

Volunteer Recruitment – A Case Study of Change

Feature Articles

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On any given day, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri welcomes thousands of guests through its doors. During their visit, guests might encounter several of the museum's more than 400 volunteers at multiple different points: when storing backpacks at the Coat Check, picking up a map from Visitor Services, considering a purchase in the museum shop or discussing the art in the galleries. Museum volunteers from teens to nonagenarians and all walks of life help make the museum an inviting, friendly and inclusive destination for guests to enjoy.

How did the museum create this strong and vibrant volunteer community? As this *Engage* feature explains, it came about through partnering, listening, learning, and the commitment and willingness of both staff and volunteers to do things differently.

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

Presiding over a 20-acre campus, the stately architecture of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art certainly hints at the collection it beholds, but first-time guests may be surprised at the bustling sense of activity and community that usually fills the halls and galleries. With free

admission since 2002, this cultural landmark has been working to be accessible to everyone who lives in and passes through Kansas City. In recent years, those efforts have extended to the volunteer corps as well.

Volunteers bring their varied perspectives to the museum and help it engage all guests with distant cultures and times, as well as contemporary voices and issues, through experiences with art. Even amid the challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, volunteers continued to support programs and operations where needed, reflecting both the volunteers' dedication and leadership's recognition of the vital contributions of volunteers. So, when the Nelson-Atkins unveiled a new museum-wide strategic plan in 2022, it was no surprise that leadership also sought to outline how volunteers could help the museum achieve its strategic priorities. But the first step was assessing current practices, particularly in light of the changing landscape of volunteerism.

"We had just gone through several changes, plus were still dealing with the pandemic and we were ready to reinvent what volunteer engagement could look like. While the museum was focused on Diversity, Equity, Access, Inclusion and Sustainability (IDEAS) and had talked about diversifying the volunteer corps, we had not looked at the system as a whole."

Anne Manning, Deputy Director, Learning and Engagement

Recognizing that outside facilitation could be vital, the museum engaged outside consultants, VQ Volunteer Strategies, to design and implement an assessment and then facilitate a planning process that would include a shared vision for volunteer engagement and a plan that mapped out the path to achieve that vision. The result was a strategic plan for Volunteer engagement, outlining how volunteers are engaged in support of the museum's priorities. The assessment included interviews with dozens of staff and volunteers as well as a customized survey, the results of which were summarized in a report with recommendations. These in turn informed the staff-volunteer planning task force in developing a vision and establishing goals and objectives for the coming few years.

Museum Volunteers – a History of Partnership

Volunteers have played an important role at the museum since it opened in December 1933.

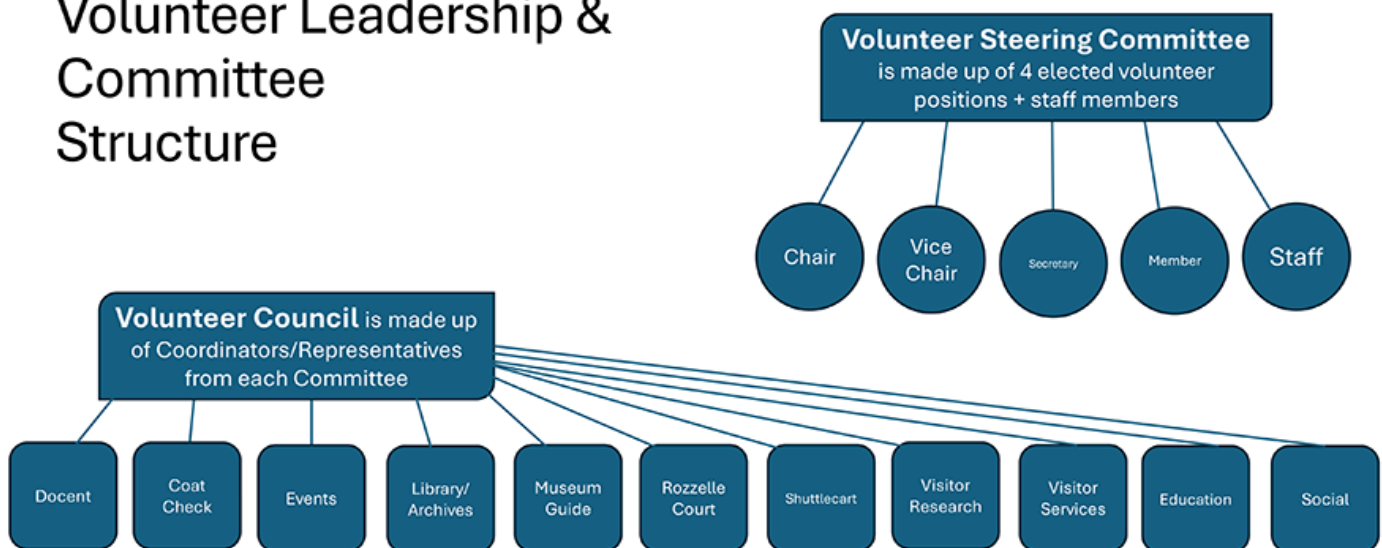
Students from the nearby Kansas City Art Institute are said to have served as some of the first security personnel and food service began with food that volunteers cooked at home. While volunteers no longer serve as security force or cook for guests, they have continued to provide

