

Volunteering Signals Engagement and Giving Potential:

A SUPPLEMENTAL REPORT TO THE 2026
NATIONAL ALUMNI SURVEY ANNUAL REPORT



Introduction



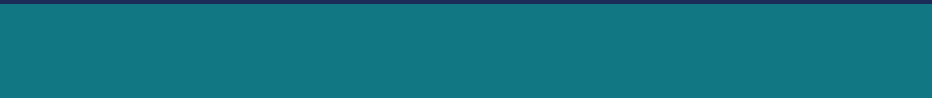
In response to strong interest from practitioners and institutional leaders, this supplemental report offers a deeper examination of one of the nine key findings from the National Alumni Survey Annual Report (March 2026):

Volunteering Signals Engagement and Giving Potential.

Too often, institutions treat volunteering as a secondary engagement channel—something adjacent to events or giving rather than central to both.

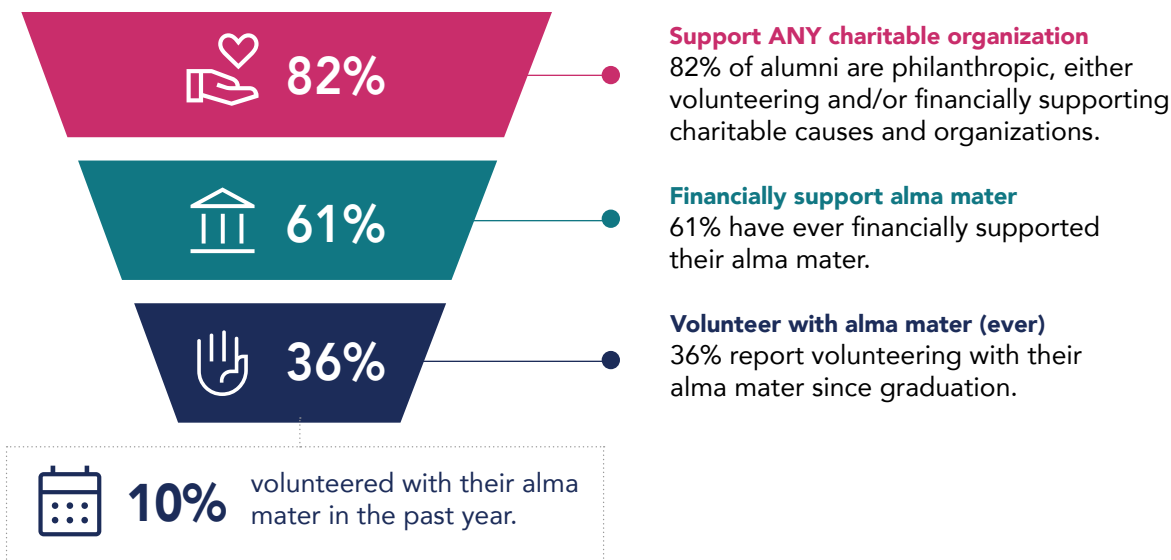
In practice, it is one of the most effective levers for building lasting alumni relationships.

Volunteering creates repeated, meaningful touchpoints where alumni contribute their time, share their expertise, and see the impact of their involvement. That consistency builds familiarity, trust, and a stronger sense of belonging.



What did we learn about volunteers and volunteer activity through the NAS data?

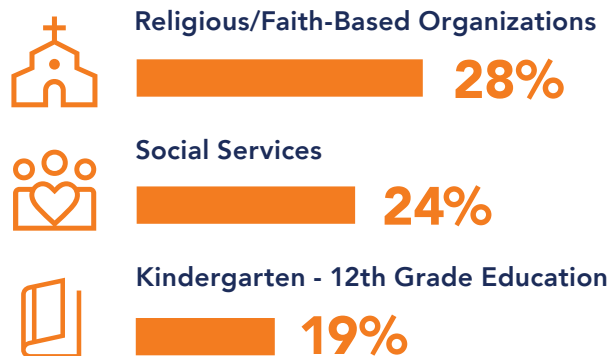
Most alumni share their time and talents, but not with their alma mater.



What type of causes do alumni currently support through volunteering?

