

## Sharing the Universe Video Series



“Growing Your Astronomy Club” is a series of three videos that offer ideas and advice gathered from research with amateur astronomy clubs across the United States. The solutions outlined here have been successfully implemented at astronomy clubs to address a variety of issues related to attracting and welcoming visitors, retaining members, and involving members as volunteers.

**Watch the videos with your Board and club members. Then review these Tips to start transforming *your* club.**

### Tips for Part #3: Cultivating Volunteers



Sharing the Universe videos are produced by the Astronomical Society of the Pacific (ASP) from research conducted by the Institute for Learning Innovation, the ASP, and from astronomy clubs like yours. [www.astrosociety.org](http://www.astrosociety.org)

All *Sharing the Universe* Videos can be found at:  
<http://www.astrosociety.org/SharingTheUniverse>



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## Part #3: Cultivating Volunteers

An astronomy club needs its members to fill a variety of support roles to help the club run smoothly. But research with astronomy clubs has shown that too often:

- Clubs find it difficult to recruit members to fill needed volunteer positions.
- Members who take over a position receive no training or support, causing them to spend way more time than they had expected.
- The same people serve in the same positions for years on end. Such people often: a) experience burnout, or b) don't think anyone else can handle the job, or c) have been in the position so long that the rest of the club expects them to continue and doesn't even consider that someone else should take over.
- Without a regular turnover of volunteers in the management of the club, uninvolved members develop the idea that they need not contribute or that there are no opportunities to do so.
- Members feel unappreciated for the efforts they make in support of the club.



**The way many clubs address these issues is to develop and sustain a *culture of service* to the club, where every member expects to eventually serve in some way.**

### Effective practices clubs use to develop a culture of service:

1. Consider Term Limits to prevent burnout and ossification.
2. Implement Effective Recruiting Strategies
  - a. Have incumbents prepare a description of their job.
  - b. Institute a policy that the incumbent recruits his/her own replacement and commits to training the new person.
  - c. Recruit one-on-one, preferably face-to-face.
  - d. Create the position of Volunteer Coordinator.
3. Make each job manageable.
4. Give volunteers public recognition for their service to the club.

- ✓ [More Tips on Retaining Volunteers](#)
- ✓ [How the Night Sky Network can help](#)
- ✓ [Action Plan](#)
- ✓ [Volunteer Roles Checklist](#)



## 1. Consider Term Limits to prevent burnout and ossification

People are the heart of your club, and without a variety of volunteers – and new blood – to help run the club, it can stagnate. In addition, if the same people keep the same jobs for a very long time, the rest of the club members might feel excluded or marginalized – with no opportunity to contribute their ideas and services to the club.

Consider instituting “term limits” for these reasons:

- To keep fresh ideas flowing into the club.
- To make members feel the club is inclusive and welcome to new people (and your club doesn’t run the risk of not being able to remove a less-than-effective volunteer).
- To give a potential volunteer assurance that they are not going to be “stuck” in the job longer than the term.
- It supports a club culture where members know they are expected to take a turn serving the club.



Afraid that imposing term limits will leave you with a lot of vacant positions that are difficult to fill? *Implement Effective Recruiting Strategies!*

## 2. Implement Effective Recruiting Strategies

Which recruiting technique you use depends on what type of volunteers you need. Recruiting volunteers for **public astronomy events** requires a very different strategy than recruiting for **positions on the Board or for committee and support/administrative roles**.

### Recruiting for Public Astronomy Events

How often do members volunteer to help at outreach events? Is it always the same group?

Club members may not know what's involved in sharing astronomy with the public. So they may be hesitant to volunteer. So, to introduce members to **public outreach**, invite club members to attend your public events just to see what goes on. Ask them to simply observe the different ways they *might* participate. They don't need to bring a telescope or talk with the public if they're not ready yet.

All they need to do is watch and learn, so they can make an informed decision about participating in a way that fits their interests and skills. This is a no-obligation introduction to public outreach.



The Volunteer Coordinator can send general emails to the membership encouraging participation and offering support for new outreachers. If you offer an **outreach training program**, make sure your members are aware of it. Many clubs use the Night Sky Network Toolkits\* to conduct training and give members ideas they can use to excite and inform the public. Your Outreach Coordinator or other experienced member might be interested in leading such a group in order to encourage more participation in your outreach events.



**TIP:** Refer members to the Sharing the Universe Video series, *Outreach Training*, for tips on successful public outreach: <http://www.astrosociety.org/SharingTheUniverse>.

