

MARTS & LUNDY SPECIAL REPORT

The Evolving Role of Alumni Relations

How institutions are organizing, mobilizing and measuring the value of alumni engagement.



Introduction

“Friend-raisers.” This has been the historical view of alumni relations, and to no great surprise: alumni offices have for decades focused their efforts on bringing graduates together in largely social settings on the vague notion that when alumni are happy, good things result. Correspondingly, institutions have tended to expect little more from their alumni offices.

Thankfully, this mostly benign view of alumni relations has increasingly gone by the wayside with far greater attention being paid to tangible ways in which the alumni function can contribute to advancing the institution – such as recruitment, advocacy, fundraising and helping students with their careers.

The area of alumni volunteerism – the ways in which the alumni office coordinates opportunities for graduates to interact with the institution – is gaining significant traction in the field. The importance of this type of active engagement cannot be understated in terms of the potential to validate and elevate the role of alumni relations while undergirding strategic initiatives. Yet, only a relatively small body of work exists from which to guide alumni offices in this regard.

This benchmark study focuses on five core aspects of alumni volunteerism and measurement:

1. What volunteer opportunities are offered through alumni relations offices, and how does this differ between public and private institutions?
2. What volunteer metrics are in place?
3. How is data collected?
4. Is there a direct connection between volunteerism and giving?
5. What are the outcomes of increased volunteerism at the institution (i.e., more recruiters, mentors, donors), and how does this address institutional goals?

Such measures can provide clues to:

- Prioritizing alumni relations programs and budgets.
- Elevating the role of alumni relations to something far more definitive than in the past.
- Taking the focus off of alumni participation as the predominant indicator of alumni support.

Christopher Vlahos
Senior Consultant

Key Findings

88% of institutions actively promote alumni volunteer opportunities on their websites.

The most common calls-to-action:

“Volunteer” & “Get/Stay Involved”

There are 14 types of volunteerism/leadership positions that are most prevalent across-the-board:

- **97%** of institutions offer leadership in regional chapters/groups.
- **72%** offer leadership in special-interest/affinity groups.
- **63%** offer leadership in student recruitment programs.
- **51%** offer participation in career services/networking programs.

Volunteer offerings differ between public and private institutions:

Legislative advocacy in public institutions versus annual fund, reunion committees and student recruitment in private institutions.

Top three goals of volunteer programs:

- increased volunteerism
- networking and career advancement
- building a greater sense of community

91% of institutions reported that alumni relations staff collects volunteer data. In 65 percent of cases, that information is stored in a database. In 15 percent of cases, that information is not tracked.

48% of alumni directors have identified a connection between volunteerism and giving. However, 27 percent were not sure whether a correlation exists.

73% of institutions use engagement/volunteer data for annual or major gifts cultivation.

Survey Methodology

The initial phase of this study was an inventory of volunteer and engagement opportunities culled directly from 177 institutional websites (89 public, 98 private). Institutions were primarily selected from their membership in the Council of Alumni Association Executives (CAAE), Private College and University Alumni Directors (PCUAD), as well as national rankings. This inventory replicates the search experience of a graduate who may be investigating volunteer opportunities offered by their alma mater.

The second phase was an online survey that gathered information on the types of volunteer opportunities measured, methods for collecting volunteer data and whether a correlation had been identified between volunteerism and giving. The survey generated a total of 45 responses (25 percent response rate): 24 private institutions and 21 public universities.

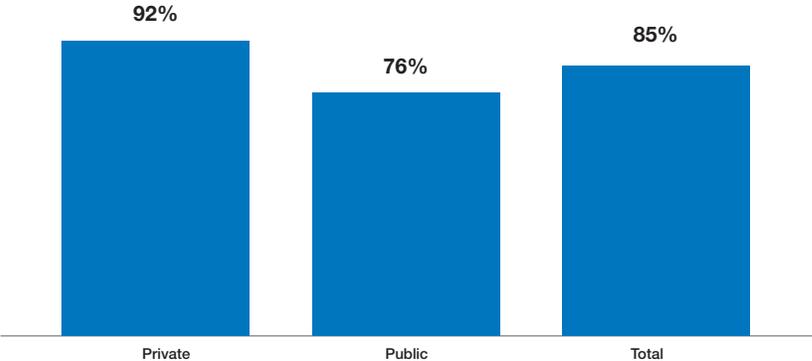
A third phase of personal interviews with alumni directors is planned to follow this initial study.