vital services for nearly a century, constantly evolving in partnership with staff to meet the museum's needs. In fact, both volunteers and staff sign a partnership agreement when onboarding, which outlines what both parties will do to support one another and the museum.

Volunteers are currently organized into teams, known as "committees," and in 2022, committees ranged from educational roles such as Docents and Museum Guides (who provide tours to organized groups or informal interpretation to guests) to guest service-oriented roles including Museum Store, Coat Check and even drivers of the "Shuttlecart" (a golf cart driven by volunteers to help guests get around the sprawling facility). Behind-the-scene roles include archives and library volunteers.

These committees have a Committee Coordinator or Representative, a volunteer who has taken on an additional leadership role by serving on the Volunteer Council and providing training support. The Volunteer Council is an advisory leadership group that works with Volunteer Engagement staff and provides important volunteer input and oversight to the volunteer program. The Volunteer Council also works with the Volunteer Council Steering Committee, which is comprised of elected officers and museum staff, to develop long-range planning, discuss new initiatives and serve as the voice of volunteers in the volunteer program.

Volunteer Leadership & Committee Structure



Back in 2022, training for some volunteer committees was both formal and extensive. Recruitment and the associated training occurred on a rolling basis for some roles and, for others, applicants had a wait time of one or even many years before they could begin training.

Training for some positions could be completed in just a few weeks; others, including the very public roles of Docent and Museum Guide, required anywhere from four months to up to two years of classes and study, plus ongoing continuing education.

The comprehensive training facilitated by staff and volunteers ensured well-trained and knowledgeable volunteers. However, the requirements and scheduling constraints sometimes limited access to becoming a volunteer. For example, weekday trainings were not accessible to people who work during traditional weekdays, which, unsurprisingly, is reflected in volunteer demographics. While there are many ways to measure diversity, the volunteer corps of 2022, like that of many museums, was generally homogenous in terms of race, gender, age and education level. Active volunteers were predominantly White, female and over 50 years old. They were well educated and mostly retired.

All volunteers are highly valued. However, the lack of demographic diversity among the corps was not fully reflective of the museum's commitment to IDEAS: Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, Access and Sustainability. This concept was far more than simply a commitment written into the museum-wide strategic plan; IDEAS was fully embraced by the museum team. Nearly all volunteers and staff interviewed and surveyed through the assessment by VQ Volunteer Strategies reported a strong commitment to the museum's IDEAS goals. Furthermore, volunteers believed they had the tools and resources needed to support them. This commitment dates back many years, as the Nelson-Atkins had long provided training to both staff and volunteers on diversity, equity, access and inclusion, with a focus on exhibit interpretation, cultural sensitivity and more. These efforts clearly helped to shift the culture of the museum, as demonstrated by survey results that reveal that nearly all volunteers, staff and trustees believed that the museum and the volunteer corps were welcoming and inclusive to volunteers of all backgrounds.

