

Successful Student Advisory Boards: Best Practices

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Academic libraries establish student advisory boards to learn more about students, to connect and communicate with students, to learn to serve students more efficiently and effectively, and to build community. Benefits can be unexpected and far-reaching for libraries who maintain a successful student advisory board. Like all community outreach initiatives, establishing student advisory boards requires careful planning. What practices should academic libraries consider to ensure the best outcomes for a library that establishes a Board?

Best practices are discussed here in these elements of organization and operation of a board: the board's purpose, goals and objectives; a consideration of campus culture; composition of the board; recruitment of members; meetings, including scheduling, agendas, the setting and the discussion; and communication with members before and after meetings.

The idea of advisory boards did not originate with libraries. Corporations and non-profit organizations make use of advisory boards in a variety of ways. Corporations may test a completely new strategy or marketing campaign, letting the board members react. By giving board members a sneak peek at new ideas, corporations make them feel vested in the success of these initiatives and can get excellent feedback.

Consumer (or Customer) Advisory Boards are used by corporations to build relationships with customers. They can react to products and services, as well as to the overall experience of shopping with or

dealing with the organization. Corporations try to build an environment of trust in which board members are comfortable enough to be completely honest in their reactions to new products, services, and advertising campaigns.

Non-profit organizations can get advice on the community environment from advisory boards, and get help with fundraising and lobbying from board members. They sometimes rely on boards to help disseminate information on their successes, and to develop new services for constituents. Public libraries often have appointed governing boards, mandated by regulations or statutes. Sometimes public libraries also develop boards of friends and advisors for feedback and advocacy, and community task forces and committees for specific projects and programming.

To clarify, there are other groups, boards, and committees that can give feedback to academic libraries. For example, many academic libraries have a group appointed by the provost or president or Faculty Senate. These groups can provide varying levels of oversight on the library's strategic directions, budget, collections, facilities, and technology. These boards can be part of the institution's governance, much as a board can be part of the governance for a public library. These faculty members and administrators can sometimes provide a challenge to library plans. But in many circumstances, members of these appointed boards can also provide helpful feedback and sugges-

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tions, and can be counted on to tell the library's story to university or college administrators.

Fundraising advocacy is a different kind of group. Members can help the library tell its most positive, impactful stories to people of influence. Friends groups emphasize public relations, community building, and programming. Task forces and committees from the institution can have an impact on the library's future direction and daily operations.

So with all those other types of groups, why might an academic library choose to create one more group? While the library can receive feedback from all of these groups, none of them are designed to give the kind of direct, "on the ground" reports that frequent users of the facilities, resources, and services can. While members of these boards, groups and committees are stakeholders, it can be argued that students are the primary stakeholders of the library.

One characteristic that can make student advisory boards uniquely helpful to libraries is synergy. When students use a service, or are surveyed or interviewed, the library receives individual feedback that is not influenced—or inspired—by the presence of others. Even focus groups, although they certainly thrive with the right group dynamic, are a group brought together on one particular occasion for a specific, targeted, somewhat narrow purpose. In contrast, board members can become acquainted with each other, or at least familiar with each other, over a period of time. While they are individuals—different majors, diverse backgrounds, demographically diverse—they have homogeneity as students of the same institution, users of the same library, the same services and resources. Many of them have experienced use of the library in the same way as part of the same required classes at some point. The synergy created by board membership can provide the library with unique information. As board members become more comfortable with library administration and with each other, the synergy will result in more honest, open, and caring conversation about the library.

In the best of circumstances, members can become a team, a team that is eager to help fellow students by improving the library, developing ideas, or

building awareness of service and resources. Their enthusiasm can spread to library administrators, faculty, and employees.

Purpose of the student advisory board; goals and objectives: Success does not occur simply because a student advisory board is formed. A successful board will be aligned with the library's mission, goals, and strategies. A very important and deceptively simple question needs to be asked: what are library expectations for the student advisory board? What is the library's goal for the board? What are objectives for each meeting, or for the year? This is important, because a board can be formed, and meetings can be very pleasant but somewhat empty, or can flail awkwardly, with librarians eagerly awaiting that valuable student feedback. Without the groundwork of focus, and without a provision of information to members, the environment for communication will not be set.

