



THE 40TH REUNION OF THE CLASS OF 1970: A CASE STUDY IN VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT

While there are many facets to any reunion, homecoming, or special event, this Case Study will look at what the Class of 1970 Reunion planners – including alumni volunteers, the Association of Yale Alumni (AYA) reunion staff, and AYA itself – did to recruit, motivate, retain, and recognize volunteers for that reunion. *(Note: Yale and American universities, in general, denote Classes by the year of graduation, rather than the year of matriculation. Also, AYA uses the term Classes to refer to cohorts graduating from Yale College, not the graduate and professional schools.)*

This Case Study presents the 40th Reunion of the Yale Class of 1970 because it received the Outstanding Class Award for programming and excellence in 2010, the year AYA instituted several Awards to recognize alumni volunteer efforts and programming excellence.

Background: Yale Classes began having reunions almost two centuries ago, starting when Yale was almost exclusively an undergraduate college. The Class of 1821 held the first Yale Class Reunion in 1824. At that time the graduating Class had only about 70 members – and Class members did all the planning and organizing of the Reunion.

But times have changed. Classes are larger and people live longer – and more groupings of alumni hold reunions, homecomings and special events. So in any one year there are more reunions in total (including reunions for the graduate and professional schools as well as shared interest and identity groups), more Class reunions and more people coming to all of them. Now, a Yale College Class includes about 1350 students – though that will increase about 15% when Yale finishes building the two new residential colleges that have been announced. Though Class Reunions are held only every 5 years, this means that each year thirteen classes hold a reunion back at Yale bringing close to 7000 alumni, family and friends to campus in late Spring every year. Officially, each Class reunion starts on Thursday or Friday and ends on Sunday. Some alumni come for only one day, and some come for only one dinner. Many stay on-Campus, in student housing.

Seven thousand visiting party-goers are more people than the Yale Campus can accommodate at one time. Consequently the reunions have to be held after graduation ceremonies when most students have left Campus, and they have to be held over two consecutive weekends in late May or early June. To create venues for the festivities, the AYA erects between 8 and 10 large high-top tents around campus – each of which provide dinner space for hundreds of people. And during each of these weekends approximately 3500 alumni, family and friends descend upon New Haven.

Today, the dining, lodging, serving, entertaining, venue tents, sound systems, security, and co-ordination of all reunion events require professional management and a budget of millions of dollars. In general, the AYA pays for those reunion activities which are mounted for all classes, and class treasury subsidies (maintained by annual dues) combined with attendance fees pay for class-specific activities and meals.

The Association of Yale Alumni (AYA) currently employs a staff of 7 – whose primary duty is to work with Classes on their programs and projects – particularly their reunions. (AYA total staff is approximately 35.) Five staff members are each specifically responsible for 2 to 4 reunions each year. But during the reunions and the weeks just prior to them the entire AYA staff is involved.

The AYA has been doing this for a long time, and has kept voluminous records and statistics. For example, it knows the average turnout for a 20th reunion, and how that differs from the average turnout



for a 40th reunion. It knows whether the reunion attendance for a particular Class is above or below the average for all Classes for that reunion. For the 40th Reunion of the Class of 1970, AYA estimated (9 months in advance) that 254 alumni would return, bringing 178 guests. The actual numbers were 251 alumni and 168 guests.

Clearly, AYA professional staffers could produce a wonderful and successful Class reunion without alumni volunteers from that Class – or with minimal input from them. In rare cases, when Class officers are not active or engaged, the AYA staff has to do so. It is also clear that the AYA professional staff spends considerable time training, coaching, encouraging, managing, and placating alumni volunteers. However, it is the experience at Yale that the quantity and quality of Class volunteer involvement affects not just reunion attendance, but the attendees' enthusiasm, enjoyment and sense of being a part of the Yale family.

What Yale and AYA do to recruit, train, manage, and thank reunion volunteers: There is much that AYA and Yale do to produce each reunion, but this will focus on its efforts with respect to volunteer engagement.

