

Chapter 4

Friends with Benefits: Fostering Community in an Academic Library with a Student Advisory Group

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ABSTRACT

Students are a primary part of any academic library's community of users. However, students' voices are often left out of the conversation when libraries develop policies, services, and resources. One option for libraries which would like to consider students' opinions and needs more closely is the formation of a Student Advisory Group (SAG), a group of students who meet with library staff on a regular basis to discuss and provide advice on library policies, resources and strategies. Academic libraries can use SAGs for assistance with communication, collection development, focus group testing, and more. This article explores the logistics of creating, maintaining and assessing a SAG, along with concrete examples from the SAG at New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD). Student Advisory Groups have the potential to enrich any academic library's outreach and community-building efforts, and should be considered as an option by any library looking to become more student-centered.

INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly mobile and digital world, academic libraries face a lot of competition. To meet that challenge, many libraries are working harder to reach out to their communities, rather than depending upon the willingness of their communities to come to them. Student Advisory Groups (SAGs) have the potential to be an important component of any academic library's outreach efforts. For many years, 'friends' groups have played a vital role in public libraries, and academic libraries have begun to see the value of collecting a group of individuals who can serve as external advisors. A SAG can be defined as a group of students who meet with library staff on a regular basis to discuss and provide advice on

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library policies, resources, and strategies. Other terms commonly used to describe SAGs include Student Advisory Boards, Student Advisory Committees, and Student Library Advisory Councils. SAGs can also serve as focus groups for informal projects, such as usability testing. Most importantly, SAGs build a sense of community by showing students that they are a vital part of the library and its operations, and that their opinions are valued. Many options exist for the creation of SAGs, defining and developing their role at the library, and measuring their success.

The benefits of forming a SAG go beyond increasing library gate counts or circulation statistics. There is some evidence that involvement in on-campus groups, such as a library SAG, helps with student retention. As Deuink and Seiler (2009) argue, “When students are involved on campus, they develop relationships with faculty, staff and fellow students that improve their experience at the institution (p. 18). An improved college experience means that students are less likely to drop out or transfer to another institution. In addition, involvement in a SAG gives students an opportunity to develop valuable skills, such as communication, leadership, and project management. On the librarian side, involvement in a SAG offers the possibility of forming rich and long-lasting relationships with students. Depending upon the reach of its projects, a SAG can also create benefits to other library stakeholders, such as faculty, staff and the local community. Overall, forming a SAG is a great outreach opportunity because it shows that the library cares about its users: “A library that has a student advisory board is a library that is thinking of its future” (Deuink & Seiler, 2009, p. 62). Many academic libraries struggle to connect with their students and their needs--SAGs provide an easy way of both getting concrete data about student opinions regarding the library and a solid group of library advocates who will spread information about the library to other members of the university community.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of SAGs and their value to academic libraries. This overview is both theoretical and practical. SAGs have the potential to enrich any academic library’s community-building efforts by creating a group of library advocates and giving students a voice in the library. SAGs are flexible, in that they can be designed to suit small liberal arts institutions as well as large research universities. The different stages of developing and maintaining a SAG will also be discussed. This includes laying the groundwork, setting the charge, dealing with logistics, and planning for assessment. In each section best practices from the literature are provided, as well as an in-depth look at the SAG at the New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD) Library.

BACKGROUND

Librarians at NYUAD have found that having a Student Advisory Group plays an invaluable role in connecting with the student community and has undoubtedly enhanced library policies and outreach. NYUAD is a unique institution in several ways. NYUAD is very young; in the 2014-2015 school year it will be in its fifth year of operation. The students are extremely diverse, representing 102 countries and speaking 98 different languages (“NYUAD Welcomes,” 2013). This environment provides both challenges and opportunities. Due to the small size of the institution, it is very easy to get to know students on a personal level. Librarians see the same students on a weekly (if not daily) basis, and often know them by name. However, librarians have wondered if this friendliness leads students to feel more connected to the library itself, or only to the individuals that they know and like. In addition, NYUAD’s international students come with very different perceptions of libraries. Many do not know what to expect from libraries, and have no conception of the qualifications or responsibilities of an academic librarian

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