



# 2017 Alumni Group Survey Insights



**On the Cover**

Photo Credit: Faustin Tuyambaze

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**It all started our junior year at the University of Missouri where we served in student government leadership together. Our bond for the college learning experience and the love for one's alma mater had forever been formed.**

Post college we went our separate ways (talent agent, website developer, university alumni relations and fundraising), but kept finding opportunities to work together even though we found ourselves on separate coasts. It was from our volunteer work with our alumni chapters and building out a custom solution for our alma mater that led us to start Alumni Spaces over five years ago.

Although we started small and as a “one-off” for the alumni association at the University of Missouri, we soon realized we had a scalable business. We are proud to call Clemson University, Florida State University, University of Missouri, University of North Carolina and University of Oklahoma part of our Alumni Spaces Family. We have collaborated with alumni association staff and group volunteers to create and design every feature on the platform.

We're different from other “vendors” on the market and truly believe in making your job easier and making it easier for alumni volunteers to give back to their beloved alma mater. We believe college should be free and alumni are the key to making that possible, so we're doing our part to make that happen.

# 2017 Alumni Group Survey Insights



For years, there has been no proven data for alumni groups to rely on. That is until now. Years of surveying alumni associations across the nation led to these results all alumni associations need to see. We presented our data alongside the University of Oklahoma Alumni Association at the CASE District IV Conference to glowing reviews and wanted you to also share in the results.

We hope you'll find our survey results and analysis valuable.

Rachel Anderson

Nick Trusty

Andrew Cafourek

Visit us online at  
[alumnispaces.com](http://alumnispaces.com)

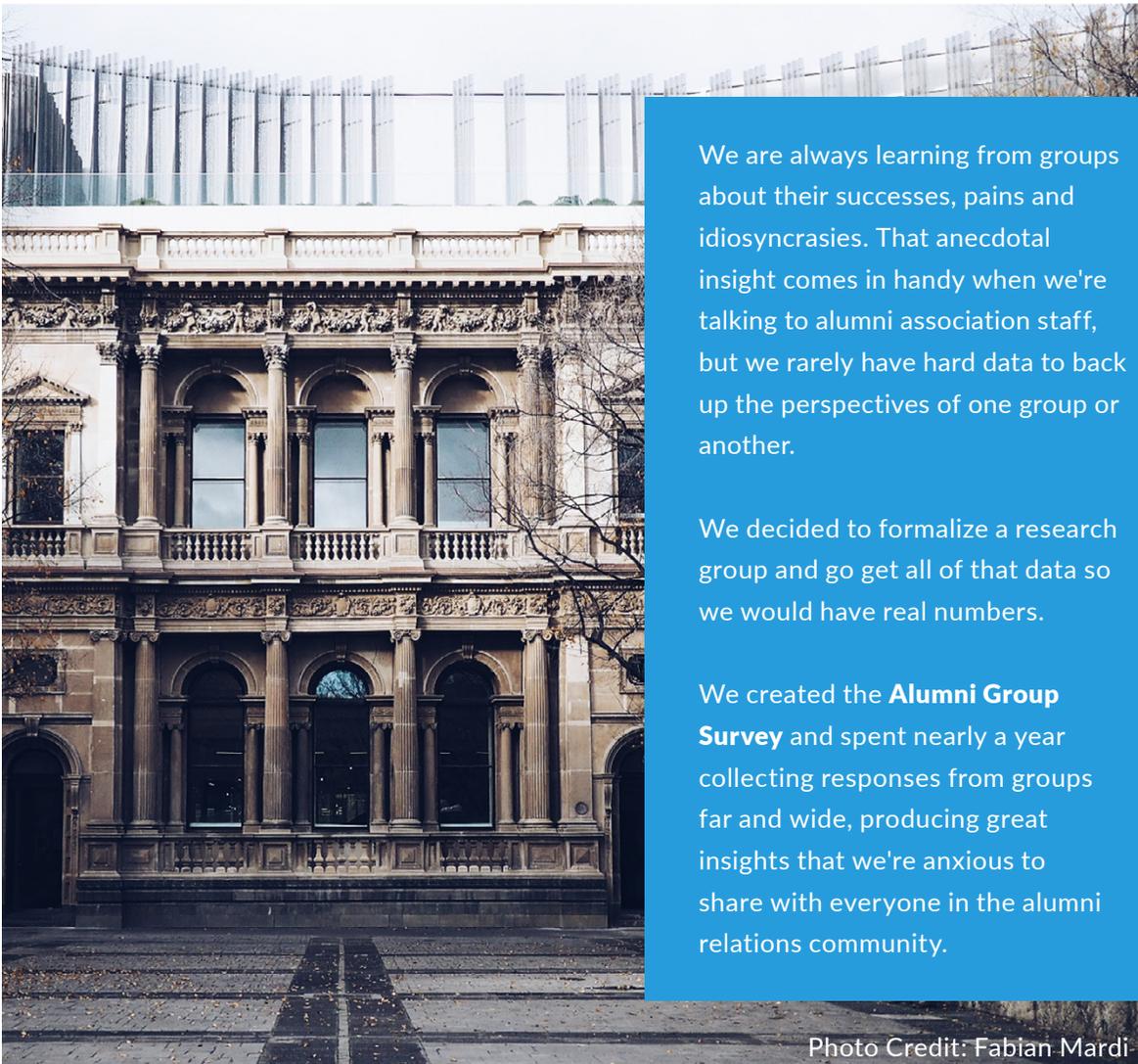


# 2017 Alumni Group Survey Insights

## Introduction + Group Profiles

### SECTION I

**We work directly with local leaders of more than 400 alumni groups in 163 cities around the world.**



We are always learning from groups about their successes, pains and idiosyncrasies. That anecdotal insight comes in handy when we're talking to alumni association staff, but we rarely have hard data to back up the perspectives of one group or another.

We decided to formalize a research group and go get all of that data so we would have real numbers.

We created the **Alumni Group Survey** and spent nearly a year collecting responses from groups far and wide, producing great insights that we're anxious to share with everyone in the alumni relations community.

Photo Credit: Fabian Mard



We got to share these results at the 2017 CASE District IV Conference in Ft. Worth where we presented alongside one of our clients, the University of Oklahoma Alumni Association.

# FWID4

CASE DISTRICT IV ANNUAL CONFERENCE

CASE does a great job of both qualitative and quantitative analysis of alumni associations as a whole, while groups like the Alumni Attitude Study deliver insights on the personal perspective of alumni. In the middle of these two segments are the groups that make up the core of most large alumni organizations. These groups are the front line of an association's brand (and the university's brand for that matter), working on prospective student recruitment, fundraising/advancement and post-collegiate networking. We believe they are a vitally important part of every university and while we had "gut" assessments about these groups as a whole, data is what we were after.

**...while we had "gut" assessments about these groups as a whole, data is what we were after.**

We structured the survey and our presentation in Ft. Worth into topical sections, covering the following areas:

- I. Introduction and Group Profiles
- II. Challenges Facing Alumni Groups & What They Need to Solve Them
- III. Alumni Group Activities and Trends
- IV. Alumni Group Funding
- V. The Digital Toolbox for Alumni Groups
- VI. Lessons From The Highest Performing Alumni Groups

Our disclaimer:  
your mileage  
may vary.

We will strive to share useful insight into the perspective of local alumni groups and draw meaningful, actionable conclusions wherever we can. Our goal is to provide you data that reinforces or challenges some of your own anecdotal perspectives so that you might be able to use these findings as a springboard to meaningful discussions within your organization.

Use this as an opportunity to discuss sticky topics or new opportunities with your volunteers.

Our disclaimer: your mileage may vary. No two groups or organizations are exactly alike and so our findings may not necessarily reflect your chapters/ groups/clubs exactly. Your familiarity with your own groups grants you a unique perspective, but if our findings surface something that is greatly out of line with your assumptions, use this as an opportunity to discuss that topic with your volunteers. And let us know how it goes – we would love to hear about organizations that defy the norm or do things differently.

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Political commentary aside, it's important to clearly define, then **reconsider**, your own assumptions.

Think critically and question the "givens."





Photo Credit: Samuel Zeller

## The Survey Sample

We received 398 valid responses from groups in 48 states representing 91 different schools in the United States. The smallest group we heard from has just **five members** while the largest has **over 10,000 members**.

The top 10 schools represented in our data are (in alphabetical order) Cal-Berkeley, Brigham Young, Duke, Florida State, Georgia, Harvard, Indiana, Michigan State, Texas A&M and Yale. The most results from any one school was 10, no one school made up more than 2.5% of the data. We were encouraged to see a great cross-section of schools represented: public and private institutions, large and small student bodies, athletic dynasties and some schools without NCAA teams.





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## Group Traits

Some of the initial profiling questions we dug into will have seemingly predictable results but are nonetheless important for setting up the baseline understanding of who we're looking at over the course of the survey.



Photo Credit: Dhruva Reddy

Most groups are small — 54% of them have fewer than 100 members. Only 10% of groups have more than 1,000 members while 3% have more than 5,000. Those 1,000+ groups tend to be exactly where you think — large metro areas or in a school's home region. A "college town" of 150-200,000 people which is home to a state school can easily have an alumni club numbering in the thousands.

**Most groups are small — 54% of them have fewer than 100 members.**

Most groups are regional or local — of our respondents, 96% were geographically based (e.g. Rocky Mountain Tigers, Suncoast Sooners, New York City Demon Deacons). The other 4% is made up of faculty/staff groups, affinity clubs, retiree groups, etc.

**Only 11% of groups are in markets of more than 5,000 alumni.** When we talk about "market," we mean the number of graduates who live in a group's region. **71% of groups have fewer than 2,500 graduates** in their market and **23% have fewer than 500.** The point here is that we tend to have high expectations for our local groups to draw attendees and engagement at the local level, but they generally have fairly small audiences to draw from. How are you measuring your group's success? Instead of whole numbers like "number of attendees," you might instead focus on population ratios such as "% of local alumni population which attended."

