



Recruiting & Retaining Volunteer Board Members: A Dozen Things You Can Do for Your Alumni & Volunteer Board

Whenever I am asked to volunteer, I generally ask three questions.

1. How much time will this take (in other words, when are the meetings, are there assignments between meetings, are there projects I will be assigned to do, etc.). I need to know this prior to making any commitment.
2. When is my term over (in other words, when is it reasonable for me to leave this position). No one volunteers for anything forever and interests change over time. Knowing when I can step away is important to me from the start.
3. Are there any financial expectations (most boards ask their members to contribute to the group at some level). If a group is headed into any capital campaigns, this last item is especially true, since it is a general rule that all board members must contribute to a capital campaign.

Getting Someone to Volunteer

Getting someone to volunteer for a board is one of the tougher challenges for any board. Volunteers are hard to come by and hard to keep. However, there are some tips to making this work. Below are a dozen things alumni and volunteer boards can do to recruit and keep volunteers.

1. **Someone needs to be in charge of finding new members.** If left to chance, rarely do boards perpetuate themselves. Someone, usually the board president, has as their duty, the role of identifying new members and keeping current ones. For most non-profit boards, this is **the most important role of the board president**. Let others do their jobs and let this be the president's role.
2. **Keeping members is easier and less costly than recruiting new ones.** Business and colleges learned a long time ago that keeping customers and students is cheaper than constantly replacing them. Ask your board members what their needs are and if the group is meeting those needs. Having some institutional memory on a board is a good thing so keep your current members around as long as both parties (the member and the board) are satisfied.
3. **Strategically recruit new members.** Boards should be representative of many eras (as far back as you can go), or geography (maybe even setting aside a slot for out-of-towner, especially with new technologies), and of skills (i.e. someone with facilities background, someone with a legal background, etc.). While it is good to put out a general "anyone interested" it is more effective to see what you need and go get it. It is analogous to the difference between rush and recruitment.
4. **Use technology.** Many alumni and volunteer boards use listserv to take care of business between meetings. Some actually vote on e-mail for small projects that need quick attention. For any alumni and volunteer board listserv, be sure to include the undergraduate officers, since the biggest complaint from undergrads is that they don't know what the alumni and volunteer board is up to. Phone conferencing is another tool when board members are spread out. It is inexpensive and a good way to solve the geography issue. Technology can increase your potential pool of alumni, rather than just those who live within 30 miles of the campus.
5. **Meetings of the group need to be set far enough in advance to accommodate busy schedules.** Hastily called meetings mean low attendance since not many people can drop everything at the last minute. Meeting the second Sunday of the month at 5 p.m.

(for example) is a good way to set meeting times a year in advance. And meetings need to end after 2 hours. This means agendas ahead of time and someone to keep the group on task. If people want to socialize before or after that is fine, but stick to a limit for the business.

6. **Move meeting location if necessary.** Sometimes where the organization is located is not where the bulk of the alumni are located. Alternating the meeting sites (every other month change to the organization facility and then the big city where the alumni live) or host regional board meetings, especially during the summer. Think of this as going to the alumni rather than asking the alumni to come to you.
7. **Roles need to be defined.** Will the group have officers and chairs in charge of projects or will they act as a “committee as a whole.” Having people sign up for a specific role that is well-defined increases chances of them volunteering. This also makes meetings go faster since they essentially report what has been done, with the group taking action on items that need discussing.
8. **Boards need position reality checks annually.** That is, people need to know how long they will serve as treasurer, homecoming chair, golf outing chair, vp for facilities, organization advisor, etc. Some positions are high burnout (treasurer and advisor) and thus need to do a reality check each year to see if the volunteer is still fine and that they are still being effective. Don’t leave someone on a position too long: their frustration level will rise and they will leave with a bad taste for the group.
9. **Know the exit.** Volunteers need to know how long they serve. Not term limits, but they need to know how long their terms are for (for example 3 years) so that they can choose if they wish to opt for another on. No one volunteers forever, so this needs to be defined, or else board members will slowly fade away and not know if they are still on board or not. If you can get 3-5 years out of a board member, you are doing well.
10. **Include parents.** Many boards are now putting a parent (or set of parents) on their board. This adds a different perspective and gets their involvement. Many groups want a parents’ club but don’t have the time to do so. A parent can take such a group and add greatly to the undergraduate experience. This also increases the potential size of pool from which to draw from for the board.
11. **Include alumni from other schools.** Given the geographic area, there are bound to be many alumni from other schools who might be interested in serving on the board. They bring a different perspective to the board and can be a great resource. National headquarters can supply the names and addresses of alumni in surrounding areas (just e-mail them the zip codes). Include these alumni on your newsletter mailing list also. Again, this increases your potential pool for board members greatly.
12. **Be sure to thank them enough.** Rarely is anyone thanked enough. Volunteers are especially in that category. Think of ways or awards such as Volunteer of The Year, Distinguished Service Award, Outstanding Alumni Award, etc. Certificates, plaques, etc. are good ways of publicity recognizing those that give of their time. **No one should leave a board without being thanked.** And be sure to thank those who allow them to volunteer. Rarely is a volunteer doing this without some support at home. One board I know has an annual get-away meeting with spouses/partners as a way to thank them.

Above all else, think of board members as volunteers.

Put yourself in their place and always ask yourself, “How would I like to be treated.”