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\*Night Sky Network ToolKits: If your club is a member of the NASA Night Sky Network (NSN), contact your club's NSN Club Coordinators for more information. <http://NightSkyNetwork.org>

## Recruiting for the Board and Committees

Problems clubs experience with recruiting volunteers for the Board or Committees:

- People join the club for their love of astronomy – not love of administration.
- Club members are generally not trained for administrative duties, so they may feel uncertain and unqualified.
- There is no one in the club who actually has the responsibility to recruit for vacant positions.

People are reluctant to volunteer if they don't know:

- How much time is involved.
- What they are expected to do.
- How long they are expected to serve in the position.
- Who is going to help them learn the job.

So who does the recruiting? What does the recruiter need to prepare? How do you recruit and support a volunteer?

### *Effective policies clubs have instituted to recruit for Board & Committee positions*

#### *a) The incumbent prepares the job description*

**The best person to prepare a job description is the person who holds the job now.**

Just have the incumbent list what they do, what tools they use, who their contacts are, and anything they feel is important for anyone holding the position to know.

#### **Checklist for job descriptions:**

- Task list:** What steps are involved in doing the job and include any deadlines.
- Contacts:** Anyone the volunteer needs to know about for the job (e.g. a list of media contacts for the publicity coordinator or, for the outreach coordinator, school and scout contacts).
- Resources** needed to learn about or to do the job (e.g. *Robert's Rules of Order* are useful for Board members, bank account and PayPal account information for the treasurer, or sources of speakers for the meeting program coordinator)
- Any special skills needed**
- Any rules or procedures** that need to be followed (e.g. procedure to reserve observing nights at the State Park)
- Time Commitment:** Be accurate regarding the estimated time commitment. Set expectations appropriately. Don't say it takes one hour a month when it actually takes 4 or 5 hours. The person may never volunteer again and might resign from the assignment.
- Term:** what is the term limit and/or expected period of service?



**TIP:** You may want to make a policy that the Board reviews the job description for accuracy and completeness.

**b) The incumbent recruits his/her own replacement and commits to training the new person.**

Make it a policy that, when appropriate, the member who currently has the job commits to find *and train* their own replacement – the incumbent is often the most motivated, can best explain the job, and can effectively train and mentor their replacement. Plan a transition period and plan for the incumbent to be the new person’s coach and mentor for the first two to four months.

**c) Create the position of Volunteer Coordinator**

- Consider appointing a Volunteer Coordinator who is responsible for recruiting volunteers for vacated positions on committees and the Board when the incumbent cannot.
- This person is also responsible for recruiting outreach volunteers.
- Oversees the volunteer recruitment process.
- Plans public recognition for volunteers (see the section “Give volunteers public recognition for their service.”)

**d) Recruit one-on-one, preferably face-to-face.**

**Why not just place a notice in the newsletter?** If that has resulted in quickly getting good, qualified members to volunteer, then your club is the exception and you should continue the practice.

**What more commonly happens:**

An article in the newsletter or an announcement at a meeting asking members if anyone wants to fill board or committee positions can result in either of these consequences:

- **No one responds.**



*“We put notices in the newsletter for three months that we needed a new editor. But nobody volunteered or even asked about it. The editor told us she couldn’t do it anymore and had to quit. We went four months without a formal newsletter.”*

- **The wrong person responds**, someone who is eager but unable or unwilling to do the job correctly.



*“Our Meeting Speaker planner had served for five years and wanted to step down. We made the announcement at a meeting and the only person who raised his hand was a long-time member. He thought our club members should be the ones to give all the talks and within a few months, we didn’t have any professional talks. HE ended up giving the talk almost every other month ‘cause he couldn’t get anyone else to do them. We lost a lot of members that year.”*

**A much better way to recruit a volunteer is to ask a specific person, preferably face-to-face.**

Research has shown this is the most effective way. People can be flattered when you ask them for help, especially if you tell them why you feel they would be good for the position.

This assures that you get the right person for the job, and, it gives you the opportunity to say why you think they are the right person. Be clear on why you are asking this particular person.

Be prepared with:

- A written job description
- How much time the job takes and how long the person is expected to serve
- Give assurance that the person will receive guidance and support from the incumbent or from another member who has held the position before.

**Recruiting by email.** Two approaches here:

1. **If you are sending the message to a selected group of club members:** Instead of sending a general message that says: “*One of you should be able to this job,*” ask their advice on which club member they might recommend for the position. This could result in getting two or three prospects you can personally approach.
2. **If you are personally approaching one member by email:** Treat it the same way as you would face-to-face. Outline what the job entails and how much time it takes. Tell the person why you think he or she is good for the job and that the person will receive training from you (if you are the incumbent). Include a job description in the email.