Yet, many Nelson-Atkins staff and volunteers recognized that current volunteer opportunities and requirements were only accessible to a limited pool of prospective volunteers. One trustee noted, "I am curious about how we are going to take away the stigma of elitism from the concept of being a volunteer?" Other volunteers noted that it may be "time to challenge our assumptions or requirements of what it means to be a docent or guide."

In short, the opportunities at the time lacked flexibility; many believed that offering more flexible training and volunteer roles would be vital to increasing the accessibility of volunteering at the Nelson-Atkins. Interestingly, flexibility was also appealing to current volunteers. A significant percentage of volunteers surveyed stated that they would be inspired to volunteer more if they could try different roles without a long-term commitment or if more short-term opportunities were available. Staff, too, indicated that more flexible requirements for volunteers would help achieve IDEAS goals: more than a third reported that more short-

term volunteer opportunities would increase volunteer impact; and well over half reflected that more volunteers who mirror the communities the museum strives to serve would do the same.

With these and other results of the assessment, a cross-divisional planning task force comprised of volunteers and staff from across the institution set about developing a strategic plan for volunteer engagement. It started with a shared vision for volunteer engagement:

A community of volunteers empowered to welcome and connect all people through joyful, creative and meaningful experiences with art.

Next, they identified five priority areas of focus to achieve this vision over the subsequent three years – including one explicitly focused on volunteer recruitment. The priorities were:

1. **Culture of IDEAS:** Establish and nurture a culture of IDEAS (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, Accessibility and Sustainability).
2. **Strategic Volunteer Roles:** Develop a varied array of mission-aligned volunteer opportunities to increase appeal and accessibility of volunteering.
3. **Recruitment:** Develop and implement outreach strategies to increase reach and attract prospective volunteers with our desired experience, skills, interests, availability and potential.
4. **Training:** Assess, refine and develop learning and professional development programs for staff and volunteers to ensure that all have the tools, skills and information they need to support the museum mission.
5. **Resources:** Secure and sustain the resources needed for success.

But, of course, the key to the success of any plan lies in its implementation and implementation of this plan required more than just the Volunteer Engagement team. Fortunately, circumstances and leadership support meant that the museum was primed and ready for greater collaboration. In the past, volunteer recruitment was handled exclusively by the Volunteer Engagement staff. For the first time, the team reached out to Marketing to gain support for recruitment – a request made easier by the fact that there were Marketing Department representatives on the strategic planning task force. Involving staff from across the organization in the planning process is a proven tactic in change management, as people have a greater stake in achieving goals they have had a hand in shaping.

“The Strategic Planning process is now very different ... with multiple departments. Staff turnover was a challenge but also an opportunity. The new hires are enthusiastic about what volunteers can do. The Marketing team was mostly new and when they were approached, they were super excited and onboard.”

- Marla Van Thournout, Volunteer Engagement Manager

Thanks to the Marketing Department, the Volunteer Engagement team had access to a whole marketing package, including social media, a public website, membership emails and onsite recruitment efforts. And even more was outlined in the Volunteer Engagement plan to ensure that the museum would be successful in its recruitment efforts.

Paths to Success

As one of the five priority issues in the Volunteer Engagement strategic plan, the recruitment priority had five goals:

- Nurture partnerships to fuel a sustainable pipeline of volunteers who reflect Kansas City.
- Strengthen positive community perception of volunteering at the museum.
- Strategically market the museum's volunteer opportunities.
- Leverage festival and special event volunteering as a bridge to future engagement.
- Audit current recruitment tactics; assess effectiveness; and establish baseline including from an IDEAS perspective.

To date, the museum has implemented numerous new tactics to enhance recruitment and retention of a more diverse volunteer pool. These steps include changes in policy and practice, as well as carefully designed change management communications.

Shifts in Policy

Application

Recognizing that accessibility and inclusion begins with an individual's early interactions with the museum, the Nelson-Atkins paid attention to those first encounters. They conducted an image audit on the website, updating images to better reflect the diversity that did exist and which they sought to achieve through new recruitment efforts. They also reviewed and revised the volunteer application form. In fact, they changed both the questions asked of applicants in writing and in the in-person interviews, shifting away from experiences with art and museums and instead focusing on qualities that are reflected in the museum's Volunteer Engagement vision statement.