- AYA encourages each Class to choose a volunteer Reunion Chair or Chairs early – more than a year before the reunion event.
- AYA provides incentives for a Reunion Chair to start planning a year early – by hosting the Reunion Chair at a reunion of another Class – the year before the Chair's upcoming reunion. This allows the Chair to observe a reunion and how it is managed.
- AYA holds a day-long training workshop for all Reunion Chairs at Yale in September, about 9 months before the reunions. Again this is at no cost to any volunteer Chair. The workshop tries to ease the organizational burden on the Chair by providing seminars on (and a 180 page guidebook about) suggested timelines, to-do items, budgets, souvenirs, musicians, entertainers, menus, programs, attendance building letters, etc. A buffet lunch and dinner lets the Chair taste from many of the suggested menus. Handouts include a list of classmates who are potential reunion volunteers because they had each volunteered for other major AYA activities. The training and materials stress that:
 - This is a team effort.
 - Volunteers, or a committee of volunteers, can be recruited for each major task
 - It is vital to have an attendance committee of class volunteers, who are willing to contact each classmate individually by letter or phone.
 - The event must be inclusive, and reaching out to shared interest groups and collectivities within the Class, whether officially SIGs or not, is important.
 - It is important to work with the Reunion Gift Committee, even though the Reunion Gift Committee is a fundraising component composed of a different set of volunteers under the direction of Yale's Office of Development, rather than the AYA.
- During the run-up to the reunion, the AYA staff liaison for the Class gently reminds the Reunion Chair of tasks to do and volunteers to be recruited and managed. AYA and its campus partners are also responsible for finalizing many different logistical aspects of the reunion, such as the meals, transportation, campus housing, audio visual requests, space for class panels, etc.
- AYA urges the Reunion Chair (and Reunion Committees) to go for attendance records – and to go beyond the numbers. That is now institutionalized as part of the AYA Excellence Awards which recognize extra-ordinary Class efforts in five different categories (<http://aya.yale.edu/content/award-categories>), posting winners online and describing those efforts for future reference: https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B_xST13LJbZ_UXVpUmxTcTIYMUE/edit.



- **Outstanding Class Award:** For the class that exhibits overall excellence in programming, including a successful mix of educational, cultural, athletic, social, and community service programming
- **Outstanding BOLD Class Award:** For the “Bulldogs of the Last Decade” class that exhibits excellence in young alumni engagement, either through an array of programming (educational, cultural, athletic, social, and/or community service), a specific initiative, or creative outreach connecting with classmates across the globe
- **Highest Reunion Attendance Award:** For highest attendance, measured as total number of alumni, family, and friends attending a quinquennial reunion, and measured against previous reunions of the same anniversary
- **Highest Percentage of Returning Alumni Reunion Award:** For highest percentage of returning alumni measured against total living alumni of the class and against previous reunions of the same anniversary
- **Outstanding Class Volunteer Engagement and Leadership Award:** For the class that best demonstrates meaningful leadership in strategic planning, volunteer recruitment, financial management, and stewardship

What the Class of 1970 did to recruit, excite, and manage volunteers. One task was keeping the regulars happy. This meant finding volunteers and working with them to accomplish the many things expected of any Yale reunion and expected in particular from past Class of 1970 Reunions. A second task was to do new things in new ways that would actively involve more members of the Class of 1970 in this Reunion – including some who had not previously been involved. This meant empowering volunteers, finding additional ones, and collaborating with others in the University and outside the Class. These efforts started with a handful of classmates: the Chair recruited some of his friends to help, others volunteered themselves, because they wanted to ensure that the reunion had certain programming.

(Much focus for this Reunion was placed on recruiting volunteers who would do or lead things at the Reunion itself. Another way to involve volunteers is to build a very large, inclusive, and extensive attendance committee – for which volunteers contact classmates and friends personally. See for example the 25th Reunion of the Class of 1988, which won the AYA Outstanding Class Award in 2013:

[https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B_xST13LJbZ_UXVpUmxTcTIYMUE/edit.\)](https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B_xST13LJbZ_UXVpUmxTcTIYMUE/edit.)