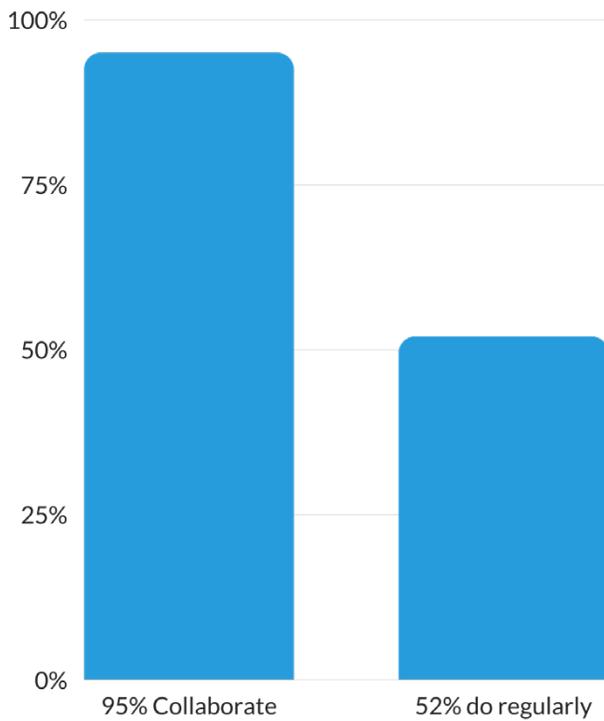
**71% of groups have fewer than 2,500 graduates in their market.**



## Group Outreach

About half of groups (51%) engage with students currently enrolled at their alma mater while 57% undertake outreach to prospective students in their area. This type of outreach tends to take the form of recruitment fairs, student send-off events or scholarship events for incoming freshmen.

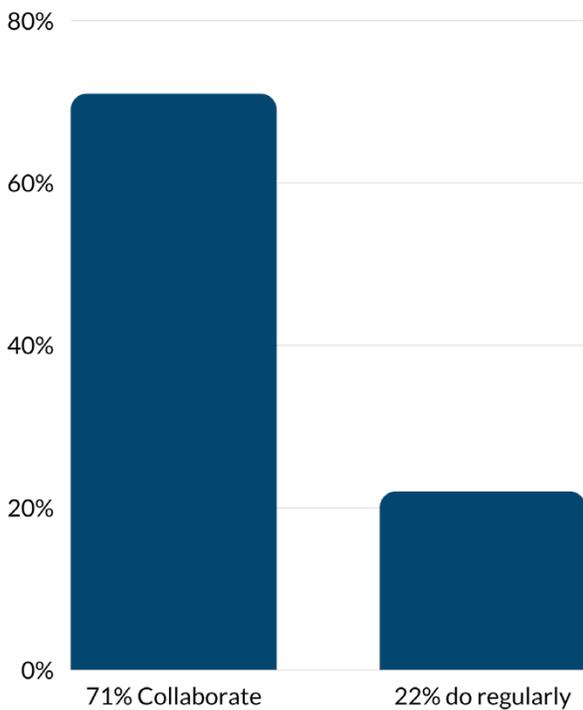
*This type of outreach puts some data behind the notion that these local groups are the front face of your brand, before future students/alumni even step foot on campus.*



“HIGHLY ACTIVE” GROUPS  
COLLABORATING WITH LOCAL PEERS

95% of “Highly Active” groups collaborate with local peers; 52% do so regularly.

And groups aren't just undertaking outreach to students. Many of them are actively engaging with their peer groups — local clubs and chapters from other schools. In a later section, we'll dive deeper into what we can learn from "highly active groups," but when we narrow our focus to the groups who set the bar for success, *engaging with other local leaders emerges as one of the most important parts of this study.* Of the most successful groups, 95% of them engage with other local group leaders and over half are doing it "regularly." This metric is the most tightly correlated to group success that we've uncovered. There is significant evidence to suggest that the more a group works with other local groups, the more successful they are; it is even more important than collaborating with other groups from your own association.



GROUPS COLLABORATING  
WITH LOCAL PEERS

Sharing successful marketing or planning tactics is a sure way to increase success everywhere.



Photo Credit: Ally Jeppsen

There is significant evidence to suggest that the more a group works with other local groups, the more successful they are; it is even more important than collaborating with other groups from your own association.

The reasons for this seem to be that local groups can pool resources, co-program (e.g. NYC has a monthly SEC happy hour) and consult on local challenges. The way a group plans an activity in Los Angeles is different than the way the same activity might be organized in Houston, Seattle or Hampton Roads. While the venue may be different, the end goals are often the same — and sharing successful marketing or planning tactics is a sure way to increase success everywhere.

When local group leaders from different schools share insights, they can know how Jumpin' Joey's BBQ handles non-profit discounts or how transportation works for a Rangers game vs. a Pirates game. ***The fact that local groups can collaborate without competing presents a huge opportunity for cooperative success.*** We plan to further explore this type of cooperation with future research — it seems that most local cooperation is based around conference (Big 12, PAC 10, etc.), but there are some examples where groups whose alma maters are in the same region/state are organizing activities together.

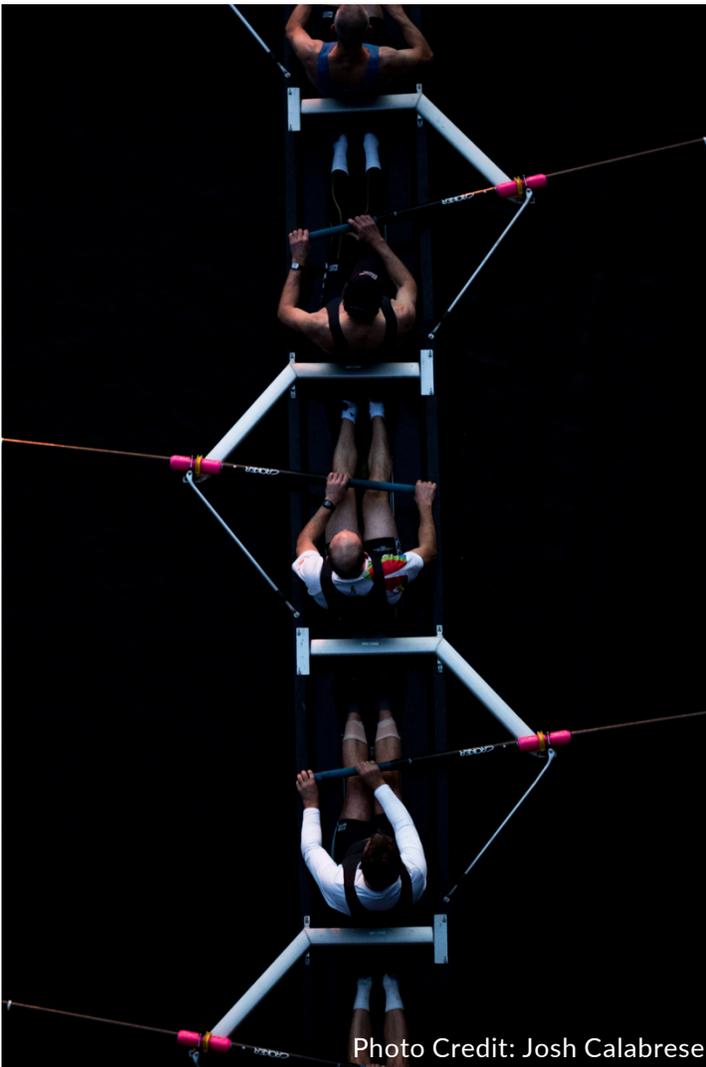


Photo Credit: Josh Calabrese



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"The fact that local groups can collaborate without competing presents a huge opportunity for cooperative success. "

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## 2017 Alumni Group Survey Insights

Challenges Facing Alumni Groups and  
What They Need to Solve Them

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SECTION II



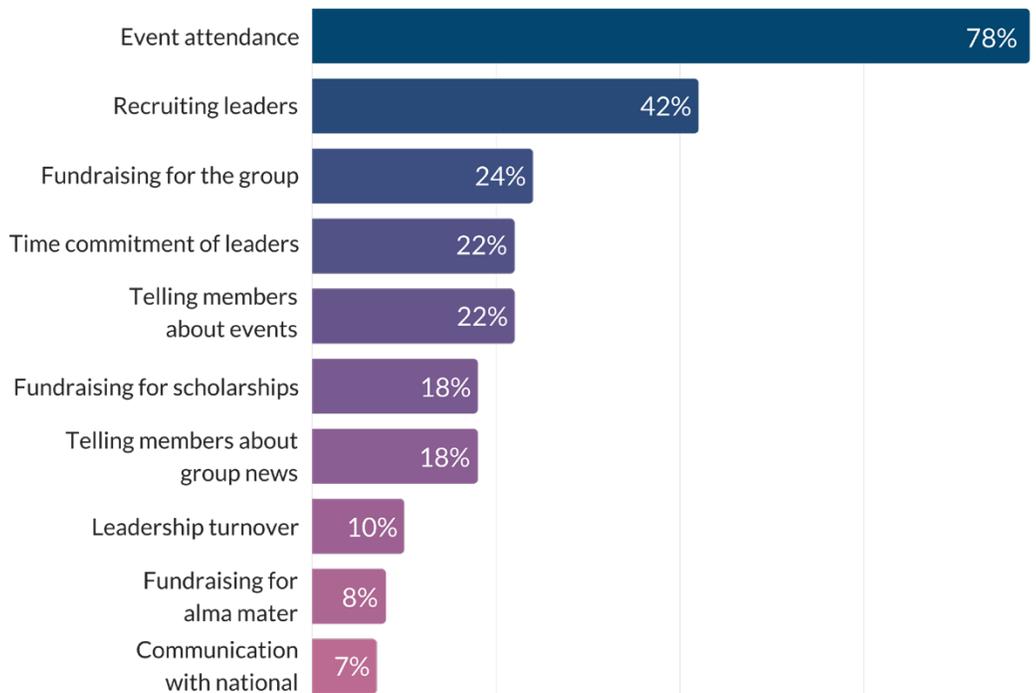


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We asked group leaders the multiple choice question: “What do you see as the biggest challenges facing your group?”

