enthusiasm, and drive your institution needs—then turn on the “wooing” and engage them as volunteers.

## Making the ask

Once you’ve found that ideal individual you want as a volunteer, what’s next?

- » **Make it easy for someone to agree to work with your institution.** You are competing with millions of other organizations listed in online sites such as [createthegood.org](http://createthegood.org), [volunteermatch.org](http://volunteermatch.org), and [idealist.org](http://idealist.org). These sites allow individuals to search for organizations with causes they have a passion for and to match their skills to the organization’s needs.
- » **Create a snapshot of exactly what you need your volunteers to do,** the skills needed to accomplish tasks related to your goals, the time commitment needed, and your short- and long-term goals and tasks. Have an online form and respond quickly when someone shows interest in assisting your institution. Ask the right questions in order to match volunteers with skills-based roles.
- » **Show the value of volunteering for your institution.** In today’s “what’s in it for me” culture, you need to make a strong case for what can be gained by working for your group as opposed to one of the millions of others that also need assistance. What makes you different? Are you assisting children with healthcare needs? Ensuring that residents in a third-world country have clean drinking water? Raising funds for students to attend college? What is it that makes it worth someone’s time and money to work with you?
- » **Share what someone can expect to gain personally**—whether it’s networking opportunities, new skills, or professional development. To attract highly skilled volunteers, create an experience that targets volunteers’ abilities and interests, develops skills, demonstrates impact, and is meaningful for individuals. People who are engaged and motivated will take time out of their busy lives to volunteer.

» **Finally, think beyond the traditional roles many of us assign our volunteers.** They can do more than run a name badge table or ask companies to fund events. Think photographers, accountants, graphic designers, florists, musicians. And someone who works in one field may have a hidden talent in another field. A quiet, reserved engineer could be a classically trained pianist who would welcome the chance to play for an event.

Think about what your institution needs assistance with and then create roles in which volunteers can help meet those needs. For instance, retirees can mentor young professionals or take on leadership roles which can free up time of paid staff. Volunteers may know their community’s movers and shakers, resources, and underlying challenges better than staff members and can help your institution to stay connected to the community. Maybe a volunteer serves only as your most ardent supporter to the larger community, and that’s OK.

## Managing volunteers

This is probably the hardest part of working with volunteers and the task that can drain your energy and spirits the fastest. However, volunteers are valuable assets to your institutional goals and worth the investment. According to the 2005-2007 *Volunteer Supplement to the Current Population Survey conducted by the Corporation for National and Community Service* (Eisner, Grimm Jr, Maynard, & Washburn, 2009), of the 61.2 million people who volunteered in 2006, 21.7 million—more than one-third—did not donate any time to a charitable cause the following year. This equals roughly \$38 billion in lost volunteer time in one year if you calculate the value of their donated time at

\$20 per hour for 1.9 billion hours. So how do you manage volunteers to create a feeling of belonging, excitement, and inclusion?

First and foremost, be mindful of the balance between professional and personal engagement. Communicate clearly from the beginning of your relationship the responsibilities which go with the task/assignment each person has agreed to take on, the length of time the role is expected to take, and the expectations of performance. Volunteers should be treated like a major donor—recruit them for their unique skill set, assign them to a manager who appreciates what they bring to the table, acknowledge their efforts, and say thank you.

Realize that everyone is different—we all have our own learning style, ways we like to work—and our own comfort levels working in teams versus individually. Some of us are comfortable speaking in public (or not), leading a project/initiative, or would rather remain in the background. Meet your volunteers where they are instead of where you want them to be by realizing that differences exist. This doesn't mean giving up your goals—it means compromising. Does your institution's website really need to have three photos as opposed to four at the top? Do name badges have to be in order by length of service or alpha by last name? While there are organizational standards and certain rules we all must follow, ensure volunteers know the parameters in which they have to work and then let them be creative and do the job.

This leads to training. Invest in the time it takes to train volunteers and the staff who work with them. While many organizations have tasks which can be completed with minimal or no training, such as assisting with a cleanup/beautification project, more often than not well-meaning people will offer to help your institution who may be lacking many of the skills you need most.

Training has many benefits. It helps new volunteers get to know the people and program, establishes

### When training be sure to cover some key topics:



**Expectations:** What are they accountable for?



**Explanations:** How to best accomplish assignments and what resources they have available to them.



**Off limits:** What are volunteers not allowed to do? Can they view or edit your database? Can they sign contracts on behalf of the organization? Are negotiations with third-party vendors permissible? What information shared with them is confidential versus public? When do they need to ask for help instead of making a decision on their own?



**Emergency:** Make sure volunteers know things such as where first aid kits are located, escape routes, the correct emergency response units to call, what to do in case of a storm/fire/flood, etc.

the minimum competency that all volunteers are expected to possess, teaches skills they need to perform the tasks assigned to them, and shows the level of professionalism expected from volunteers.

Assign specific staff members the role of coordinating, planning, and implementing training. Remember, not everyone is comfortable in front of a group and/or can present well. Make sure you have objectives for the training which are covered at the beginning of the time you have with volunteers.

Finally, make sure not to forget to evaluate the training—information covered, the trainer, location,

etc. Make it simple for volunteers to give feedback and offer ways to do it both anonymously and face-to-face.

In a perfect world training should continue as volunteers work with your institution. Take time to update them on new policies or procedures and offer them professional development opportunities to update skills they are using to meet your objectives. These skills could also be used at their place of work or at home. You could also offer first aid or other useful certification classes.

## Evaluation

Regardless of the length of time someone has spent as a volunteer with your institution, make sure you ask them to evaluate their overall experience working with you. This can be completed via a short online survey created through one of the many online surveying sites such as [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com), [doodle.com](https://www.doodle.com), [surveyplanet.com](https://www.surveypal.com), and so on. Ask some simple questions:

- » **Was the project/goal/task accomplished to the satisfaction of the volunteer and the institution?**
- » **How well did they individually and/or as a group/board complete the task assigned?**
- » **What did they need from the staff/organization that they didn't have?**
- » **What went really well?**
- » **What improvements could be made or what would they do differently next time?**
- » **Will they work with your institution again? If so, in the same role? Different role?**

## Say thank you

Last but most importantly, say *thank you*. Praise your volunteers for the job they completed for you. Ensure that both personal and public recognition occur through hand-written thank you notes, recognition on websites, at events, in magazines/newsletters (both digital and print), or via social media (with the volunteer's permission, of course).

Remember: keep in contact with your former volunteers. They may not have time to help your institution again right now but that doesn't mean they won't come back to you—they are still donors even if all they contributed was their time.

## References

Eisner, D., Grimm Jr, R. T., Maynard, S., & Washburn, S. (2009). The new volunteer workforce. *Retrieved October, 3, 2011.*





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