Findings

Website Inventory

Eighty-five percent of the colleges and universities make volunteer opportunities clearly available on their websites, a fact that underscores the importance of alumni volunteerism and engagement. This is somewhat more prevalent among private institutions.

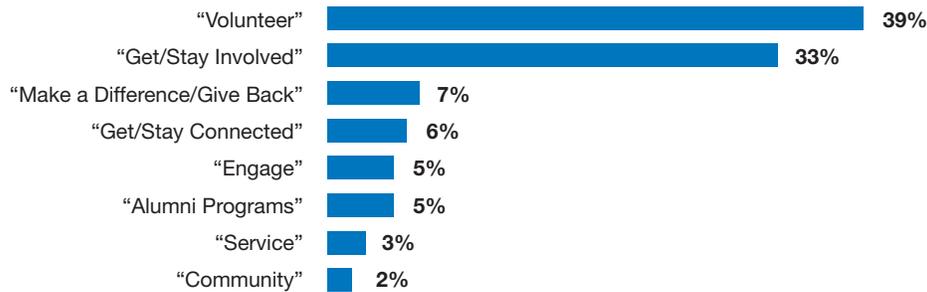
Volunteer Link on Website



There are a wide variety of ways that volunteer opportunities are presented online. Primary links that explicitly refer to “Volunteer” and “Get/Stay Connected” comprise almost three-quarters of the volunteerism calls-to-action:



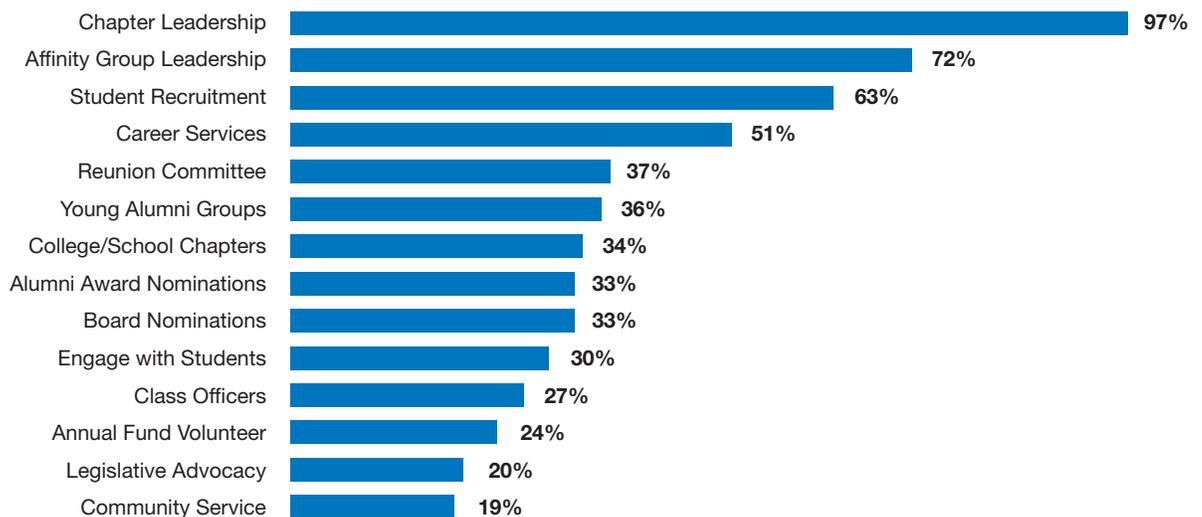
Description of Volunteer Links on Website



Indiana University's volunteer link stands out among its peers as being powerfully explicit: "Shape IU's Future." IU's unique statement is an exceptional call-to-action that captures the essence of an engaged alumni body.