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## Biggest Challenges Facing Alumni Groups



The results show some expected issues as well as some things to learn from interconnected challenges. The most obvious and top challenge was "Getting members to attend events," selected by 78% of groups. That is likely related to the fact that almost a quarter (22%) have trouble telling members about events, creating a cyclical challenge where members don't attend activities they don't know about.

**Group leadership was another recurring theme for challenges.** 42% of groups have difficulty recruiting leaders, making it the 2nd highest ranking challenge in our survey. 22% also have issues getting time commitments from those leaders, but apparently if you can recruit and engage a leader, they will stick around. In fact, only 10% of groups said that leadership turnover was a challenge.

Throughout this research survey, our aim is to tease out places where we can draw *actionable* conclusions or hypotheses, especially areas with opportunities for compounding benefits.

In this case, the data suggests that groups who are challenged by retaining leaders are also much more likely to have issues recruiting and engaging new leadership. By concentrating some of your association's efforts on fostering the engagement of new leaders, there is a big potential to solve the the challenges around group leadership at each point in the life cycle. ***Getting leaders engaged and committed to the group makes it easier to retain them over the long-term while fostering an environment of growth which allows for more successful recruitment of new leaders.***

## How do your strongest groups bring new volunteers up to speed and grant them responsibility without overburdening or setting them adrift?

Examine the current "onboarding" process used by your strongest groups. How do they bring new leaders up to speed and grant them responsibility without overburdening or setting them adrift?

Fundraising is a topic we'll explore with future surveys, but in this study only 8% of groups cited "Fundraising for your alma mater" as a challenge. Our hypothesis is that

this number is very low because most groups are not actually doing much fundraising for the school directly. We do know that they are thinking about fundraising, though. ***24% are challenged by fundraising for their group while 18% face a similar situation fundraising for scholarships.***

A validating statistic for association staff to be proud of is that only 7% of groups are facing problems communicating with their national association (though more active groups tend to have a greater problem here which we'll cover in Part 6).

We'd love to hear examples of methods, channels or strategies you've developed for managing your communication with local alumni group leaders.

## Solutions

After assessing their challenges, we asked:

*"If your national association were to offer services to local groups, which services would most help your group become more successful?"*

The wording of this question is important because we wanted a useful look into their perspective without opening the floodgates with a simple question like, "What do you want from your association?" Instead, we've narrowed the focus down in two ways.

1. We've specifically framed this in the context of the association so we know that these are solutions they are looking for in their staff liaisons.
2. Instead of asking for anything they might want, we asked them to consider what could help them become more successful. So the answers should be tied to self-empowerment and success.





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"There is no silver bullet to solve alumni engagement, but there are tools available to make it easier for your local leaders to move where the puck is going. If we teach them how to use them, the relative cost is low and the potential benefits are very high."

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## Digital Tools

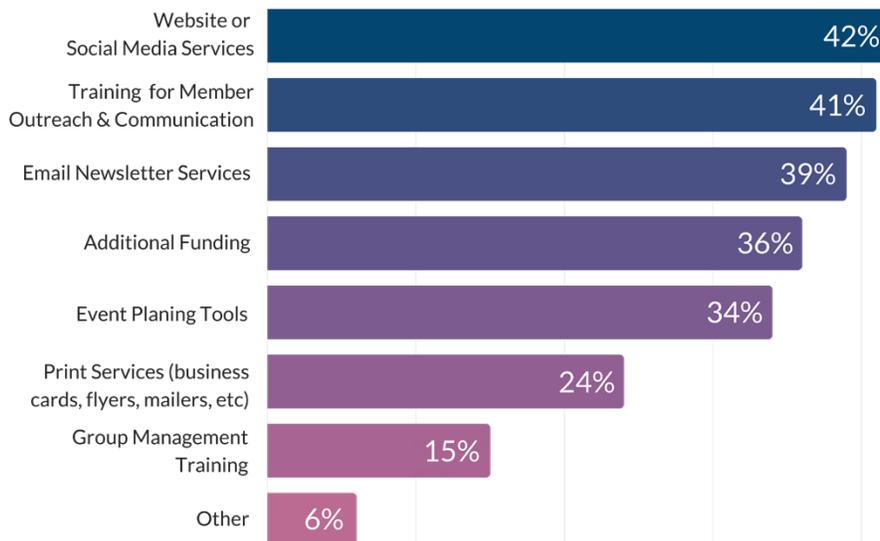
The most common answer to this question was for website or social media tools. **42% of all groups said that this was a solution they hoped for from their association in order to drive their success.** This finding validates one of the “gut” assumptions we set out to investigate with this research. When we talk to groups and hear about how they are disappointed with their current sites and the support they're getting in that department, it validates our core product — but until now, we haven't had hard data to make this case to alumni associations.

We are going to dive deeper into digital tools later, **but 36% of groups are hoping for a better solution for**

**"newsletter tools."** We know email databases are a hot topic in alumni relations and we'll explore this further in Section V.

**34% of groups are looking for event planning tools to manage RSVPs, registration, venue booking, name tags, etc.** We've always encouraged groups to use Eventbrite for many of these tasks — it has a strong marketplace of add-on tools, offers great mobile support for ticketing and payment processing and Alumni Spaces offers one-click integration with their platform. Take a look at their great tools and see if they can help your organization modernize some workflows.

### Services Group Leaders Want to Be More Successful





## Training Inside and Out

Where we found the most interesting insight in this section was a surprise to our team and drove us to challenge some of our own thinking on group priorities. **41% of groups said that they are looking to their associations for member outreach training.** This is training on how to solve that challenge which plagues 78% of groups: getting members to events. This should be an exciting insight to anyone looking for cost-effective ways to make a big impact on the success of their alumni clubs because this is another one of those areas that pays compound interest when we invest in it.

The ripple effects of member outreach training are far-reaching: by encouraging group leaders to try new or more effective avenues of outreach, we can see more members engaging with the group online or at activities, which begins a cycle of making it easier to reach even more people. This itself trickles down into improving leadership recruitment, fundraising and member communication. The conclusion of many panel discussions on this topic is "you should engage your alumni more"... but how?

## Teach your local group leaders — find every available resource at your disposal to offer new tactics at how they can improve local member outreach.

- Create tactical playbooks for how to do certain marketing strategies — these types of lessons can be transposed across school, geographic area or group type. There are a thousand consultancies out there who will come do expensive trainings, but you may be able to achieve this more effectively.
- Find an alumnus of your school who is a social media manager or marketer with tactical experience to host a 45 minute webinar. Compensate them fairly, but you're likely to find them open to at least partial compensation in bookstore credit, tailgate passes or a personalized paver in your next capital project. Create a series of webinars or resources to teach your local leaders the essential basics of how to create and target a Facebook ad. Sure, making an ad is "easy," but when someone has taught you a few helpful tricks and tips, the effectiveness of your ads escalate dramatically. Do the same for teaching group leaders how to write great content for their website, how to manage an effective LinkedIn group or even ways to cost-effectively design and print flyers and posters. The bottom line is that your alumni themselves can be great and willing resources for your groups. For example, Georgia State University alumna Dr. Talaya Waller hosted a personal branding event for young alumni in July 2017. The audience is more general, but the idea is the same: tap your audience for experts and amplify their knowledge to improve your organization.
- Have some in-house resources ready for them to use — some of our clients pre-load their group websites with 10-15 high quality images of athletic events, campus or their mascot. Some even have their internal design team create a promotional image for each game of the football season, or at least one for each major sport. Nothing fancy, just two helmets or team names with a date and time. Pre-size them to fit in a Facebook cover photo, News Feed ad or the sizes they need for their website. If you make these things available and make them super simple to use, you'll see the quality of your network's digital presence rise immediately with very little effort. Make them available publicly and you might even get it on the radar of your general alumni population.

## Management training: It doesn't have to be boring.

Another important area for training that surfaced in this survey was group management training. 15% of groups are also looking for help to become a more effective group. It's important to consider that while the top tier of a group leadership — the president and treasurer perhaps — are likely to be relatively older, many committee members or volunteers tend to be younger alumni. *These are individuals who may not have had the opportunity to assume leadership positions in their career or community.* And regardless of a person's age or experience, the skill-set necessary to inspire an organization of volunteers differs from typical managerial skill.

The skill-set necessary to inspire an organization of volunteers differs from typical managerial skill.



