

# Reunion Virtual Events

## Overview and Best Practices

### Virtual Events Overview

A year-long approach to class engagement allows for a reunion experience to be inclusive, flexible, and adaptive. Virtual events give you the ability to gather your classmates for discussions in response to current events, and at no financial cost to your class or individual classmates.

The appetite for virtual programming during your reunion year will vary by class. The HAA does not require reunion classes to organize class-specific virtual reunion programming, but know that it is available as an option as desired by the class and volunteers. Faculty and administrator programming for all reunion classes organized by the HAA will still be available as a virtual program option for your classmates.

Without the constraints of time and space limitations imposed by in-person gatherings, reunion leaders are encouraged to design a schedule of virtual programs and activities that would be most attractive to and engaging for classmates. No matter when you hold your programming, you have the opportunity to make it more accessible and inclusive.

- Be deliberate about how you schedule programming to limit drop-off and screen fatigue. Have fun with your formats, topics, and formality. Prioritize interactivity.
- Based on past experiences from classes and volunteers, we'd recommend (if interested) no more than one event per month from whenever you kick off, through May. This is not a hard and fast rule, and reunion leaders can determine what works best for your class. You may find that there is interest in more social events, for example, that your class can run independently and with greater frequency. Many classes find that starting with a simple social event virtually—light on programming content—gets the ball rolling.
- In addition to real-time events, consider asynchronous activities in which classmates can participate on their own schedule. Examples of such activities include posting on social media accounts or Facebook groups, sharing food or drink recipes, short reflective writing activities, athletic challenges, watching videos online, or participating in wellness activities.
- You might also organize class gatherings or discussions following the virtual programs that the HAA is planning for all reunion classes (either immediately after each session, or sometime shortly after). This can be a great way to engage your classmates around these topics, with the benefit being that you don't have to plan a lot of content for this event.

Please refer to the HAA's virtual engagement toolkit for volunteers (which can be found here: <https://alumni.harvard.edu/virtual-engagement-toolkit>) for more details in addition to the information listed below.

### Virtual Reunion Events Best Practices

Below is a selection of highly engaging virtual reunion formats for classes. Resources such as the Class Report or class surveys can be utilized to help identify topic areas and classmates to feature. Have a suggested idea to share? If you see something missing or that you would like to add, please let your HAA staff liaison know.

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- **Diversity and Inclusion:** Harvard University is committed to fostering a campus culture where everyone can thrive, a key to which is ensuring that we each experience a profound sense of inclusion and belonging. Events must be developed to make all members of a class feel welcome and included. Your leadership and featured speakers should be reflective of your class community, and language used in the class surveys, emails, and other materials should be reviewed for inclusivity.
- **New Volunteers:** Many classes recently found that by offering virtual programming, new classmates emerged as volunteers and potential leaders to host future programming. Make time to conclude all event sessions with an opportunity for participants to share informal feedback and raise new ideas. If you hear from classmates looking for programming, enlist their help in pulling it together.
- **Time zones:** Your HAA staff liaison can provide you with a class overview to determine where your classmates are located throughout the world. As you develop programming, mix up the day and timing of offerings to allow for more participation across time zones.
- **Sharing of Zoom/platform links:** For real-time events, share the Zoom (or alternative platform) event link with participants and invitees at least two days in advance to prevent last-minute confusion and requests for help (or if it will be sent closer to the event, be sure to note that in a communication).
- **Recording and Sharing Video:** Record content-rich sessions to share with classmates unable to attend the event (note: you must receive advance permission to record from featured speakers and/or participants). It is important to note if a program will or will not be recorded in the event messaging. Reunion Committee members will be responsible for determining where to host the videos (and uploading the videos to the platform).
- **No Shows and Attrition:** The HAA has observed a higher rate of no-shows and attendance attrition for virtual programs vs. in-person programs. If your event's numbers drop, please know that this is to be expected and prep your featured classmates or speakers accordingly. Expect your final event registration numbers to drop by 40 to 50 percent as a general rule. On the positive side, the virtual format also makes it easy for non-RSVPs (or "walk-ins") to join the program at the last minute.
- **Alcohol:** If you host social programming and include recipes for drinks, consider nonalcoholic options. This is particularly appreciated by those in different time zones, as well as those who don't drink.
- **Guests/Children:** Where appropriate, be explicit about including children and loved ones in virtual sessions. Many sessions can be adjusted to include those eager for a window into the Harvard experience, while some might be most appropriate only for classmates.

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### Virtual Event Platforms

The HAA College Alumni Programs team recommends using Zoom for your virtual programs. We recognize that volunteer-led groups may want to experiment with other platforms, but for the reasons listed below, we highly recommend the use of Zoom to optimize class participation and predictability. Zoom is accessible and inclusive for your classmates in the following ways:

- Captioning and transcribing: Zoom offers automated captions that are largely accurate.
- Recordings: Capturing and sharing Zoom recordings is a straightforward process that allows content to be shared quickly and easily with class members who cannot attend in real time.
- Zoom has been widely adopted: Nearly anyone who has participated or plans to participate in a Harvard virtual event or meeting has some Zoom experience. If a class chooses a different digital event platform, many participants may need to learn how to use it.
- Regular updates: Zoom's regular updates continue to offer more call in options.
- Please visit the Zoom Resources page of the College Alumni Programs Officers Lounge volunteer resources website for additional assistance (which can be found here: <https://officerslounge.classes.harvard.edu/article.html?aid=223>). Your HAA staff liaison also has extensive experience using Zoom and can assist with your events or help train volunteers on the features of Zoom.