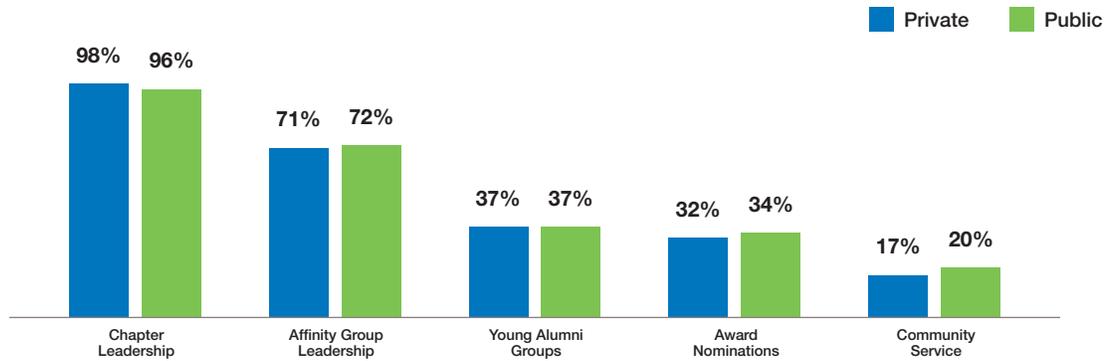
There are 14 different types of volunteerism/engagement that are the most prevalent among the institutions reviewed in this analysis:

Volunteer Opportunities Available via the Institution's Website



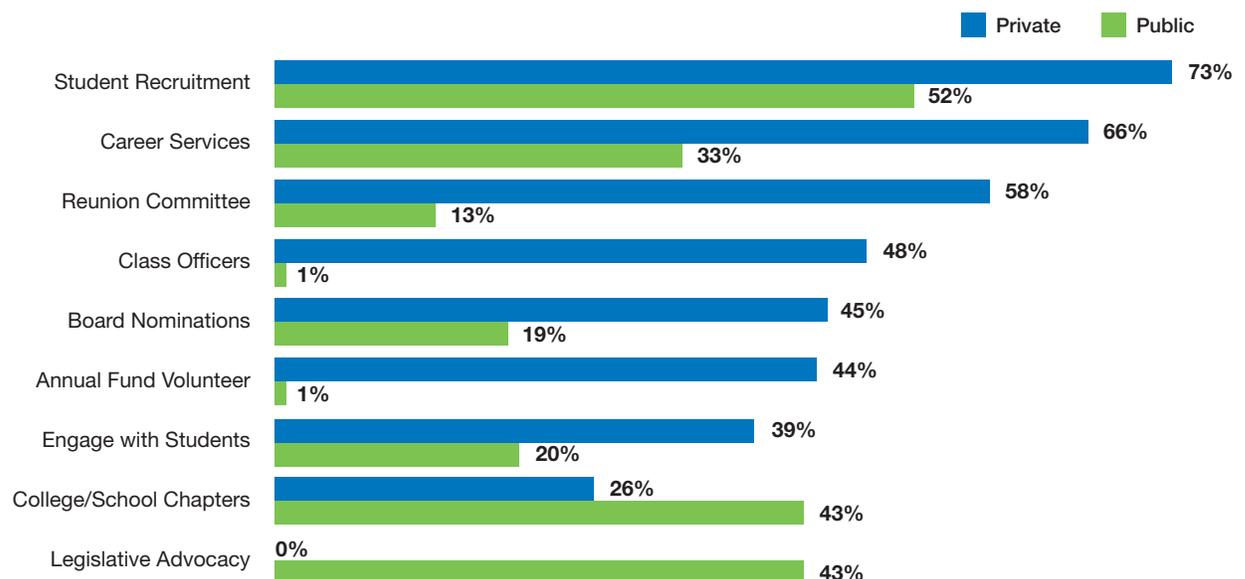
There are five examples of volunteerism and engagement that are equally as common between public and private institutions.

