



Tales from a New Trustee

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What does a library Trustee do?

In previous columns, I've discussed the process of becoming a library Trustee. I also covered the orientation process that helps new Trustees learn about the library and the board. In this column, I'll focus on the actual duties of a library Trustee, so that you have a good understanding of your role on the board. Keep in mind that these are my ideas and thoughts — others may have different ideas.

I enjoy being a library Trustee, but it's not all fun. There are difficult decisions to make at times, and one has to learn a lot of new "stuff." If you've never served as a public official, you may not realize all the rules and regulations you have to abide by that you never knew existed. Just learning the difference between governance of the library and management of the library is harder than you think.

Much of the work of a board of Trustees is done in conjunction with the director of the library, who is responsible for the management of the library and the library staff. Learning the boundaries of who does what is often a problem for a new Trustee. Don't get caught up in trying to manage things in the library. Been there, done that, on occasion! Remember that the board hires the director to manage the library. The board's duty is to govern, not to micromanage.

There are six essential responsibilities of a library Trustee:

- Hiring/firing and evaluating the library director
- Strategic planning
- Policy development and approval
- Oversight of library resources and finances

- Regular evaluation of library activities
- Advocating for the library

Accomplishing these responsibilities means that you as a Trustee have a number of duties. Those duties may vary by state and by library. Typical duties of a Trustee are to:

- Attend board meetings.
- Preview the agenda, minutes, and documents before each meeting.
- Participate in discussion and decision making at board meetings.
- Stand by decisions made by the board.
- Serve on committees as assigned by the chair.
- Commit time outside of meetings for the work of the board, as necessary and appropriate.
- Participate in board-sanctioned activities, such as fundraising or public relations in the community.
- Represent the library at community events — be visible and accessible to those you represent.
- Become informed about library issues through participation in your regional library system, state library association, and/or ALA. Don't forget about ALTAFF!
- Become informed about laws that govern public libraries in your state.
- Become an advocate for the library community.
- Maintain high standards of ethical behavior.

(List adapted and reprinted with permission of the Illinois Library Association from Trustee Facts File, Third Edition, 2004, Robert P. Doyle and Robert N. Knight.)

Overwhelming is a good word to describe the list, isn't it? Most library Trustees are volunteers who simply love their libraries and want to make them the best library they can be. How do we find the time to do all of this?

Looking at the list of six key responsibilities, I must point out that

several of these elements are things that some Trustees never get an opportunity to work on, or only do so over a period of years.

For example, I've talked to Trustees who have never had to hire or fire their director. They have a long-term director who is doing a good job and the Trustee may serve a number of years on the board with no need to look for a new director. There are a number of libraries in my area who have had directors who have served for 20 years or more, including ours. During that time, a number of Trustees came and went from the board without ever going through the process of hiring a director.

In my first year on the board, we spent about six months going through the hiring process (that's material for a future column). Of course, evaluating the director's performance should be done annually. Since we used a consultant as our director for about a year, I'll be involved in evaluating our director for the very first time in early 2010. I'm still learning as I go!

Strategic plans should be done about every three to five years, with minor updates in the intervening years. Most Trustees will have a chance to approve, if not actually contribute to, a strategic plan for the library. I plan to be involved in updating our plan during 2010. By then I'll have two years of experience on the board, so I hope I'll be knowledgeable enough to make a contribution.

Policy development and review is a process that most libraries go through regularly, updating key policies as needed or required by law. While we have done some work in the past two years, we're going to take the opportunity to review all of our policies as we update our strategic plan and review changes that may be needed for our new building. We'll start this in 2010.

Oversight of resources is something that happens at every board meeting, as the board approves bill payments, hears reports from the director and staff, approves the budget and tax levy, and otherwise focuses on the



operations of the library. This is the part most of us have familiarity with when we become Trustees, and we generally feel comfortable with this type of issue. It does get more complicated when there is a building program that involves new construction or remodeling and that may require the issuance of bonds or the passage of a referendum.

