

FRIENDS ON CAMPUS:

Academic Libraries and Their Friends

Friends of Libraries Can Help Raise Community Awareness to Get that New Library Built or Remodeled

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Friends of Library organizations often find new library building or renovation projects challenging. The traditional activities performed by Friends of Libraries often do not require a substantial commitment of time and money. However, the need for a new building or for a substantial library expansion or renovation can trigger changes in the expectations of the role that the Friends of the Library play.

Library Friends, through their ties to the community or campus, and through contribution of their time and expertise can provide invaluable help in making capital projects move forward.

Friends can play a crucial role in building awareness about the need and in reshaping public opinion to favor the project. Often, the people who will have to certify that the fund raising, planning and construction can move forward do not understand the need for physical plant improvements. The library continues to offer services and house the collections, even as critical systems begin to break down affecting services and collections. The library roof may need to be replaced. The heating and air conditioning system may be well past its anticipated life expectancy. Increases in energy cost may make it imperative that the windows and insulation of the building be upgraded. Quiet library deterioration is often unknown to the powers-that-be who set institutional priorities for capital expenditures. As a result, other capital projects within the community or on campus receive the funding.

Members of the Friends of the Library can make a substantial contribution by

increasing administrative and community awareness of the need for improvement or replacement of the library facility. This can be done by assisting in the drafting of documentation that describes these needs and by promoting the project.

A "Space Needs Assessment" document fulfills two objectives. The first is to analyze the current space of the library against a variety of factors such as patron usage, collection management, collection storage, services offered, environmental safety, physical accessibility, and generally accepted standards for public or academic library facilities. The second objective is to determine the current and future facilities needs for the building as well as what current services and programs and collections should be curtailed or cut back.

A two-part needs assessment recognizes that library facilities needs evolve over time even as the existing physical plant ages and deteriorates. Over the past two decades, the evolutionary process has sped up as technology, new media, publishing activity, and population have expanded. Buildings planned thirty years ago were not planned with today's services and collections or with patron and community needs in mind. Some buildings were designed with enough flexibility to facilitate the changes we have witnessed. Many buildings, however, simply do not have the flexibility in their interior space nor the infrastructure or electrical systems to handle many of the changes that have taken place.

The library director, board, staff, and Friends can facilitate the drafting of the needs assessment by working together to do the measurement, identify the programs

as well as the sizes and types of the collections that are being supported. They can also work together to conduct focus groups, and interviews of patrons and staff, local business leaders, academic administrators or anyone else who may have a strong interest in improved library facilities and services. This is a labor and time intensive activity and the library may alternately ask Friends to provide resources to retain the services of an outside consultant or architect to prepare the assessment.

It is extremely important that plans are not so grandiose or expensive that individuals who see the need for improvement are not turned off by the specter of increased taxes or reduction in other services. A detailed needs assessment is critical in developing preliminary understanding of the project's monetary requirements.

Friends can also help develop presentation materials which usually feature photographs, statistical information, and short narratives describing building problems and needs. Inclusion of a one page executive summary backed by the full document and appendices should be designed to inform and influence decision-makers. With these materials in hand, Friends can help raise campus and/or community awareness about the need for new or improved library facilities. Friends can organize meetings, write newspaper stories and letters to the editor, and assist in the drafting of annual reports in addition to their regular fund raising activities. These efforts help build awareness among a wider population and help convince decision-makers that the project should move forward.

Friends can and should be campus and community opinion leaders when it comes to supporting new and/or improved library facilities.

Check the Friends Zone for archived "Friends on Campus" articles. Many focus on issues applicable to Friends of all types, sizes, and missions.