Training Requirements

In seeking to lower the barriers to volunteering, the museum took a fresh look at training and asked themselves, as noted by Volunteer Engagement Manager Marla Van Thournout, “What is *essential* to learn?”

Take the Docent Volunteer role, for example.

- By considering all the content of the training and putting it through that filter, the Volunteer Engagement team along with Docent leadership restructured the training from a two-year curriculum to a one-year required curriculum, spanning a one-year period and reorganized into training modules, with the second year being optional for those who wished to learn more.
- Furthermore, they restructured which tours and collections were required (namely, the introductory tours) and identified collection-specific tour training as optional.
- More breaks between modules were built into the training schedule, to allow volunteers space for synthesizing what they were learning and to schedule important life events.
- They implemented an additional training offering on Saturdays, to allow volunteers who work a traditional schedule a little more flexibility.
- Finally, they are developing a cyclical training plan so that volunteers would have the chance to circle back and ‘catch’ a training on a topic they may have opted out of earlier. Such a plan also benefits current Docents as they would have more options to take trainings on topics for which they’d like a refresh.

In other words, the Nelson-Atkins restructured longstanding policies about requirements in order to create more ... you guessed it ... flexibility!

Shifts in Practice

Practices have changed as well. New recruitment tactics and the way trainings are structured have shifted.

Recruitment Tactics

In partnership with Marketing, the Volunteer Engagement team experimented with new recruitment tactics, as noted above. For example:

- While the team had posted on social media in the past, with Marketing’s help, they leveraged targeted ads and sent targeted emails to museum members. They also worked together to develop and purchase print ads and radio spots with media by and for Hispanic and African American communities and expanded their reach through community partners.

- They offered live information sessions onsite and online and posted the recordings so anyone could watch them on demand, something that had not been offered previously.
- Finally, recognizing that their visiting audience was already broad and diverse (and inspired by suggestions from colleagues at another art museum), they developed new onsite tactics. For example, on weekends, the museum engaged Docents and Museum Guides from diverse backgrounds to gently intercept guests and do word-of-mouth recruitment which garnered some of their most diverse applicants.

Training Practices

For decades, Docents and Museum Guide Volunteers were trained separately. But, as part of the effort to make volunteering more accessible (as well as to match the changing goals of volunteer interpretation and guest interactions), these two groups of education-focused volunteers were trained together for the first time in 2024. In the past, Docents and Museum Guides would complete the same core curriculum training through their separate training tracks. Under the new model, both groups completed the core curriculum training at the same time before branching off to focus on their specific roles. This provided several benefits:

- Trainees learned about each other's volunteer roles, which reduced siloing and fostered increased understanding of and respect for one another's roles in the museum.
- It allowed volunteers to quickly develop friendships across committees.
- A handful of volunteers who began training in one role realized that the other would be a better fit, allowing them to easily shift their volunteer committee without having to drop out of training and await the next recruitment cycle.
- Finally, it allowed more efficiency for staff in terms of the time and resources needed to conduct training. This created more bandwidth to provide additional training and supports outside of the core training for those who needed it.

Communications

These shifts in policy and practice would never have been successful without careful change management which, in large part, was focused on communications.

The museum was proactive in their communications, working hard to avoid any news or misunderstanding trickling out through the grapevine. They devoted a large portion of a Fall meeting with the volunteer corps to recruitment and training and the anticipated changes in both. Messaging focused on the 'why' – namely to ensure long-term success of the museum and the volunteer program – as well as the 'how' – noting that these changes resulted directly from the strategic plan which was developed collaboratively between staff and volunteers. They also carefully considered the 'who' – relying heavily on volunteer leadership committees to help spread the messaging around change and to provide a channel for

communicating feedback, questions, or concerns on behalf of volunteers. They also took advantage of existing meeting structures to communicate the upcoming shifts. Museum-wide meetings like the monthly All-Staff & Volunteer Meeting, as well as communications at regular Docent and Museum Guide trainings, helped communicate the plan for the coming year.