**Steps to recruit:**

1. Tell the person what the specific job is.
2. Tell him why she or he is a good prospect.
3. Give a quick overview of the job.
4. **Give the prospect a copy of the job description.**
5. **Assure him/her that you, as the incumbent, will be a coach and mentor for the first few months, as needed.**
6. Gauge the prospect’s interest.
7. Follow up within a few days.



Examples of what to say:

*“Michael, you always attend meetings and seem interested in making the club a success. Since I’m stepping down, we’d like to invite you to join the Board as the treasurer next year. It involves depositing checks we receive and paying the bills. We have a bank account and a PayPal account. Almost all the members renew magazines online now, so there isn’t much of that you’d need to do. I found that it takes about three or four hours a month. During renewal time, a little more. I’m happy to get you started and answer any of your questions during the first few months.”*

*“Terry, I really admire how you’ve served the club and I know you don’t think you’re qualified to fill my role as club President, but several Board members including Craig, the Vice President, suggested we ask you. Both Craig and I can help you through the year and be good resources for you to depend on throughout your two-year term.”*

*“Lee, the Membership Coordinator is moving out of the area and you seem to get along with people easily. If you were able to take over within the next month, she can show you how the membership is managed.”*

Follow up on any expression of interest within a week. The sooner you re-contact them after the initial request, the more likely it is that they will accept.

**TIPS**

- ✓ Ask younger members to manage the publicity and social media for your club events.
- ✓ Invite younger members and women to take leadership roles. Let them help show veteran members new ways to enjoy and perpetuate the hobby. They need to have ownership of the club, to have their ideas listened to, to be given a place to serve and make a difference.
- ✓ New members are usually quite enthusiastic. Encourage newer members to consider serving as officers or committee chairs. Keep an eye out for new members who regularly attend meetings. Assess them to determine if they would be willing and available to fill a needed position on the Board or on a Committee.



### 3. Make Each Job Manageable

Consider all the positions your club has and make sure each of them has a reasonable amount of work. A **generally acceptable workload is 3 to 6 hours a month**. This is in addition to regular club events, such as the monthly meeting, board meeting, public events, and club observing events.



**TIP:** If any of your members are devoting more than eight hours a month to administrative tasks, to avoid burnout you may want to consider splitting jobs up.

Review the list of roles below. Which ones does your club have? How many of these roles are managed by the same person in your club? **If there are members who are wearing more than two or three hats,** the Volunteer Coordinator may want to check with them regarding how they are handling the load.



Common Board Positions:

1. **President:** Prepares agenda and presides at monthly board and general meetings; Provides support to board members and committee chairs as needed to enable them to fulfill their jobs; Represents the club at club and public events.
2. **Vice-President:** Steps in for President in his/her absence; assist President with his/her duties
3. **Treasurer:** Receives all monies and makes disbursements to pay obligations of the club; keeps club's financial records and manages bank account(s).
4. **Secretary:** Records minutes of all Board and Business meetings and distributes minutes to members.
5. **One to five "Member-at-Large" positions.** These are voting members of the Board and often fill other administrative or support roles in the club.

Common Committee or Administrative/Support Roles:

6. **Membership Coordinator:** Tracks and keeps membership records up-to-date, accepts new member applications, sends reminders about renewing membership, keeps track of dues paid.
7. **New Member Steward:** Supports new members during their first year of membership, introduces new members to the club, its culture and activities.
8. **Volunteer Coordinator:** assures that all club positions are filled and the process to recruit is followed. Recruits for positions as needed.
9. **Outreach Coordinator:** Accepts requests from the public and schedules special events, notifies club members of outreach opportunities, gets signups and assures enough members will be present. Cancels and reschedules special events as needed.
10. **Public Astronomy Coordinator:** Manages regularly scheduled events, like monthly star parties: plans dates, plans programs, prepares materials.
11. **Outreach Training Mentor:** Partners an experienced club outreach with new outreach volunteers. Prepares members for outreach and uses Night Sky Network ToolKits, videos, and resources for training.