Volunteer Opportunities: Private and Public



On the other hand, there are stark differences between the two groups in several other areas of engagement. For example, the concept of **legislative advocacy** is common among flagship public universities, whereas this activity is hardly the purview of private schools not dependent on state funding. Conversely, private institutions rely much more heavily on alumni involvement in areas such as volunteerism for the **Annual Fund, reunion planning, class officers/class representatives** and **student recruitment programs**:

Volunteer Opportunities: Private and Public



Beyond this core listing of 14 volunteer/engagement opportunities offered online, a number institutions offer other areas of engagement unique to their own culture and identity. A sampling of highly innovative ideas of alumni involvement is below:

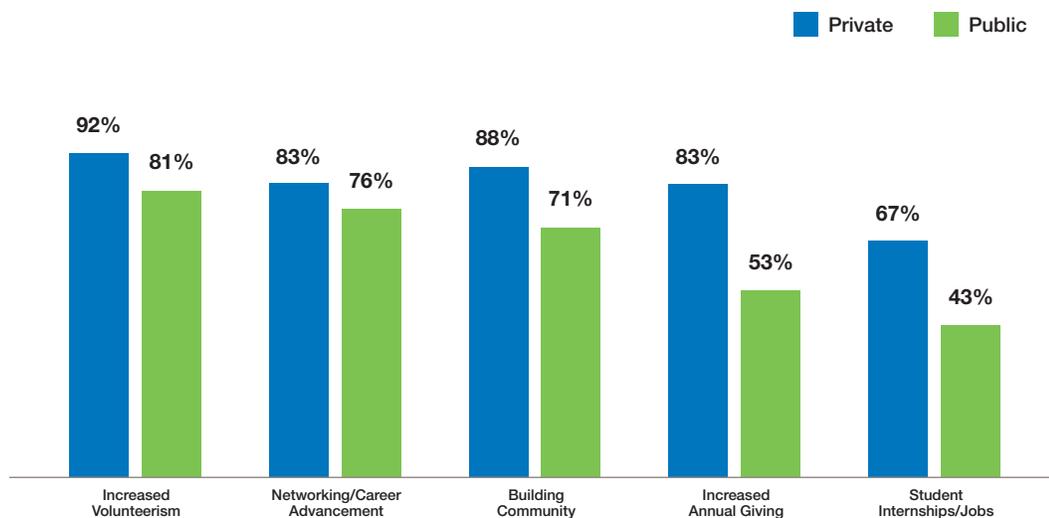
- **Barnard College: Alma Maters (Sweet Mothers) Programs**
Events and activities focused on the challenges and joys of balancing motherhood, work and other aspects of women’s lives.
- **Colorado State University: Done in a Day**
Provides a variety of low-commitment volunteer opportunities from staffing a check-in table, handing out items to students and reviewing graduate research presentations.
- **Florida State University: Emeritus Alumni**
A constituency organization that encourages the continuing interest and participation of alumni that graduated 50 or more years ago.
- **Hamilton College: College and University Presidential Inaugurations**
Alumni are invited to participate in the procession of delegates from institutions at presidential inaugurations across the country.
- **Marquette University: Association of Marquette University Women (AMUW)**
A program that provides opportunities for service with peers and strives to enhance women’s educational and cultural opportunities.
- **Miami University of Ohio: Miami Mergers**
A web portal for the 14 percent of Miami alumni who are married to another alum; provides “members” a venue for posting updates, stories, videos and special valentines.
- **MIT: Parent Connectors**
Alumni serve as a resource for prospective parents by sharing insights and practical knowledge to help ease any anxieties created by new students’ transitions to college.
- **Morehouse: Alumni Mentoring Program**
A collaboration between Morehouse and The John W. Harland Boys & Girls Clubs that mentors African American males between 10–17 years of age.
- **The Ohio State University: The Buckeye Room**
A monthly online forum where alumni are invited to provide input on the university and the alumni experience.
- **University of Southern California: Five age-based alumni communities, each with distinct programming**
Current Students, Young Alumni (up to age 34), Second Decade (ages 35–49), Encore Trojans (ages 50–70) and Half Century Trojans.
- **Washington University: Home Plate Program**
Students are matched with a host alumni family for home-cooked meals and enjoyable conversation. (“Home plate” is a double entendre that also refers to St. Louis’ strong baseball tradition.)