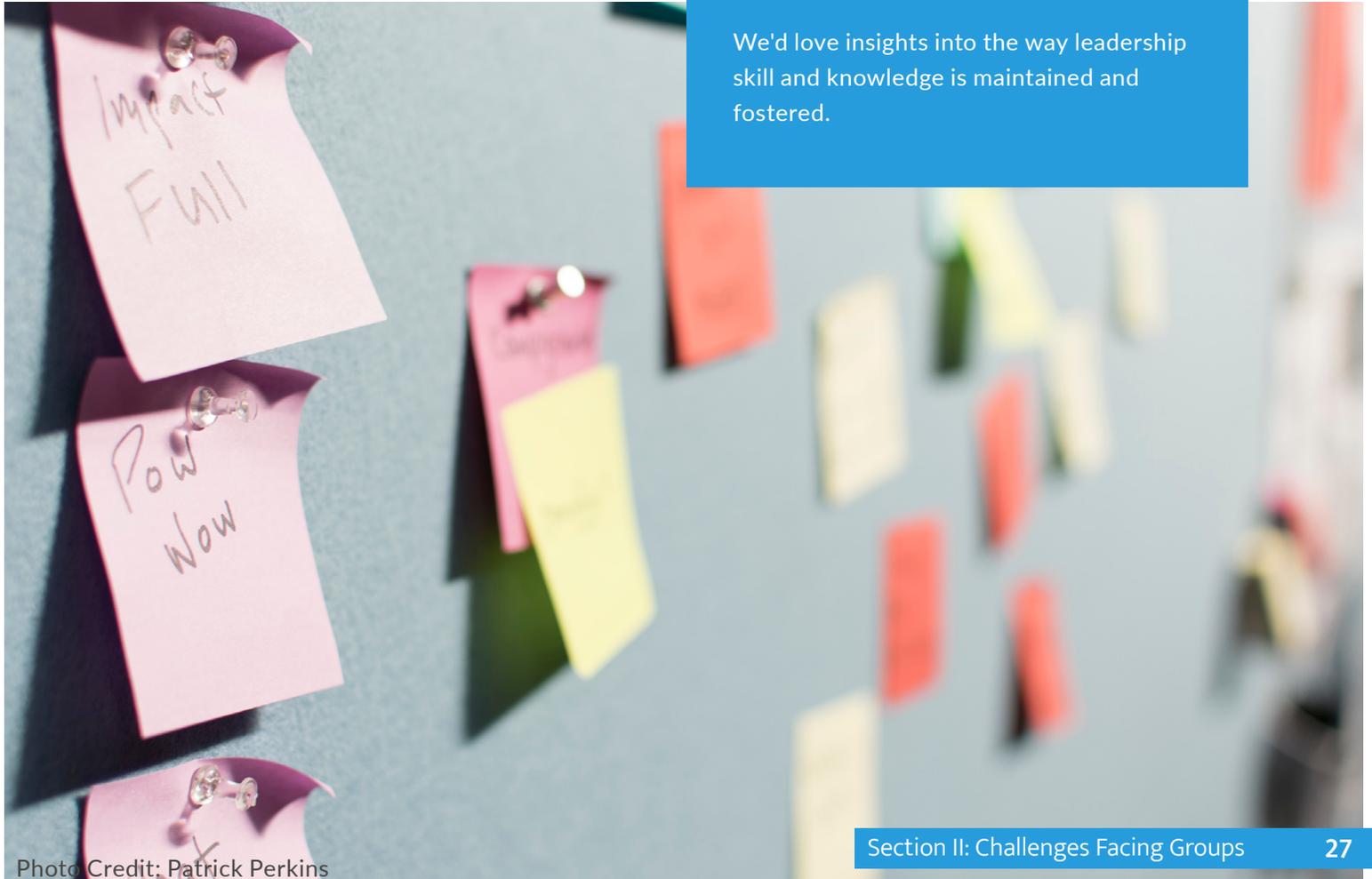
### You might consider a few training topics like:

- How to effectively structure an alumni group, with ideas for committee areas, timing/ structure of meetings and bylaw guidance – some groups specifically mentioned bylaws in their responses.
- Motivating volunteers to bring their best effort despite not getting fiscal compensation
- Running an effective meeting
- How to plan an event, step-by-step (including permits, rentals, day-of considerations, etc.) You don't necessarily need to host a training on each of these, the solutions could be as simple as compiling a list of links or blog posts that cover some of these topics – for example, David Farris has a [great overview of how university committees \(http://alumnispac.es/HigherEdCommittees\)](http://alumnispac.es/HigherEdCommittees) can be more effective with some great guidelines that can be applied both to alumni groups and likely within your own teams.

Or, produce your own internal handbook that evolves over time to provide a resource to new group leaders.

## How do you handle training for group members today?

We'd love insights into the way leadership skill and knowledge is maintained and fostered.



## Finally, the Money

### Only 39% of groups said that money would be a solution to their challenges.

We know that ~40% is not a small set of groups, but it's encouraging to see that additional funding ranks below other options like website tools and outreach training. This shows that your leaders know that some of their problems require resources they can't sufficiently provide for themselves even if they did have more funding. We aren't drawing the conclusion that you should not give money to groups (we'll cover funding more thoroughly in Part 4 of this series), but this reinforces previous conclusions that your assets can and should be devoted to creating tools and resources to empower all of your groups and leaders.



Photo Credit: Fabian Blank

## Do More with Less

Budget cuts are the norm across institutions. Alumni staff are asked to achieve higher goals with less funding and smaller teams, while also forging new paradigms of engaging their alumni across more channels than ever before. Meanwhile, the future of sustainable higher education funding relies on growing alumni support, which all combine to mean that alumni associations need their local groups more than ever before (and they need them to be *dynamic* and *broadly capable*.) Along the way, challenges like those uncovered in our research are bound to pop up. but the good news is ***solutions are available that minimize the effect on budgets without sacrificing effectiveness.*** Training alumni leaders and adopting powerful digital tools can empower them to act and grow independently, while staying tightly connected to your team.



# 2017 Alumni Group Survey Insights

## Alumni Group Activities and Trends

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SECTION III



# 2017 Alumni Group Survey Insights

## Alumni Group Activities and Trends

### SECTION III



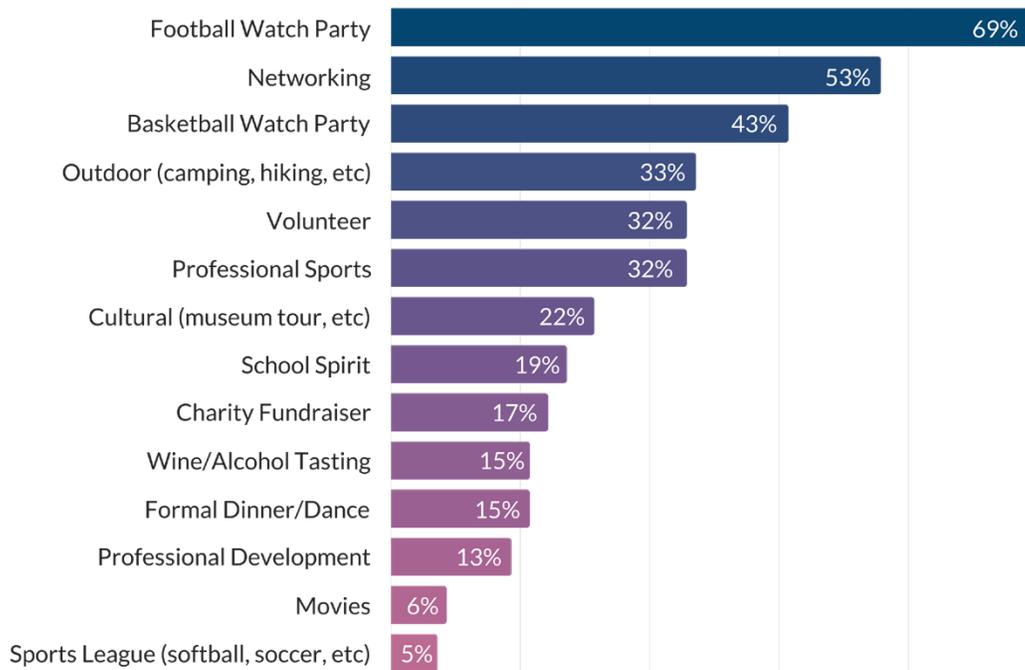
### Events!

Events are the lifeblood of almost every local alumni group. They are the offline culmination of all those online engagement efforts; a way in which your alumni network physically manifests around the globe. We asked group leaders to tell us about the types of events they host throughout the year and which they deem to be most successful. In this part of the study, we focused specifically on local offline events — many groups are pursuing digital engagement efforts and online activities, which we'll cover in a future study.

Photo Credit: Emma Dau

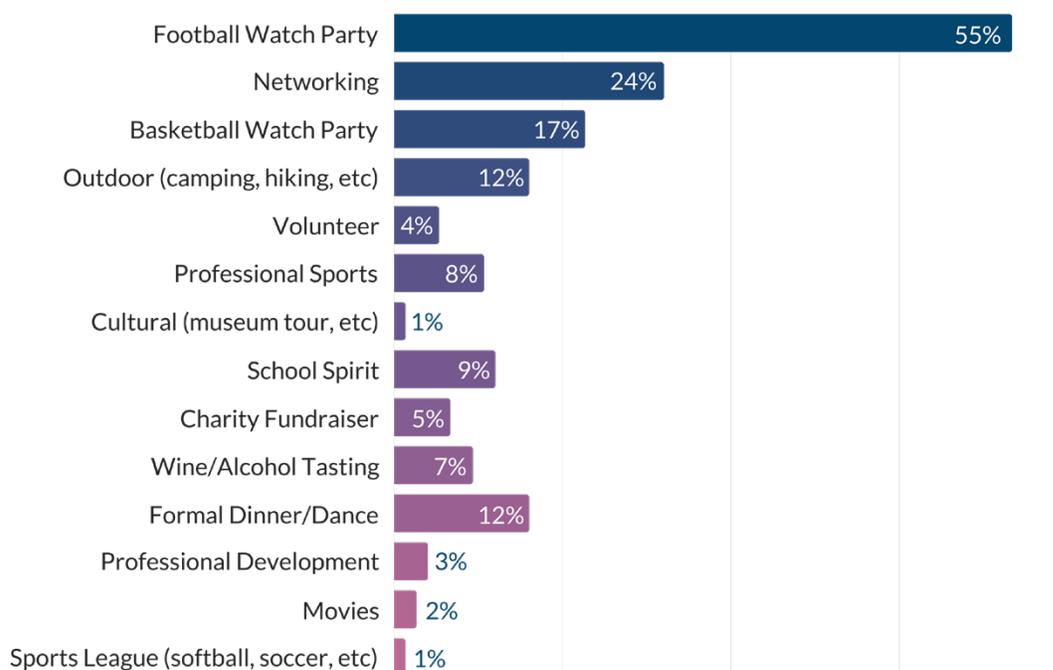
PREVIOUS PAGE: UGA College of Ag & Environmental Sciences Office of Communications and Creative Services

## Which types of events has your group hosted in the past year?



As might be expected, with 69% of groups organizing them, football watch parties are the most common activity. While basketball watch parties came in at #3 with 43% of groups hosting them, the #2 slot was networking events. 53% of groups organize networking events. This of course, doesn't mean that 53% of all activities are for networking, but simply that 53% of all groups are hosting at least one each year.