When asked about volunteer activity within the past year, religious or faith-based organizations rank high, along with social services.

Alumni also report directing their time to support K-12 education, not surprising as we consider life stages and alumni with children in school.

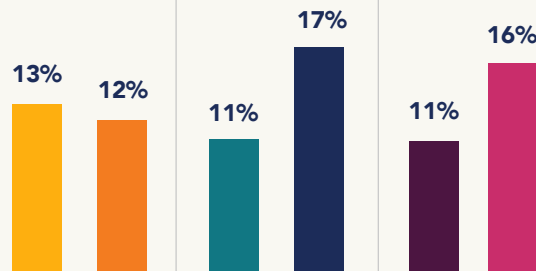


Volunteering for higher education ranks eighth overall. A closer look at the top 10 volunteer-supported causes by demographic and generation reveals differences:

TOP 10 VOLUNTEER-SUPPORTED CAUSES

1. Religious or Faith-Based	(28%)	25%	26%	26%	26%	28%	25%
2. Social Services	(24%)	19%	27%	23%	26%	22%	28%
3. K-12 Education	(19%)	15%	23%	19%	22%	16%	25%*
4. Civil Rights / Social Justice	(18%)	13%	22%*	17%	23%*	15%	28%*
5. Arts & Culture	(17%)	14%	19%	16%	20%	16%	21%
6. Political	(16%)	13%	17%	16%	15%	15%	18%
7. Environmental	(12%)	11%	14%	13%	13%	11%	19%*
8. Higher Education	(12%)	13%	12%	11%	17%	11%	16%
9. Health Care Delivery, Access	(11%)	8%	11%	10%	13%	10%	13%
10. Animal Rights & Welfare	(10%)	7%	11%	9%	11%	8%	15%*
*Represents a 5-point (or more) variance from the overall percentage.		(Overall)	● Male	● Female	● White Alumni	● Alumni of Color	● Over 45
							● Under 45

Supported Higher Education by Volunteering in the Past Year

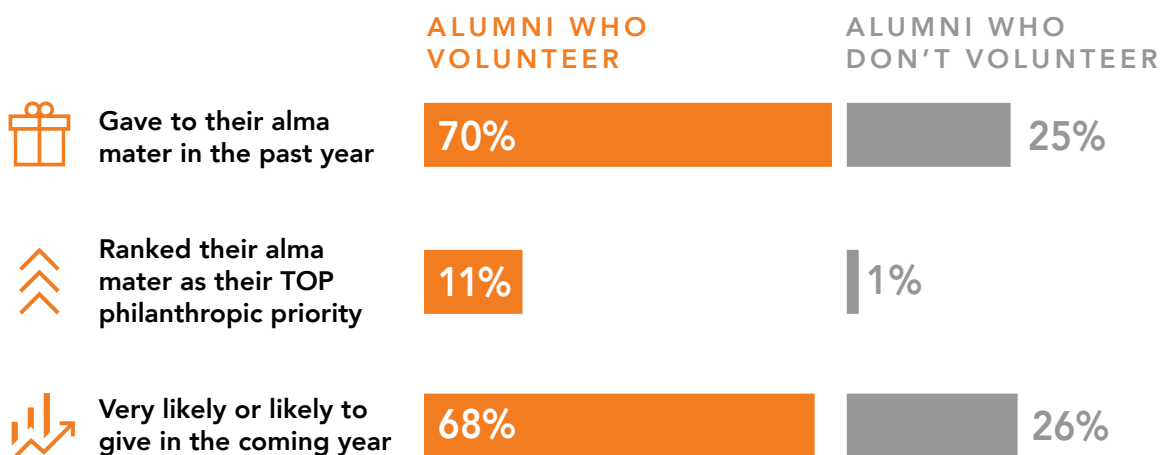


Does volunteering with their alma mater influence a sense of connection and giving to the institution?

Yes, the data show a correlation between volunteer activity, connection, and giving.

Alumni who volunteer with their alma mater—even those who aren't current donors to their alma mater—feel more connected and informed. Alumni volunteers are 8x more likely to feel *very connected* to their alma mater and 5x more likely to feel *very informed* about the institution than those who have never volunteered.

