



The Role of the Friends Board

Every library can benefit from a strong Friends group. Whether you are a community member or library director, by starting a Friends of the Library group you'll be giving an important gift to the community.

It can happen that the role of a Friends of the Library group and the role of the public library Trustees become unclear. 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. This tip sheet, and the tip sheet "The Role of Library Trustees," indicate where their work and communication should overlap or complement each other.

Friends are community members who value the service of libraries and volunteer to help them by raising money and advocating for their library. Friends usually operate with a self-elected board of directors representing the community and have separate 501(c)(3) status.

1. Friends may be future Trustees, and Trustees future Friends; however, there should be no overlapping board members (see below).
2. Friends are kept informed of the library's plans, progress, and challenges by the library director.
3. A Friends board member should be appointed as a liaison to the library's Board of Trustees. This liaison should attend all Board of Trustee meetings, be prepared to report Friends issues and activities to the Trustees, and report back to the Friends.
4. Friends recognize that they do not perform a policy-making role for the library, but should feel that their opinions are valued by the Trustees.
5. Friends support policies set by the library Board of Trustees.
6. Friends serve as "connecting links" between the library and community, interpreting one to the other.
7. Friends' funds supplement the library's operating budget to provide materials and programs that enhance the library's service. Friends' funds should not replace money that is normally provided by the city or institution for library operations. Friends decide how to spend their money after conferring with the library director and with the library director's input and approval.
8. Fundraising by the Friends is done with the knowledge of the Trustees and in coordination with the library director.
9. Individually and collectively, Friends use their influence to assist the library in obtaining desired financial support from the community or institution by representing the library point of view to local government, academic leadership, legislators and the media.

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The Role of the Friends Board, continued

Should a member of the library board 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:

1. It can imbue a single member with more power and authority than his or her peers on each of the boards.
2. There can be a perceived conflict if a member of the policy making Board is also in a decision making (i.e. management) role on the Friends Board that helps fund the library’s services.
3. There can be a potential conflict of interest when a policy the library Board is proposing might be considered not 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 a while, this should be considered a temporary necessity, and the new Friends should elect officers (other than library Trustees and library staff) as soon as possible.

Additional Resources

Tip Sheets

- The Role of Library Trustees
- When Friends Aren’t Friendly
- When Friends Aren’t Friendly, Part 2

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