



The Role of Library Trustees

It is not uncommon for the role of the Friends and the role of the public library Trustees to become confused. What authority and responsibilities do the Friends have? What is the role of the Trustees? Should an individual serve on both boards? If either of these groups is unsure of the limits of their respective authorities, conflicts can, and often do, arise. Fact Sheets 10 and 11 outline the roles of the Trustees and the role of the Friends, specifically indicating where their work and communication should overlap or complement each other.

There are typically two types of Trustee Boards - a) a governing board or b) an advisory board.

The Governing Board is either elected by the general population or is appointed by the city or town's elected council. This type of board has full authority over the governance of the library. This Board hires the library director, sets policy, and works closely with the director in establishing and presenting the library's budget to the city.

The Advisory Board typically exists where the library is a city or county department, the library director is hired by the city or county, and the library director reports directly to the city/county manager or mayor. The Advisory Board typically has no

governing authority though it may be an appointed or elected Board. By law in most states, this board still has responsibility for assisting with policy setting, but does not have responsibility for the budget or the direct oversight of the library director.

In both cases, the library Board of Trustees engages in the development of policies that govern library services.

In both cases, the library Board of Trustees works with the library administration in planning and goal setting for the library.

In both cases, the library Board of Trustees should meet at least monthly with the library administration in an open meeting where a Friends liaison should be

present and have an opportunity on the agenda to update the Board of Trustees on the Friends' activities.

In both cases, all members of a library Board of Trustees should become personal members of the Friends at the highest level they are able.

Individually and collectively, Trustees should act as advocates of libraries and present the library point of view to their locally- and nationally-elected legislators and leaders.

At least yearly, the library board should plan a joint meeting to discuss mutual concerns with Friends. This can be done in conjunction with a breakfast or dinner meeting.

Should a member of the library Board of Trustees also serve as a member of the Friends of the Library Board? The generally accepted wisdom is "no." There are a number of reasons for this:

[continued](#)



The Role of Library Trustees, continued

It can imbue a single member with more power and authority than his or her peers on each of the boards.

There can be a perceived conflict if a member of the policy making Board is also in a decision making role on the Friends Board that helps fund the library's services.

There can be a potential conflict of interest when a policy the library Board of Trustees is proposing might not be considered to be in the best interest of the Friends. For example, deciding to give discarded library materials to an outsourced agency or proposing the establishment of a foundation for fundraising.

Even if your Trustee board and Friends board are working in perfect harmony right now, no precedent should be set that will allow possible conflicts in the future. Though it is the case that a Trustee Board member may take a leadership role in creating a new Friends group and therefore have a decision making role in both for awhile; this should be considered a temporary necessity and the new Friends should elect officers (other than library Trustees) as soon as possible.

Additional Resources

Tip Sheets

The Role of the Friends Board

Toolkits

Friends and Libraries: Working Effectively Together

Publications

101+ Great Ideas for Libraries and Friends (chapter on Organizational Effectiveness)

Webinars/Training

Short Takes for Trustees: Working with Friends

Other

Understanding Roles: The Separate But Complementary Roles of Friends, Trustees, and Library Directors