- Plans for Ensuring a Solid Foundation and Perpetuating Class Traditions. *The usual type of activities for the regulars*
 - Entertainment Committee to find music (rock and roll bands made up of classmates) for Friday night and Saturday night, and schedule a short concert by classmates who had been in the Whiffenpoofs (an undergraduate singing group) as students.
 - Programming Committee to find speakers and assemble discussion panels to fill four time slots (2 on Friday afternoon and 2 on Saturday afternoon). Preferably many of the panelists would be classmates.
 - Food Chair to choose from among the AYA proffered menus for the weekend, with a goal of satisfying classmates’ differing tastes in food and beverage while containing costs.
 - Attendance Committee to contact as many classmates personally to urge them to attend.
 - Memorial Service organizer to schedule and prepare a memorial service for classmates who had died since the last reunion
 - Art “committee”, work with 2 artists who were classmates and had been active volunteers at previous reunions, to produce a reunion logo and decorative artwork
 - Souvenir, arrange production of a memorable souvenir to take home from the reunion.



- Reunion Book Committee Chair, produce a book with reflections from classmates.
- Additional Efforts Requiring New Volunteers. *New ideas and the less usual for new volunteers.*
 - Entertainment Committee Chair found extra time slots on Friday and Saturday for almost as many Class musicians as volunteered to perform: 38 musicians playing classical, protest, folk, rock, blues, jug band, and jazz musicians participated. Some had never come to a reunion before. Thursday evening featured an iPod playlist of rock 'n' roll from the Class' college years put together by a classmate who was a musician and radio station music announcer during college. In addition, pre-reunion concerts were held in 3 cities.
 - Programming Committee put together 8 panel discussions for Friday and Saturday (involving 23 classmates) plus a speaker, then found time slots on Thursday for another speaker and another panel.
 - Food committee was able to save enough money on the weekend meals, to include a free Thursday evening reception.
 - Art Committee Chair put together a glossy art book of representative work of 17 classmates who worked in the visual arts, and held a book signing at the reunion. This Art Book is in addition to the Reunion Book of reflections listed above. An illustrated self-guided walking tour of notable Yale Campus architecture was also produced by another classmate.
 - Souvenir, three additional souvenirs were produced in limited quantities to promote pre-reunion events and induce classmates to write reflections for the Reunion Book. (Submit a reflection and get a souvenir.)
 - Sport Interest Groups. Although some of the biggest undergraduate sports associations (football and swimming) have frequently held all-Class receptions during Reunion weekend, many others had not. For this reunion, Class of 1970 volunteers worked with the Alumni Sports Associations and the Yale Athletic department to hold all-Class receptions for fencing, sailing, and crew –and a pre-reunion fly fishing event at the Yale Pond. For Class members, events featuring martial arts, yoga, and golf were also included.
- Not all efforts were successful, but all volunteers (and most classmates) felt more a part of the Reunion.
 - One classmate proposed a 100 mile long-distance bicycle ride ending at Reunion. Although no one offered to join him, he did make the 100 mile ride.
 - One volunteer proposed a pre-reunion race-car driving school. A few classmates were interested (and even paid deposits), but not enough to make it work.

Not counting contributions either to the Art Book or the Reunion Book, over 60 of the 254 classmates who attended the reunion volunteered their time or services to make it happen. Over 80 contributed to the Art Book and the Reunion Book (some to both).

Most volunteers and many other classmates felt more a part of the Reunion than previously.

What the Class of 1970 did to thank volunteers.

- Reunion and pre-reunion activities were featured in the Class blog, along with thanks to volunteers involved in some specific events.
- Two emails were sent after the reunion, thanking all volunteers, with copies posted to the Class website: Matters of Note at <http://alumninet.yale.edu/classes/yc1970/40th-note.html> and Plethora of Thanks at <http://alumninet.yale.edu/classes/yc1970/40th-thanks.html>.