## Which types of events are your most well-attended?



In order to get some assessment of not just which events are happening, but those that are successful, we also asked group leaders to tell us which types of events are the most well attended. When those responses are stacked up, we see that each category shrinks.



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"If we could all improve football watch party attendance by 10%, it would be a great metric but overall have relatively little effect on alumni engagement rates or group success. If we can affect a 10% change in a smaller category, we're opening new pathways to new audiences."

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No one would expect sports league games to be the most well-attended types of events, so only seeing 1% of groups describe it that way seems normal. To extract some insight from these two series of data, we looked for categories that are under or over-performing expectations – events that many people are hosting but are ranked very low for attendance, or the inverse: events that are hosted by relatively few groups but have a high attendance rank.

When we narrow the focus down like that, two clear outliers emerge: **Volunteer events and formal dinners/dances.**





Photo Credit: Daniel Funes Fuentes

## One third of groups host volunteer activities, but only 4% describe them as well-attended.

If we're being honest with ourselves, this is not very surprising — most of us love the idea of helping people, as long as someone else is actually going out to do the helping. Similarly, just over half of all groups host networking events, but only a quarter describe them as well-attended. The reason we highlight these is not because we have a silver bullet to solve attendance, but to suggest that when you are looking for ways to affect meaningful growth in the success of group events and alumni engagement, there is significant relative benefit to be had in categories like these.



Photo Credit: Park Troopers



Photo Credit: Phillip Breker

## Moving the Needle

If we could all improve football watch party attendance by 10%, it would be a great metric but would overall have relatively little effect on alumni engagement rates or group success. If instead, we can focus on those types of events that are very common across groups, but have lots of room for improvement, there is significant potential payoff. If we devote resources to groups to experiment with new ways to promote or host networking or volunteer events, the lessons could be easily transferred to other groups to improve their own efforts. The best part is that you can experiment with many different approaches in many different

groups and see what moves the needle — some things won't be a perfect match for all groups but over time, raising the attendance rates for these under-performing types of events will have significant engagement rate impact that is not dependent on a sports team's annual performance. And your network's under-performing categories might be different than the data suggests here — as always, talk to your groups and find out about how their various event categories perform. *(Small sales note: if you use Alumni Spaces, you can get that data any time you want with just a few clicks.)*



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"82% of groups hosting formals consider them to be amongst the most well-attended of all their events."

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On the other end of the spectrum, we have formal dinner/dance — a type of event that is punching above its weight class when it comes to engagement. Only 15% of groups are hosting a formal dinner or dance each year. But of the groups who do host one, 82% consider them to be well-attended, making this the highest engagement rate of any type of activity. This suggests that there is a big opportunity out there to host more of them in additional markets where you can apply the lessons of your groups who are hosting them today.

Our first assumption was that groups hosting formals would be in large metro areas — and many of them are — but mid-sized cities are actually the most likely to have this tradition. Places like St. Louis, Cleveland, Minneapolis, Portland or Charleston are hosting annual dinners to raise money for scholarships, award scholarships, recognize their members or commemorate a date. Everyone sees the rich and famous don expensive dresses and tuxedos for luxiourious galas, but most of us don't have the opportunity to put on a fancy outfit and pose in front of a step-and-repeat banner (that's the logo filled background the celebs get photographed in front of on the red carpet). ***This is your chance to build an aura of gravitas and exclusivity around your alumni association's presence.*** It certainly takes work to put together a fancy event, but you can start small — consider simply



Photo Credit: Pietro Jeng



Photo Credit: Michael Browning

making a reservation for 15-20 people in the back room of a local restaurant. Even if you simply split the bill and ask for a \$30 scholarship donation on top of the cost, you've laid the foundation for a recurring activity with a formal air. **This is also a great way to appeal across demographics — young or old, everyone likes to get dressed up every once in a while.**

Although it may not be a smashing success for every group, these formals are so successful for those that host them, you may be surprised at which groups latch on and start forming a new tradition. We're planning to devote a future study to some of the details around these events: average cost per plate, venues, event topics, formats, etc. And, we'd love to hear from you about groups who host formals or those who are exploring the idea — how do they measure success and how did they start it?



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"...young or old, everyone likes to get dressed up every once in a while."

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Weekly

Mon

100% responders

5\$ each

84% conversation rate

Costs :  $\frac{\$42,000}{}$

= 7,843 / buyer

89%

### Upcoming Campaign



Audience Size 10,000

Response Rate → 10%  
(expect, how?)

Conversion Rate → 53%  
average buyer purchase -

## 2017 Alumni Group Survey Insights

### Alumni Group Funding



# 2017 Alumni Group Survey Insights

## Alumni Group Funding

### SECTION IV

We took a look at local alumni group funding – how much groups receive and how it impacts their success. We asked group leaders to describe the quantity and type of funding they receive from their national association and, as with all topics that involve money, we're

sure there are two sides to the story. But our focus is on group leader perspectives, so we're analyzing the data they've given us, without trying to check it against association staff perspectives (though we are considering this as a strategy for future research).

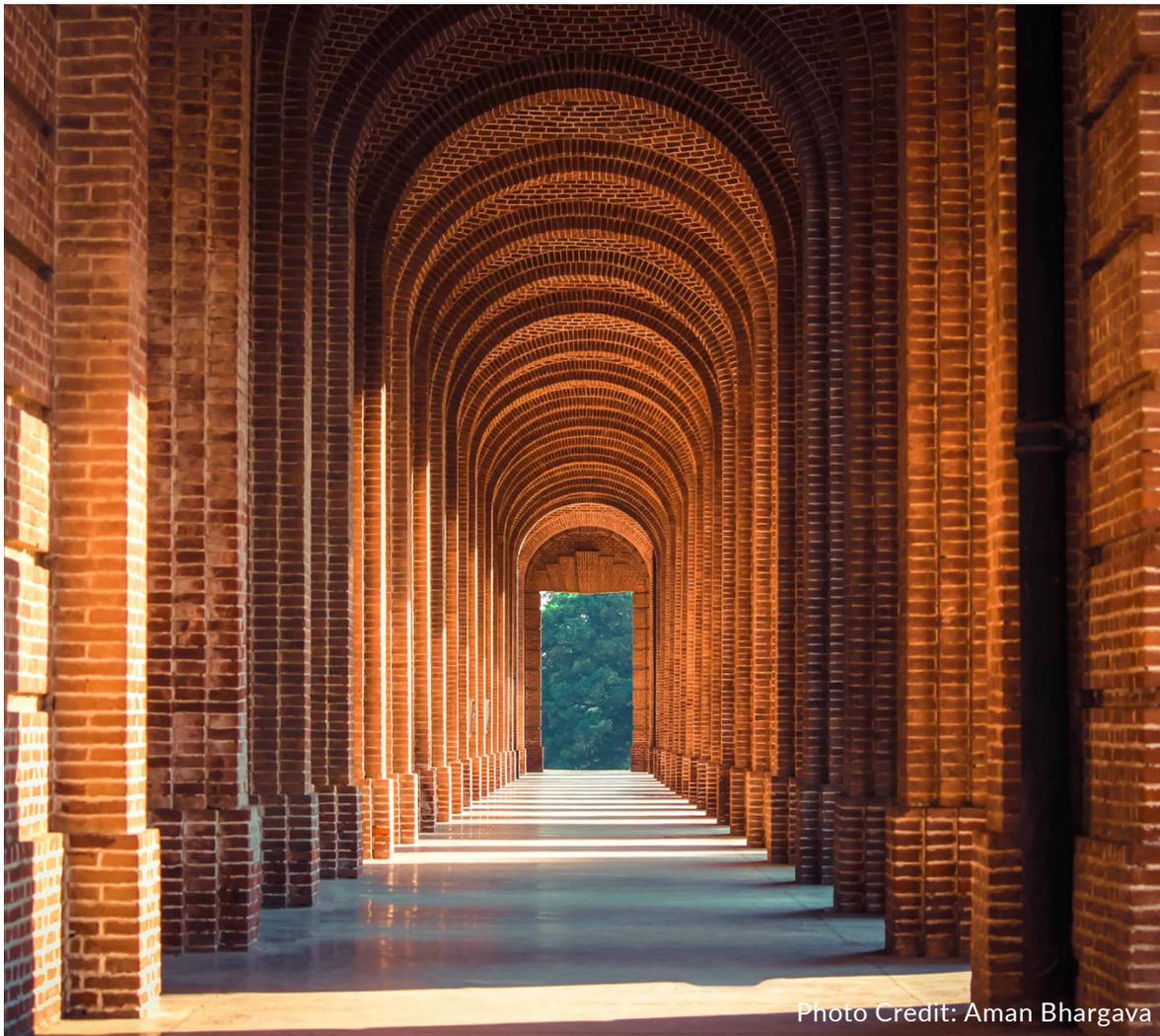
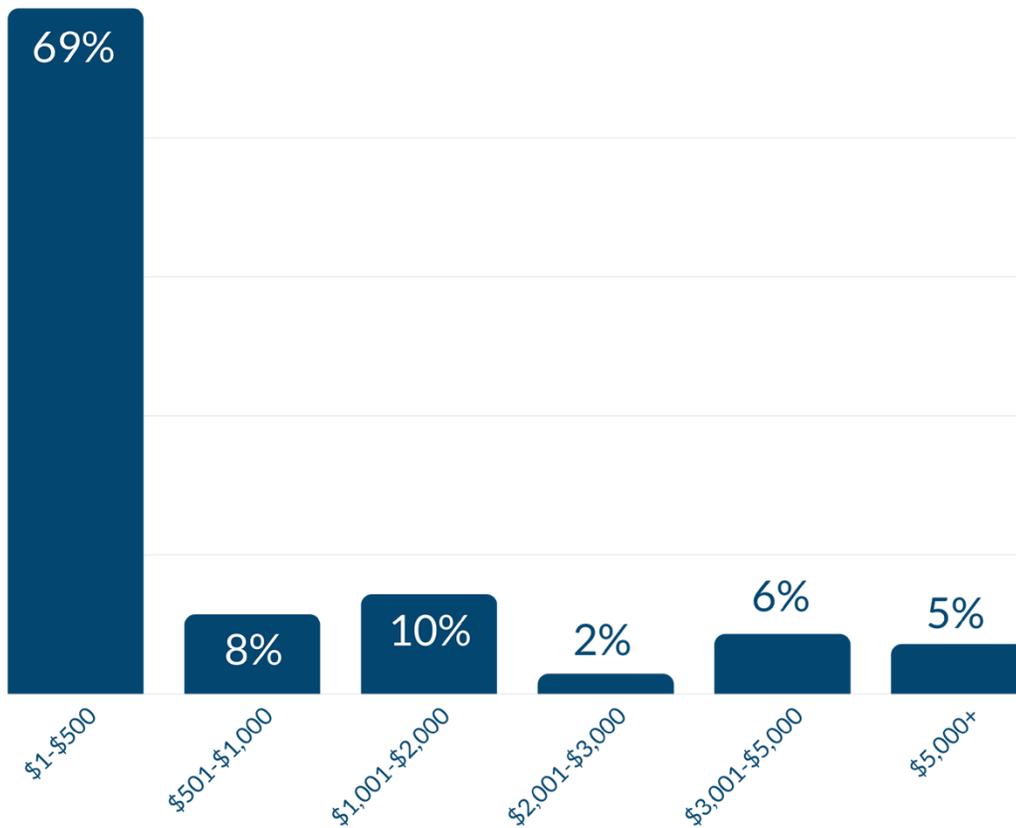