Alumni who volunteer with their alma mater are also among the most philanthropic. Volunteers are more likely to have given, express greater intent to give in the future, and score higher on 'school as a priority' when impact is clear.



Does volunteer engagement lead to increased giving?

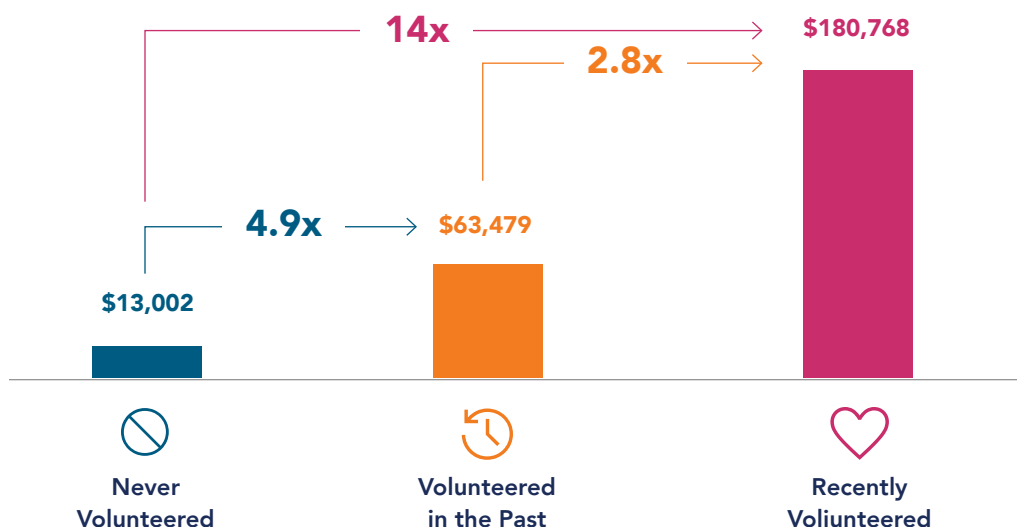
Charities that provide meaningful volunteer opportunities build stronger bonds with their supporters, and this often leads to increased giving. Nearly two-thirds of alumni who actively volunteer report donating \$1,000 or more to charitable organizations last year.

Based on the giving history provided by NAS participating colleges and universities, **the average lifetime giving from recent volunteers was \$180,768**. That is well above the \$63,479 average from donors who had volunteered but not in the past year, much higher than the \$45,321 average across the full donor population, and significantly more than the \$13,002 given by those who stated they had never volunteered with their alma mater.

Focusing on building trust through volunteerism will likely convert to financial support.

AVERAGE LIFETIME GIVING TO ALMA MATER

(based on volunteer activity with the institution)



Are alumni interested in volunteering with their college or university?

One in five alumni (20%) indicate they are likely to volunteer with their alma mater in the future.

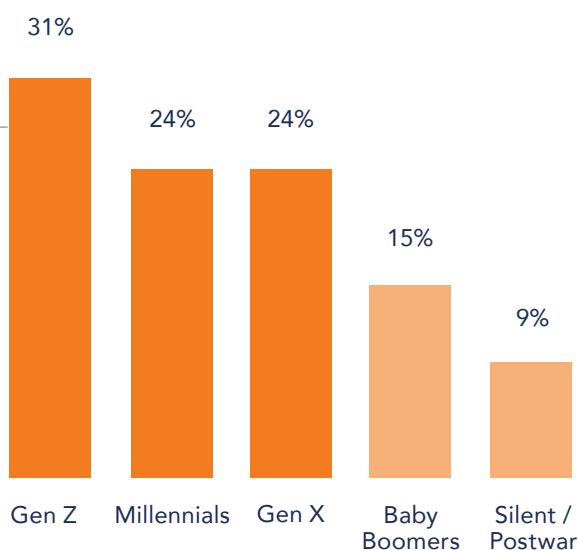
Women are slightly more likely to engage in volunteer activities than men (21% vs 19%), as are alumni of color (27% vs 17% of white alumni). Younger generations indicate greater interest in volunteering—31% of Generation Z grads compared to 24% of Millennial and Gen X grads.