Evaluation of library activities happens informally as we hear information and ask questions at board meetings, but it can also include more formal opportunities, such as conducting a community survey to determine if the library is meeting the needs of the community's residents or conducting a board self-evaluation on how well the board works together to accomplish the mission of the library.

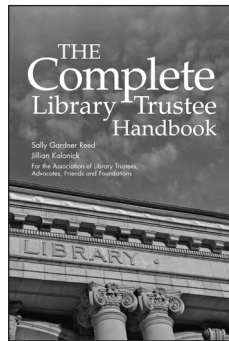
Being an advocate for the library is something that we as Trustees must do on a daily basis. Advocating for libraries is one of our chief roles, whether it is answering the questions of a resident or library patron or interacting with a local elected official or businessperson. Be aware of how your library serves your community and be ready to talk about it at the drop of a hat.

Take time to get to know your local elected officials and your state legislators. Talk to them about adequate funding for public libraries. Tell them about the good things your library is doing. Find out what your state library association recommends in terms of state legislation, and lobby for libraries.

During the current recession, we've seen numerous states and cities try to cut funding for libraries at a time when libraries are serving more patrons than ever, and when those patrons need libraries to help them look for work. In some cases, effective advocacy has reversed or at least reduced funding cuts.

Being a library Trustee is hard work, a lot of responsibility, but offers great satisfaction and the opportunity to give back to your community. Thank you to all of you who serve now and who have served in the past as library Trustees.

Order 'The Complete Library Trustee Handbook'



ALTAFF members and affiliates may order the new *The Complete Library Trustee Handbook* for \$35 — \$20 off the retail price. The price includes Media Mail shipping. Visit www.ala.org/altaff and click on "Products

and Services" then "Publications" for an order form. Members and affiliates may also request to be invoiced by faxing the printable order form available online or by calling the ALTAFF office at (800) 545-2433, ext. 2161. Non-members may purchase the book for \$55 through Neal-Schuman Publishers.

Join ALTAFF's Trustee listserv

Trustees from all types of libraries are invited to participate in ALTAFF's electronic discussion group focused on topics of interest to library Trustees. The listserv is an information forum for those wishing to seek and share best practices for library Trustees.

When you send an e-mail to the listserv, it is automatically sent to all subscribers, and their e-mails are sent to your e-mail. In this way, Trustees from around the country can share advice and their real world experiences. Messages are automatically archived for future searching.

Discussion topics can be whatever interests you — effective meetings, board recruitment, library policies, etc. Participants agree to abide by a few simple guidelines. You do not need to be an ALA member or an ALTAFF member or affiliate to participate.

For instructions on how to join and a list of guidelines, visit www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/altaff/trustees/listserv. If you have questions, please e-mail altaff@ala.org.

Demand for library technology resources on the rise

Several years ago, a survey of librarians found that the second most common reason they joined the profession was a love of reading and books. The top reason, however, was a desire to help people in their communities. Computers and the Internet are critical to connecting communities with the information and resources they need to learn, explore, create and build success.

Between 1996 and 2006, the percent of public libraries providing free access to computers and the Internet grew from 44.6% to nearly 100%, where it continues to stand. Misperceptions about the need for libraries in the Internet age and the rapid pace of technological change, however, threaten libraries' ability to provide quality public access to the tools needed to thrive in the digital age.

The roles of library Trustees, Friends, and Foundations have become even more important as fundraisers and advocates for public funding to support the library's mission in the 21st century.

Findings from the Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study, funded by the American Library Association (ALA) and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, provide the most current and comprehensive picture of public library technology resources and challenges. This article will share information provided by thousands of libraries in every state; by state library agencies; and from interviews with library staff, Trustees, and patrons.

Libraries online

The 2008-2009 study provides a snapshot of the range of technology resources public libraries provide, including:

- About 70% of libraries report they provide the only free access to

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