Photo Credit: Aman Bhargava

PREVIOUS PAGE: Rawpixel

## Alumni Funding from Alumni Associations



A quick look at group funding tells us that most groups receive very little direct financial support. Of those that reported funding data, 69% of groups receive \$500 or less from their national association each year. But those who do receive substantial cash support are seemingly well-funded, with 22% of groups getting more than \$1,000 per year and the lucky few 5% receiving over \$5,000 per year.

As all associations are constantly hunting for better ROI data, we wanted to analyze these funding numbers to see if the funding a group receives affects its overall "success" — in our case, again measured by the number of events held in a year. Anecdotally, most leaders and association staff we spoke to expected there to be a fairly direct relationship between funding and success. While more successful groups tend to raise a lot of their own money, they also have large events or supply needs. However, we found almost no correlation between funding and success — in the end, the correlation coefficient was approximately .13 (a value of 0 would mean no relationship at all, 1 means perfect 1:1 relationship).

**We found almost no correlation between funding and success...but we are not saying "don't give money to your clubs."**

In fact, if we look at those outlier groups who receive more than \$5,000 each year, 40% host fewer than 10 events each year. Most of them are reasonably successful, hosting an average of 14 events a year, but to see 40% not able to reach the threshold of reasonable success is lackluster to say the least. It is also interesting that while these highly-funded groups are in markets of all sizes, about half of them are in areas with significant alumni populations. And while most groups in areas with very large alumni populations tend to be amongst the most active of their peers, those who are receiving significant funding are holding nearly 65% fewer events.

Photo Credit: Michal Janek





So while we've focused on those groups receiving outlandish sums of money, we see similar results down the line — groups that receive more money than their peers actually tend to underperform when considered by how many events they host in a year.

Now, we are not saying "don't give money to your clubs." In fact, underfunded groups tend to be the very small, barely active groups from small remote areas. These groups could probably do a lot more with some additional funds to jumpstart their efforts. But we are seeing a lot of evidence to suggest that with mid-to-large sized groups, adding funding has limited impact on their success. Instead, there are huge opportunities to boost their success and jump start that cycle of self-sustaining engagement by focusing on providing the tools and services they need to solve their most pressing challenges.

**...underfunded groups tend to be the very small, barely active groups from small remote areas.**



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"...groups that receive more money than their peers actually tend to underperform when considered by how many events they host in a year."

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# 2017 Alumni Group Survey Insights

The Digital Toolbox for Alumni Groups

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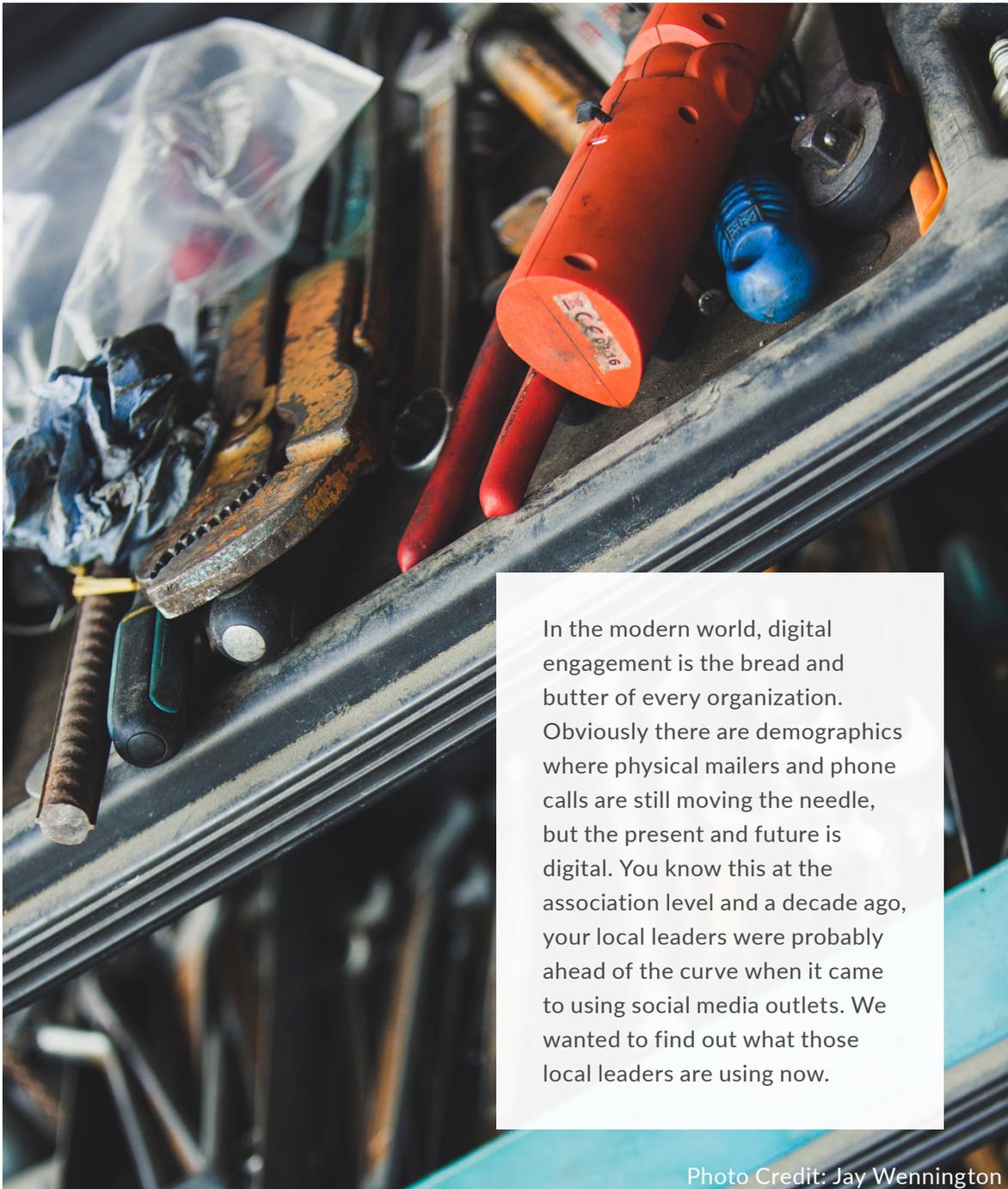
SECTION V



# 2017 Alumni Group Survey Insights

## The Digital Toolbox for Alumni Groups

### SECTION V



In the modern world, digital engagement is the bread and butter of every organization. Obviously there are demographics where physical mailers and phone calls are still moving the needle, but the present and future is digital. You know this at the association level and a decade ago, your local leaders were probably ahead of the curve when it came to using social media outlets. We wanted to find out what those local leaders are using now.

Photo Credit: Jay Wennington  
PREVIOUS PAGE: Sticker Mule



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“...a decade ago, your local leaders were probably ahead of the curve when it came to using social media outlets. We wanted to find out what those local leaders are using now.”

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## Group Websites

53% have their own website — this is a website they update and which exists independently of Facebook, Tumblr, Medium or any other social platform. An interesting note: of those who do not have a website, 44% said that "website and social media tools" are the #1 thing they need to address their challenges.



We've all come across defunct group websites, abandoned for years, that look like Geocities artifacts. But in reality, if a group has a site, they tend to be active in keeping it updated. 53% update their website at least once a month and 20% keep it updated once a week.

**44% said that “website and social media tools” are the #1 thing they need to address their challenges.**

That updating tends to be the responsibility of a fairly small number of people. For 50% of groups, just one person has access to update the website and for an additional 44%, access is limited to 2 or 3 people. For our team, this is a great insight because we know that if something as core to a group as its website is the responsibility of just a single person, we need to make sure that our products make it as easy as possible for anyone to update their site, regardless of technical ability. If it isn't dead simple, it will get procrastinated or forgotten, as that one person's time is filled with other responsibilities.

## Half of all group sites are editable by just *one person*. Alumni associations need to make sure they are offering a method for preserving institutional knowledge at the group level.