74%

Of note, 74% of alumni who have volunteered in the past year indicate they are likely to volunteer again—a positive sign and opportunity. Repeated engagement and volunteer activity helps cultivate lasting relationships and repeat giving.

BY GENERATION

Younger generations indicate they're more likely to volunteer with their alma mater in the future.



In what types of volunteer opportunities are you most likely to participate with your alma mater?

Alumni are less interested in traditional, passive roles and more motivated by opportunities where they can actively contribute.

Advisory boards and event attendance feel passive; mentoring and service feel productive and mission-aligned. Survey data showed younger generations are most excited by volunteer opportunities that involve sharing career insights and offering internships or other professional support.



Female alumni and alumni of color show elevated interest in service-oriented opportunities, signaling alignment with community impact, representation, and collective contribution.

These preferences point to a shift. Alumni want volunteer experiences that feel relevant, where their expertise or time creates visible, tangible impact.

When institutions meet that expectation, volunteering becomes more than participation—it becomes a pathway to deeper engagement, stronger trust, and ultimately financial support.

SEVEN PRACTICAL, HIGH-IMPACT STEPS

What's next?

Sometimes it's hard to know where or how to start. Taking action can be daunting, especially for resource-stretched shops. Most institutions don't need a full rebuild of their program. A few targeted shifts can make volunteering easier, more relevant, and more measurable.

1 Audit What You Already Have

Start simple: list current volunteer roles and participation levels. Which roles are active vs. stagnant? Where are alumni actually showing up? Which opportunities require high time commitment vs. low? This exercise quickly surfaces what's working—and what's just legacy structure.

2 Add 2-3 Skills-Based, Low-Lift Opportunities

You don't need a full portfolio overhaul. Pilot or refine a few options aligned with what alumni say they want. This might include career panels, industry roundtables (virtual or in-person), resume reviews, mock interviews, Giving Day social ambassadors, and short-term mentorship sprints. These are easier to launch and tend to drive immediate interest, especially with younger alumni.

3 Make Participation Frictionless

Reduce barriers to entry by creating clear role descriptions ("What will I actually do?") with defined time expectations (one hour, one-time, monthly), and a simple sign-up process. If it feels complicated, alumni opt out.

4 Start Tracking—Even If It's Basic

You don't need perfect infrastructure to begin. Track who volunteers, how often, and in what capacity. Tag activities in your CRM (or a simple spreadsheet). Begin connecting engagement to other behaviors over time. What gets measured becomes visible—and therefore manageable.

5 Reframe How You Talk About Volunteering

Shift the narrative externally and internally from "help us" to "share your experience" or "make an impact." Describe outcomes rather than roles (mentoring students, supporting careers, serving communities). Language matters and can help shape participation.

6 Recognize and Close the Loop

Follow up with volunteers: share the impact of their contribution, thank them quickly and specifically, ask them about their experience, and invite them to the next opportunity. This is where engagement and listening turns into retention.

7 Align Advancement and Engagement Teams

Even informally, start connecting the dots. Share volunteer data with gift officers, flag highly engaged alumni, and coordinate outreach where appropriate. This doesn't require structural change—just better communication.

Analysis of open-ended survey comments reveals four volunteer personas.

These are not fixed categories; they are dynamic states that alumni move between over time, as their capacity, interests, and life circumstances evolve. The implication is clear—a one-size-fits-all approach to volunteer engagement will consistently fall short. Institutions will succeed when they build the capacity to listen, interpret signals, and respond with opportunities that meet alumni where they are.



Intellectual Contributor

These are not casual volunteers. They are walking endowments of expertise, referencing roles like “adjunct professor,” “guest lecturer,” “research collaborator,” or “advisory board member.” They may say, “I’d be happy to mentor... I’ve just never been asked.”

What they want: To be asked for their expertise, not just their time.

Opportunity: These alumni are often underutilized because we default to broad, labor-based roles. The opportunity is to better identify and qualify their expertise, then match them with high-value, skills-based engagement. This requires more intentional vetting, clearer role design, and a developed pathway for how their involvement can deepen over time.



Connector

These alumni see themselves as bridges. They want to “interview prospective students,” support “college fairs and recruitment events,” “help increase enrollment,” or “connect first-generation students to careers.”