We have compiled a collection of Harvard-themed Zoom virtual backgrounds if you want to direct your classmates to the individual links on this page to choose a background for your events:

<https://officerslounge.classes.harvard.edu/article.html?aid=224>.

This being said, we encourage classes to ultimately use whatever platform they are interested in or comfortable with, but HAA staff are only equipped to staff and support Zoom events.

### Faculty Outreach

The HAA organizes faculty and administrator programming for reunion classes throughout the reunion year, so we encourage reunion committees to create classmate-focused content for their class-specific virtual events. However, if your class would like to invite Harvard faculty to be part of a speaking event or a panel, please be in touch with your HAA staff liaison to determine the best way to move forward with an ask.

Each class can decide if they want their panels or speaking events to only feature classmates, or if they would like to feature guests from other classes, Harvard faculty, or speakers without a Harvard affiliation. Your HAA staff liaison can help you think through the appropriate speaker(s) depending on your goals for the event, and availability of speakers. If you would like to feature a Harvard faculty member, please let your HAA staff liaison know as soon as possible. They will then connect with a team in the HAA that manages event invitations to faculty who can advise on the best way to make the ask or offer additional/alternative names depending on the event.

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### Norms for Virtual Events

Some classes find it helpful to set a positive tone for classmate discussion. Below are some draft norms for your edit or inclusion as you deem useful. At the start of your session, you may want to review norms, post on screens (if applicable), or ask participants to share any additions.

- Listen actively – seek to understand not respond; respect others when they are talking.
- Participate to the fullest of your ability – our community depends on the inclusion of every individual voice. And give space for others to speak.
- Embrace discomfort – be open to vulnerability and willing to challenge yourself to participate beyond your comfort level. When needed, step out of the room (or mute video) and rejoin when you are ready.
- Expect and accept non-closure – these are deep, challenging, and highly nuanced issues and this is an ongoing dialog. We can decide on meaningful actions, but we may not resolve everything (or maybe anything).
- Speak from your own experience instead of generalizing ("I" instead of "they," "we," and "you"). Share your own story as you are willing.
- Be open, curious, and respectful – invite and consider new ideas and perspectives.
- Focus on ideas – do not be afraid to respectfully challenge one another by asking questions.
- Assume positive intent – but honor the learning opportunity and own the impact of the words we use.
- Keep confidence – take actions, lessons learned, and continuing conversations forward without compromising the confidentiality of participants' identities, experiences, or viewpoints.

### Social Mixers

- Approach:
  - Gather classmates together informally and assign breakout rooms to chat.
  - This format most closely mimics the experience of walking through a tent at reunions.
  - Breakout rooms can be randomly assigned in groups for time limited cycles, or set up as self-selecting to allow class participants to choose their smaller group discussions and move between different breakout groups. Offer discussion topics in the chat to get the conversation started.
  - Option to host game night/trivia nights in this format.
  - Host roughly five breakouts depending on duration to allow for active mixing.
- Roles:
  - Designate a host or hosts to welcome participants at the start, check in between breakout groups, and “host” any revelers at the end.
- How your HAA staff liaison can help:
  - Provide guidance on format adjustments, “run of show,” and past invitation samples.
  - Train class leaders to host the Zoom session and work with features like breakouts.
  - Send class communications marketing the event.

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### House Events

- Approach:
  - Gather classmates together informally to celebrate House-based traditions, such as Lowell House Tea, stein nights, or a new take on your House formals.
  - If the event is for one single House, all participants can be in one large “room.” Depending on the size of the group, you might decide to go to breakouts at some point.
  - If hosting a multi-House event, consider having everyone together for the start and then have breakouts by House.
  - If holding a multi-House event (perhaps by House neighborhood), consider how attendees can represent House affiliation/spirit by wearing House attire, using custom Zoom backgrounds, and changing Zoom display names to include House.
- Roles:
  - Designate a host or hosts to welcome participants at the start and facilitate dialogue.
- How your HAA staff liaison can help:
  - Provide guidance on format adjustments, “run of show,” and past invitation samples.
  - Train class leaders to host the Zoom session and work with features like breakouts.
  - Send class communications marketing the event.