Campus culture: Who are your students, and how would you characterize their interaction with faculty, staff and administration? The library's "read" on campus culture should inform the formation and operation of a board. Is your campus somewhat formal, and traditional? If so, students may enjoy a formal paper invitation to join the board, formal meetings, and customs like use of a gavel, election of student officers, and even a particular name for the group that reflects campus or library history. Perhaps most students commute to campus and hold full-time jobs. This culture may call for a more casual approach to students, communicating by text and e-mail, a lighter schedule of shorter meetings, and putting students on a first-name basis with library attendees. It is best practice for the institutional spirit, typical communication and traditions to be incorporated as the student advisory board is formed. It will be a welcoming environment for student members.

Composition of the student advisory board: The board, of course, is primarily composed of students. If the institution has both graduate and undergraduate students, should both serve on the board, or should there be two boards? If there are two boards, should they ever be combined for a joint meeting? This re-

quires a consideration of campus culture, the library's expectations of the board, as well as the size of the student body in both groups.

Who should attend meetings to represent the library? This is an important consideration as well. It is best practice to have the dean or director in attendance. Deans and directors do not always have the chance for frequent interaction with students, so this offers them a unique opportunity. Student members will recognize that they have the chance to "speak truth to power", and that their opinions, ideas, and comments are of the greatest importance, since they are addressing library leadership. Other library leaders should be selected to attend as well. But they should not exceed student attendance; student members should not feel outnumbered by librarians. A senior member of the library leadership team should take responsibility for the board and all of its communication with students. This is someone that students will contact with queries or ideas; this person sends agendas, meeting notes and announcements to the students. It is a best practice for student members to know with whom they should communicate outside of meetings.

The number of students appointed to the board may reflect the ability of students to commit to regular or irregular meetings. More formally, students could receive appointments as alternates; less formally, a larger group could receive appointments to ensure a certain level of attendance at each meeting.

If there is a perceived benefit to inviting a faculty member of the appointed library advisory board to attend student library advisory board meetings that could be considered. But it is important to keep in mind that student members need to feel comfortable expressing positive and negative thoughts and reactions at meetings. Sometimes faculty members or administrators can intimidate students, even outside of the classroom environment.

Recruitment of student members: Recruitment of members may be the most critical element of success in creation of the board. Board members need to commit to attending meetings, and to communicating

their ideas, comments, suggestions and complaints. It is particularly important to keep campus culture in mind as the process for recruitment is developed. Receiving an appointment to a board, and being able to put that on a resume, can be important to students. Student government and student organizations can help you recruit. They can be asked to appoint for representatives for the board. The benefit is that students involved with student government have a natural interest in campus life and in representing the student body. Faculty and administrators can suggest student members as well. A student assistant employed by the library can serve effectively on the board each year. Students can be recruited from groups known to produce responsible student members, such as scholarship winners, members of the honors college, or honorary societies, which gives the library a group of committed, hardworking students. Special attention can be paid to ensuring representation from various disciplines, or to upper and lower divisions and transfer students.

All of the students mentioned above are busy and involved, and are likely to follow through on their commitment to board membership. However, those are not the only students served by the library. Other methods of recruitment include asking librarians and library staff to recommend "power users" of the library. "Power users" are students who frequent the library, using books and materials, services, and technology. Another source of members can be the Suggestion Box, or complaints. A student who takes the time to write or call with a suggestion or complaint is already interested in the improvement of library services. If the complaint is constructive, the student can be a particularly effective board member. Student Disabilities Services can be an important source of student board members who will provide a different perspective. Services for international students can recommend members who have an important and different perspective as well.

If board membership seems to be mostly members of Greek houses, consider asking social organizations on campus that have non-Greek members. Some

of these organizations may hold meetings or meetups in library group study rooms or in a library café, giving them a vested interest in the library's success.