What they want: To open doors for others.

Opportunity: Connectors are most effective when treated as partners, not just participants. Identify those with strong networks and a willingness to engage, then involve them in designing systems and processes that support their strengths. With their input, agency is built in the program.



Builder

These are organizers, creators, and instigators. They offer to “start a club,” “organize a reunion,” “arrange an event,” or “create something new.” They don’t just want to join—they want to initiate.

What they want: A sandbox to begin building something.

Opportunity: Builders bring energy and outside thinking. Create space for them to help you build or solve a problem. With this type of volunteer, it’s especially important to provide a clear framework and appropriate guardrails. When supported well, they can accelerate progress and introduce new ideas. Unlocking these volunteers can unlock the superpower of your alumni.



Conditional Participant

This is the largest group—and often the most misunderstood. Their responses sound like: “It depends,” “I need more information,” “Maybe later,” or “I would if it felt meaningful” or “if it were virtual.”

What they want: A clear, reassuring invitation to participate in a meaningful activity with a specific timeframe.

Opportunity: The barrier here isn’t willingness; it’s friction. These alumni are not opting out; they’re waiting for an opportunity that fits. The path forward is clarity and flexibility. Be explicit about what the role entails, the impact it creates, and—critically—the time commitment. Define expectations in concrete terms (hours, days, duration) so alumni can quickly assess fit. Design opportunities that allow for easy entry and exit, meeting alumni where they are rather than requiring long-term or large effort commitment upfront.

What can we learn from alumni who have not (yet) volunteered with their alma mater?

Quite a bit. Their survey responses don’t reflect a lack of interest as much as a lack of alignment between what is offered and what feels relevant, clear, or accessible to them.



Conclusion

Most institutions don't need more volunteer roles; they need better-designed, more accessible, and more intentional volunteer experiences. Starting small, piloting quickly, and learning from real participation data remains the most effective path to building a stronger, more responsive model.

The work begins with listening. When alumni say they've never been asked to volunteer—even when we know they have—it's not a data error; it's a signal. It tells us our outreach isn't breaking through in a way that resonates. The takeaway isn't to send more messages, but to communicate differently—more clearly, more personally, and in ways that align with how alumni see themselves.

It also requires adapting to where alumni are in their volunteer journey. As individuals move from one stage to another, their motivations, capacity, and expectations shift. Opportunities that once felt relevant can quickly become noise if they no longer match that reality. Clear structure matters. Even simple frameworks—such as tiered roles based on time commitment—help alumni better understand where they fit and what's expected.

A defined vision for volunteer progression is equally important. Volunteers are not static—they grow over time and, when supported well, often become some of the institution's most committed advocates and donors. Cultivating that growth and progression is where the long-term value lies.

This raises a broader strategic question: Are institutions sufficiently clear about how volunteer roles are defined, communicated, and sequenced?

That clarity includes articulating what types of service are needed, why it matters, and what participation requires. Just as importantly, it means gathering feedback, recognizing that engagement is relational, not transactional—and adjusting expectations and outreach as alumni move through different stages of readiness.

Ultimately, to fully realize its value, volunteering must be resourced and managed with the same level of intention as fundraising. This includes investing in staff, systems, and technology; designing opportunities that are purposeful and aligned with alumni interests; and tracking participation in ways that inform strategy and allow institutions to respond and evolve.

The 2026 NAS data underscore a particularly important opportunity:

While the current financial capacity of younger alumni may be limited, their willingness to volunteer is not.

Institutions that meet this moment—by offering meaningful, flexible, and accessible opportunities—are not simply increasing participation; they are building the foundation of their future donor pipeline.

Each volunteer experience strengthens connection, builds loyalty, and generates insight. Over time, that engagement translates into philanthropy as capacity grows—positioning institutions to present the right giving opportunities, informed by a deeper understanding of their alumni.

Alumni who volunteer are more engaged, more connected, and more likely to give. In this way, volunteering functions as both an early indicator and an accelerant of philanthropic behavior. For institutions seeking to build a healthy, sustainable donor pipeline, volunteer engagement should be treated as a core component of advancement infrastructure—intentionally designed, adequately resourced, and rigorously measured.



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