### Affinity Group Meet-Ups

- Approach:
  - Gather classmates together informally to celebrate affinity groups. This might include career and professional interests, ethnicity and identity groups, hobbies, student organizations, or other groups that might be of interest to your class.
  - If the event is for one single group, all participants can be in one large “room.” Depending on the size of the group, you might decide to go to breakouts at some point.
  - If hosting a multi-group event, consider having everyone together for the start and then have breakouts by group.
- Roles:
  - Designate a host or hosts to welcome participants at the start and facilitate dialogue.
- How your HAA staff liaison can help:
  - Provide guidance on format adjustments, “run of show,” and past invitation samples.
  - Train class leaders to host the Zoom session and work with features like breakouts.
  - Send class communications marketing the event.

### Alumni Panels/Guest Speakers

- Approach:
  - This format most closely mimics the experience of a traditional symposium panel or guest speaker session at reunions.
  - A Zoom webinar or a meeting are both appropriate formats for a panel, each with its own pros and cons. A webinar allows for greater control by the host over who is seen, who can speak, and how questions are sent to the moderator. Many classes prefer to use Zoom meetings, however, as it allows for a more social experience than a webinar.

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- Roles:
  - Designate a host or moderator to welcome participants at the start, facilitate active participation by all panelists, and manage Q&A at the end.
  - Designate a classmate co-host to help moderate the chat, as it can be difficult for one person to moderate the discussion and chat at the same time.
- How your HAA staff liaison can help:
  - Provide guidance on format adjustments, “run of show,” and past invitation samples.
  - Train class leaders to host the Zoom session and work with features like breakouts.
  - Send class communications marketing regarding the event.
  - Facilitate introductions to Harvard faculty or members of other classes whom you wish to invite to speak to your class.

### Glimpses/Classmate TED-style Talks

- Approach:
  - This format most closely mimics the experience of a traditional session at reunions. Glimpses are short, personal talks by classmates about their lives (3-5 minutes each).
  - The virtual setting allows for more classmates to participate as speakers and gives them the option to pre-record their talk if there are any time conflicts or if a speaker is uncomfortable presenting live.
  - A Zoom webinar is most appropriate for this type of event, as it allows for the greatest administrative control over what the virtual attendees are seeing and hearing during the session. The webinar format does prevent some social interaction between classmates during the session, but the Zoom administrator can circumvent this challenge by designating all participants as presenters near the end of the event.
  - Examples of topics from past Glimpses include:
    - Almost becoming “first gentleman” of the State of Vermont
    - Building one of the most eco-friendly homes in America (as the fulfillment of unfilled dreams of becoming an architect)
    - Returning to acting after 30 years
    - Being on the plane that went down in the Hudson River.
    - Teaching 5th grade
    - Losing a cherished old family home to fire
    - Losing the ability to walk in college
    - Launching a not-for-profit later in life
- Roles:
  - Designate a host or moderator to welcome participants at the start, facilitate active participation by all panelists, and manage Q&A at the end.
  - Designate a classmate co-host to help moderate the chat, as it can be difficult for one person to moderate the discussion and chat at the same time.
- How your HAA staff liaison can help:
  - Provide guidance on format adjustments, “run of show,” and past invitation samples.
  - Send class communications marketing the event.
  - Facilitate introductions to members of other classes whom you wish to share firsthand experience in organizing a similar event.

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### Roundtable Discussions

- Approach:
  - This format most closely mimics the experience of a “dining hall” conversation at reunions and creates the opportunity for reflection and discussion of topical issues.
  - This is a great format to host alumni discussion around timely topics, encourage reflection, or illuminate new connections (such as caring for aging parents, career changes, etc.).
  - If hosting one topic, keep all participants in one large “room.”
  - If hosting a multi-topic event, assign breakout rooms.
- Roles:
  - Designate a host or hosts to welcome participants at the start and facilitate dialogue. The host sets the tone for the meetings, conveys official guidelines for communication, and encourages participants to share their perspectives and create a respectful and dynamic conversation.
  - If hosting multiple concurrent discussions, each breakout room needs a facilitator.
- How your HAA staff liaison can help:
  - Provide guidance on format adjustments, “run of show,” and past invitation samples.
  - Train class leaders to host the Zoom session and work with features like breakouts.
  - Send class communications marketing the event.

### Virtual Book Clubs

- Approach:
  - Many classes have published writers. Consider establishing a virtual book club series or standalone event to discuss their works.
  - If possible, invite the classmate (writer) to join the book club and/or speak to the group as a capstone discussion upon completion of the book/work.
- Roles:
  - Designate a host to welcome participants at the start and facilitate dialogue. The host will agree to read the book, manage the technology, and prepare questions for the session. The host sets the tone for the meetings, conveys official guidelines for communication, and encourages participants to share their perspectives and create a respectful and dynamic conversation.
  - If the author takes part, consider a discussion to start, followed by Q&A.
  - Review the Virtual Engagement Toolkit for a step-by-step guide on virtual book clubs (which can be found here: <https://alumni.harvard.edu/virtual-engagement-toolkit/virtual-events/virtual-book-club>)
- How your HAA staff liaison can help:
  - Provide guidance on format adjustments, “run of show,” and past invitation samples.
  - Assist with surveying the class to identify authors (if unknown).
  - Train class leaders to host the Zoom session and work with features like breakouts.
  - Send class communications marketing the event.