



Refreshing Your Volunteer Corps

What do you know about your volunteers?

Do you know your volunteers? Do you know their age, marital status, household income, level of education attained? Are you struggling to refresh the ranks of your volunteer corps? A few years ago a Congressional report stated that “Volunteering rates in the US are no lower than in the 1970s.” Really! Certainly we’ve improved from disco music, bellbottoms, huge sideburns, tube socks, lava lamps, and the AMC Gremlin

In 1974 the most typical American volunteer was a married white woman between the ages of 25 and 44 who held a college degree and was in an upper income household. Recent studies suggest that gender, marital status, age, education, income and race are still factors impacting the frequency of volunteerism in our nation:

- More women volunteer than men, and the steady and significant increase of women in the workforce today has not changed the gap and the higher prevalence of women as volunteers persists.
- Married Americans are fifty percent more likely to volunteer than those who had never married. Logically, parents are naturally inclined to support their children’s activities yet this does not fully identify the marriage factor in higher volunteerism. Married but childless Americans volunteer more often than never-married adults. And married parents volunteer only a bit more than

(continued, page 2)

Demographic and Cultural Changes Impacting Volunteerism

Chasing Volunteers

As fundraisers for nonprofit organizations, it is essential that we understand the ebbs and flows of volunteerism in our sector. For many public nonprofit organizations the only thing more important than funding is if, when, why and how individuals engage in volunteerism. Fundraisers should be closely watching the evolving cultural and societal forces impacting volunteerism today.

Do you hold a Tocquevillian image of the United States as a vibrant society where people of all ages, economic standing, and racial and ethnic groups are actively involved in public life? Or, are you more influenced by articles over the past several years lamenting the presumed decrease in civic engagement and volunteerism?

Who is counting what?

Getting a handle on volunteerism in America is surprisingly more difficult than even we first thought. The disjointed history of those who have endeavored to count, or more appropriately survey, the level of volunteerism in America was documented by the U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, Social Capital Project in May of 2017. While our federal government conducts a census every ten years, there is no similar authoritative source of data on nonprofit volunteerism over time.

Since 2002, the US Department of Labor has taken an interest in volunteerism, and the CPS (Current Population Survey) administered by the Census Bureau for the Bureau of Labor Statistics provides the most comprehensive survey data today. Varying past methods and data inconsistencies make it difficult to analyze how volunteerism has changed over the past many decades. For instance, some surveys only ask about individuals that volunteer for organizations, while others include statistics on those who simply help neighbors and others individually.

More recently the Corporation for National and Community Service (AmeriCorps) has gotten in on the game. Thankfully, many private companies and surveys have also added to what we believe we know about volunteerism, such as Gallop and Fidelity and US Bank to name a few.

(continued, page 3)

Volunteerism between the Generations:

A current report from AmeriCorps estimates the rates of volunteerism between generations:

- **Generation X:** (ages 45 to 56)
36.4% — 21,720,574
 - **Baby Boomers:** (age 57 to 75)
30.7% — 22,631,756
 - **Millennials:** (age 26 or so to 44)
28.2% — 19,904,598
 - **Generation Y:**
26.1% — 6,456,628
 - **Silent Generation:** (over age 75)
24.8% — 6,673,509
- Further, 30.0% of veterans volunteer, and 39.9% of parents volunteer.

One frustration we encountered when considering the AmeriCorps figures is the suggestion that Generation Y and Millennials are two different groups, while many demographers use the terms synonymously. The figures above infer that these two generations span more than 95 million Americans, which is inconsistent with other published definitions. The US Census Bureau is little help, as they only seem to define Baby Boomers and those who are older or younger.

(Source: AmeriCorps: Volunteering in America: Demographics)

[https://americorps.gov/newsroom/news/via AmeriCorps.gov](https://americorps.gov/newsroom/news/via/AmeriCorps.gov)

What do you know about your volunteers?

childless married adults.

- Age differences in volunteering seem to be narrowing over the past five decades yet those adults ages 25 to 44 volunteer less than they used to, and those 65 and older who volunteer has remained stable. Individuals ages 45 to 64 tend to be the highest volunteering age group, by a small margin.
- Education is an important factor. Individuals with a college degree are nearly three times more likely to volunteer than those with less than a high school degree.
- As household income decreases, so too does volunteering. Volunteering in households making \$100,000 or more are 21 points higher than households making less than \$20,000.
- Race is also predictive. Non-Hispanic whites volunteer more frequently than non-whites.

A private study recently commissioned by Fidelity Charitable of almost 2,000 current donors highlights the evolving cultural differences and priorities among volunteers today, and it may be the most current survey to provide insight of the impact from Covid-19 social distancing. Before the pandemic in March of 2020, respondents to the Fidelity survey reported that volunteerism was on the rise, with 30 percent saying they had increased the amount of time that they volunteered in the past two years. After the onset of the pandemic in August through a follow-up survey of nearly 500 Fidelity donors, two-thirds of the donors reported decreased volunteerism. While many organizations have attempted to engage volunteers virtually a majority of respondents prefer in-person and on-site activities. Hopefully we can all get back to in-person activities very soon.