12. **Meeting Program Coordinator:** Plans and makes arrangements for speakers and programs for club meetings in coordination with the Board
13. **Webmaster:** assures website is up-to-date and operational.
14. **Newsletter Editor:** compiles and does layout and production of the Club Newsletter. Distributes newsletter to membership.
15. **Publicity Coordinator:** Publicizes regularly scheduled events to local media, schools, and other organizations
16. **Meeting Greeter:** Greets visitors to club meetings, provides them with information on the club, and introduces visitors to other members. Assures the Welcome Table is stocked.
17. **Refreshment Coordinator:** Responsible for meeting and event refreshments.
18. **Equipment Manager:** Maintains and manages any club-owned equipment; transports equipment as needed to events.
19. **Meeting Room Set-up Manager:** Opens meeting room, puts out signs, and sets up meeting room with tables and chairs as needed; sets up audio-visual and computer equipment.
20. **Observatory Manager:** Assures all equipment is in working order; manages the schedule for use.

Public Outreach Event Roles:

21. **Public Astronomy Program Presenter:** Prepares and delivers appropriate presentations and demonstrations at public events; prepares relevant visitor handouts such as star maps, telescope tours, or astronomy information sheets (e.g. Solar System Planets).
22. **Telescope Operator:** Operates telescope at public events and prepares “scripts” for objects s/he shows in the telescope.
23. **Event photographer:** takes photos at public events, gets photo releases as needed.
24. **Event reporter:** writes newsletter/website articles about past and upcoming events, encouraging members to participate in the next one. This could be someone who would write a regular column for your club newsletter on your outreach program.
25. **Event Host:** Greets members and visitors at public astronomy events; helps visitors get oriented at the event; has handouts with club information.

## 4. Give volunteers public recognition for their service to the club

People want to be appreciated for what they do. Public recognition for service to the club (such as managing the website or securing meeting speakers) is as important as recognition for public outreach.

The BIG SECRET about public recognition of volunteers: It's not *just* for the volunteers.

It's also a way for your club to:

- Make club members aware of all the work that goes on behind the scenes.
- Highlight the importance of each position to the success of the club.
- Show members the variety of positions that need volunteers.
- Contribute to fostering a culture of service to the club where all members expect to eventually serve in some way.



Top motivations for people to volunteer:

- An interest in learning something new.
- A strong desire to do something to contribute to the club's mission.
- A sense of obligation, of giving back.
- The prestige, recognition, or connections the position offers.
- To have fun.

Recognition does not need to involve gifts or cash rewards. Very few people are *motivated* to volunteer for the primary purpose of getting some monetary reward or gift (e.g. reduced dues, a special mug). Feel free, however, to offer gifts or perks in *appreciation* for service.



*"There are no trophies, no money – what's important is the thank-you. If someone recognizes what you do, that's enough because we're all volunteers – we do it because we want to, not because we have to."*

### Ideas for Giving Public Recognition

The Volunteer Coordinator can be responsible for thanking volunteers publicly:

- Put a notice in the newsletter a few times a year.
- Have the volunteers stand up and thank them at club meetings.
- Have an annual award ceremony to recognize all the members who serve the club in some way.
- Consider having a special name badge or pin to identify volunteers and the type of service they perform or the position they currently hold. These are passed along to the next member who takes over the position.
- Some clubs give pins or buttons to members who help out at public outreach events.



## More Tips to Retain Volunteers

A special note to Outreach Coordinators:



### Keep it manageable. Don't over-commit your club.

Consider how much time your members are willing to spend at extra astronomy events, like school star parties, Scout campouts, or booths at community events.

**Limit the number of events.** If you schedule one or two events every week throughout the year, you're likely to burn out your volunteers. Before committing, remember this guy's story:



*"You don't want to exhaust the volunteers. When I first took over as Outreach Coordinator, I'd tell everyone who asked that we'd be happy to hold stargazing events for their group. Between March and June, I committed our club to more than 20 events. I wish someone had really sat me down for 10 minutes."*

It's OK to tell teachers and scout leaders, *"We can't do it then. Let's plan for another time (or for next year)."*

**Limit the number of invited participants.** Make sure the organizer at the facility understands that there is a limit to how many people you can accommodate.



*"The teacher said she had 20 students from her class who were planning to come and some would bring their families. But word got around the school and over 600 kids, teachers, and parents showed up. We only had 3 telescopes. What a crazy night."*

**Useful Reference:** Volunteer Management Resource Library: <http://www.energizeinc.com/art.html>



## How the Night Sky Network can help



Use the free services of the Night Sky Network to facilitate club administration.

Streamlining and simplifying administrative activities go a long way toward making club jobs more manageable. The NASA Night Sky Network provides a variety of resources specifically designed to meet the needs of astronomy clubs and streamline club management.

For a video overview: <http://NightSkyNetwork.org/about.cfm>

The Night Sky Network (NSN) makes it easier to spread the club duties among several members. Using NSN to manage mailing lists, newsletter distribution, membership, outreach events, volunteer service, and your calendar can make almost any club job easier.