Initial Successes

Fortunately, these efforts are already paying off across many measures. The museum had established a goal of recruiting a new pool of volunteer Docents and Museum Guides which better reflected the diversity of the Kansas City community – and they have met and exceeded that goal.

In terms of sheer numbers, 2023 saw a record number of applicants for these two volunteer committees – 158 in total – who speak 13 different languages, including American Sign Language. Among them, 20 percent identify as Black, Hispanic, Asian or Pacific Islander. The new Museum Guide class has 34 percent racial diversity and the Docent class has 20 percent. Two of the Docents are Spanish-speaking and numerous Museum Guides speak multiple languages.

But results extend beyond numbers alone. The newly-recruited volunteers have brought their enthusiasm and joy for art into the galleries. Docent trainees and the recently graduated new Museum Guides are already facilitating art discussions in multiple languages for guests of all ages and backgrounds. With the addition of their support, the museum has been able to increase their capacity for offering tours and programming that better meet the demand from the public. The newly added volunteers have also increased opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds to learn from one another, something that the museum has already received positive feedback about from both volunteers and museum guests.

Tips for Recruitment Success

Recruitment has been identified as the top volunteer challenge by nonprofit leaders^[1] and recruiting a more diverse volunteer corps can seem even more daunting. But learning from The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art may demystify this process and position others for success. When asked what they recommend to other organizations, the Nelson-Atkins volunteer team shared:

- *Don't do it alone.* Success depends on engaging others across the organization – both vertically and horizontally. Engage your peers as well as leadership and frontline staff. It

takes a team with expertise, collaboration and buy-in.

- *Invite input at strategic points*, from the early planning stages through implementation and evaluation – as well as at milestones throughout the process. Doing so helps to sustain buy-in and it invites new ideas which may be very helpful!
- *Communicate early and often*. Don't leave opportunities for misunderstanding or for people to generate their own information. Being transparent and proactive will pay off in big dividends.
- *Create an action plan* with clear timebound objectives, metrics for success and most-responsible-people.
- *Just do it!* Don't be afraid of change. Believe in the process.
- *Don't forget your community*. Your volunteer corps is a reflection of the audience you serve and the community the museum inhabits. Listen, learn and welcome feedback on what they're looking for in a volunteer opportunity.

Please share your own stories and advice

What advice would you share with others based on your successes and lessons? Comment below to share your tips, brainstorm ideas for enhancing recruitment success, or ask questions of the authors and other peers.

Footnote

[1] Dietz, Nathan and Grimm, Robert T., Jr. 2023. "The State of Volunteer Engagement: Insights from Nonprofit Leaders and Funders" Research Report: Do Good Institute, School of Public Policy, University of Maryland.

Beth Steinhorn

As President of VQ Volunteer Strategies, Beth Steinhorn partners with organizations and their leadership to increase their impact through strategic and innovative engagement. As a thought leader, Steinhorn regularly participates in the national dialogue about volunteerism and engagement and is... [Read more](#)

Marla Van Thournout

Marla Van Thournout has been managing volunteers since 2009. She holds a BA degree in Art History & French Studies from the University of Minnesota and a certificate in

Free Choice Learning from Oregon State University. Van Thournout spent her career at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas... [Read more](#)

Denisse De Leon

Denisse De Leon is the Director of School and Community Programs and Partnerships at The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri. She supports museum staff as they create meaningful and memorable programming central to the museum's mission: to invite all people to explore the art in its... [Read more](#)

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Faiza Venzant, CVA Temecula, California

Fri, 10/25/2024

Case studies such as these are really powerful. They show us how values put into action lead to positive outcomes. Congrats to the museum staff and all involved in showcasing this work and best of luck as you continue animating your values!

[Reply](#)

Beth Steinhorn, VQ Volunteer Strategies, Colorado

Sat, 10/26/2024

Thanks, Faiza. We are so pleased to share this story and are glad you believe it has relevance to organizations of many kinds. Thanks for your leadership in this work as well!

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