The Fidelity report proposes differences in responses and stated values between generations. Millennials reported placing greater value on transparency and want to better understand their impact than Baby Boomers. The older Boomers are described as more traditional volunteers that prefer to serve by simply lending a hand, in contrast to Millennials that like to donate their skilled labor. Boomers were more likely to focus their time with a single organization, while Millennials indicated they had recently volunteered for three or more organizations. Competing for the attention of Millennials may be increasingly worthwhile as a third of them say they give more to the nonprofit they volunteer with.

For development officers and nonprofit executives, this information on the changing face of volunteerism should best serve as a wake-up call to make greater strides to learn more about the specific interests and values of their actual corps of volunteer. Further, we will all be challenged to improve the programs and methods of engaging, communicating and recognizing the irreplaceable value and importance of our organization's volunteers. How we work to help individuals to become more involved is changing but it will still lead to greater donor investment in our organizations.



Chasing volunteers

Cultural Changes

The renowned political scientist, Robert D. Putnam posited that all of America's social capital was waning in his 1995 research paper, and book *Bowling Alone* published in 2000. Other sociologists have joined this position and written about civic engagement and volunteerism declining in the years since September 11, 2001. Another researcher pushed back on some of this doom and gloom in 2020 with a historical analysis of volunteerism back to the 19th Century proposing that the rate of volunteerism is constantly in flux and reacts to political, social and ecological events, yet volunteerism remains strong and relatively constant over the long haul.

There are clearly cultural changes these days that are troubling for volunteerism. The number of individuals and families attending church service, where many people have traditionally volunteered is declining. Reportedly millennials are delaying marriage and childbirth, and they face greater home-buying challenges than earlier generations and would thus logically diminish participation in your local little league sports teams. And now Covid-19 induced social isolation has changed so much of what we thought we knew.

So what do we know? Susan M. Chambre, professor at the City University of New York, concluded from her extensive research that "volunteering long has been influenced by historical forces and exhibits socio-economic, gender, and age differences." And, "there are two important changes in recent years: a sharp decrease in working class volunteering and an increase in the desire of 'give back' to causes and organizations that benefit themselves, friends, and family."

What do fundraisers need to know?

Fundraisers must remember that involvement leads to commitment and greater levels of involvement, possibly through direct volunteerism, increases the likelihood of giving. Further, volunteering has always been stratified by gender, race, ethnicity, religion and social class. And, the rates of those who volunteer vary from city to city, state to state, and generation to generation. More than likely, your organization's ability to engage volunteers today will have more to do with factors you can control than national shifts in culture and demographics.

There is both good news and reason for future concern. If you are interested in securing more major gifts, then it will be reassuring to know that surveys suggest those who are more likely to volunteer today match the profile of excellent major gift prospects. But our oldest volunteers will need to be replaced in the years ahead, and the manner in which our organizations communicate and engage the next corps of volunteers will need to change to keep our institutions strong and vital.

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On Second Thought

Volunteers Do It Better

by David S. Goettler



Despite the incredible growth and increasing professionalism of the non-profit sector, some folks may be losing sight of the continuing importance of volunteer fundraisers to the health and vitality of our nonprofit organizations. There are many excellent development officers at work today, for sure; but, the undeniable truth is that when it comes to securing major gifts — volunteers do it better.

In a time when more and more fundraising departments are partially or completely dependent on professional staff, the notion of volunteer fundraisers may seem impractical or even anachronistic. Admittedly, managing a corps of volunteers can be just as much work — even more than assigning donor calls to employees. So why bother? Because a well prepared and practiced volunteer does it better.

When volunteers internalize an organization's mission and case for support, and begin to articulate it in their own words and experiences, they have invested themselves in the future of the organization—they have invested themselves as "owners." Long-term financial commitment is built upon our tradition of voluntary involvement.

When a volunteer issues an invitation to a peer and advocates for a cause, his or her charitable motives are clear, and their message is better received. Donor prospects are simply more responsive to someone they know and respect as a peer and more often they are also more generous in response to the appeal of that volunteer. The volunteer's motives are clear. Staff members may be perceived as merely "doing their jobs." While a courteous phone call from a development officer could go unanswered for months, an inquiry from a friend or business peer will almost always get a timely response.

Volunteers provide accountability and credibility to the community and they act as the eyes and ears in the community—and the community's eyes and ears within the organization. Wise volunteers help to ensure that an organization's mission is meeting real community needs, while at the same time helping to ensure that the organization receives the recognition and support it requires to sustain that mission.

Emphasizing the importance of the volunteer in fundraising and advancing our organizations does not mean that a board of directors should fire its development staff. We also know that our volunteers want and need support and guidance, and they are more effective when working with staff and fundraising counsel. It is the role of staff and fundraising counsel to ensure that each volunteer is well prepared and then rewarded with success.