Meeting schedule and agenda: Depending on campus culture, and the needs of the library, there can be regular scheduled meetings of the board (“every third Thursday at noon”), or meetings can be scheduled once or twice each semester. It is important to inform members in advance, and it is a best practice to send an agenda. The agenda should contain a listing showing the members of the library staff or administration who will be in attendance with job titles, so students can get an idea of which areas are represented. Although meeting notes will already have been sent from the previous meeting, each agenda should be accompanied by those notes. Students lead busy lives and at some times may not read the notes and at other times may wish to be reminded of the previous meeting. To maintain attendance, it is a best practice to send an e-mail reminder of the meeting. Students can be asked if they would prefer to be reminded with a text message or phone call on the day of the meeting. If there are a large number of distant learners at the institution, some members may want to attend virtually by Skype or phone or other method.

A best practice is to develop an agenda for each meeting, keeping the library's objectives in mind, which builds a sense of urgency, ensuring that students will want to contribute to the discussion and attend the meeting. Every library has issues in which students are passionately interested, and it is important to let board members know that the library will address them and provide new information when it is available.

Location: It is a best practice to hold board meetings in the most attractive setting possible. If there is a board room or special conference room in the library, this is the best location. This conveys to the student members the importance in which the library holds this meeting, and their participation.

Meeting activities: Demonstrating to student advisory board members that they are special and important creates the unique synergy that lets them feel free to give the library open, honest, construc-

tive feedback. The most important practice is to treat every suggestion, comment or question as valuable. Nothing that the board members suggest is wrong or mistaken. Remember that for library users, perception is the reality. Listen as if every word the student members utter is golden. After they have completely expressed themselves, a response from a library leader follows. This means that those from the library in attendance have to be prepared for and welcoming to negative feedback. If a change can be made, no matter how small, it should be made quickly and the board should be informed of the change.

It is a best practice to serve food at student advisory board meetings. It should be “a cut above” food that is being served in other meetings. It is a way of demonstrating the value and importance of this meeting.

If the library has promotional items (pens, pads, jumpdrives, mugs), or can have an item created for board members in appreciation of their service, these items should be given to members.

It is a best practice to give board members “privileged information” ahead of public announcements. It might be news of a new service or new furniture. Corporate boards use this idea to make board members feel like “insiders” who are in the know.

A best practice is to be clear with introductions at every meeting so student members know exactly who attending librarians and administrators are. Students may not remember librarians between meetings.

Leave time at each meeting for students to bring up items that are important to them. Every thought and expressed idea has value.

Communication with board members between meetings: It is most important to thank board members for their service at the end of each academic year or semester.

Congratulate them on academic achievements, learn about their areas of study, and send them an e-mail during finals to wish them good luck. Make sure students know your door is open, so members will come to visit or e-mail between meetings. Campus culture influences the formality or informality of these communications.

It is a best practice to send out notes following each meeting, and any follow-up to items brought forward at a meeting. If a change has been made, or if new information has been made available, communicating this information is the best way to let members know that their discussion was valuable. Notes also need to be sent to library leadership, whether in attendance or not.

Board-gathered information and activities can be an important element in closing the loop: getting information from the Board, analyzing it, acting upon it, communicating the change, and assessing the success of the change represents a closed loop in the assessment process.

Users need to feel that the library values their needs and perceptions. A student advisory board can produce comments and feedback, and with library decision-makers present, a change can be made quickly, and reported back quickly. It shows the board members the power of their ideas. Their opinions are valuable even on small matters.

Conclusion: Student advisory board members can form the basis of groups needed to test Web page usability, evaluate a service, review survey results or comments from other students, or contribute ideas to large or small facilities changes, even participating in charrettes for planning construction.

Advisory boards can become advocates for the library. Library administration can provide an overview, and student advocates can take it upon themselves to present that to the college or university administration.

One final best practice is to realize that to achieve these results, building a successful board takes time. Establishment of a student advisory board is not a shortcut to obtaining qualitative assessment information, or to communicating to the entire student body. But a successful board can provide invaluable information to an academic library, and provide insights into providing the best possible services, resources and facilities to its most important group of stakeholders: students.