NACS members say the returns far outweigh the time they invest in volunteering for the association.

If you’ve never taken a volunteer position with NACS, perhaps 2010 is your year to devote some of your time, energy, and skills to your professional organization. According to many NACS volunteers, both seasoned and new, it could be the best move you ever make—for yourself, your store, and your career. Certainly, you won’t find yourself alone.

OPPORTUNITIES GALORE

That NACS has a volunteer opportunity to suit nearly every experience level and time commitment is reflected in the increasing numbers of college store professionals who are giving their time.

“We have nearly 400 people volunteering this year,” notes Cynthia D’Angelo, NACS vice president of association services. She adds that volunteer opportunities run from “something that takes a few minutes” to a three-year commitment once a member reaches the NACS Board of Trustees.

Naturally, most volunteers tend to start small with local or one-time assignments. “A lot of folks start in a local, state, or regional organization, because that’s the easiest,” says D’Angelo.

The association tries to make volunteer opportunities easy to find and understand through a number of guides and descriptions available on the NACS web site (www.nacs.org). “Our goal has been to find something for everyone to do,” says Cindy Thompson, director of committees/state relations for NACS.

Volunteers can participate on one of the six Competency Councils: College Store Operations, Course Materials and Intellectual Property, Marketing and Campus Relations, Leadership and Human Resources, Retailing, and Business Stewardship. Interested members might also join a Community of Practice representing a particular membership constituency, participate in an ad hoc group, work on an advisory committee, or even write an article for The College Store magazine.

Any of these can represent a step on the path to eventual board membership if the volunteer decides to pursue that route. Thompson explains that NACS has constructed a volunteer
organization structure to offer many different paths to board positions, so that many different volunteers will find themselves prepared for that responsibility.

“We’ve tried to move to a skill-based approach to ascending to the board. People don’t need to feel that if they haven’t done every job they’re not qualified,” she says.

With so many potential paths to service with NACS, it’s no surprise that every volunteer career progresses a little differently.

THE LONG-TERM LEGEND

For Bob Warner, president of the privately owned University Book Store Inc. serving Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, volunteering has been a way to represent the interests of the privately owned store community while taking new information back to his own job. He began volunteering with three years on the Privately Owned Stores Committee.

“Private stores are not usually as involved with NACS,” Warner says. Yet, the more involved he got, the more he learned about the interests of institutional stores, a perspective with which he was less familiar. His volunteer career became one of give and take.

“I continued to learn as I went along,” he says. “I felt I could give something back as I learned more.”

Warner’s experience highlights a common theme among NACS volunteers: Volunteering leads to learning opportunities that might otherwise be more difficult to find and take advantage of.

“If you are not in a volunteer position,” says Warner, “the information is there, but you have to seek it out, and you may only seek out what applies to you at the time,” missing out on valuable learning opportunities.

Volunteering, however, exposes participants to a wide range of experiences and information they can apply to their own stores.

“It has now become part of the job,” Warner says. And as a member of the NACS Board from 2007-2010, he’s been in a position to help shape the industry as it deals with challenges posed by digital course materials, rentals, the Higher Education Opportunity Act, the recession, and other factors.

NEWER VOLUNTEERS

If Warner is at the point in his volunteer career where his activities are a reflexive part of his job, Chad Schreier, manager, Lebanon Valley College Store, Annville, PA, is just discovering what volunteering can mean.

After attending his first CAMEX in 2007, Schreier volunteered to work on the NACS Monthly Planner calendar, a project he says “forced me to sit down and evaluate the college store cycle for the year.”

Schreier, who most recently worked on the CAMEX 2010 Program Committee, says he finds the lessons he gains from volunteering at various levels help him do his full-time job better. One of the things he’s taken back to his store is an improved knowledge of how to “better allocate resources from the college.”

Like many volunteers, he’s discovered that he can simultaneously contribute experience and receive knowledge he desires. “There are not a lot of 26-year-old store managers,” he notes, explaining that he can offer a younger perspective to his committee colleagues, a viewpoint closer to that of the students they serve.

At the same time, Schreier sees volunteer work as an unparalleled opportunity to form relationships. “Volunteering is the best way to do that networking,” he says.

He feels the return on his volunteer investment is well worth his time. “It is zero risk, 100% reward,” he says. “You’re going to get more out of it than you put into it.”

Lisa Walden, general book/supplies manager, University of New Mexico Bookstore, Albuquerque, would agree. She’s found volunteering to be an outlet for her speaking talents.