Online Survey

An online survey of chief alumni officers provided the opportunity to go more in-depth to identify the primary goals of alumni engagement programs, methods of data collection and, importantly, whether there is evidence (even anecdotal) that volunteerism is connected to giving.

The primary goals of alumni volunteer programs fell into five core categories.

Volunteer Program Goals

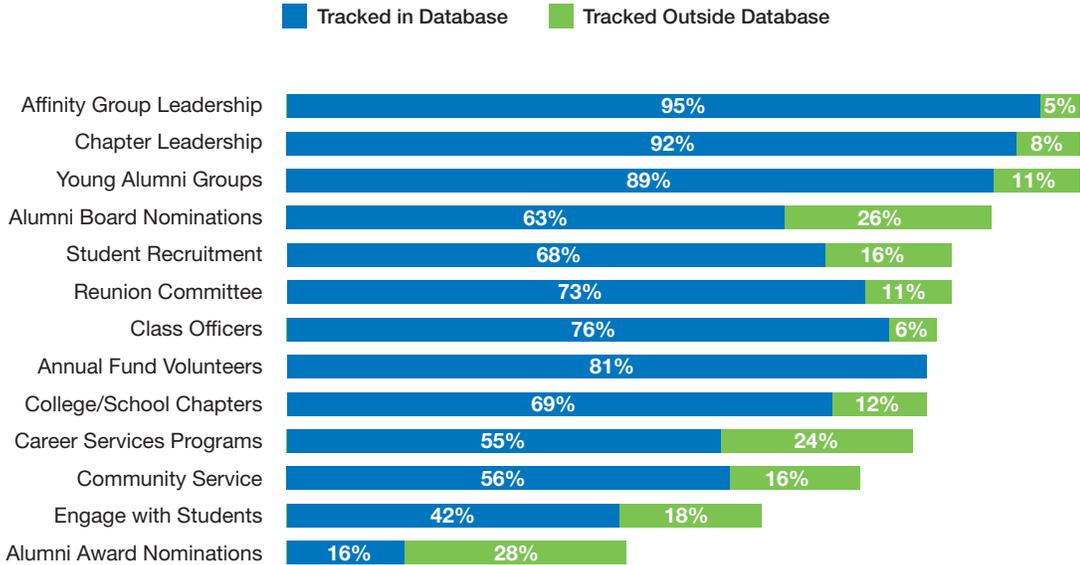


Each of these areas was selected as a goal of private institutions more often than publics, most notably in the area of **increased annual** giving. This no surprise given the emphasis that private schools place on rankings (although this is not to say that publics do not want to improve their participation rate).

Additional engagement goals articulated by alumni directors include “increased advocacy for the institution,” “leadership pipeline development,” “advancing the strategic priorities of the university” and “raising the visibility of the institution.”

It is clear that collecting volunteer information is important to alumni offices. Each of the core set of 14 volunteer activities are tracked to varying degrees, whether directly in the alumni/university database or via data collection outside of the database.

Tracking Alumni Volunteering



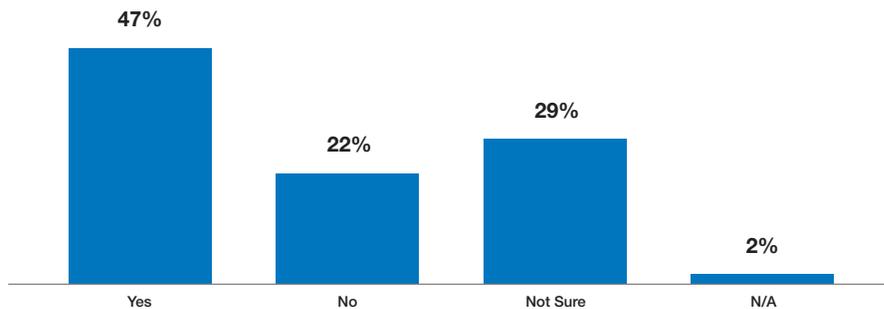
Data is collected through a variety of sources, whether directly by the staff, provided by others or self-reported, but the data collection task falls primarily to Alumni Relations staff:

Data Collection Methods



The ability to extract a correlation between alumni engagement and giving is a critical step to providing tangible support of the institutional advancement initiatives. However, as indicated below, less than half of the respondents were able to determine that such a correlation exists at their institution:

Is there a correlation between volunteerism and giving?



A number of chief alumni officers spoke with specificity on the volunteering correlating with higher giving. Several reported finding that volunteers give significantly more than non-volunteers (at least twice as much as non-volunteers). Others reported that volunteers were more likely to give by factors of two or three times.

“We consistently found that alumni event attendees as well as alumni volunteers (across all spectrums) give as a rate two to three times higher than the average alumnus.”

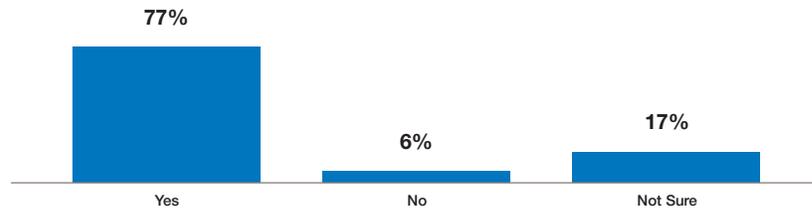
Others did not cite specifics but were nonetheless certain as to the impact of volunteerism on giving:

- “Overall, we have done many internal studies around the correlation of engagement and giving, and it is not only statistically significant, it is also quite large for some sub-segments of our alumni.”
- “Overall giving percentages and average gift amounts are higher among engaged alumni.”
- “There is a correlation. What we have not proved is whether it is causal, and if so, how.”
- “Alumni who are engaged, particularly those who have served as volunteers, show a higher correlation for giving.”
- “We have found that as former students of the university are made aware of engagement opportunities, it helps build an affinity to the institution and to the alumni association. Once they are aware of the opportunities available to former students, most of which are available due to the generosity of gifts to our annual fund, they themselves are inclined to make a gift.”

Almost one-third of respondents were not sure at this juncture whether there is a correlation between engagement and giving. However, several respondents referred to institutional plans to elevate the volunteer data collection and tracking.

It is also important to note that the vast majority of recorded volunteer and engagement activity is used in annual and major gift prospecting. This provides a greater overall purpose to alumni volunteer efforts, as more attention is being paid to alumni that volunteer as donor prospects.

Is recorded alumni volunteering used in annual giving or major gift prospecting?



Closing Thoughts

This analysis underscores three of the principal movements that characterize the work of alumni relations offices today:

1. **The emphasis throughout the field on engagement of the broad alumni base.** This concept has gained significant traction, particularly among public institutions whose principal efforts to “engage” alumni was often via a dues-based membership program.
2. **The importance of measuring alumni involvement with the institution.** This ability to track alumni engagement undergirds strategic priorities and provides the alumni office with a clear and definitive sense of purpose.
3. **Recognition of the alumni relations office as a more important member of the institutional advancement team.** The alumni relations office has the responsibility to engage all alumni, and there is now a much greater appreciation of the direct impact of engagement on giving.

Alumni are key stakeholders and must have a strong and engaged presence for their institution to meet its goals. It is the responsibility of the alumni relations office to organize, mobilize, harness and measure all aspects of alumni involvement.

A special thank you to **Kathy Howrigan**, Consultant, and **Alison Rane**, Associate Consultant, for their outstanding work throughout the research itself and in the preparation of this report. Both Kathy and Alison are members of our Analytical Solutions team.

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