- **Event Calendar** with all info needed about an event: Location, directions, weather report, moon phase, time of sunset, basic sky map, Clear sky chart, member RSVPs
- **Club event calendar widget** you can snap into your website. It displays the events you added to the Night Sky Network. And it's always up-to-date. You don't need to burden your webmaster to keep your events current.
- **Membership management** including membership application, member roster, ability to keep records of membership dues paid, newsletter mailing list, event notifications, and message groups.
- **Online form for the public to request events** from your club (customizable with your own message)
- **Free publicity** for your events through widgets, apps on mobile devices, and social media. Example: Go StarGaze iPhone app: <http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/go-stargaze/id380833895?mt=8>
- Online tracking of volunteer hours
- Outreach Training Videos
- Online Astronomy Activities that illustrate concepts in astronomy clearly – and include videos
- Online renewal of magazine subscriptions at the club discount rate

For the full manual on setting up and managing your club on the Night Sky Network:

<http://nightsky.jpl.nasa.gov/docs/HelpCoordinator.pdf>

Ask one of the tech-savvy, online-oriented members in your club to help set up your club on NSN.



*“With the Calendar function, Membership Roster, club look-up, and other resources, the Night Sky Network website is a ‘One Stop Shopping’ experience for club business. Further, I can attend to club business anywhere and anytime.”*

For assistance with setting up your astronomy club on the Night Sky Network, contact:

[nightskyinfo@astrosociety.org](mailto:nightskyinfo@astrosociety.org)

### Action Plan: Cultivating Volunteers

Make your plan for implementing practices to cultivate volunteers.

| Already Do<br>✓ | Implement by<br>mm/dd/yy | SUGGESTED PRACTICE                                                                                                   |
|-----------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                 |                          | Invite members to attend public astronomy events to see what goes on                                                 |
|                 |                          | Review and evaluate volunteer roles in the club (Use “Volunteer Roles Checklist” on next page)                       |
|                 |                          | Implement these recruiting policies:                                                                                 |
|                 |                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incumbent prepares a job description</li> </ul>                             |
|                 |                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incumbents commit to finding and training their own replacements</li> </ul> |
|                 |                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruit one-on-one, preferably face-to-face</li> </ul>                      |
|                 |                          | Implement Term Limits                                                                                                |
|                 |                          | Create the position of Volunteer Coordinator                                                                         |
|                 |                          | Implement a program of public recognition for volunteers                                                             |
|                 |                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Place notices in the newsletter</li> </ul>                                  |
|                 |                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hold an annual awards and recognition ceremony</li> </ul>                   |
|                 |                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make badges with the position names</li> </ul>                              |
|                 |                          | Use Night Sky Network resources:                                                                                     |
|                 |                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use Event Calendar and member RSVPs</li> </ul>                              |
|                 |                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use Calendar Widget on our club website</li> </ul>                          |
|                 |                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manage membership roster</li> </ul>                                         |
|                 |                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Track Volunteer Hours</li> </ul>                                            |
|                 |                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use ToolKits and Videos to train members for outreach</li> </ul>            |
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### Volunteer Roles Checklist for Board and Committee/Administrative Positions

Since multiple members may fill the Public Outreach Event Roles, those roles are not listed here.

| CLUB ROLE                    | Name(s) of Member(s) doing this | Req'd Number of Hours per Month |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| President                    |                                 |                                 |
| Vice-President               |                                 |                                 |
| Treasurer                    |                                 |                                 |
| Secretary                    |                                 |                                 |
| Board Member                 |                                 |                                 |
| Board Member                 |                                 |                                 |
| Board Member                 |                                 |                                 |
| Membership Coordinator       |                                 |                                 |
| New Member Steward           |                                 |                                 |
| Volunteer Coordinator        |                                 |                                 |
| Outreach Coordinator         |                                 |                                 |
| Public Astronomy Coordinator |                                 |                                 |
| Outreach Trainer             |                                 |                                 |
| Meeting Program Coordinator  |                                 |                                 |
| Webmaster                    |                                 |                                 |
| Newsletter Editor            |                                 |                                 |
| Publicity Coordinator        |                                 |                                 |
| Meeting Greeter              |                                 |                                 |
| Refreshment Coordinator      |                                 |                                 |
| Equipment Manager            |                                 |                                 |
| Meeting Room Set-up Manager  |                                 |                                 |
| Observatory Manager          |                                 |                                 |
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