When her store director—Melanie Sparks, CCR—was elected NACS president for 2008-2009, Walden was asked to serve on the General Books Committee, a daunting task for someone relatively new to the college store industry. “Everyone knew each other but me,” she says. “I felt very insecure since I had only been in the industry for three years. I sat quietly for 10 minutes and then said, ‘This is fun!’ and they couldn’t shut me up.”

Volunteering with NACS has given Walden some much-needed camaraderie in a position in which she has few peers. “There are not that many general book managers,” she says. “Talking to others made me feel like I could make a difference in my store.”

Walden gave her first presentation at CAMEX 2009, and intends to keep at it. “I have an unending passion for it,” she says. “I don’t consider it volunteering; it’s like a perk to me.”

She encourages other young professionals to seriously consider volunteering for NACS. “Even if you don’t feel like you have something to give, go because you want to,” she says.

Volunteering: Who, What, Where, and How

One way to launch your volunteer career is to contact your state or regional association. To explore volunteer opportunities with those associations and with NACS, go to www.nacs.org/volunteer.
Volunteering exposes participants to a wide range of experiences and information they can apply to their own stores.

THE VENDOR
Volunteering for NACS doesn’t only attract the talents of its college store members. Steve Arnold, regional sales manager for Herff Jones Inc. in Indianapolis, IN, sees volunteering as a good way to forge the kinds of business relationships that benefit both vendors and stores.

“I’ve never bought the idea that people are too busy to volunteer,” he says. “Volunteering puts you in a position to know a little more about the industry. It’s a close-knit industry. People work together rather than apart.”

Arnold, who is currently the associate trustee/supplier on the NACS Board, finds his service a way to share ideas and information without dealing with the hard sell: “If you had a good idea you could share it. I saw volunteering as a way to get in front of people; you could meet people in a less competitive way,” he explains.

Volunteering has helped Arnold learn to see issues from different perspectives, something he finds valuable in the current collegiate retail environment. “Volunteering and getting involved is more important now than ever—or you run the risk of being left out,” he says. “I couldn’t imagine not doing it.”

THE PRESIDENT
Like many college store professionals, Bill Simpson, president and general manager, UConn Co-op, University of Connecticut, Storrs, and a past NACS president, entered college retailing as a student. He notes that no formal degree or career path brings people to work in college stores. “We learn on the job,” he says.

Simpson’s education began early with encouragement to contact his regional association and get involved “to get out of my own four walls.” In the process, he says, he began to “build a network of colleagues you could rely upon.”

As with many volunteers, Simpson says that “serving keeps you in the mix; it allows you to be a better, more informed manager.” He notes that his career has always centered on large stores, so the smaller-store sessions allow him to stay in touch and become better at his own job by absorbing multiple perspectives. He’s observed a similar impact on other volunteers.

“I’ve seen a lot of people blossom,” he says. Now at the top of his volunteer career, Simpson tries to foster that blossoming by mentoring newer volunteers. “The mentoring process let’s you pay it forward; that’s what I’m trying to do,” he says.

He advises anyone thinking about taking their first steps on the volunteer path to “look for things you can take back to your own shop,” but also to expect the experience to have “something of altruism to it, giving back to the industry.” He stresses that he’s gotten far more out of volunteering than he’s invested in terms of time.

He also recommends that those just starting out “focus on the things you enjoy doing. When you do things you enjoy, you get more out of it.” With the wide range of volunteer experiences available at NACS, finding one that suits your particular skills and preferences shouldn’t be hard to do.

Don’t Take Our Word for It
Volunteers are the lifeblood of our association. Volunteers work countless hours to carry out the mission and vision of our association, helping to steer the direction of not only NACS but our entire industry.

“Volunteers also enhance the lives of their peers through the sharing of expertise and skills. NACS volunteers make a difference.

“Thank you for selflessly giving of your time, your expertise, your enthusiasm to mentor others, and your passion to improve our industry. You have enriched my life as well as those of so many others. You are NACS.

—Vicki Morris Benion, CCR
NACS President 2009-2010
Christopher Burch
Donald Burden
Claudette Burns
Shelly Burrows
Cari Callahan
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Matt Livengood
Adrienne Loftin
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Rinaldo Mathews
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Estella McCollum
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Kevin McKiernan

“Volunteers are the lifeblood of our association.”

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Tina Cleveland
Douglas Cline
Antwan Clinton, CCR
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Willie Coleman
Emily Colton, CCR
Bill Connors
Erin Lambert-Conohan
Michael Coston, CCR
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Stacey Gabbitos
Nicole Gallo
Gwen Gardner, CCR

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