*This also shows us that alumni associations need to make sure they are offering a method for preserving institutional knowledge at the group level.*

We can't count the number of times we've worked with a group and heard something along the lines of "we're not sure how to log into the current site or renew the domain because Bob bought it 8 years ago and he's since moved to a Tahitian ashram." When 94% of group sites are editable by such a small

group of people, it's important to make sure groups have a way to preserve access and information, balancing local independence with long-term institutional perspective.

In the next section, we'll also examine how the most successful groups use digital tools, but we'll tell you ahead of time that over 90% of highly active groups have their own site to share their news.



Photo Credit: Raw Pixel

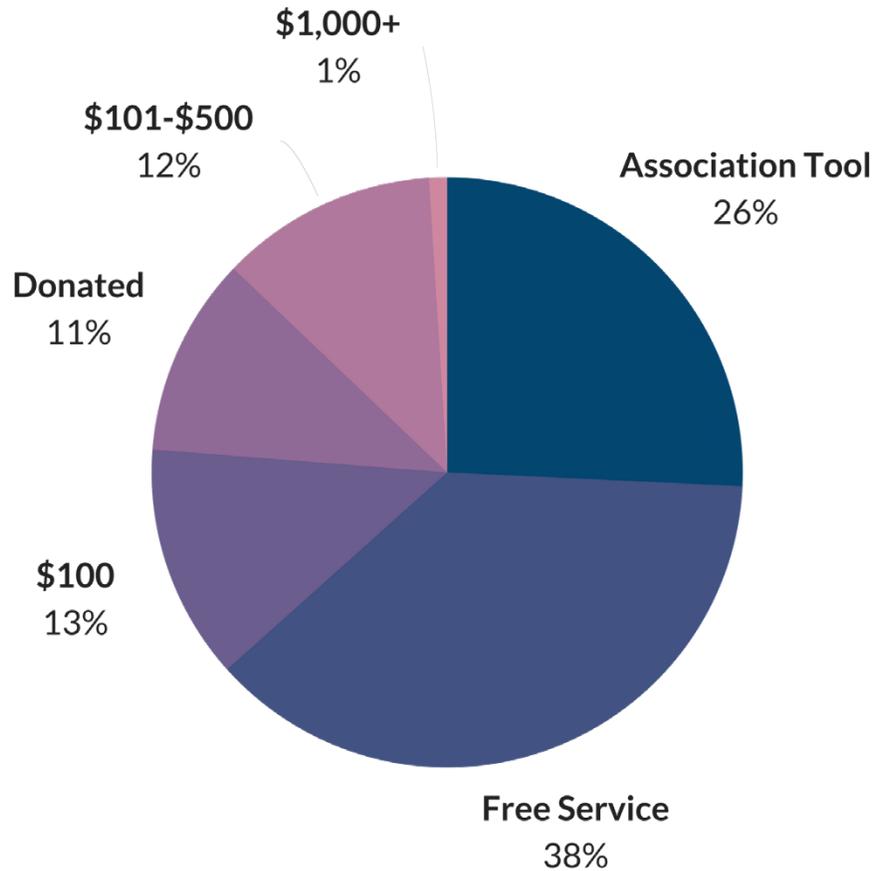
## Let's Make a Deal

Most groups are getting a great deal for their website. 75% aren't paying anything for their site because 38% use a free service, 26% have a website tool provided by their association and 11% have a website that was built or sponsored by a member.

Because we build tools that alumni associations use to power their local group websites (and so much more!), we wanted to see how groups like the tools they're being provided today. ***Of the 26% who have a website provided by their alumni association, over a third (36%) said they were unhappy with their current site.*** And for 25% of them, "website and social media tools" was their #1 need — all despite getting exactly that from their association today for *free*. So we know that even if your organization is providing these tools today, there is still a need to find out what group needs aren't being met. The main takeaway: talk to your groups, find out what they think about the tools you provide today and see how you can improve them. *(See, that wasn't too much of a sales pitch.)*

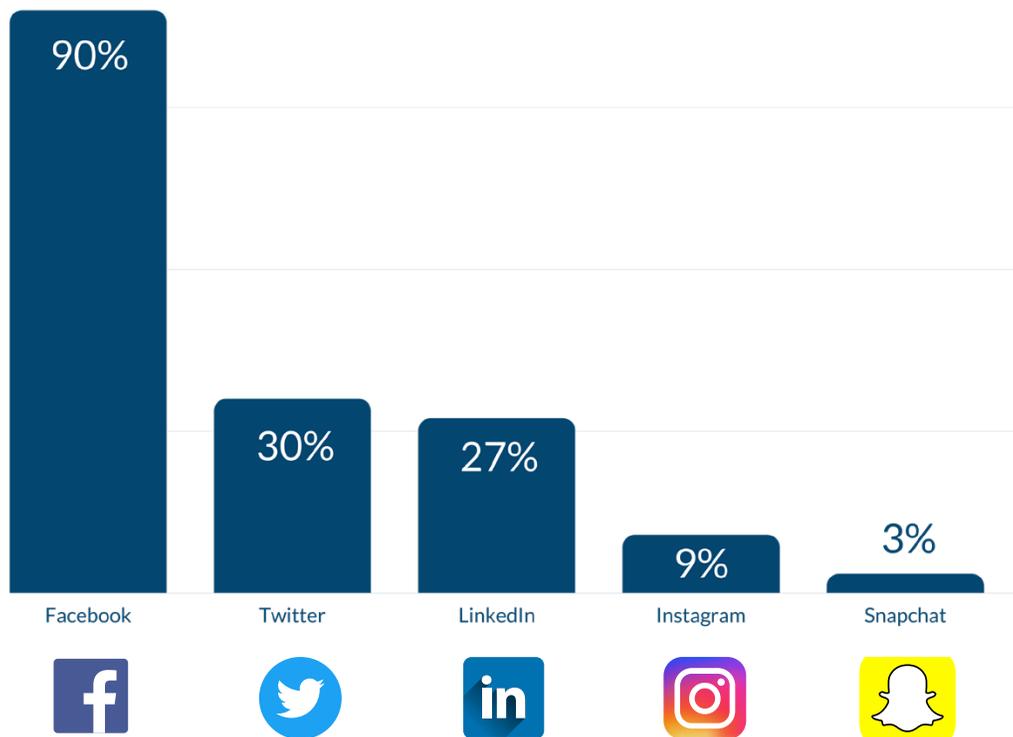
For 25%, “website & social media tools” was the #1 need.

## Cost of Alumni Group Websites



**75% aren't paying anything for their site because 38% use a free service, 26% have a website tool provided by their association and 11% have a website that was built or sponsored by a member.**

## On which social media outlets is your group active?





## Social Love

Social media is the real battlefield of alumni engagement today. It is a fight for attention amongst a million outlets, but you have something that no brand or company does: love. Most associations say "affinity," but most people don't know what "affinity" means. It's also a weak word — it means something like "predisposition to" or "liking of" a thing. **But most alumni loved their time in college, they love their alma mater and they still get a wistful sense of longing when they visit campus. Even the ones who aren't "engaged" (yet).**

We asked groups what channels they are using to reach these people and the results are the usual suspects: Facebook (90%), Twitter (30%), LinkedIn (27%) and a smaller number are using Instagram (9%) and Snapchat (3%). In the next section, we'll dive a bit deeper into which of these tools are used by the most successful alumni groups and in later research, we're going to drill into how groups are actually using each of these channels: ads, events, sales, etc.

## You've Got Mail (still)

When we asked specifically about events, we learned that only 60% of groups are using Facebook Events to get the word out. But 71% are using email communications to promote them and a surprising 21% use postal mail at least once a year.

Speaking of email, we have to touch on the third rail of alumni group relations for a moment. 71% of groups are sending email newsletters and just over half (54%) have their own databases. Now, we're sure there are people reading this thinking "Oh, I'm glad our groups aren't doing that anymore, we took care of that back in the Great Email War of 2015." Chances are that your groups still have their own email lists. Going into this, we thought that "about half" of groups we talk to have their own lists and when the survey results came back at 54%, it validated a lot of anecdotal evidence we've gleaned from speaking to club leaders.

We found that 28% of them are using MailChimp, 18% are on ConstantContact, a handful of groups use other platforms and an amazing 53% responded with "Other." When someone selected "Other," they could then enter some text to elaborate, so we dug through all the responses by hand and categorized what people were using instead of the most common newsletter tools out there. We discovered that we left off the most popular "black market" email tool available to local group leaders.

**71% of groups are sending email newsletters and just over half have their own databases. (Yes, your groups, too.)**

Constant Contact® 



## The most popular email marketing tool is “I send newsletters from my own email account.”

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Had we included “I send newsletters from my own email account” as an option, it would have been #1 at 37%. They answered things like:

“Gmail”

“I just copy and paste it”

“Yahoo!”

“I do it manually”

“They don’t let us use a newsletter,  
so I send my own.”

It’s pretty clear that in lieu of having access to the right tools to send our newsletters, they’re doing it anyway, using less effective means of communication without unsubscribe links, link tracking, without A/B testing, all probably in violation of CAN-SPAM Act. If your groups say they don’t have an email list, chances are at least some are lying to you.

But we think that’s fine. ***The data around all of this suggests that we need new, more collaborative tools, not more restrictive rules.*** 76% of the most successful groups in our survey maintain their own database

(interestingly, 86% of them are using MailChimp). We’re very familiar with the reasons alumni associations want to limit access to their databases for fear of overloading alumni with unvetted content as well as the arguments from local groups who feel cut off from the most effective means of communicating with their members.

But it is clear that what most alumni associations are doing now is not working and is unsustainable in the long-term. Somehow we’ve got to start creating a tool that democratizes access while centralizing the data, allowing groups to communicate with their members more freely while giving alumni the flexibility to control who they are hearing from.

That’s going to be a big focus for a lot of research in the future: newsletter content tools and strategies for dealing with it. In the meantime, we want to hear how your association handles email, what the pitfalls or successes have been and how you wish it all fit together.



