



Volunteer-run Reunions – the Professional’s view

At Yale every graduating class holds a reunion on campus every 5 years. Several professionals at the Association of Yale Alumni (AYA) work primarily with Classes (the groups of students who graduated from the College in a specific year). Each professional usually works the same reunions each year, for example, the 40th, the 45th, the 50th and the 55th. Each Yale College Reunion is planned in partnership with between one and three volunteer reunion chairs who are appointed by their class secretary (or what might be called their class “president”). While the reunions themselves vary greatly in character, there are some common principles that govern the way AYA shepherds reunion chairs through the reunion planning process.

Here are some best practices and logistical concerns that you might keep in mind:

1. *Train your volunteers well.*

Reunions can be very complex and involve a number of different deadlines for tasks ranging from communications to budget building to decisions about menus. AYA helps reunion chairs get their minds around this complexity in two ways: by inviting them to a day-long Reunion Chairs Workshop nine months in advance, and by providing them with a binder full of information and a planning calendar, to keep them on track in the following months.

2. *Share information about past reunions.*

Reunion chairs are always invited to attend the corresponding reunion the year preceding their own gathering in New Haven. They also have access to the printed programs of several previous reunions. From this kind of exposure to what classes have done before them, reunion chairs can make informed decisions about what might work best for their class.

3. *Stay in constant touch.*

Staying in touch with reunion chairs and their committees is very important. The best ways to do so may depend on the age group with which you are working. For some professionals at AYA, the most frequent correspondence with chairs is by email. For professionals working with older alumni the most frequent method may be by telephone. Some get reunion chairs and committees together by conference call on a periodic basis. Staying informed about what your chairs are planning helps prevent misunderstandings and even disaster. You may spend a significant amount of time writing emails explaining why something will or will not work. Your steady and encouraging advice will be the key to their success.

4. *Leave the details to professionals.*

If your budget permits it, make sure that the logistics of a reunion are overseen by professionals. This means not just alumni relations professionals, but also caterers, tent companies, furniture rental companies, sound and lighting technicians, and the like. Yale handles the cost of these vendor services by charging each class a flat per-person price. When university alumni relations professionals have long-term relationships with the reunion vendors (both on and off campus ones), the university professionals can negotiate more effectively than volunteers who may work with this vendor only once in a lifetime. This is also important because the university may be the one ultimately paying the bill.

5. *Encourage creativity.*

While much of your job will be to manage your reunion chairs, and to make sure that the logistics of the reunion run smoothly, don’t be too quick to dismiss a creative idea. This may be a desire to expand or adapt what some other class did, or to try something entirely new.

6. *Show your appreciation.*

In addition to thanking your reunion chairs throughout the planning process, consider some kind of gesture during the reunion itself, or afterwards. For example, AYA offers reunion chairs accommodations in a guest suite on-campus at their reunion headquarters. This allows them to be close to the action but still enjoy the comforts of air-conditioning and other amenities. On the day a reunion chair arrives for the reunion, AYA has a box of locally baked gourmet cookies ready for them; and sometime during the summer following the reunion the Executive Director sends each reunion chair a thank you letter accompanied by a modest gift.