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"...groups that receive more money than their peers actually tend to underperform when considered by how many events they host in a year."

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# 2017 Alumni Group Survey Insights

Lessons From The Highest Performing Alumni Groups

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SECTION VI



# 2017 Alumni Group Survey Insights

## Lessons From The Highest Performing Alumni Groups

### SECTION VI



Photo Credit: Baim Haniff

PREVIOUS PAGE: SpaceX

If your alumni group hosts just 10 events in a year, you are amongst the top 37% of all groups.

When we crunched all the numbers from this survey, we created a lot of cross-sections to see how groups sharing certain characteristics might line up on other metrics experiences.

**Are groups that receive more money more likely to succeed?**

**Do groups who host their own website consider reaching their members to be as much of a challenge as those who *don't* have a site?**

The most striking way we found to draw conclusions about a group was based on the number of activities they host.

## Your group does not have to be all that active to be a success story.

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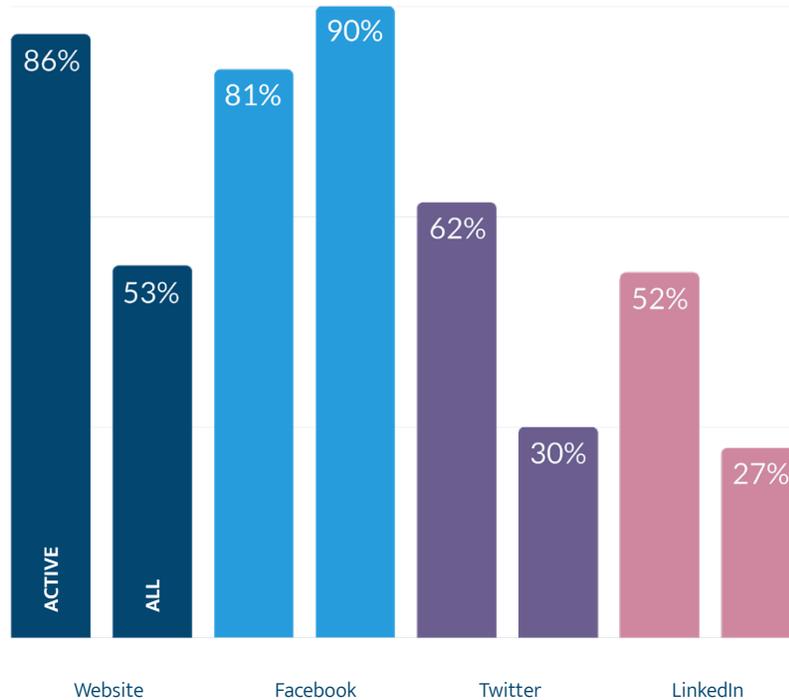
"Number of events hosted in a year" is not a perfect measure for gauging true on-the-ground success of a group, but it is a decent proxy as it transcends a number of variables. Large or small, funded or broke, the number of events it hosts suggests something about the quality of a group. If a group hosts a lot of unsuccessful events, it will eventually scale them back — or if it starts with a few highly successful events, it will expand the calendar, suggesting that regardless of how we measure success, over time, more successful groups tend to host more activities in a given year, even in small markets.

***The most active groups in our study host more than 50 events each year,***

***but they are outliers, representing only 2% of their peers.***

And since only 10% of groups hold more than 20 events, your group does not have to be all that active in order to be a success story. ***In fact, if your local alumni group hosts just 10 events in a year, you are amongst the top 37% of all groups.*** Ten events per year is a very attainable bar for success — it amounts to just one event every five weeks or even just a watch party per football game. If you mix in an annual holiday party, summer picnic and a single volunteer event, you're already one of the most active groups in America.

## Active Groups Compared to All Groups



With 63% of groups holding fewer than 10 events per year, we want to draw some meaningful lessons from the success stories in our survey. You might also recall from our first post in this series, the most commonly shared trait amongst successful groups is local peer collaboration. 95% of these groups work with other alumni organizations in their area, collaborating and learning from one another. How else do the most successful groups differ from the average? What types of activities are they hosting, how do they promote them and what tools are they using?

## The Outliers

First, we looked at the outliers — those big groups hosting more than 50 events per year. That is a huge level of activity, unrealistic for most groups. These Super Groups tend to have very large alumni populations to draw from — 62% of them have more than 7,500 alumni in their areas but only 32% receive more than \$500 of funding each year. Evidence that as groups become more active and drive sustained outreach, they need less institutional support in the long-run and become stronger as a result.

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Photo Credit: Mike Wilson



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“As groups become more active and drive sustained outreach, they need less institutional support in the long-run and become stronger as a result.”

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## The Top 5%

If we expand our consideration to the top 5% of groups, we get a mixture of successful groups,  $\frac{1}{3}$  from private schools and  $\frac{2}{3}$  from public, with replicable lessons for any alumni population. These "Highly Active Groups" are hosting more than 30 events each year and are 12% less likely than the average group\* to say that event attendance is a problem for them.

They also tend to be better at communicating to their members and cultivating/retaining leaders, being 5-10% less likely than an average group to cite those as challenges. They are more likely, however to say that fundraising for scholarships (+11%) and communication

with their national association (+5%) are challenges. When asked what tools could be provided to help them address those challenges, they are 20% more likely than the average group to need additional funding and 10% more likely to need group management training. Being very active, ***it's probable that these groups are hitting the limits of their funding and organizational effectiveness because they are growing, but have not yet fully developed a self-sustaining cycle of engagement.***

These groups also see success with different types of activities compared to the average (see Section III for

The cream of the crop average more than two events per month.



more details). They have significantly more successful networking events (+19%), professional sports outings (+21%) and wine tastings (+12%) while other categories like outdoors, volunteer, formal dinner/dance and professional development are moderately more successful (+7-10%). They are, however, a bit less likely to see success in categories that are heavily relied on by the average group. They are slightly less likely to cite football watch parties (-7%), basketball watch parties (-5%) or school spirit (-10%) as successes.

Photo Credit: Frank Luca



*\*Methodological note: references to the survey as a whole or “average groups” consider the entire set of responses, including the Highly Active Groups we’re examining. This is worth noting because if we were to have compared the active groups to those who are less active (rather than the average), the differences we’ve explored here would have been even more stark.*

## Digital Lifestyles of the Active and Successful

When it comes to the digital tools they need to drive these activities, (see Section V for details) this category of groups probably doesn't need website tools because 86% of them already have their own site, compared to just 53% of their peers. Similarly, 22% fewer mentioned email newsletter tools as a needed tool... most likely because 76% of them already have their own email database (86% of those use MailChimp, FYI).

When we look at their digital tools, a few clear trends emerge. 86% have their own website, 81% use Facebook, 62% are on Twitter and 52% are using LinkedIn to engage their members.

Highly Active Groups have a distinctly different digital toolbox than the average. These are some of the most distinct differences between Highly Active Groups and the average group – they are 33%

### Most groups over-rely on Facebook when they should be diversifying their digital toolkit

more likely to have a website, 32% more likely to use Twitter, 25% more likely to use LinkedIn but surprisingly, 9% less likely to use Facebook. We don't interpret this to mean that using Facebook could make you less successful, but rather that **most groups over-rely on Facebook when they should be diversifying their digital toolkit.**

When the most successful groups are using Twitter at a rate more than twice the average, we know it is worth examining more deeply. Find out who in your network is using Twitter to promote their local group and learn how they've found success.

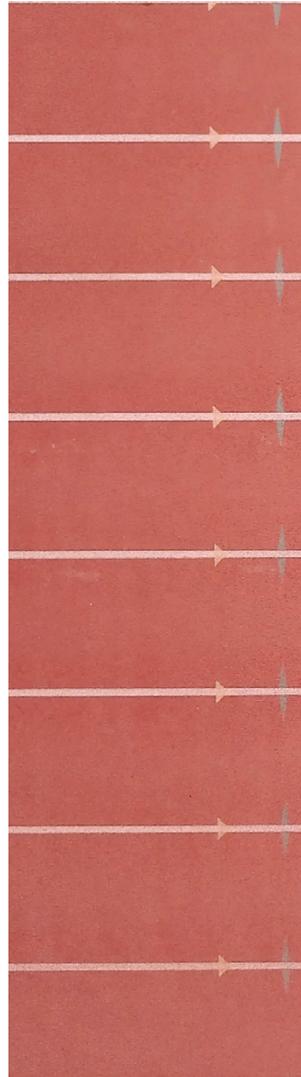




Photo Credit: Steven Letham

## The Why and How

Of course, nothing is a silver bullet — group success cannot be distilled to a single trick or tool. ***Examining the habits of successful groups is just like reading books written by successful leaders in politics, business or society — not by copying their methods but by emulating their strengths, we can progress towards our goals.***

Our goal for this survey and the analysis we've shared was to add a foundation of data to some of the anecdotal knowledge alumni

relations professionals and group leaders have about their organizations. Some of this data probably confirms or contradicts assumptions you have had and that is the main lesson from all of this: talk to your groups, understand how they align or differ from our findings and see if you can apply some lessons from what we've shared to make your alumni groups more effective. We'd love to hear about how it goes or how your groups are different.



Photo Credit: Faustin Tuyambaze

We're focused on helping alumni associations better engage with their member clubs and helping those same clubs operate at a higher level. While we've been able to help deliver on that promise for our partners, we constantly strive to stay on the cutting edge of alumni engagement and provide the alumni groups we work with the tools they need to succeed in an ever changing world.

Our findings from this study have spurred fantastic discussions and we hope you found our research to be valuable and you can apply them to your own engagement and alumni relations strategies. Our goal in sharing our findings is to leverage data to support or challenge assumptions associations and alumni groups face on a daily basis. Use this research and analysis as a springboard for conversations with your groups and see where they fit or diverge from the trends we've uncovered.

We look forward to connecting with you about any findings that resonate strongly with your organization and how Alumni Spaces can elevate your alumni groups to drive meaningful engagement and activate new donors in local communities.



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